

Moving Beyond Déjà Vu Reform

**Why Chicago Children Need
A Fresh Start, Not More Upheaval**



**A report by
The Chicago Teachers Union**

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- ***CPS and the Board of Education are pushing ahead without addressing the legitimate concerns of parents, teachers and other stakeholders—and without considering alternatives.*** Even if CPS feels strongly that the closure or consolidation of a particular school is justified, district officials should hear the concerns of parents, students, teachers and the entire community, and strive to address these concerns. Although CPS has scheduled a number of public hearings, its chief executive officer and the Board of Education president personally have attended virtually none of these hearings. CPS's leaders have not fully explored all other options, including existing reform initiatives that are already bearing fruit.
- ***There is a positive alternative to CPS's closure and "turnaround" proposal: Fresh Start.*** Students at Chicago's *Fresh Start* schools have made impressive learning gains thanks to this initiative, which was launched jointly by CPS and the Chicago Teachers Union in 2005. Expanding *Fresh Start* and reducing class size in neighborhood schools that are struggling the most is a strategy that offers real hope—most importantly, without dislocating more students, their families and teachers. Studies show that children who move from one school to another can lose months of learning, a loss that can be devastating for a child's educational success. By contrast, researchers who studied "turnaround" schools could not find one that was able to sustain academic improvements.
- ***CPS's selection process for choosing schools to close or consolidate was seriously flawed.*** In some cases, the selected schools violate CPS's own standards. In other cases, the chosen schools have made significant academic progress. In still other cases, CPS may have understated the utilization rates of schools.

- ***CPS has never provided a valid explanation for how it identified the “turnaround” schools.*** The district’s formula apparently focused on test scores without accounting for numerous other factors that strongly influence student achievement. In fact, the high schools that CPS wants to designate as “turnaround” schools are performing no worse than other comparable CPS high schools.
- ***CPS’s proposal would not move students to schools that are truly academically superior.*** CPS officials say these closings and consolidations are necessary so they can “do something dramatically better” for students. But once test scores are statistically controlled to reflect student mobility, family income levels and other critical factors, the picture that emerges is startling: Overall, the schools to which these students would be moved are *not* academically superior to the current schools they attend.
- ***The way CPS has written its closure-turnaround plan will make it far tougher for Chicago to attract and retain quality teachers.*** Teachers are more than willing to be held accountable, but they shouldn’t be the only ones who are held accountable. CPS’s plan continues a pattern of reform that scatters children and uproots teachers, creating an unstable environment that encourages more and more teachers—both new and experienced—to leave. Teacher attrition in Chicago is already costing taxpayers more than \$86 million annually. Several of the schools slated for closure or consolidation are struggling largely due to high turnover among their administrative and teaching staff.

I. Introduction

In the 1993 motion picture “Groundhog Day,” actor Bill Murray plays a TV weatherman named Phil Connors who is covering the Groundhog Day ceremonies in Pennsylvania. When Connors awakens the following morning, he discovers that everyone else thinks it is still February 2. Connors can’t get his producer or anyone else to realize they’ve already lived through Groundhog Day. The following morning, another February 2 dawns, and Connors realizes that townspeople are simply repeating the same ritual they did the day before.

Many parents, students, teachers and other stakeholders of the Chicago Public Schools (CPS) are feeling the same sense of frustration that Phil Connors felt in “Groundhog Day.” But what is playing out in Chicago is not happening on a movie set—it is real life.

Consider the pattern of the past 10 years. In 1997, CPS officials decided to “reconstitute” seven high schools. In 1999, CPS implemented a “reengineering” plan for additional high schools. Since the 2001-02 school year, more than 60 Chicago schools—an average of nearly 10 schools per year—have been closed, consolidated or reconstituted by CPS due to low academic performance, declining enrollment or other reasons. These actions caused significant disruption for thousands of students, their families, communities, teachers and staff.

This year, in the immortal words of Yogi Berra, “It’s déjà vu all over again.” Despite widespread concerns and many unanswered questions, CPS leaders are determined to fast-track yet another round of school closures, consolidations and relocations that will disrupt the lives of thousands of students and their parents, while creating greater uncertainty and unrest among teachers and staff.

CPS Chief Executive Officer Arne Duncan has said the plan is essential “to challenge the status quo, to do something substantially better.”¹ But the plan doesn’t meet Duncan’s own standard for two reasons. First, this plan *continues* the status quo by calling for more school closings and reconstitutions. In fact, two of the high schools whose teachers and staff will be reconstituted—Orr and Harper—would suffer the same fate they did 11 years ago when most of their teachers had to reapply for jobs.² Second, CPS can’t promise students “something substantially better” because the receiving schools are not statistically better in academic terms than the schools the schools proposed for closure or consolidation. In addition, CPS proposes to carry out its plan in ways that violate a policy to which CPS agreed in 2007.

It’s time for CPS and the Board of Education to turn off the auto-pilot, treat parents, educators and other stakeholders as valued partners, and temporarily suspend their school closure-consolidation plan until they have conducted a thorough reassessment of its impact on students, families and communities.

It’s time for CPS and the Board of Education to turn off the auto-pilot and treat parents, educators and other stakeholders as valued partners by postponing their school closure plan until a thorough assessment is done.

