

A Perfect Storm: Chicago's School Closings and Students of Color with Special Needs

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On May 22nd, the Chicago School Board of Education will decide whether to approve the largest set of school actions in the history of the U.S, including 54 school closings, 11 school co-locations, and 6 school turnarounds. Recently a group of parents, in conjunction with the Chicago Teachers Union (CTU), filed a civil rights lawsuit against CPS alleging that these school actions violate the Americans with Disabilities Act. These events highlight some implications of these school actions for students of color with special needs. My argument is that the combination of (a) the magnitude of the proposed school actions, (b) the speed in which these actions are expected to take place (a few months), (c) the characteristic and needs of these students, and (d) the already-existing racial disparities in Chicago creates a “perfect storm” in which students of color with special needs will be the most affected.

The magnitude of CPS school actions cannot be overlooked: their impacts will be felt in different ways by 46,562 students, of which 80% are African American and 16% are Latinoⁱ. Within this number are over 6,400 students with special needs (students who have an Individual Educational Plan, or IEP), of whom 2,331 are enrolled in the closing schools. CPS school actions will require taking a close look at thousands of IEPs to ensure that the impacts of these actions do not result in violating the provisions of services established for each student. This is a titanic task, as services cannot be provided in a generic way, but rather on individual bases as mandated by the Individual with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). Violating any IEP provision constitutes a violation of the federal IDEA law. Rushing to evaluate thousands of IEPs, communicate with thousands of parents, and then make sure that the services needed are provided in all affected schools, within a few months, creates a fertile ground for not meeting students' IEP provisions.

Take, for instance, the time needed to train teachers. CPS promises that schools receiving special education students will be trained to address the unique needs of all incoming students. This will most likely entail a short-term training with little opportunity for practice and coaching, which is not sufficient to effectively prepare teachers to work with students with diverse needs. For example, the children with hearing impairments at Jackson elementary are going to a school where the teachers are not trained in sign language. Lafayette elementary (a closing school) has a special program for students with autism who are included in the general education classroom for part of the day. Training teachers in American Sign Language, or learning to work with students with autism, cannot be achieved in a few months. Therefore, these students with disabilities will inevitably be placed in schools that are not ready for them.

Furthermore, many of students of color with special needs affected by the school actions are included in the general education classroom. Inclusion is a complex and time-consuming process that demands trust and relationship building, and the development of a sense of belonging. These take a tremendous amount of effort and time from school professionals, parents, and of course,

from the students themselves. CPS has stated that students with special needs will go to schools that can meet their IEP's goals and services, but this will often mean that they may end up attending different schools than those receiving their former general education peers. In any case, students with special needs may be included in general education classrooms inhabited by students they have never met. The effort towards inclusion of thousands of students of color with special needs will be set back as they move to new school communities in where relationships and trust will have to be rebuilt.

The issue of class size is an additional concern. Classroom sizes in the receiving schools will grow as a result of the school actions, and some are projected to be overcrowded. A recent report by WBEZ and Catalyst Chicago Magazine found that more "than 1,560 homerooms in Chicago public elementary schools are over the school district's class size limit"ⁱⁱ. Concerns about class size need to be contextualized with the fact that Illinois School Board of Education is currently discussing lifting the cap size of special education students in *any* classroom, which would allow CPS to overcrowd special and general education classrooms. Overcrowded classrooms will pose an extra challenge to include students of color with disabilities, as teachers may not be able to serve them properly when teaching large classrooms. Oversized classrooms may also discourage IEP teams from placing students in the general education classroom, as the general education teachers may have too many students to serve the individual needs of students with disabilities. This would further exacerbate a situation in which students of color already are less likely to be included in general education classroom compare to their White peers: while 60% of White special education students are included in the general education classroom for at least four-fifths of the school day, only 45% of African American special education students are included at this rate. CPS' proposed school actions stands to worsen these racial disparities, as these school actions would disproportionately affect African American students.

Students of color with disabilities are particularly affected by commuting through unsafe neighborhoods. Children attending the targeted schools walk through some of the most dangerous and violent parts of Chicago. Students with disabilities face heightened risks when negotiating unsafe areas, particularly in terms of vulnerabilities to gang activity and harassment. Children with cognitive learning problems, autism, behavioral and emotional difficulties, ADHD, and sometimes students with learning disabilities struggle picking up social cues, tend to have compulsive behaviors, and they may also have low self-esteem. These characteristics put them at a higher risk to be the victims of, and participants in, acts of violence. CPS' proposed safety plans have already been criticized by hearing officers who reviewed them recently, for reasons including the lack of appropriate guidelines, transition plans, and staffing, these kinds of concerns are elevated to a greater level in light of the absence of consideration of the special needs and risks presented by special education students.

In conclusion, the magnitude and speed of the proposed school actions are likely to create a perfect storm that is poised to particularly jeopardize the educational experiences of students of color with special needs. These students are the most vulnerable, as they experience a kind of double jeopardy: their exclusion and disadvantage are aggravated by the interaction of multiple factors affecting them in light of their special needs and the disproportionate risks faced by racial minorities. Any discussion of the impacts of school closings cannot decouple special educational needs from the historical discrimination and structural inequalities experienced by African

American and Latino youth, whose schools already cluster in hyper-segregated locations within the city of Chicago. Careful attention is needed to plan school transitions in ways that can avoid the likely negative impacts described in this article. The short timeline allowed for the proposed massive closings will not suffice to prevent a perfect storm.

ⁱ<https://www.dropbox.com/s/3uudoz589252g5k/CREATE%20Researchers%20on%20Impact%20of%20Proposed%20School%20Actions%204-10-2013.pdf>

ⁱⁱ <http://www.wbez.org/node/107196#data>