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Child mental health experts raise serious concerns about the impact of proposed mass school closings on Chicago students

Today, several notable social workers, counselors, and child mental health professionals from prominent Illinois and Chicago organizations and universities submitted a set of statements to the members of the Chicago Board of Education detailing their serious concerns about the potential negative impact of school closings on Chicago Public Schools (CPS) students' social-emotional health.

Tomorrow, the Board of Education is scheduled to consider approving up to 54 school closings and consolidations.

The experts shared their statements at a press conference held at Roosevelt University and sponsored by Parents United for Responsible Education, a Chicago public school parent advocacy organization, with support from members of the Chicagoland Researchers and Advocates for Transformative Education (CReATE).

PURE began reaching out to various child development experts for substantiation of the concerns raised at school closing hearings by parents and others for the emotional well-being, safety, and social adjustment of Chicago students, and found that parents' concerns are echoed by research and experience of experts in the field.

The proposed school closings and consolidations will affect as many as 47,000 children in mostly low-income, under-resourced communities. Mental health experts know that these children and their families are already disproportionately affected by the cumulative effects of multiple stressors, impairing students' ability to engage positively in school. The disruption resulting from closing so many schools in such a short time without adequate preparation or support is likely to create a variety of new stresses and problems for these children, interfering with their socio-emotional and academic development.

Among those speaking at the press conference were

- Ann Aviles de Bradley, Assistant Professor, Department of Educational Inquiry and Curriculum Studies, Northeastern Illinois University
- Daniel Cooper, Assistant Director, Institute of Public Safety and Social Justice, Adler School
- Francisco X. Gaytan, Assistant Professor School of Social Work, Northeastern Illinois University
- Erin Mason, President, Illinois School Counselors Association
- Cassandra McKay-Jackson, Assistant Professor, Jane Addams College of Social Work, University of Illinois at Chicago
- Erika Schmidt, Director of the Center for Child and Adolescent Psychotherapy of the Chicago Institute for Psychoanalysis

The experts' shared concerns

Included in the concerns raised by these experts were:

Transitions/Mobility:

Erin Mason, in her statement on behalf of the Illinois School Counselors Association, wrote that transitions for some students result in academic difficulties, social/emotional problems, decline in self-concept, poor motivation, decreased attendance, and increased dropout rates. She cited one study that found that ***all students that move from one school to another have more trouble and more problems than other students.***

She added that the negative effects of mobility include lower test scores, lower grades, decreased level of high school completion, students being more likely to repeat a grade, students having difficulty creating peer relationships, and behavioral problems. Mason further stated that:

States, schools, and districts need to recognize student mobility as ***a barrier to success***, understand how it impacts academic achievement and must learn ways to address the issues relating to mobility.

Adjustment: NIU's Ann Aviles de Bradley pointed out that students from closing schools will likely experience a period of adjustment; the processes in place at the welcoming school to help new students adjust will be critical. Students who have difficulty adjusting may lose ground academically, become withdrawn, depressed or even aggressive.”

CPS has failed to provide needed support even for its most vulnerable homeless children. Ann Aviles de Bradley added that ***“instability in both home and schooling environments is associated with the poorest educational outcomes.”***

Relationships: According to Erika Schmidt, director of the Center for Child and Adolescent Psychotherapy, 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.***”

UIC's Cassandra McKay-Jackson added, Low attachment (or school detachment) is related to ***higher levels of violent behavior and aggressive beliefs, more negatively perceived school climate, and lower academic motivation as well as higher risk for school dropout.***”

Student safety: Mason states that basic safety is a primary need to be met for all children. The closing of schools may pose greater danger for some students who must travel further to get to school or who must travel across known gang lines or through unsafe areas. As a result, ***students may experience anxiety, fear and thus may be more likely to be absent, tardy, to skip school, receive suspensions or show a decrease in academic performance.***

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Support services: NIU's Francisco Gaytan stated that linking narrowly about academic performance measures and immediately apparent financial issues, ignores the intricate roles that schools play in the lives of all students. He pointed out that the complex lives of newcomer immigrant youth and Latinos often require a single, easily and regularly accessible site, where comprehensive and culturally sensitive services are available. Schools often are the only site that plays such a role in the lives of Latinos and immigrants. He added:

