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Chicagoland Researchers and Advocates
for Transformative Education

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CReATE Research Brief on School Closures

When a school is closed, the facility is shut down, school staff is displaced, children are sent to other schools, and the community loses a vital resource. If Chicago Public Schools (CPS) follows the city's Commission on School Utilization March 2013 recommendations, 80 CPS neighborhood schools (13% of the entire system) will be closed, disrupting the lives of nearly 25,000 children. CPS expects that students will need to travel an added 1 to 1½ miles to get to their new schools. Over the years, CPS has mobilized three different types of arguments to justify school closings: underperformance, cost savings, and underutilization. We examine each of these here.

Underperforming schools

In the current round of school closures, the Chicago Public Schools has stated that it is not closing schools based on performance, but is looking strictly at the utilization of a facility. However, throughout the 2000s, the predominant justification by CPS for closing schools was the need to shutter or turn around underperforming schools as measured by standardized test scores and attendance. It is useful to examine the evidence on how these recent school closures impacted student academic performance in Chicago. This can give us insight on what can be expected with the future round of closures.

Students from turnaround or closed CPS schools who moved to academically stronger schools, and/or schools with strong student-teacher relationships, experienced the greatest gains from school closures.¹ However, the reality of school closures in the CPS system suggests that students accessing academically stronger schools are the exception, not the rule. A 2009 study by the University of Chicago Consortium on Chicago School Research (CCSR) found that 82% of students from 18 elementary schools closed in Chicago moved from one underperforming school to another underperforming school, including schools already on probation.² In a follow up 2012 report, the CCSR determined that 94% of students from closed Chicago schools did not go to "academically strong" new schools.³ According to the 2009 CCSR study, "One year after students left their closed schools, their achievement

in reading and math was not significantly different from what we would have expected had their schools not been closed."⁴ The authors conclude that, overall, there were no significant positive or negative effects on academic achievement resulting from the closure when students transferred to comparable schools.

On the other hand, a study by Kirshner, Gaertner, and Pozzoboni (2010) contradicts the no-effect findings when examining comparable transition schools.⁵ The authors found that students who transitioned into new schools following closure scored lower on tests one year after closure; they were at an increased risk of dropping out, as well as an increased risk of not graduating. Interview data from this study suggests closure was viewed negatively by transitioning students and imposed a stigma upon them that followed them into their new schools. The researchers found that test score trends on standardized tests for transfer students declined after the closure was announced. Test scores for students from the cohort that transferred to other schools continued to decline for two standardized test administrations after the closure announcement.

School closings will also negatively affect the achievement levels for students in the receiving schools. A Michigan State University study found that "while the closing of low-performing schools may generate some achievement gains for displaced students, part of these gains will likely be offset by spillover effects onto receiving schools." For one thing, closings often lead to increased class sizes and overcrowding in receiving schools. As a result, the pace of instruction is slower and the test scores of both mobile students and non-mobile students tend to be lower in schools with high student mobility rates. One study comparing the curricular pace of stable schools and highly mobile schools in Chicago found that highly mobile schools lagged behind stable schools by one grade level on average.⁶

In various cities, school closures have led to several negative experiences for displaced students, including a doubling of the likelihood of dropping out of school, increased school violence, lowered likelihood of enrolling

in summer school programs in the summer following school closure, higher rates of school-to-school mobility, disrupted peer relationships, and weaker relationships with adults.⁷ Closures disrupted relationships students had established with adults and other students at their closed schools, leaving the students with few social and emotional supports to help them adjust to the challenges of the new school.⁸

Underutilization and cost savings

In the current round of school closures, Chicago Public Schools leaders have changed tack and instead are focused on saving the district money by closing underutilized schools. CPS claims they are facing a \$1 billion deficit in their budget for the school year 2013-2014. However, CPS's past history of budgeting should give caution. Comprehensive Annual Financial Reports from the school years 2011-2012 and 2010-2011 show that CPS has a recent history of overstating their budget troubles. In the 2011-2012 school year, the Chicago Board of Education (BOE) approved a budget with a \$214 million deficit. However, CPS ended the school year with a \$328 million surplus. And again, the BOE approved a budget anticipating a \$245 million deficit for the 2010-2011 school year, but the district ended that school year with a \$328 million surplus. In both cases CPS's budgeting was off by \$500 million dollars.⁹