II. What Would CPS’s 2008 Plan Do?

The CPS plan unveiled Jan. 24 would significantly impact 19 Chicago public schools in the following ways:

- **Closures or consolidations** – A total of 10 schools would be closed or consolidated. They are: Excel-Orr High School, AASTA-Orr High School, Mose-Vines High School, Johns Middle School, Miles Davis Academy, Midway Academy, Carver Middle School, Abbott Elementary, De La Cruz Elementary and Gladstone Elementary.
- **Phaseout schools** – Two schools would be “phased out,” meaning no additional students would enter these schools, but they would remain open to serve existing students. This could eventually mean the loss of a neighborhood school. These schools are: Irving Park Middle School and Andersen Elementary.
- **“Turnaround” schools** – One high school and four elementary schools would be designated as “turnaround” schools and would be overseen by the newly created CPS Office of School Turnarounds.
- **Relocated schools** – Two schools, Roque de Duprey Elementary and Edison Elementary-Gifted Center, would be relocated to new buildings.

Once again, CPS will reshuffle students and teachers as if they were a deck of playing cards. And, once again, it appears that CPS is making these changes with little thought of the “big picture”—of how these changes may hamper efforts to improve student achievement, maintain the trust of parents, and retain dedicated teachers and staff.

The decision to close or consolidate a school should be made only after all other options have been explored.

A school district should allocate public tax dollars in a cost-efficient manner that prioritizes students’ needs. No responsible stakeholder has argued that all schools with sharply declining enrollments should be kept open indefinitely. The decision to close or consolidate a school should be made only after all other options have been fully explored. Even then, a closure or

consolidation should be implemented with careful planning for the transition that fully involves and respects the affected students, parents, teachers and staff. Effective educational decision-making is data-driven. What demographic data is CPS using to guide its decisions?

III. CPS’s Forceful Push for More School Closings

The determination of the Board of Education and CPS to secure fast-track approval for its school closure-turnaround plan suggests they have forgotten about the *public* in public education. The president of the Local School Council for Edison Elementary-Gifted Center said CPS officials have treated their plan like “a done deal.”³ Consider the following:

- The very timing of the plan’s release—announced the day *after* the Board of Education’s Jan. 23 meeting—suggests that CPS and the Board aren’t interested in what the public thinks. Why wasn’t a significant proposal like this released a couple of days earlier so parents, teachers and the community could have used the January meeting’s public participation portion to share their views?
- At the Board of Education’s last meeting, Board President Rufus Williams was asked by the Chicago Teachers Union if he and other voting members of the Board would attend the upcoming public hearings scheduled to allow public input on the closings, he replied, “We don’t go to all the hearings. We may not go to any.”⁴

- Williams' criticism of Local School Councils (LSCs) as "flawed" and his call for weakening the role of LSCs have been seen by many in the community as the Board's desire to curb the voice and involvement of parents.⁵
- When parents of one elementary school expressed concerns that their children would be transferred to a middle school campus, the response of David Pickens, the district's deputy CEO, was disrespectful. "It's nonsense. They're all the same kids," Pickens told the *Chicago Tribune*.⁶ No parent should be insulted by CPS for voicing his or her legitimate concerns about their 6- and 7-year-olds attending a campus that serves middle-school-age students.

The district's CEO and Board president have attended virtually none of the public hearings on the proposed school closings and consolidations.

Even if CPS feels strongly that the closure of a particular school is justified, the district owes parents, students, teachers and the entire community ample opportunities to be heard. CPS should welcome, not ignore, questions and concerns from these stakeholders. After all, these questions present CPS with an opportunity to reassess its proposal. Exposing decisions to public scrutiny and justifying them should not be viewed by CPS officials as an inconvenience—it's their *responsibility*. It's how a public school system is held accountable to the public.

In its own briefing document, CPS identifies "[o]ther uses of the building" including real estate "development" as one factor it used to choose which schools it should close or consolidate. Why is the potential for real estate development considered a valid reason to uproot thousands of students and hundreds of teachers and staff?⁷

The relationship between CPS policies and real estate trends has been studied by Kenneth Saltman, a professor of education policy at DePaul University. Saltman has examined the Chicago Housing Authority's practice of shifting public housing to mixed-income developments that have drawn the interest of private developers and corporate investors. After mapping the public schools that CPS had closed or consolidated over the past several years, Saltman found that the vast majority of these schools were situated in the same neighborhoods as the Authority's mixed-income developments.

"The common denominator in the school and housing transformations is that private investment in public services is shifting governance from the public to private entities at the expense of Chicago's poor and working class communities," Saltman wrote. "This has been very lucrative for developers, corporate investors and private-management companies, but it has been tragic for residents."

IV. A Positive Alternative: Fresh Start

CPS can do more to raise student achievement by building on its successful collaboration with the Chicago Teachers Union and expanding the *Fresh Start* initiative. *Fresh Start* was launched in eight low-achieving schools in 2005.

Three years into *Fresh Start*, there are ample signs that it is having a major and positive impact on student achievement. Several *Fresh Start* schools have recorded double-digit gains in student achievement. Among the six participating elementary schools, reading scores on the Illinois

Standards Achievement Test (ISAT) have jumped an average of more than 17 percentage points in only three years. Most of these schools have seen their math scores climb at least 20 points during this same period. Science scores on the ISAT have also improved at all of these schools.⁸ Before *Fresh Start*, most of these schools had high rates of teacher attrition. Today turnover rates are much lower. Although *Fresh Start* high schools are not seeing a similar jump in test scores, the initiative has brought focus and stability to schools that were seeing high rates of teacher attrition.

