

Mass school closures revealed as Chicago Mayor Brandon Johnson works with CTU to suppress opposition

Alexander Fangmann, Joe Raymond
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Mayor Brandon Johnson asked Chicago Public Schools (CPS) CEO Pedro Martinez to resign last week over the CEO's refusal to take on short-term loans to fund pensions and raises for educators. Martinez has refused to resign and his ouster has now become a flashpoint as divisions within the ruling class come into the open over how to handle the district's upcoming "fiscal cliff," suppress the wage demands by educators who have been working without a contract since July 1 and impose savage cost-cutting measures.

Johnson's meeting with Martinez and his request for the latter's resignation was preceded by revelations by the Chicago Teachers Union (CTU) of the existence of a CPS "space consolidation" analysis. According to an email sent by CTU leaders to the entire membership on September 13, "over 100 schools are being analyzed for possible cuts, closures, or consolidations."

Martinez and other district leaders have denied any plans are in place to close schools. Martinez wrote, in an email sent out to the families of CPS students, "Let me reiterate: I will not recommend that any schools be closed during my leadership of CPS." However, given the recent announcement of the closure of 21 public schools in Seattle, the existence of a CPS school closure analysis should be seen by Chicago educators and parents as a serious threat, and any denials by district leaders should be treated with contempt.

Just north of Chicago, suburban Evanston/Skokie School District 55 leaders presented a deficit reduction plan at a September 16 board meeting that includes school closures, layoffs and bus route eliminations in order to stave off fiscal insolvency. Under state law, the Illinois State Board of Education (ISBE) has the power to dissolve school boards and install an "Independent Authority" to take over the affairs of a school district in such situations.

CTU Vice President Jackson Potter told *Chalkbeat* the space analysis included a list of about 70 schools that could be consolidated with another 70 schools. Budget slides obtained by the union raise the possibility of staff furloughs to address the district's nearly \$1 billion budget shortfall for next year, which currently does not include any funds for educator raises. At a "public bargaining session" between CPS and CTU on Tuesday at Cameron Elementary, Potter again raised the issue of the school closing list, asking district leaders whether they supported or rejected it.

CPS Chief Education Officer replied in the manner of a mealy-mouthed bureaucrat, absurdly claiming that the analysis was just part of a "discussion" between the board and district leaders.

She said:

As part of our work leading towards the development of the strategic plan, the district leadership and the board collaborated in solidifying critical components of the plan such as North Star Vision for the students, what the quality of the daily student experience needs to look like, what the new school funding model for our schools needs to look like, because you know we moved towards a new budget model. This process did include the analysis of multiple sets of data, and over a period of time, this information was shared confidentially for the discussion between the leadership and the board for discussion purposes only.

I want to make it very clear that this referenced list was never made as a recommendation nor was ever considered for any follow up or next steps by anyone, including the five-year strategic plan. So, I would like to make myself clear here as a representative from the district, there never was a plan to close schools. Currently there is no plan to close a school, and these data discussions were really part of conducting an analysis, looking at all possible opportunities, as any organization does as part of making critical decisions.

Other district leaders have been more candid. *Chalkbeat* reported that CPS Chief Operating Officer Charles Mayfield said "a conversation needs to happen" in regard to schools with low enrollment, because "everything has a cost to it."

According to the latest five-year CPS Educational Facilities Master Plan, issued in 2023, the district deems 293 out of 497 schools as underutilized, which it defines as less than 70 percent of the building being used for school operations. The 179 schools labeled as "efficient" enroll between 70 percent and 110 percent of their capacity, while schools are only labeled as "overcrowded" if they are packed to the gills at over 110 percent of their capacity. A state moratorium on school closings by CPS expires on January 15 of the coming year.

On Thursday, the CPS board passed a moratorium on school closings through the 2026-2027 school year. This measure was undoubtedly taken to suppress major opposition to school closings from emerging. However, the measure by the board is no real brake on school closings, as it can be reversed by the board itself at any time.

A higher proportion of the schools labeled as underutilized are located on the predominantly black working class south and west sides of the city, which have been hit hard by decades of deindustrialization. As a result, neighborhoods in these parts of the city have seen significant decreases in population, which were exacerbated by the 2013 closure of 50 schools under former Mayor Rahm Emanuel.

As the WSWs noted in an article on the 10th anniversary of the

closings:

The decline in neighborhood population that drove the decline in enrollment at many schools is intimately connected to the mass closure of factories from the 1970s through the 1990s. In 1960, one-third of Chicago workers were employed in manufacturing, which was heavily concentrated on the South and West Sides of the city. Hasbro, Schwinn, Zenith, US Steel, Oscar Mayer, Brock, Electro-Motive and scores of other closed factories employed hundreds of thousands of workers.

By 2017, less than 9 percent of Chicagoans were employed in manufacturing, and in many of the neighborhoods where those factories were once located, jobs simply disappeared without being replaced, leading to mass unemployment and all the attendant social devastation. As social conditions in the neighborhoods worsened, many of those workers with the means to do so moved away.

An analysis of the effects of the school closures ten years on carried out by WBEZ and the *Chicago Sun-Times* found that all of the claims made by the Emanuel administration and accepted by CTU leaders, that the closures would allow resources to be more effectively allocated to remaining schools, and that student learning would be improved, have turned out to be complete lies.

