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## The Battle for Chicago's Schools

by Caleb Jenkins

(English 1102)

A school is significantly more than just a mere institution of learning. Any place where someone would spend the vast majority of their developmental years would have a profound effect on their life. A school is where children grow, make friends, and develop skills that will stay with them for the rest of their lives. For the children, this is truly a home away from home. These 'homes' even benefit the parents of students because a school is the glue that holds a neighborhood together.

However, these homes are being 'foreclosed'. On March 21, 2013, Chicago Public Schools officials announced that they would close 54 schools and 61 school buildings before the next school year (Resmovits and Bellware). Children, in some instances, will have to walk over 27 minutes, across gang lines through dangerous neighborhoods, to their new 'home' (Resmovits and Bellware). CPS (Chicago Public Schools) claims that they need to close these underperforming, underutilized schools in order to use their limited resources wisely. However, the schools designated for closing are predominantly located in poorer neighborhoods. The shutting down of these schools will only perpetuate the economic inequality between races and social classes, and the solution is investing in, not closing, these struggling schools because children from poor families need quality education to break cyclical poverty.

To understand the magnitude of this current dilemma facing Chicago, one has to understand the history of the city's neighborhood formation. The different neighborhoods of Chicago have always been ethnically and racially divided. In the mid-1800s, when Irish and other European immigrants came to Chicago as poor workers, they lived in neighborhoods with those of their similar ethnic group. They were pushed out of the city center after the Great Chicago Fire since they could not afford to build new homes in accordance with the new building codes. However, during the great migration of African-Americans looking for jobs and an equal opportunity toward the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> and beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the white ethnic neighborhoods joined together. They instituted ordinances that restricted neighborhoods in which African-Americans were allowed to rent or buy houses (Manning).

These few neighborhoods that would allow African-Americans to live in them were known as the Black Belt, and they bred poverty and crime. Poor African-Americans were crowded together in places where crime was rampant. Even to this day, the south and west sides of Chicago, where the Black Belt was concentrated, remain some of the most crime ridden neighborhoods in the country (Manning). This is because the African-American people who live there are stuck in cyclical poverty. The segregated schools that existed gave African-Americans a poor quality education. Without a proper education, coupled with racism, many of them could not get well-paying jobs and would sink into poverty. Their poverty would affect their children's education, and the cycle would repeat itself.

When segregation eventually ended and became illegal, CPS tried different initiatives to integrate schools in the 1970s. This was met with much backlash from white parents, and the number of white children in the system fell dramatically. From 1970 to 1980 the number of white children in Chicago Public Schools dropped 60%, and it even halved again by 1990 (Rury). The massive withdrawal of whites from public schools has led some to conclude that the schools are still not fully integrated. This withdrawal has hurt the public schools. When the system lost its white children to Catholic schools, it also lost their rich, influential parents. The system lost people who were

personally invested in the wellbeing of the schools and who also had the social and monetary capital to advocate for them. This has left CPS in shambles today.

Today, Chicago Public Schools face a slew of problems. Although graduation rates have improved dramatically, from 53% in 2000 to 65% in 2009, high school test scores have risen, and all this without a decline in average academic performance standards, problems still remain (Luppescu 5). Racial gaps in achievement have increased steadily. White students are making slightly more progress than Latino students, and African American students are falling behind all other groups (Luppescu 5). The graduation rate for white students is 10% higher than Latinos, and 20% higher than African-Americans, compared to 5% and 14% respectively in 1997 (Luppescu 57). Despite some progress in standardized testing, the vast majority of CPS students still have academic achievement levels that are far below where they should be to graduate and be ready for college (Luppescu 5). Crime, gangs, and drugs affect a large portion of public school students (Moser). Many students get involved in these problems, largely due to the poverty in their own homes, the lack of quality role models, and the inevitable lack of interest in school, causing them to not graduate.

Lack of funding creates another problem, as after school activities and elective programs get canceled due to budget shortcomings, student involvement and interest drops. As recently as 2011, only a fourth of Chicago's schools had a full-time art teacher and a full-time music teacher, and mindboggling 42% had neither (Featherstone). Budget shortcomings also lead to huge classroom sizes, with one kindergarten teacher reporting she had 42 children in her classroom (Featherstone). These problems combine to create the most staggering dropout rate in the country. Chicago's school district has only 15% of the nation's schools, yet it has nearly half of the country's dropouts each year (Luppescu 51). It is clear that CPS is a struggling school district with numerous problems, but the solution is ever evasive.