Fresh Start schools provide high-quality professional development in areas such as classroom management, strengthening teachers' ability to keep students focused on academic tasks. At each school, the teachers and principal jointly develop a plan for curriculum and instruction that is based on a comprehensive school reform model whose success has been confirmed through extensive research.⁹ *Fresh Start* isn't a cookie-cutter approach. Participating schools can choose

Reading scores at *Fresh Start* schools have jumped more than 17 percentage points, and math and science achievement has also improved.

from various instructional programs whose success has been validated by extensive research. CTU has asked the district to work with us to expand the *Fresh Start* initiative to additional schools; CPS has declined.

What do we know about the "turnaround" model embraced by CPS officials? It allows students to remain in their school as new teachers and a new principal move in. Under the CPS plan, the Chicago-based Academy for Urban School Leadership (AUSL) will receive \$10.3 million from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation to "transform" three high schools over the next several years and expand its teacher residency program.¹⁰

Compare the existing *Fresh Start* with CPS's turnaround-closure approach.

- First, the student achievement data tips heavily in *Fresh Start*'s favor because we are already seeing the impressive gains this initiative has produced. By contrast, Andrew Calkins of the Mass Insight Education and Research Institute said, "We spent two years looking at turnarounds and could not find a single example of turnaround work that was successful and sustained and done on scale, not just one school." It's no wonder why a Chicago newspaper recently referred to CPS's turnaround approach as a "roll the dice" strategy.¹¹
- Second, an analysis of CPS's proposed closure-consolidation plan reveals that students would be moved to receiving schools that are *not* measurably better than their current schools. So what is the point of moving these students?
- Third, CPS's proposal would only exacerbate an existing problem: student mobility. Low-income students are already three times more likely to change schools frequently than upper-income students.¹² Research links higher mobility to lower student achievement.¹³ It is very difficult for a teacher or principal to truly get to know a student who transfers into a school four months into the school year. The periodic waves of school closures and consolidations in CPS magnify these consequences. As the founder of the Network for Equity in Student Achievement has written, low-income students are "those who need stability the most."¹⁴ A school consolidation creates instability for students at both the closing school *and* receiving school. Julie Woestehoff, executive director of Parents United for Responsible Education, has asked "how many more

thousands of children will have their lives turned upside down and fall behind academically in this next round of closings?”¹⁵

- Fourth, another round of closings and consolidations will have a negative effect on student safety, discipline and socialization. In some cases, the proposed school consolidations would mix students from neighborhoods with rival street gangs. In another case, a school for the gifted is being consolidated with a non-gifted middle school.¹⁶ There are no clear indications that CPS officials have developed specific interventions or plans to address these challenges. Last year, a study released by a University of Illinois-Chicago professor examined the last wave of closings and consolidations. According to this study, teachers and staff in the receiving schools “had inadequate preparation for an influx of new students,” experienced “increased discipline problems and concerns about school safety” and faced other new pressures.¹⁷
- Fifth, *Fresh Start* is more likely to succeed than CPS’s proposal because *Fresh Start* treats teachers, staff and principals as partners in the process, not as adversaries. Journalist and author Karin Chenoweth studied high-achieving urban public schools, and she identified several factors that heavily influenced these schools’ success, including: “Teachers feel supported.”¹⁸ Instead of CPS’s punitive, wholesale approach of dismissing hundreds of teachers, *Fresh Start* uses a peer mentoring and evaluation program for both new and veteran teachers. This program provides support and assistance that enhances the quality of instruction.

CPS has made several bold claims about the success of its closure and “turnaround” strategy, but these claims don’t hold up under scrutiny.

CPS’s Duncan has cited Sherman School and Harvard Elementary as two schools “we turned around” using the so-called turnaround model.¹⁹ In both of these schools, the entire faculty was dismissed and a new faculty was hired. But has the turnaround model really transformed these schools? Within one year after Sherman was reopened as a “turnaround” school, one-third of the new teachers had left. Even though the 70 percent of the teachers who stayed are doing a commendable job, student mobility and absenteeism remain high. The teachers and staff who remain there deserve credit for some progress, but they have succeeded in spite of an environment that no one should replicate: high rates of student mobility and high teacher turnover.

It’s too early for anyone to make claims about Harvard Elementary because the turnaround model was launched there just last fall. Therefore, there is no test data to assess what impact, if any, the program is having.

Duncan has cited Dodge School as an example of what can happen when a school is reconstituted. He points to improved test scores to prove his case. He also argues that Dodge still is a “neighborhood school,” just as it was before its staff was turned upside-down. Duncan doesn’t admit, however, that the Dodge School neighborhood has been gentrified with the construction and sale of high-priced townhomes. Although, technically, it may still be a neighborhood school, the student population at Dodge has changed significantly in terms of family income. Although we can commend the efforts of the teachers and staff at Dodge, it is misleading for CPS to compare current test scores with those of four or five years ago.

Earle School is another “success” story that CPS points to, and it should. Yet this school did not use the “turnaround” strategy that CPS is promoting; the faculty at Earle was not fired. Indeed,

the school finally has a stable and effective administration after years of topsy-turvy changes in principals. The current principal and staff are working as partners, and its progress reflects the value of collaboration and continuity.