As one of the rare institutions that welcomes all, closing down a nearby neighborhood school would place a large burden on many immigrant Latino families when the ***school is quite possibly the only social service that they can access.***

Current supports viewed as inadequate

Many of the experts mentioned that ***significant cut-backs in mental health services*** make mass school closings even more problematic. Moran pointed out that:

Providing critical services for students experiencing mental health has become more difficult due to the closure of several community-based centers. Further, Illinois ranks third in the nation for cuts to mental health services and funding for community mental health services for children has been reduced by 13 percent between fiscal year 2009 and 2012. CPS has a ratio of approximately 1 social worker for every 1,000 students, which is well above the ratio recommended by the National Association of Social Workers, which is a ratio of 1:250.

The efforts CPS has made so far to address these concerns have fallen far short of what our experts consider appropriate. Aviles de Bradley said, "the current whole class exercises that have been reported in some closing schools are simply inadequate to meet the myriad of complex individual needs of children and their families."

Schmidt added,

CPS has demonstrated a disregard for the health and well being of these children and their families through its handling of the slated closures....CPS has assigned outsiders to go into each school to help bridge this transition. These are people the children do not know or trust and those 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 attend 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.

According to Aviles de Bradley,

Moving students to unfamiliar schools, individuals and environments will certainly impact their social and emotional wellbeing. Failure to critically examine and understand these potential outcomes is not in the best interests of students, families, schools and their respective communities. Specifically, closing and/or consolidating an unprecedented number of schools without sufficient resources and explicit plans in place to address the many needs of all students, will likely result in increased behavioral and emotional problems, ultimately having a

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negative impact on students, teachers, schools and communities. As thirteen of the hearing

officers noted in their reports, there are not adequate plans in place for the safety needs of students, families and communities. This lack of planning and resources will be especially harmful to students experiencing poverty and homelessness. ***To minimize and ultimately eliminate the negative social-emotional impacts on students, a reconsideration of the proposed school actions must occur.***

McKay-Jackson added,

When school detachment is coerced it could be likened to a traumatic event that occurs without any preparation, shattering feelings of security and promoting a feeling powerlessness and vulnerability to a potentially dangerous world. By laying this understanding of trauma over the current proposal of school closings I suggest that this process of forced school detachment may have greater ramifications for affected students later in their school years.

Recommendations

Our experts had many recommendations for an improved process that might lessen some of the negative effects they identified.

For example, McKay-Jackson urges school leaders to involve students in their deliberations:

Engaging student voice and their meaningful participation in positive decision- making also fosters social emotional development. Yet through the exclusion of student voices from the school closure conversation there has been a missed opportunity to support future school attachment. If schools are in fact a forum by which our society generates an active citizenry and further advances a nation's progress, exclusion only reinforces a sense of powerlessness, and an historical pattern of divestment of schools that serve youth in low-income neighborhoods and those of color. Supporting student voice does not require adults to abdicate their decision-making roles but it does invite youth to participate in joint problem solving, promoting an equity-based reform that requires participation of those who are intended to receive support and who have been most affected by inequitable policies.

Mason's statement for the Illinois School Counselors' Association includes a detailed list of recommendations, including creating a transition team at each school that would include parents, counselors, and school social workers and using school social workers to offer positive programs to address student, family, and school community needs.

PURE's response

Parents United for Responsible Education is grateful to all of these highly-qualified child development professionals who took the time to respond to our request for their expertise on and opinions about how Chicago's proposed mass school closings may affect our children. As noted above, these experts' concerns echo those of many parents who spoke out during the hearings and in other venues and events over the past months.

We have been more than disturbed by the apparent lack of attention by CPS leaders to parents' concerns and to similar issues raised by education experts, including CPS teachers. We hope that today's presentation by child development professionals will be seriously and thoughtfully considered by those leaders before making a decision that clearly has the potential to cause a great deal of harm to so many children.