Facing these problems and a nearly billion dollar deficit, CPS announced plans to shut 54 schools and 61 school buildings (Resmovits and Bellware). The solution to low student achievement and involvement proposed by CPS is cutting back on schools that have low test scores and attendance, to better use those resources to make the current schools more effective. It is essentially downsizing one of the largest school districts in the country to make it more manageable. In many predominantly black neighborhoods in the South Side the population has dwindled due to the poor state of those neighborhoods. In order to avoid an "underutilization crisis," CPS is closing the underused schools. They claim that this better allocation of funds could save on average \$500,000 to \$800,000 per school (Resmovits and Bellware). The money saved from closed schools will go into funding 13 new special science programs, five International Baccalaureate programs, and putting air conditioning and fine arts classes in 19 of the schools to where children will be relocated (Resmovits and Bellware). However, this tentative 'solution' only overly simplifies the problem and, in the long run, has a very little chance of turning around this failing district into a thriving one because it creates a mediocre system to turn a profit and continues a system of injustice.

This 'solution' only perpetuates the current problems of racial and economic inequality in Chicago. The century old racial and economic divisions in this city have festered problems. They have made Chicago the nation's most dangerous city with 506 murders each year (Murders Fall 42 Percent in America's Deadliest City: Chicago). When the city neglects struggling neighborhoods by denying them a quality education, breeding grounds for violence and poverty are created. Unfortunately, the school closings are concentrated in neighborhoods on the west and south side that were the same ones that made up the Black Belt. It is not surprising that not a single school will be closed in Lincoln Park or in any other northern, white, affluent neighborhood (Lutton and Vevea). Shutting down these schools and squishing hordes of disinterested children in one classroom creates a mediocre system of education for already struggling neighborhoods and will only continue the cycle of inequality in this city.

Shutting down and giving up on struggling schools and students is being complacent with mediocrity. The logic behind the closings claims that we should not waste money in schools that are struggling. However, this capitulates that the poor, crime-ridden neighborhoods in the west and south sides will always be that way. It essentially condemns them by creating desolation and calling it peace. It offers no solution, only a way to avoid the problem by sweeping it under the rug. The problem is a rug can only hold so much before the lumps of dust overflow and create a disheveled room. Society will pay eventually for not properly, and equally, educating its youth.

Moreover, research and case studies have shown that school closings ultimately have no positive effects on the quality of education. When DCPS (District of Columbia Public Schools) closed 23 "low-performing" and "under-enrolled" schools, there was little to no academic progress. On average, the students' new schools had even lower odds of making the Annual Yearly Progress under No Child Left Behind than the schools out of which they were moved (Weiss). Even in Chicago, where in 2010, dozens of schools were closed, there was no progress. An astonishing 8 out of every 10 students that were displaced scored lower on standardized tests the next school year (Weiss). The reason for this failure is that student involvement and interest in school dipped, since they are forced out of their comfort zone. How can it be expected of children, who are already disinterested and struggling, to suddenly care more when they are thrown into a larger class at a school farther away? The obvious can only be expected; dropout rates and crime will rise, and test scores and student achievement will fall.

Not only does interest dipping cause schools closings to fail, but also in many cases students are sent from one low-performing to school to another in a similar situation. This happened before in Chicago and many other school districts across the country, and it is happening again this time around. One stellar elementary school that is set out for closing, Garvey, has a pre-school, air conditioning and a computer lab. The school it is moving to has all of those benefits, but it does have lower test scores than Garvey (Editorial: Up to 47,500 kids in school shake-ups). A predominantly African-American elementary school, Lafayette, is being absorbed into Chopin Elementary School. The schools are fairly similar in features and test scores, yet Lafayette has an outstanding music system, a rarity for a Chicago Public School (Editorial: Up to 47,500 kids in school shake-ups).

Academic progress is not the only problem with the school shakeups; student safety is also a major concern. Many young students will cross gang lines to attend their new school. The long distance that many students will have to travel is also concerning. For example, the walk from Libby Elementary, a school being closed, to Sherman Elementary, the school the students are relocating to, will take 27 minutes through a dangerous part of the South Side (Resmovits and Bellware). The route also passes seven abandoned buildings. With many poor parents unable to walk their children to school, passing through such areas will undoubtedly increase the rate of child abductions (Resmovits and Bellware).

