



NEIGHBORHOOD CAPITAL BUDGET GROUP

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Chicago Public Schools Board of Education Meeting
Testimony on NCBG's Schools Task Force Recommendations for an
"Alternative School Closing Process & Policy"
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Submitted by Andrea Lee,
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To the Chicago Public Schools Board of Education,

My name is Andrea Lee and I'm the director for NCBG's Schools Initiative Program. Today I am here to represent **NCBG's Rebuild Our Schools Task Force**, a coalition of LSCs, parents, community groups, and leaders from across Chicago who advocate for high-quality schools with adequate facilities that enhance opportunities for our children and meet the needs of our communities.

First, I'd like to begin by showing support for schools that are denouncing Renaissance 2010 and asking CPS for their voices and recommendations from the ground to be heard. This includes the Save Senn HS Coalition, the Little Village / North Lawndale TAC, and Carver Military Academy that wishes to change its military program, but not through the R2010 initiative or by losing its LSC. NCBG's support also goes towards all of the schools out there that resisted school closings as CPS' only strategy for change, all of the newly constructed schools that are simply being deemed Renaissance 2010 schools, and all of the principals, teachers, and LSCs out there who have asked for autonomy and have great visions for their schools, but are prohibited to implement these creative ideas due to CPS' restraints. What we've learned after 4 years of closing schools and from the continuous community protests is that communities want to be involved from the bottom-up when decisions are being considered, not from the top-down *after* decisions have been made, much like the Renaissance 2010 and school closings process resembles.

However, the **real purpose** for being here today is to **respond to and deliver NCBG's Schools Task Force recommendations for CPS' call for community input** on its process for closing schools, announced on November 17th. Calling for input into the process is a good start and we must make note of this attempt to improve policy, however, we believe that CPS can do better in terms of soliciting more substantive feedback from the public and addressing how CPS will seriously commit to amending its school closing policy. Our Schools Task Force and school partners were very disturbed that CPS is not intending to amend its existing policy, but that instead it is going to develop guidelines for closing schools, not amend its policy. NCBG believes that **in order for CPS to make a genuine good faith effort to convince the public that it wants to create a fairer, transparent, and more systematic approach to closing schools, then CPS must change its School Closings and Consolidation Policy (04-0225-PO2).**

As such, **the NCBG's Schools Task Force calls on CPS to not close any more schools** until it has amended its existing **School Closing Policy to reflect a fairer, more consistent, and more systematic process and policy** when making decisions to close and consolidate schools.

Long before CPS closed the most schools yet in June and before Renaissance 2010 was announced, NCBG's *Rebuild Our Schools* Task Force has held an ongoing education campaign on improving the process for school closings so that decisions are transparent and that school closings are implemented fairly and systematically across Chicago. A **model policy will not leave room for inequitable or racist claims** as to how CPS decides to close its schools.

Since February 2004, NCBG's *Rebuild Our Schools Task Force* has solicited ideas and recommendations to achieving a fairer, transparent, and more systematic approach to closing schools. In particular, the *South Side United LSC Federation and Designs for Change* looked critically at the document to provide many specific recommendations, and as such, this **document truly represents all our voices in communities all across Chicago**. NCBG's **call for an "Alternative School Closing Process & Policy"** to CPS' current practices and policy is joined by education advocates from organizations and schools across the City who have agreed that CPS needs to re-examine its School Closings and Consolidation Policy (04—0225-PO2) so that its process and policy is **transparent and implemented fairly and systematically throughout Chicago**. All of the **leaders and representatives who endorse a call for an Alternative School Closing Process & Policy have agreed that CPS' School Closing policy and process has not achieved these goals, and have been a part of the dialogue towards offering solutions** to improve the school closing process and policy as seen in this document. In fact, you may view the attached document of 62 community groups, organizations, and schools that we know have participated in the input process for creating this document and we are calling on CPS to hear and accept these recommendations called upon by education stakeholders across the City.

Additionally, as a matter of good public policy, NCBG's *Rebuild Our Schools Task Force* and partner allies strongly encourage **CPS to convene school reform leaders, parents, and other stakeholders to draft and finalize an amended School Closing Policy** of which this document may be used as a model for the discussion. CPS should additionally obtain **public input prior to voting** upon the amended policy.

The Schools Task Force's "Alternative School Closing Process & Policy" prefaces that:

"CPS work with the community to draft a new policy that is consistent with the above and the policy recommendations outlined in this document, followed by public hearings prior to approving the new policy.