Finally, CPS has yet to explain the impact that these closings and consolidations are likely to have on class sizes at the receiving schools. There is no indication whether CPS has investigated this impact and, if so, explored any instructional or organizational strategies to mitigate any negative effects.

Reshuffling teachers at the affected schools can also undermine successful school improvement. A 2002 study of Chicago elementary schools found that a powerful factor shaping school improvement was whether staff within a school trusted each other.²⁰ An environment of trust means teachers are more likely to discuss their academic challenges and collaborate on effective strategies. Building this trust is extremely difficult in an unstable environment like CPS, in which teaching staff are regularly reshuffled like a deck of cards.

V. Four Reasons Why CPS Should Suspend Its Plan

1. CPS's selection process for choosing schools to close or consolidate is seriously flawed.

The Chicago Teachers Union believes that the process CPS relies on to select schools for closure or consolidation is seriously flawed. CPS officials have painted a picture that wrongly implies that all of the schools proposed for closure or consolidation fit the traditional definition of an underutilized school—namely, a school with a static attendance zone whose enrollment has steadily declined. In some cases, declining enrollment was accelerated by the way in which a school's attendance zone was changed over the years. In other cases, even where enrollment has declined significantly, the school doesn't meet CPS's criteria for other reasons. Consider these examples:

- ***Ignoring its own standards***— Last year, the Board of Education adopted a policy governing school closures, declaring that no elementary school would be closed for academic reasons if that school “has a new principal who has been in place for two academic years or less.” Neither Gladstone Elementary nor Copernicus Elementary has a principal whose tenure has spanned two academic years. This same policy declares that a school will not be closed for academic reasons if “there are no higher performing schools in close proximity” to the school.²¹
- ***Disrupting progress at Fulton***— Fulton Elementary is one of the schools on CPS's proposed “turnaround” list. Its selection comes in spite of the fact that Fulton has doubled the percentage of students performing at or above grade level. This is remarkable progress for a school that has had four different principals over the past four years. Ironically, CPS's proposal to reclassify Fulton and dismiss its teaching staff was released only four days before the state superintendent of education announced that Fulton earned a 2007 Academic Improvement Award. In this letter, State Superintendent Christopher Koch stated “how pleased we are with the efforts you and your staff have made to help

Fulton was targeted despite the fact that Fulton has doubled the percentage of students performing at or above grade level — remarkable progress for a school that has had four principals over the past four years.

students demonstrate academic improvement over the last three years.”²² Fulton’s principal, its Local School Council chairperson and its No Child Left Behind chairperson recently delivered an open letter to CPS, pleading with the district to allow the school to continue their reading program and other model programs. The letter warns officials that Fulton students “will be left behind if the (turnaround) proposal is implemented as presented.”²³ Fulton met the requirements for becoming a *Fresh Start* school, but a CPS official discouraged the idea.²⁴

- **Targeting a school on the upswing** – CPS proposes to consolidate Abbott Elementary even though the school was just removed last year from state “improvement status” because it met its “adequate yearly progress” for two straight years. CPS’s utilization assessment of Abbott apparently doesn’t include the usage of the Choir Academy Charter School and the Near South Child Development Center, a preschool program for infants through 4-year-olds that is operated by Easter Seals. Rita Washington, manager of the Easter Seals center at Abbott, has warned that closing the Near South Center would have “a devastating effect on the community” because it is the only infant-toddler, full-day program within the neighborhood.²⁵
- **Raising student safety concerns** – De La Cruz Elementary is one of the schools proposed for consolidation. De La Cruz parents are understandably concerned that their children would have to cross multiple lanes of busy traffic on Damen and/or Western Avenues to reach Finkl Elementary—the designated receiving school. In addition, De La Cruz Elementary is reportedly at 61 percent of capacity, a utilization rate that CPS has identified as being within the ideal utilization range.
- **Understating utilization at Andersen** – Parents and staff at Andersen Elementary are upset about CPS’s designation of the school as underutilized. One researcher said that based on class size limits for special education students and the need for “pullout” rooms to serve students in regular classes, Andersen’s utilization figure is well above the 47 percent cited by CPS. “Their criteria for space utilization do not take into account legal requirements which limit the number of kids in each special ed class,” said Rod Estvan, a special education advocate with Access Living.²⁶
- **Forgetting about meals at Carver** – The principal at Carver Middle School, which is targeted for closing, has been at the school for less than one academic year. This fact violates the spirit—if not the letter—of CPS’s policy on school closures. Yet closing Carver Middle is not a smart choice for other reasons. First, Carver Primary School, unlike the middle school, has no kitchen facility. Instead of being served a hot, fresh meal, is CPS going to rely on microwaved food to feed students at the receiving primary school? Getting a straight answer to this and other questions has been difficult for parents and the Carver community. Second, potential savings from closing (and eventually selling) the middle school are minimized by the fact that the boilers and piping to heat Carver Primary School are housed within Carver Middle. CPS will need to continue maintaining and operating this heating equipment.
- **Turning full circle at Orr** – Some of the schools targeted for closure or consolidation have gone through one form of consolidation or “reinvention” in recent years. Orr High School is an example. A few years ago, students and staff were reshuffled at Orr, and the high school was divided into three smaller schools. Now, CPS is turning full circle, and parents are deeply frustrated by CPS’s circular scheme. “First, they break up [Orr], then they put it back together,” one parent recently told the *Sun-Times*. “They don’t know

what they're doing. They're just using our kids as experiments."²⁷ At least two of the three Orr campuses have experienced high turnover of principals or teachers in recent years, and CPS's plan includes no long-term strategy to specifically address principal and staff attrition.

