



**Chicago Lawyers' Committee  
for Civil Rights Under Law, Inc.**

*Chicago's Partnership for Equal Justice*

May 18, 2013

Honorable Rahm Emanuel, Mayor  
Chicago City Hall, Room 507  
121 North LaSalle Street  
Chicago, Illinois 60602

Barbara Byrd-Bennett  
Chief Executive Officer  
Chicago Public Schools  
-and-

David Vitale, Chair  
And All Members  
Chicago Board of Education  
125 South Clark Street  
Chicago, Illinois, 60603

AN OPEN LETTER SEEKING JUSTICE  
IN THE SCHOOL CLOSING CRISIS

The undersigned are attorneys who serve or have served residents of Chicago's poorest communities. Together we reflect many decades of experience working with lower income children, youth and families in communities of color.

Our City is in a crisis about the planned closing of neighborhood-based public schools. Specifically, as many as 54 Chicago Public Schools will be closed and 61 building structures emptied in addition to school "turnarounds" and consolidations which will dramatically alter the school environment for vulnerable elementary students. More than 47,500 elementary students will be affected including more than 3,906 students experiencing homelessness and 2400 students requiring special education services. No such massive school closure has been attempted in the history of our City or our nation. This alone must give all reasonable people pause.

Moreover, this massive undertaking is being executed in advance of the delivery of a 10 year school facilities master plan, as required by Illinois law, to be developed with the full involvement of the parents, teachers, and residents of the school communities. As the saying goes, measure twice, cut once. Closing schools before sharing a clear, well-thought out plan for the City's educational and economic future signals a perilous lack of accountability from our public administrators. Without such accountability, the proposed plan could be a recipe for disaster. Sadly, we won't know until it's too late.

Overwhelmingly and almost exclusively, the communities of Chicago targeted for massive school closures are those on the City's South and West Side: communities that are dramatically impoverished and predominantly comprised of African Americans. Such disparity is at best unsettling and is, indeed, provoking racial and economic divisiveness. Tensions run high before the actual closures have even been approved.

The Illinois School Code emphasizes that school actions such as these “have a profound impact on education in a community” [5/34-18.43(a) (5)]; must be “equitable” and “should include the input of the community to the greatest extent possible.” [id.] It notes that the individual school is “the essential unit for educational governance” and squarely asserts that “the primary responsibility for school governance and improvement is in the hands of *parents, teachers and community residents* at each school.” [5/34-18.43(a)(6)]

Now, after more than three months of a public vetting process in which as many as 20,000 Chicagoans spoke up, we are confident of one thing: substantial members of the affected school communities are opposed to these actions; feel disenfranchised in the process; and are terrified for the safety, educational future and well-being of the children, families and communities that will be affected. In short, despite the public vetting, these communities do not feel that their concerns are credited and do not embrace this radical approach.

We have seen displacement of thousands of students during this past decade of school closures, consolidations and turnarounds and, based on experience, are wary of assurances that the massive displacement of children at risk -- low-income children of color, children who are homeless, and children with special needs -- into other struggling schools will be accomplished safely or will benefit these students in any real measurable way. Little evidence exists that it has in the past. *See* CReATE Research Brief on School Closures, March 2013, examining relevant studies and critiquing CPS rationales at: <https://www.dropbox.com/s/tq712v9x47gkajo/CReATE%20Research%20Brief%20%235%20School%20Closures%20March%202013.pdf>

Yet forced school changes with all their grave uncertainties can have a dramatic negative impact and destabilize the neediest students. *See, e.g.*, Chicago Coalition for the Homeless analysis of CPS data which shows 8% of students affected by proposed closures and consolidations are students experiencing homelessness, 92% are low-income and 88% are African American. <http://www.chicagohomeless.org/cps-school-closures-impact-homeless-children/>

The proposed removal of so many schools from impoverished communities of color has been read as an ominous statement on the prospects of those living there. It only adds to the distress and despair, creating a feeling that the City is disinvesting where economic growth and stability is so important –and that we are a City divided.

Members of the Chicago Educational Facilities Task Force (appointed by the Illinois General Assembly), local aldermen, state legislators and numerous community

organizations which have studied the likely impact of these actions and scoured and challenged the data propounded by CPS publicly urge that these massive proposed school closures be halted by CPS; that a true 10 year school facilities master plan as required by Illinois law first be developed with the full involvement of the parents, teachers, and residents of the school communities; and that the racial and economic implications of any proposals be fully considered.

For all these reasons, and because access for impoverished and disadvantaged families and communities to the critical decision-making process for schools is an issue fundamentally of justice, we, the undersigned attorneys, join in those recommendations.

Please direct your response to Paul Strauss at the Chicago Lawyers' Committee for Civil Rights Under Law, Inc., 100 N. LaSalle St., Suite 600, Chicago, IL 60602, (312) 202-3649, [pstrauss@clccrul.org](mailto:pstrauss@clccrul.org).

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