SUMMARY:

- Closing schools for academic reasons is rarely a good idea
- Schools on probation are supposed to get assistance from CPS – what proof will the public get that the assistance was in fact provided, with a detailed explanation of what that assistance entailed, and an evaluation of why the assistance wasn’t successful in improving the school?
- The social and academic supports that the RECEIVING schools will get should have been provided to the school that closed
- The School Action remedies are not appropriate for low-performing schools; The CCSR’s 5 Essential Supports address the problems
- CPS has had problems rolling out the Performance Policy because it analyzes different data than the previous system. The Common Core State Standards go into effect next year, again disrupting trend data, an important component of the Performance Policy
- Charter schools are exempt from the process, as they are exempt from the Performance Policy (Board Report 10-0728-P04). Several charter schools are on probation and would qualify for a School Action
- Value-Added is a major component of this process yet it has been proven to be flawed on many levels
- Using Network averages is problematic because the range and diversity across the large geographies make the comparison of the schools biased, especially when magnet and gifted schools are included
- Using the 25th percentile on the growth component of the Performance Policy, a quarter of the schools will always be considered failing even if they’re doing well

The Chicago Teachers Union is very concerned about the draft of the Chicago Public Schools’ School Action Guideline Policy for several reasons, primarily the over-reliance on the Performance Policy.

The Chicago Consortium on School Research’s “Five Essential Supports” addresses the problems that schools face; closing, phasing out, restructuring/turning-around and co-locating schools are not remedies for low-performing schools. CPS keeps stating that “far too many underperforming schools are not preparing our children for college and career,” but CPS is not telling us what exactly it has tried to do over the years to help support struggling schools and there has not been a publicly stated hypothesis for why these schools continue to struggle. The “Five Essential Supports” have been calculated for every school in the district – why can’t CPS take this analysis and work with the schools to build up these supports? Why would closing, phasing out or otherwise restructuring a school solve the issue of under-performance?

Per Section B of the Performance Policy, CPS is supposed to “give assistance to Probation schools to ensure that all aspects of the plan, including the school budget, reflect and are tailored to the individual needs of the school and that the plan addresses the educational deficiencies at these schools.” When CPS releases the list this year, it should provide the public with an evaluation of the assistance it has provided to the school and an explanation about why this assistance has both been sufficient and not improved the school.

CPS and the Network Chiefs should already be monitoring all of the schools in the City of Chicago District 299 to ensure that each school receives the supports it needs in order for all students to achieve academic success. This School Action Guideline does not take into consideration the availability of important school supports until stage 3 – Transition Plans – and then provide those supports to the RECEIVING SCHOOL – which is much too late to help the students reach their full potential. This shows CPS’ lack of sincerity in ensuring that all schools are equally supported and “reflect a commitment to creating higher quality educational options for students”.

Per Board Report 10-0728-P04, charter schools are exempt from the Performance Policy as they are only held accountable to their approved charter. Since the first step of the School Action guidelines is to create a list of schools that have been on Level 3 probation for two consecutive years, and since there are in fact charter schools that qualify for said list, it is completely prejudicial to exclude charter schools. Students from the closing schools often go to charter schools that may, in fact, be performing no better than the school from which the students are coming. There are no provisions for this.
The use of a value-added metric in determining whether or not schools get on this list for possible school actions, is problematic. There is a large body of research that shows that “value-added” does not account for the severe disadvantages and lack of resources faced by students and schools staff in some communities. Value-added is not a valid measure of school performance and should not be used for high stakes decisions.

For high schools, this policy will include “Freshman On-Track” and “Drop-out Rate.” Measurement of these components are fraught with errors such as failing to account for grade repetition, student re-enrollments and transfers, and inconsistency, among others. Such measures can also be heavily biased against under-resourced schools. Does CPS plan to also include a calculation for how many high school students did not have a classroom teacher for the entire first month of school due to the “20th Day Rule?”

The FAQ on the CPS website verifies that there are problems with matching data on CPS Dashboard and the Performance Policy: “in many cases...does not have four years of data”, which causes inaccuracies in the trend score calculations. Thus, CPS will be making life-altering decisions to close community schools based on a system that has bugs and inaccuracies! When CPS switches to the Common Core State Standards next year, we’ll be back at the same problem.

In the second stage of the Guidelines, CPS proposes to take into consideration data analysis of various important elements with no mention of the metrics to be used, the method of data collection, and the ability of CPS to currently use this factor. The School Action list will be announced “on or before December 1, 2011”, a date by which it would be impossible to include this data analysis, making it a moot point.

CPS also proposes to analyze community and school feedback. CPS stated at the October 14, 2011 CEFTF meeting that it will not release the School Action list prior to December 1st – what, then, would the community and school feedback be based on? How will this testimony be weighted and considered in the ultimate outcomes? CPS officials stated at that same meeting that the public will have two months to comment and respond to being on the School Action list, therefore this step in the process is out of order and again, insincere and a moot point.

Additionally, CPS proposes to evaluate the historical context of the schools on the list to look at prior interventions, changes in school leadership and staff, and “other local school context.” From preliminary analysis by the CTU, low-performing schools tend to be those that have had many changes (such as new principals, new curriculum, new standardized tests, attendance boundary changes, loss of transportation, budget reductions, etc.) imposed upon them which create instability in the student population, staff and leadership, which undermines academic achievement. CPS does not currently maintain a database with this information, as far as the public is aware, and thus would again be unable to include this important analysis prior to the final School Action decisions in February 2012.

Finally, CTU looked at the SIPAA from an elementary school that fits the profile for a building subject to the School Action Guidelines. This school is located in a disadvantaged community and has high special education and homeless populations, and has had four principals in the last four years. The issues this school contends with illustrate the need for CPS to spend more resources supporting schools rather than excessively monitoring them. Too often, a school is put on the School Action list and then CPS gives the building to a charter school, which will not be held accountable! This particular school lost its Title I funds and was forced to cut full-day kindergarten, lay-off eight teachers hired to reduce class size, and lay-off six support personnel. How much will this new School Action Policy take into account these issues of funding reductions and leadership instability?

In conclusion, CPS’ draft School Action Guidelines do not address the issue of raising student academic achievement and CPS’ goal of providing “quality” schools in every community. The guidelines are more of the same failed policies and practices of previous CPS administrations: moving too quickly to close neighborhood schools and replace them with charter schools without ever demonstrating that CPS faithfully tried to adequately support struggling neighborhood schools.