- ***Moving a “receiving” school to a closing school*** – CPS created Midway Academy in 2005, and its purpose—in CPS's own words—was to “serve as a receiving school for several nearby schools” that faced “severe overcrowding.”²⁸ For Midway's status to change in the space of *only three years* from a “receiving” school to a closing school strongly suggests that CPS officials are making decisions about facilities in a haphazard. These decisions do not appear to be based on a long-range, facilities utilization plan. Moreover, these decisions do not seem to be based on the academic and social needs of students and their families.

Airline pilots are trained to avoid turbulence, but CPS seems to welcome it—despite the negative impact on children and families.

Unfortunately, this has become a pattern. A few years ago, CPS poured millions of dollars into Bunche Elementary for renovations, but then closed it anyway and transferred its students to other schools.

The issue of underutilized schools should be approached with great sensitivity to the community and with an eye to all options that maximize educational outcomes, not just the close-and-consolidate mindset. Even if a school's closure can be justified after a careful consideration of all options, how such a decision is carried out has a crucial impact on student learning and public support for our schools.

Sadly, the “full speed ahead” approach that CPS is taking will continue what has been a multi-year pattern of upheaval and dislocation for more than thousands of Chicago students and hundreds of their teachers.²⁹ Airline pilots are trained to avoid turbulence, but CPS leadership seems to welcome it—despite its negative impact on children and families.

Under CPS's plan, children have neither names nor faces; they are only a head count. When one CPS official referred to a group of 1,500 students affected by the closings and consolidations, he said, “That's less than one-half of 1 percent of (all) students.”³⁰

2. CPS has never provided a scientifically sound basis for how it identified the “turnaround” schools.

Concerns about the likely success of the turnaround approach are amplified by the pseudo-scientific way in which the designated turnaround schools were chosen. The selection criteria focused on test scores without properly adjusting those scores to account for other crucial factors such as students' socioeconomic status, mobility rates, special needs status, and English language proficiency.

The American Federation of Teachers examined test score data for the high schools that have been proposed for “turnaround” status and compared the last four years of test scores with a comparison group of high schools whose student populations were statistically similar—factoring student mobility, special education participation and limited English language proficiency and other characteristics that are known to influence student achievement. Without these adjustments, the average CPS high school *appears* to have test scores that are nearly three

times higher than the newly proposed “turnaround” high schools. But the difference in scores between the two groups is statistically insignificant once the proposed “turnaround” high schools are compared to statistically similar schools.³¹

In simple terms, the students at Harper and Orr, the high schools targeted as “turnaround” schools, are *not* achieving at levels below those of comparable students. Therefore, there is no scientifically valid, academic reason for singling out these high schools. CTU is not satisfied with the academic progress of these schools, but we believe it does a disservice both to students and staff at Harper and Orr to label these schools as acute failures.³²

The notion behind the “turnaround” concept is that replacing teachers and other staff will turn schools around. Ironically, the Gates Foundation already helped to fund a staff replacement program in three of the four high schools designated as “turnaround” schools. Under its newly announced plan, CPS is again using Gates Foundation funds to essentially do the same thing.

Blaming teachers and staff is the easy way out for CPS officials who have never assumed their share of accountability. Teachers and staff at nearly all of the designated turnaround schools have been struggling to raise achievement largely because of issues and obstacles beyond their control. Howe Elementary is a case in point. Teachers and staff at Howe report persistent shortages of basic school supplies, high rates of student mobility and serious tensions among the school’s administrators.

3. CPS’s proposal would not move students to schools that are truly academically superior.

In promoting their closure-turnaround plan, CPS officials have touted the opportunity to close underperforming schools and move these students to schools where they will receive a much better education. In making this pledge, CPS is relying solely on test scores, ignoring many factors that strongly influence those scores. Once test scores are statistically controlled to account for student mobility, family income levels and other critical factors, the picture that emerges is startling: Overall, the schools to which these students would be moved are *not* academically superior to the schools they now attend.³³

In fact, the difference in 2007 ISAT scores between the schools slated to be closed and the receiving schools is statistically insignificant. What is the benefit of moving so many students from one set of schools to other schools whose academic standing is almost identical?³⁴

This is another instance of déjà vu. Reviewing school closings from 2002 to the present, the *Chicago Catalyst* wrote that most of the 8,000+ students who were displaced were then “enrolled in schools that were not much better than the ones” they left behind.³⁵

4. The way CPS has written its closure-turnaround plan will make it far tougher for Chicago to attract and retain quality teachers.

Under the CPS plan, all of the teachers and staff in the eight closed or consolidated schools would be forced to “reapply” for jobs. However CPS tries to sugarcoat its proposal, the *Chicago Tribune* provided a reality check when it recently reported that the plan would “fire the staffs of eight schools.”³⁶

If there are teachers in these or other schools who aren’t cut out to teach, appropriate actions should be taken. Teachers and staff are willing to be held accountable, but they should not be the

only individuals in our system who are held accountable, and the process should be fair and sound. Unfortunately, if its plan is approved, CPS will do what no urban district can afford to do: scapegoat teachers—the very people whose best efforts are frequently second-guessed by a CPS hierarchy that hasn't stepped foot in a classroom in months, if not years.