Nonetheless, CPS estimates that they will save between \$500,000 to \$800,000 annually for each school closed. According to these estimates, if CPS closes up to 80 schools, it will gain between \$40 million and \$64 million from savings achieved by avoiding building upkeep and operational expenditures like heat and daily maintenance.¹⁰

CPS's estimates of how much they will save on closures are based on the assumption that CPS can lease, sell or repurpose 50% of the shuttered buildings. CPS is already having difficulty disposing of the schools they have already closed. A Pew report determined that the City of Chicago was only able to sell, lease or repurpose 17 of its closed school buildings between 2005-2012. During that same time, 24 closed school properties remained on the market, constituting 58% of the CPS closed school properties that had originally been placed on the market.¹¹

This is consistent with nationwide trends. Another 2011 Pew report summarizing the research on school closings in six cities showed that school closures did not save the school districts as much money as was hoped. In addition to the inability of these districts to sell or lease their properties, closure-related costs cut further into savings, as districts found themselves paying for closed school site maintenance or demolition, moving services, and support for both displaced students and the schools that received them.¹² Closures have many upfront and, in some cases, hidden costs, as a recent audit of the 2008 Washington D.C. school closures conducted by the Office of the D.C. Auditor underscores. The audit determined that instead of saving the district \$30 million, as claimed by former schools chancellor Michelle Rhee, the closures actually

cost the city \$40 million after factoring in the expense of demolishing buildings, removing furnishings, and transporting students. Further, the district lost another \$5 million in federal and state grants as students left the system, many to the charter schools being built in tandem with the closings.¹³

Chicago Public Schools claims that Chicago's population loss is the reason why schools are underutilized. CPS officials point to Chicago's population loss over the last decade (resulting in 144,035 fewer children living in Chicago from 2000 to 2010) as creating 139,000 empty seats in CPS. However, according to a WBEZ analysis of CPS's Racial/Ethnic Survey data, the school system only reported a loss of 31,500 students during this period.¹⁴

Utilization is based on the physical size of a school and the number of students occupying a classroom. The Chicago Board of Education has determined that 30 children in a classroom is the ideal or most efficient class size for Kindergarten through eighth-grade classes. Classrooms under 30 students are deemed underutilized. By these standards, CPS estimates that 50% of its neighborhood schools are underutilized, and nearly 140 are half empty.

It is questionable whether 30 students per class should be the standard for the ideal utilization of a classroom. The Student Teacher Achievement Ratio (STAR) program initiated in Tennessee in the late 1980s has yielded the most comprehensive and credible studies on the impact of class sizes. In the STAR program, students and teachers were randomly assigned to two types of classes: a small class with an average of 15 students or a regular class with an average of 22 students. After four years, researchers determined that the difference of seven students had significant impacts on student achievement. Students from the smaller classes outperformed students from larger classes by the equivalent of three additional months of schooling in the first year.¹⁵ Studies of STAR also determined that African American students, lower-income students, and students from urban areas benefitted the most from smaller class sizes.¹⁶ Additionally, CPS's calculations of utilization fail to account for students with disabilities, although in many of the targeted schools 20-30% of students are challenged by a learning disability. These students require a class size of 10 to 15 students, but the 30-student formula does not take this into consideration.

Relation between closures and charters

Chicago Public Schools and charter schools operators consistently claim that school closures have nothing to do with charter schools and that CPS will not repurpose the closed schools into charter schools. Briefly, charter schools are funded with public money but are privately operated (either by for-profits or non-profits) and therefore are removed from public decision-making processes. Charters are not accountable to the elected Local School Councils made up of teachers, parents and community members.

