

Amid cuts and closures

A new school year begins in Chicago

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Chicago Public School (CPS) students return to school this week in a dramatically different environment. School closures and consolidations have resulted in longer commutes through dangerous areas, falling school enrollment and overcrowded classrooms. The deep cuts to school budgets have also resulted in barebones classroom instruction. Meanwhile, the district has still managed to award principals thousands of dollars in merit pay bonuses.

Over the summer, CPS instituted the largest school closures in American history, shutting about 50 schools and laying off more than 3,000 teachers and staff. Due to the closures, an estimated 10,000 students will walk longer, more dangerous routes to school each day.

Across the city, and concentrated on the south and west sides where most of the 50 schools were closed, shiny new “Safe Passage” signs contrast with run down or abandoned lots, homes and businesses, pot-holed streets, and closed school buildings. Some parents protested this morning in front of the closed schools.

Twelve thousand students formerly attending the closed schools were to have enrolled in one of 287 “receiving” schools, but more than 2,000 of those students have not been enrolled in their receiving schools, according to school records. Overcrowding is a serious safety and instructional concern with the consolidations, as at least 10 elementary schools have been put over capacity by the consolidations.

In a largely cosmetic gesture, CPS allotted \$15.7 million for a Safe Passage program, in which safety workers usher children along the new longer routes to school that resulted from the school closures. The program employs 600 workers, in the mornings and afternoons, who are paid \$10 per hour, five hours a day, five days per week. Despite the low pay and few hours, 2,800 people applied for the positions, reflecting the

dire circumstances in the neighborhoods where schools were closed.

Safe Passage workers were minimally prepared for their role: hundreds of new workers sat through a one-day session, which covered the basics of how to manage conflicts. Shunba May, who started with the program three years ago, told *DNAinfo.com* that his first year was “brutal” because he was not prepared for the difficult situations he encountered.

The majority of Safe Passage routes are in the most dangerous areas of the city, where gang-related shootings are common. Last week, five people were shot at 6 p.m. along a Safe Passage route, one block from the recently closed Stewart elementary school on the north side.

So far in 2013 there have been 133 shootings and 38 murders within a block of the Safe Passage routes, representing 16 percent of shootings and murders within the city. Of that, 68 shootings and 12 murders occurred during daytime on a school day.

The city’s board of education, appointed by Democratic Mayor Rahm Emanuel, will vote this week on the proposed district budget for next year, which CPS states will contain \$68 million in cuts to classroom funding. The figure is deceptive however, as funding has increased for charter schools within the CPS network and for “receiving schools.” As a result, neighborhood schools face an estimated cut of \$162 million in per-student funding.

Within schools, principals have cut programming and classroom resources to fit reduced per-school budgets. Last Thursday, Emanuel gave 134 principals cash bonuses for “excellence leading their schools.” The bonuses ranged from \$5,000 to \$20,000, part of “performance-based merit pay” for principals successfully implementing cuts. The bonuses are

funded by a handful of the city's billionaires, including Hyatt heiress Penny Pritzker, Groupon CEO Eric Lefkofsky, and venture capitalist and Emanuel adviser Bruce Rauner.

For some schools, this means spending per-pupil will drop as much as 20 percent, with cuts per school totaling in the millions of dollars. Raise Your Hand, an education advocacy group, reports that 92 schools have lost art teachers, 58 lost physical education teachers, 54 lost music teachers, and 40 lost librarians. Over 160 CPS schools do not even have a library.

This is only a portion of the thousands of staff that have been laid off this year. In May, 550 probationary appointed teachers were let go. In June, 855 staff, including 545 teachers, were laid off as a result of the school closures. In July, more than two thousand—1,036 teachers and 1,077 support staff—were let go. In early August, 200 more lunchroom workers were laid off.

Since the closing of 50 so-called “underutilized” schools, CPS has posted a new “request for proposals” for charter schools in the southwest and northwest of the city that are largely Latino and growing in size.

The gutting of public education over the last year in Chicago comes in the wake of the September 2012 strike of 26,000 teachers, in which planned school closures were a major point of contention. A significant portion of the blame for the closures, cuts and consolidations in Chicago falls on the Chicago Teachers Union (CTU) and its pseudo-left political allies, who branded the strike a “victory” after it was shut down in an austerity contract.

During the strike, union leaders insisted that school closures and layoffs could not legally be made an issue in the strike, since the passing of Senate Bill 7 in 2011 prevented teachers from striking over issues related to working conditions. CTU leaders collaborated with state Democrats, Republicans, and right-wing education “reform” organizations in writing that legislation, which passed unanimously in the Illinois legislature.

In its response to the cuts and closures, the union has postured as an opponent of the Emanuel administration, while presenting itself as a more efficient manager of school closures, consolidations and the expansion of charters. CTU Vice President Jesse Sharkey's criticism of the school closings was that the plan to do so was inadequate. He said last year, “There's no point in closing schools until there is a plan in place.”

This year teachers in the largest network of charter schools in the city, United Neighborhood Organization's (UNO) Charter Schools, have been unionized by the Alliance of Charter Teachers and Staff (American Federation of Teachers), which works closely with the CTU. The CTU's statement on the UNO's recognition of the union reads, “We are working together to both organize UNO and put the brakes on charter proliferation.”

In reality, exactly the opposite has taken place. An unprecedented number of schools have been closed, teachers have been laid off, cuts deepened, and privately run charters expanded.



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