Consider the context in which CPS is operating. Although teacher recruitment and retention is a challenge for most public school districts, it is especially challenging for urban school systems like CPS. Roughly half of all new teachers entering urban school systems leave within five years.

The stakes are huge—both academically and financially. Researchers have established a firm connection between teacher retention and academic progress. Linda Darling-Hammond, director of the National Commission on Teaching and America's Future, has cited research showing that experienced teachers are more effective than beginners at addressing instructional and classroom challenges. According to Arizona State University professor David Berliner, it takes between five and eight years for someone to master the art of teaching.³⁷ In other words, it is vital that CPS be successful at recruiting teachers *and* retaining them as they grow and master their instructional skills.

The financial costs of teacher attrition are huge. A recent national study reported that the average cost to taxpayers is \$17,872 for *each teacher* who leaves CPS. According to the study, the annual cost of teacher turnover in CPS is more than \$86 million, a figure that illustrates “that thousands of dollars walk out the door each time a teacher leaves ... (and) turnover costs become a drain” on a district's scarce resources.³⁸

Given both the academic and financial costs of teacher turnover, it's unthinkable that CPS would draft a closure-turnaround plan that disrespects teachers, sabotaging Chicago's efforts to recruit and retain talented teachers.

In a recent interview with CNN's Lou Dobbs, CPS's chief executive officer, Arne Duncan, downplayed the effect of displacing hundreds of teachers. “Great teachers (who must reapply) will find jobs in those schools or elsewhere,” Duncan said.³⁹ How can he be so sure of this? Duncan and other CPS officials fail to grasp that excellent teachers eventually will become so frustrated with a turbulent work environment that they leave. It's deeply stressful for any teacher who has built relationships with students, parents and colleagues at a school to suddenly see them scattered to different locations of the city.

Teaching has never been confused with a get-rich-quick scheme. Given the relatively low salary levels for the profession, it should surprise no one that a teacher's work environment is one of the leading factors shaping his or her satisfaction. Most teachers will not tolerate an unstable work environment for very long.

CPS should be acutely aware of Chicago's recruitment-and-retention crisis; after all, one of CPS's designated “turnaround” schools has a faculty of whom 81 percent have been hired within the past two years.

In order to improve student performance, Duncan has said “you have to bring in the best and brightest” teachers to Chicago.⁴⁰ Unfortunately, as *Time* magazine reported this month, “there's

Given the academic and financial costs of teacher turnover, why would CPS advance a plan that disrespects teachers, sabotaging Chicago's efforts to recruit and retain talented teachers?

evidence that the best and brightest (teachers) are the first to leave” when their work environment deteriorates.⁴¹ In other words, CPS one-dimensional focus on *recruiting* the “best and brightest” new teachers will all be for naught unless our district provides them with a stable and supportive teaching environment that makes them want to stay.

Last year, researchers at the Great Lakes Center for Education Research and Practice found that high rates of teacher attrition hinder successful reform because this attrition “impedes schools’ efforts to build professional learning communities and positive and stable school cultures” as well as “undermin[ing] the legitimacy of the schools in the eyes of parents.”⁴²

Linda Darling-Hammond, director of the National Commission on Teaching and America’s Future, has criticized schools that “are constructed as though teaching doesn’t matter” and “constructed as though relationships don’t matter.”⁴³

As CTU President Marilyn Stewart told CNN recently, “education is about creating stability in relationships.”⁴⁴ In other words, an optimal school is a community where expectations are made clear and where teachers, staff and students know and trust each other. This trust drives teachers and staff to share experiences and coach each other on strategies that work for students.

Unlike CPS, parents value the relationships that students and teachers form, and the continuity and stability of instruction. Juanita Nelson is one of many Chicago school parents who can’t understand why CPS would force all of these teachers and staff to reapply for their jobs. Nelson sends her daughter to Miles Davis Academy, and she frequent volunteers at Davis, a role in which she witnesses first-hand the extraordinary efforts of teachers and staff. “I see them teaching everyday and I see the love they have for the children, everybody from the security guard to the principal,” Nelson told the *Chicago Tribune*.⁴⁵

Although CPS officials have never been willing to say so publicly, there is an unmistakable and punitive message when an employer abruptly informs its employees that they must “reapply” for their jobs. Intended or not, the message sent to teachers and staff is unmistakable: it’s *your* fault that children aren’t scoring well on achievement tests.

This punitive message is at odds with the view of dozens of Davis parents. In fact, about 70 Davis parents attended a public hearing Feb. 4 to insist that the teachers not be left in limbo with no knowledge if or when they would be rehired. One of these parents said, “It would be a crime not to relocate (Davis) teachers with the students.”⁴⁶

Arne Duncan, CPS’s chief executive officer, acknowledges that “in any struggling school there are obviously some good teachers. Those good teachers have a chance to get hired either back or (at) a different school.” But good teachers deserve more than a mere “chance” at finding a job in a Chicago public school. Casting teachers into job limbo at a time when the economy is weakening and jobs are shrinking is no way to honor talented teachers. Duncan claims that teachers “that aren’t as strong don’t get hired back,” but how can he guarantee that the “good” teachers are hired back and the others are not? What scientifically valid measure is CPS using to govern the rehiring process? How will principals be selected, placed and inducted into their leadership positions? What targeted, research-based support systems for staff will be in place to advance student success?⁴⁷

The reality is that under CPS’s proposal, principals will be free to rehire whomever they want, and the basis for their decisions may or may not be educationally sound. No parent, teacher or taxpayer will ever know.