Instead, an unelected Board of Directors helms each charter school. Charter schools admit students from across the city and select their students by an application process, test scores, and/or lottery draw. As such, charter schools do not have to admit the local neighborhood children.¹⁷ Charter schools also have a history of excluding students with learning disabilities and special needs, expelling students for discipline policy violations at higher rates than CPS, and excluding poor test takers and English Language Learners.¹⁸

Advocates of charter schools claim that the lack of union and public involvement allows the schools to innovate and elevate academic performance. This claim does not hold under scrutiny. According to CPS's own data, an average charter school performs 10 percentile points below comparable (in terms of racial composition and number of students qualifying for Free or Reduced Lunches) traditional schools on reading test scores.¹⁹ Charters also consistently underperform by 12 percentile points on reading and 2 percentile points on math test scores relative to comparable public magnet schools.²⁰

There are many reasons to believe that school closures are directly related to the expansion of the charter school system. First, the budget deficit, in part, can be attributed to the costs of expanding the charter school system. In FY 2012, \$350 million was budgeted for the Office of New Schools, the office devoted to developing new charter and contract schools. For the upcoming fiscal year, CPS allocated an additional \$23 million to fund new charter schools, nearly half of what they estimate they will save if they close 80 neighborhood schools. In addition, the United Neighborhood Organization (UNO) was successful in lobbying the Illinois General Assembly for an additional \$35 million to expand their charter school network in 2012, at a time when the state cut over \$200 million from the public school budget.

Second, there is a strong local and national trend of converting closed public schools into privately operated charter schools. Forty-two percent of all closed public schools across the U.S. have been turned into charter schools. Chicago parallels that trend, with 40% of its closed public schools converted into privately operated charter schools.²¹ Moreover, the reopened charter schools did not necessarily benefit neighborhood children. A study of closed neighborhood schools that were reopened as charter schools in Chicago showed a transformation in the student body attending these reopened schools. The new students tended to be more affluent, with higher prior achievement, and fewer of them had special needs. The schools also served fewer students from the neighborhoods in which the schools were situated.²²

Additionally, charters do not save the district money. CPS compensates organizations for approximately 75% of charter schools' operational expenses. Charters also receive funds from a combination of state and federal grants, non-profit grants and fund raising. In addition, many of the charter replacement schools lease their school building from the district. When examining the lease agreements between CPS and various charter schools, the Chicago Teachers Union found that CPS leased a significant

number of the public buildings to privately operated charter schools for just \$1.²³

Third, Chicago Public Schools currently has plans to expand their charter system. In 2012, CPS signed the Gates Compact with the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation (a non-profit that financially supports the expansion of charter schools). As part of the Gates Compact, CPS pledged to open an additional 60 charter schools in the near future. Already CPS has plans to open 13 new charters in 2013, despite their claim that the system is underutilized. If the future location of charter schools mirrors the existing trends, then the new charter schools will be located in the neighborhoods facing traditional public school closures (see below).

Fourth, charter schools have created the conditions under which traditional neighborhood schools are considered underutilized. CPS has allowed charter schools to proliferate and absorb nearly 53,000 children into their system as of 2013, up from just 5,525 students who attended charter schools in 2000.²⁴ Furthermore, the district added more charter schools to the system at precisely the time it was experiencing declining enrollment. For example, in 2000, CPS had 432,000 students and 597 schools. In the current school year, CPS has 403,000 students and 681 schools. In this way, the proliferation of charter schools is a significant contributor to the underutilization that those CPS schools in danger of closure may be experiencing.²⁵