CPS makes a **conscious planning and decision-making effort to limit the number of school closing** and consolidations, knowing that:

- ✓ **Schools are anchors and public assets** in our neighborhoods with great potential to serve, stabilize, and revitalize our communities.
- ✓ **Student mobility disrupts learning.**
- ✓ **Small class sizes and small schools are better learning communities**, particularly for low-income communities, communities of color, and those that are already academically struggling.
- ✓ **Many schools will be required to accommodate a re-population** of future families moving into the neighborhoods, so preserving and enhancing our schools instead of closing them temporarily, or even permanently, must be carefully considered. Closing schools and selling the valuable buildings and land to make a profit without a careful projected demographic and fiscal analysis may not be fiscally responsible over time.

In situations where CPS is faced with a decision to close a school, it is the responsibility of CPS to always provide **timely notification** to **all involved** in any potential school closing decisions. These school closing decisions will be based upon multiple criteria, not one determining factor or number. Whereas in the past, CPS closed schools due to capital repair needs, **CPS should not shut a school down because it chose to not invest in and improve the building's facility**. Furthermore, while no schools should pose a legitimate **Health, Life, Safety** threat under any circumstances, **CPS should not close** a school for this reason and CPS should find an alternative space so that the school may continue to function without closure during these repairs.

Given that stability, community, and opportunity is very important to learning, all children that were forced to transfer due to CPS' decisions to close a school should be entitled to **remain at their school of choice until graduation**, and where applicable, transportation will be provided by CPS.

Thus, as school closures and student mobility should be prevented and pre-empted through improved planning strategies, CPS' newly amended School Closing Policy would require a **long-term, transparent, and strategic plan for identifying in advance potential schools that may be candidates for school closure.**"

Our Alternative School Closing Policy provisions address what is currently lacking in CPS' existing policy:

- 1) Transparency of school closing decisions, which are based on more than one factor;
- 2) A fair and systematic policy so that we aren't questioning why other schools w/similar characteristics aren't closing);
- 3) Adequate and timely notification and communication of school closings to all stakeholders, proposed closing and receiving schools, families, and communities affected;
- 4) Genuine support and review of local alternative recommendations to closing schools. In our document, we refer to this as an *Alternative Educational & Facilities Plan*;
- 5) More community-driven, inclusive, and coordinated planning to determine what is best for a particular community's school. Strategic planning is also needed to limit forced mobility due to school closings;
- 6) Adequate preparation time for public hearings, and modeling public hearings from the LSC Principal Contract Hearing Process, using an outside arbitrator from the American Arbitration Association;
- 7) Enabling LSCs to be involved in the school closing process and having the ability to vote on these decisions;
- 8) A systematic School Closings Check-List of criteria that is applied fairly to all schools to determine a pool of schools that may be considered;
- 9) A School Closing Impact Analysis on the schools to be closed and the receiving schools that is made public; and
- 10) Externally commissioned evaluations of the schools that have closed and the student outcomes of those affected. *Do we really know that this is the best strategy for change?*

We would like to emphasize our support for the LSC's desire to be recognized and have the ability to take a formal position on whether to close a school or not. By including this in our model *alternative policy*, LSC's are empowered to make use of its powers and make decisions that represent the school. Additionally, should the LSC disagree with CPS' proposal to close a school, the LSC and the school-community at-large should be given a genuine opportunity to create an alternative education plan with real input from those that know and understand the students, the challenges, and the opportunities best. In fact, our *Alternative Educational and Facility Plan* recommendation would be much like CPS' R2010 RFP, but comes to the communities first.

In summary, this model Alternative School Closing Process & Policy would:

- ☞ Instill faith in communities that their involvement and encouragement to put forth an *alternative educational and facilities plan* for their school as a means to pre-empt school closings would be valued;
- ☞ Minimize inequitable and racist claims about CPS' decision-making process; and
- ☞ Model a transparent process that is clear enough for any school to be able to identify if they are candidates, and thus have an opportunity to develop a bottom-up "fix" to pre-empt a school closing.

We do encourage the Board of Education to seriously review and encourage Mr. Duncan and his policy team to show a genuine, good-faith gesture to un-due its poor school closing practices, by working with community stakeholders like NCBG's Schools Task Force and partners to draft an amended **School Closing Policy that embodies a fairer, more consistent, and more systematic process and policy** when determining proposed school closing and consolidations, much like the one presented before you today. With that said, on behalf of NCBG's *Rebuild Our Schools* Task Force, thank you for your time.