There have been many other effective alternatives to closing schools that have been shown to increase the success of inner-city schools. Keeping schools in struggling neighborhoods open and investing in their programs is the best way to revolutionize this school district. By not merging schools together, the class sizes can be kept at a reasonable amount, less than 20 students in a classroom. Children in small classes always do better than those in crowded ones (Featherstone). If these struggling schools are combined, then a teacher who is already struggling to keep a medium-size class engaged will have to figure out how to get a crowded classroom involved. This would be setting up the teachers for failure.

Another way to improve these schools in poor neighborhoods and thus improve the quality of the neighborhood is to change the way funds are distributed between schools. Even though Chicago does spend nearly \$13,000 a year per student on average, that money is not divided equally (Moser). Currently, schools are given more money if they achieve higher standardized test scores (Featherstone). Although this may seem like a good incentive to motivate schools to work harder, it

actually punishes poor children and increases the gap between the rich and the poor. For example, children from rich families in Lincoln Park will inevitably score higher than children from Austin. The rich children in Lincoln Park will get more funds, better teachers, more programs and the next year will have even higher test scores. Thus, the cycle continues and the poor children get an even poorer quality education. Schools should allocate resources according to need, thus lowering the gap in education between the rich and poor.

These better allocated resources can be used to fund programs that will benefit the struggling students. Only a fourth of Chicago's Public Schools have a fulltime music and art teacher and there are 160 schools without a library (Featherstone). Without these extra programs and learning aids, students lose interest in school. The lack of interest and effort will result in poor performance and a poor education. A school having the basic necessity of a library is critical in children developing their reading, writing, and communication skills, some of the most important things that are taught at school. Denying children these fundamental parts of a quality education denies them a fair chance at life.

A school that has been a model of what a quality urban school should look like is Harper High School. This school had a turnaround in 2008 where it was given no shortage of funds. Including the many extracurricular activities created to raise student interest and involvement in school, was the Becoming a Man program. This mentorship program was extremely effective. Students who partook in the program "experienced a 44 percent drop in arrests for violent crime and an up to 23 percent increase in graduation rates" (Moser). Those kinds of results show the effectiveness of investing in, not neglecting public schools.

Although these plans require a sizable investment, when considering the future of our society's children, the price tag should not be our greatest concern. In his book, *Savage Inequalities*, Jonathan Kozol makes the argument that when we under fund schools in poor neighborhoods, we cause innocent children to lose their future (Kozol 1-6). They grow up with a poor education and thus get a low-paying job, if any job at all. Many fall into poverty and become criminals, and then our society has to deal with the cyclical problems it created. The choice is to either invest in their quality educations now or live with the financial burdens of their economic futility and crime for years to come. Specifically, although the Becoming a Man program, effectively used at Harper, costs \$1,100 per student, it can save society anywhere from \$3,600 to \$34,000 per participant, depending on how one measures the costs of crime (Moser).

Ironically enough, CPS's plan to shut schools has no guarantee to save money. Schools closings in the Washington, DC, school district did not save the system its estimated \$23 million. It actually cost them nearly \$40 million in unforeseen expenses (Weiss). The moving and closing fees, coupled with parents moving their children to charter schools and the unanticipated cost of transporting children even farther to school, destroyed the only faint benefits the inevitably failing policy decision had (Weiss). Since it will cost millions of dollars either way, then heavily investing in struggling schools will prove to be the most economic choice in the long run.

Today CPS is faced with a huge problem with its underperforming and underutilized schools. However, closing them is not a quality solution. It is only a tentative one that accepts a mediocre system and perpetuates cyclical poverty and inequality. The only way to alleviate the tensions from racial and economic inequality and reduce the poverty that makes Chicago the nation's deadliest city is to invest in these impoverished neighborhood's schools by lowering class sizes, adding afterschool and extracurricular programs like art and music, equipping each school with a functional library, and instituting mentorship programs. Although the price tag may be hefty, it is still much less than the one society will inevitably have to pay for having numerous adults with a poor quality education. It is necessary to protect the 'glue' that holds neighborhoods together and give children a safe 'home,' so that Chicago can be a revitalized city.

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