Are there better ways to strengthen the quality of teaching in CPS? Absolutely. One approach is the Peer Mentoring and Evaluation Program (PMEP) that is part of our *Fresh Start* initiative. PMEP is based on an award-winning program from Ohio that has strengthened the quality of teaching and helped identify those who may not have what it takes to be successful teachers.

VI. CPS Has a Choice to Make

Effective school reform requires focus, continuity and stability. The frequent reconstitutions, consolidations and closures that CPS has pursued—and *the way* it has pursued them—over the past decade create instability and disarray. This alienates parents, students and teachers, and punishes neighborhoods. We are concerned that CPS is so focused on launching a new wave of school closures and consolidations that its attention is being diverted from existing successes such as *Fresh Start*.

CPS has a real choice. It can continue engaging in déjà vu reform, which scatters students and teachers. Or CPS can significantly expand the *Fresh Start* initiative, which raises achievement without creating the dislocations of students, their families and teachers that result from endless closings and consolidations. We urge CPS and the Board of Education to pursue a different path:

1. **Slow down the speeding train** – CPS and the Board of Education should place their closure-turnaround plan “on hold” and reassess the assumptions on which it is based and the schools that it has targeted. As this report notes, some of the schools slated for closure or consolidation don’t even meet CPS’s own criteria for such drastic remedies. More public discussion and deliberation can improve this plan or identify better options.
2. **Expand the *Fresh Start* initiative** – Students at *Fresh Start* schools have made impressive learning gains. Expanding *Fresh Start* would extend the benefits to other schools and students—offering real hope without dislocating more students, their families and teachers.
3. **Reduce class sizes at schools that are struggling the most** – At times, CPS’s focus on smaller schools has tended to overshadow the need for smaller *classes*. As CPS’s promotional “Small Schools Get Results” website admits that when small schools are created, it is often “done without a reduction in class size.”⁴⁸ Far too many elementary school classrooms in our city have class sizes in excess of 30 children.⁴⁹ At Copernicus Elementary, one of the schools on CPS’s closure-consolidation list, some class sizes hover *near 40 children*. Numerous studies show significant achievement gains when elementary schools reduce class sizes. Last school year, it was reported that Chicago’s average class sizes were 2.3 students higher than those in New York City and 5.6 students higher than those in Los Angeles.⁵⁰

School improvement is not a solo exercise. It is the product of teamwork. Success will require CPS to move away from its top-down approach by partnering with parents, teachers and the community in meaningful ways. CTU believes that Chicago can have a school system that parents and the community are proud of. We hope that CPS will work constructively with us to make this vision a reality.

Notes

- ¹ Paul D. Bowker, "CPS to Close Schools, Fire Staff," *ChiTown Daily News*, Jan. 24, 2008.
- ² Kayce T. Ataiyero, "200 Teachers, 7 Principals Face Ax After Years of Poor Performance," *Chicago Tribune*, Jan. 24, 2008.
- ³ Carlos Sadovi, "School Closings in Flux, Chicago Board of Education Tells Parents," *Chicago Tribune*, Jan. 24, 2008.
- ⁴ From a transcript of the public participation portion of the Chicago Board of Education's Jan. 23 meeting.
- ⁵ An audio transcript of Board of Education President Rufus Williams' Oct. 2, 2007 speech to the City Club of Chicago can be accessed at "CPS Board President Hates LSCs," a post on Alexander Russo's blog, *District 299: The Chicago Schools Blog*, Oct. 25, 2007; see: www.district299.com.
- ⁶ Carlos Sadovi, "Parents Worry as School Officials Consider Combining Miles Davis Academy and Johns Middle School," *Chicago Tribune*, Feb. 5, 2008.
- ⁷ CPS School Consolidation Plan: Briefing Document for Stakeholders, January 2008.
- ⁸ These scores refer to the percentage of students who met or exceeded the standards set by the Illinois Standards Achievement Test. See: "ISAT Scores: 2001-2007," a fact sheet produced by Fresh Start Schools.
- ⁹ For more details on Fresh Start, go to the Chicago Teachers Union website at: http://www.ctunet.com/quest_center/fresh_start.php.
- ¹⁰ AUSL's Urban Teacher Residency program pairs recent college graduates and mid-career teachers with experienced anchor teachers who serve as their mentors for an intensive, year-long apprenticeship. During the year, teacher residents also earn a master's degree and state teaching certification. To gain acceptance into the program, teachers must commit to teach for at least five years in an underperforming CPS school.
- ¹¹ Kayce T. Ataiyero and Carlos Sadovi, "Brave New World for Chicago Schools," *Chicago Tribune*, Jan. 29, 2008.
- ¹² Paul E. Barton, *Parsing the Achievement Gap: Baselines for Tracking Progress*, Educational Testing Service, October 2003.
- ¹³ *ibid.*
- ¹⁴ Thomas Fowler-Finn, "Student Stability vs. Mobility," *The School Administrator*, August 2001.
- ¹⁵ "CPS's Poor Planning Provides Yet Another Excuse to Close Schools," the comments of Julie Woestehoff, executive director of Parents United for Responsible Education, posted on Dec. 19, 2007 at 12:22 p.m.
- ¹⁶ These schools are the Edison Gifted School and the Albany Multicultural Academy. See the transcript of: "Parents at Gifted School Protest Possible Move," *Chicago Public Radio*, Jan. 23, 2008.
- ¹⁷ Pauline Lipman, University of Illinois at Chicago, *Students as Collateral Damage? A Preliminary Study of Renaissance 2010 School Closings in the Midsouth*, in collaboration with the Kenwood Oakland Community Organization, January 2007.
- ¹⁸ "Finding High-Achieving Schools in Unexpected Places," a conversation with Karin Chenoweth, *Harvard Education Letter*, May/June 2007.
- ¹⁹ Arne Duncan was interviewed on CNN's "Lou Dobbs Tonight," Feb. 4, 2008.
- ²⁰ Anthony S. Bryk and Barbara Schneider, *Trust in Schools: A Core Resource for Improvement*, New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 2002.
- ²¹ Text of "Rescind Board Report 04-0225-PO2 and Adopt a New Policy on the Closing of Schools," which was approved by the Board of Education in 2007.
- ²² Transcript of a Jan. 28, 2008 letter from Christopher Koch, Illinois superintendent of education, to Warletta Johnson, principal of Fulton Elementary.
- ²³ Dr. Warletta Johnson-Brookins, Laddie Leason and Diana Bryant, "Robert Fulton Elementary School: Turnaround Proposal Response," a document presented to the Chicago Public Schools administrative office on Feb. 11, 2008.
- ²⁴ Letter from Chicago Teachers Union President Marilyn Stewart to Cheryl Colston, director of labor/employee relations for the Chicago Public Schools, Jan. 31, 2008.
- ²⁵ Curtis Black, "School Closing Numbers Challenged," *Newstip*, the website of The Community Media Workshop, Feb. 15, 2008.
- ²⁶ *ibid.*
- ²⁷ Maudlyne Ihejirika, "Duncan Defends Shakeup, But Parents Don't Buy It," *Chicago Sun-Times*, Jan. 25, 2008.