Finally, the people in charge of the closure process and Chicago Public Schools leadership are supporters of charter school expansion. The current CPS CEO, Barbara Byrd-Bennett, is a Broad Foundation executive coach, training superintendents in the principles of business model school reform. The Broad Foundation invests millions in transforming schools into more privately controlled entities and seeks to train the next generation of leaders to realize the charter school takeover of the public schools. A recent memo issued by the Foundation proposes what the *Washington Post* quotes as "a series of strategic shifts in the foundation's education programs designed to 'accelerate' the pace of 'disruptive' and 'transformational' change in big city school districts."²⁶ The Broad Foundation released a 2009 report detailing the political tactics and strategies public officials should employ when conducting mass school closures. We see many of their recommendations implemented in this current round of school closures in Chicago, including: using the language of how a school is designed for X number of children but only Y number are using it; emphasizing declining enrollment; stating that the current use is an inefficient utilization of facilities; and insisting that closures will allow officials to "right-size" the system.²⁷ Additionally, CPS' communications department acknowledged that the Walton Foundation, founded by the family who owns Wal-Mart, gave CPS a grant for \$478,000 to finance the community engagement process around the "utilization crisis."²⁸ The Walton Foundation is an avid supporter of charter school proliferation, giving \$700 million to "choice" schools in a bid to transform public education into a privately controlled domain.

Racial Disparities of School Closings

School closures are especially contentious in Chicago as they disproportionately affect working-class communities of color.²⁹ Since 2001, 98 of the 100 schools being closed or phased out in Chicago have been located in predominantly African American and Latino communities.³⁰ Of the 129 schools CPS identified as underutilized in February 2013, 88% of the students attending these schools are African American, with 103 of the schools composed of a student body that was over 90% African American. Nine of the 129 schools have student bodies that are predominantly Latino.³¹

Disinvestment in public schools and empty buildings will deepen the hardship confronting neighborhoods already suffering from community disinvestment and may contribute to even further population loss of African Americans in Chicago. For example, WBEZ aggregated data on abandoned properties, city-owned vacant lots, and community area census figures from the city's data portal site, and mapped them on top of the locations of the schools targeted for potential closure.³² They found that school closures directly correspond to the locations of troubled mortgages, foreclosures, and population loss. Closing neighborhood schools will discourage people from moving back into these disinvested communities. Furthermore, closures may exacerbate tensions between communities and lead to violence. Since 2004, school closures that transfer students to schools outside their immediate neighborhoods have resulted in spikes of violence in and around elementary and high schools.³³ We strongly caution policy makers to consider the added stressors that closures bring to these communities.

School closures also disproportionately impact African American teachers. The Chicago Teachers Union reports that African Americans made up nearly 40% of all CPS teachers in the 1990s. By 2012, that proportion was reduced to under 20%.³⁴ In previous rounds of Chicago school closings, 65% of the teachers displaced were African American women.³⁵ A 2012 report by the Consortium on Chicago School Research on school closings and turnarounds determined that, "The teacher workforce after intervention across all models was more likely to be white, younger, and less experienced, and was more likely to have provisional certification than the teachers who were at those schools before the intervention."³⁶

Conclusion

At present, the data reviewed in this research brief does not support Chicago Public Schools' claim that closures are a viable solution to the current issues in the district. Instead, their greatest potential is to inflict deeper harm on African American and Latino/a communities. In addition to the current issues of privatization (via charter school

expansion) and displacement, massive school closings are poised to continue the legacy of mass displacement, marginalization and isolation of low-income communities of color in Chicago. Contributing to our concern is the revelation by the *Chicago Sun-Times* that Tom Tyrell, a former Marine colonel whose military credentials include hostage negotiation in the war in Kosovo, has been appointed by CPS as the official in charge of administering school closings. As CReATE, we are charged to pose the following question: If CPS has hired a former military official to administer school closings, what is the assumption of the central office regarding the potential of conflict if the closures are implemented? In so doing, we predict a heavy-handed response from law enforcement if the current closures, which do not even serve their stated purposes, are implemented.

Notes

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Public education in a democratic society is based on the principle that every child is of equal and incalculable value. This guiding principle requires the fullest development of every member of our nation. Effective public schools are necessary to enable every member of our nation to reach his or her fullest potential. Schools in a democracy aim to prepare the next generation to be knowledgeable and informed citizens and residents; to be critical thinkers and creative problem solvers; to be prepared to contribute positively to communities, workplaces, and societies that are characterized by diversity and inequities; and to be healthy, happy, and prepared to support the well-being of others with compassion and courage. The children and youth of Chicago deserve no less.

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