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On Chicago Mass School Closings

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As Director of the Center for Child and Adolescent Psychotherapy at the Chicago Institute for Psychoanalysis, I work in programs at schools in the Engelwood and Woodlawn communities, where we provide group counseling to students in several schools and mental health consultation to teachers, students, and staff in another. As we have helped the children in these schools deal with emotional problems so they can become more effective learners, we have also learned invaluable lessons from them. The most important lesson is that these schools are special places in the lives of children – far more than bricks and mortar. While schools are places of learning and social interaction, they serve additional purposes in the inner city. These schools are vital to the community and represent a home away from home, a place of protection, continuity, and safety where youngsters can be safeguarded from the outside world – from adversity, poverty, violence, and a lack of neighborhood resources. Schools represent children’s potential and hope for the future, a safe haven where they can imagine the possibilities for themselves.

School communities are built on a network of important relationships. While the primary relationship is between the child and teacher, other relationships within the school – the principal, assistant principal, classmates, older and younger students, the security guard – all these people provide an integral role in supporting children and helping them thrive. The continuity of these relationships is critical for children whose lives may be frequently disrupted by trauma or loss. Without this kind of stability and continuity, children have a difficult time engaging in learning or even feeling like learning matters to them.

Many of these school children are living in urban battlefields scarred by gangs, drugs, and violence. Some of them have been traumatized, often as witnesses or victims of violence that pervades their neighborhoods. The psychological implications of exposure to violence in children cannot be overestimated – it is destructive, can be life altering, and often leads to behavioral, social or academic problems.

The closing of a school represents yet another traumatic loss for children who already feel devalued and disregarded by circumstances beyond their control. The school offers these children a sense of place and meaning in a protective, nurturing community that knows, values, and respects them. As the needs of children are disregarded, they may begin to disregard themselves and others, thereby contributing to all of the problems that make education in the inner city so challenging.

Indeed, there are many problems in inner city schools and reform is urgently needed. But closing these schools is not the only solution, and furthermore, it is a solution that disregards a child's right to the safety, security and continuity that makes learning possible. CPS has demonstrated a disregard for the health and well being of these children and their families through its handling of the slated closures. Because the closings were announced before they were definite – children, teachers and school administrators have been placed in a situation of uncertainty and the anxiety of not knowing what will happen to them. They have been told that these closings are for their benefit, even though those benefits are far from clear to them, and what they feel is uncertainty, anxiety and loss. Despite this uncertainty, CPS has assigned outsiders to go into each school to help bridge this transition. These are people the children do not know or trust, while the people the children do know and trust are given scripts to program their communication, rather than being allowed to help the children deal with the fears and anxieties that inevitably accompany such disruption in their lives. Children, parents, principals, teachers, and all the staff that make a school a community feel devalued by this impersonal and unrealistic handling of these closures. The challenges of real educational reform for the lives of some of the city's most vulnerable children in some of the city's most poorly resourced neighborhoods will not be solved by these school closings. The only solutions that will work must take into account the emotional needs of the children within these schools.

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