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- ²⁸ Jan. 24, 2008 letter from CPS chief executive officer Arne Duncan to teachers and staff members of Midway Academy.
- ²⁹ Paul D. Bowker, "CPS to Close Schools, Fire Staffs," *ChiTown Daily News*, Jan. 24, 2008.
- ³⁰ Maudlyne Ihejirika, "Duncan Defends Shakeup, But Parents Don't Buy It," *Chicago Sun-Times*, Jan. 25, 2008.
- ³¹ "An Evaluation of Chicago Schools Designated for Turnaround, Closing or Consolidation in 2008-09," a Feb. 19, 2008 memorandum from F. Howard Nelson of the American Federation of Teachers to Marilyn Stewart of the Chicago Teachers Union.
- ³² *ibid.*
- ³³ *ibid.*
- ³⁴ *ibid.*
- ³⁵ The Chicago Catalyst's finding was cited by: Pauline Lipman, University of Illinois at Chicago, *Students as Collateral Damage? A Preliminary Study of Renaissance 2010 School Closings in the Midsouth*, in collaboration with the Kenwood Oakland Community Organization, January 2007.
- ³⁶ Kayce T. Ataiyero and Carlos Sadovi, "Brave New World for Chicago Schools," *Chicago Tribune*, Jan. 29, 2008.
- ³⁷ Cynthia D. Prince, "Missing: Top Staff in Bottom Schools," *The School Administrator*, August 2002.
- ³⁸ Gary Barnes, Edward Crowe and Benjamin Schaefer, "The Cost of Teacher Turnover in Five School Districts," a study published by the National Commission on Teaching and America's Future, June 2007.
- ³⁹ Arne Duncan was interviewed on CNN's "Lou Dobbs Tonight," Feb. 4, 2008.
- ⁴⁰ *ibid.*
- ⁴¹ Claudia Wallis, "How to Make Great Teachers," *Time*, Feb. 25, 2008.
- ⁴² "Charter School Teachers 'Voting With Their Feet'," a news release on a study by the Great Lakes Center for Education Research and Practice, May 22, 2007; see: www.greatlakescenter.org.
- ⁴³ Interview With Linda Darling Hammond, *Only A Teacher*, a program of the Public Broadcasting System; for a transcript of the interview, see: <http://www.pbs.org/onlyateacher/today2.html>.
- ⁴⁴ Marilyn Stewart was interviewed on CNN's "Lou Dobbs Tonight," Feb. 4, 2008.
- ⁴⁵ Carlos Sadovi, "Parents Worry as School Officials Consider Combining Miles Davis Academy and Johns Middle School," *Chicago Tribune*, Feb. 5, 2008.
- ⁴⁶ *ibid.*
- ⁴⁷ Arne Duncan was interviewed on CNN's "Lou Dobbs Tonight," Feb. 4, 2008.
- ⁴⁸ "Small Schools: Frequently Asked Questions," a page from CPS's "Small Schools Get Results" website at: <http://smallschools.cps.k12.il.us/faq.html>.
- ⁴⁹ Rosalind Rossi and Art Golab, "Schools Are Top Scorers, But Have Jammed Classes," *Chicago Sun-Times*, Nov. 26, 2006.
- ⁵⁰ Rosalind Rossi, "Honey, Should We Shrink the Kids' Classrooms?" *Chicago Sun-Times*, Nov. 24, 2006.