In fact, the closure of schools has continued to feed the negative spiral of the predominantly minority working-class neighborhoods which bore the brunt of the assault of deindustrialization. Census tracts with a majority black population which suffered school closures in 2013 saw their population decline precipitously, losing 9.2 percent of residents from 2012 to 2018, compared with tracts that did not have a closed school, which lost only 3.2 percent.

Despite the union bureaucracy's repeated references to the space analysis and potential school closings, *Chalkbeat* has noted that neither the district nor the union would provide a copy of this report. If CTU officials were serious about combating these potential closures, it would release the list immediately to begin rallying students and the wider public against the district's plans. This is all the more the case as the CTU claims that budget slides obtained by the union indicate a scenario where the district would lay off 5,000 educators in order to make up a budget shortfall.

One educator on the CTU members Facebook group raised the issue of transparency: "I wish we could get the list of the 100 schools!"

The reality is that the CTU leadership is well aware of the massive attack that is coming and is preparing to collude with Johnson, a former CTU lobbyist, and the Democratic political establishment to suppress popular resistance.

The CTU and its Caucus of Rank-and-File Educators (CORE) were instrumental in the 2013 school closings. Despite knowing that mass school closures were on the horizon, CTU leaders shut down the 2012 strike and rammed through a sell-out austerity contract that did nothing to halt the closures.

In a CTU Members Only Facebook group, one educator commented on the closure of 50 schools in Chicago in 2013 and "the damage it does to students and families. ... CPS cannot be allowed to balance their budget on the backs of students and families, but they will continue to try."

Martinez has refused to step down as CEO and by all appearances is digging in for a fight to maintain his position, an unprecedented situation since the establishment of mayoral control over CPS in 1995. Although the CEO reports to the Chicago Board of Education, whose members are handpicked by the mayor, Martinez's contract, approved when the board

was controlled by former Mayor Lori Lightfoot, contains a provision requiring six months notice and 20 weeks severance if he is dismissed without cause. If he is fired for cause it is likely he would sue for wrongful termination, as he did in 2014 when he was fired by the school board of Washoe County, Nevada. That case was ultimately settled for \$700,000.

Democrats debate how best to suppress educators' struggle

In either case, Martinez's refusal to step down has become a flashpoint revealing tactical divisions in the Democratic Party over how best to manage a deepening fiscal crisis while preventing a workers rebellion against austerity from emerging. In an op-ed published Tuesday in the *Chicago Tribune*, Martinez claimed that he would not resign, "because doing so would risk creating a leadership vacuum and instability that could disrupt the strategic progress we've made to date."

Martinez has garnered support from the editorial board of the *Tribune*, the *Chicago Sun-Times*, the Civic Committee of the Commercial Club of Chicago and the Chicagoland Chamber of Commerce, representative of his support among the financial elite more broadly. On Tuesday, an open letter in support of Martinez was released with the signatures of over 20 members of the Chicago City Council, as well as figures such as Arne Duncan, a former CPS CEO and Secretary of Education under President Barack Obama.

In particular, Martinez has been praised for his stand against Johnson's proposal that the district take out \$300 million in short term loans to cover pension costs and raises for CPS educators, whose negotiations with the district have stalled. Reports have indicated CPS has offered 4 percent raises, with 4-5 percent raises in the following three years, depending on inflation. However, as there is no revenue in the budget for those raises, funding them would require either borrowing, cuts or assistance from the state or federal government. CTU has claimed the district is considering furloughs or thousands of layoffs in order to pay for the contract.

In his op-ed, Martinez wrote, he remains "against exorbitant, short-term borrowing, a past practice that generated negative bond ratings for CPS and that would likely lead to additional bond rating cuts and higher borrowing interest rates." CPS current yearly debt service amounts to \$826 million for FY 2025, or around 8.3 percent of the total CPS budget.

This debate is not over whether to impose the cuts but over how best to do it. Johnson has already made it clear in response to the budget deficit that, "There are sacrifices that will be made." While preparing to impose school closures and mass layoffs, the mayor, who has brought many CTU staffers into his administration, and the CTU bureaucracy are working to shift responsibility for cuts—as well as the failure to live up his campaign promises and the expectations of teachers regarding contract negotiations—onto Martinez, Governor J.B. Pritzker and the state legislature. In an action coordinated with Mayor Johnson, the CTU announced that its House of Delegates had unanimously voted no confidence in Martinez on September 18.

In an interview on the Ben Joravsky Show, CTU president Stacy Davis Gates said, "Never has there been an alignment at the granular, at the broad level in which we have it today, with the board of education, with the mayor of Chicago, and with the teachers, paraprofessionals and clinicians that hold our school communities down. And yet you have this one dude, who is the CEO, who quite frankly, we did think we could work with. We being the teachers. He has family members that are part of our union. Pedro is a graduate of the Chicago Public Schools, he has a tremendous story. But the only thing he has been doing at the bargaining table is telling his people that they can't afford it."

Even though Pritzker, the state's billionaire Democratic governor, has already said he is not interested in a "rescue" for CPS or other districts facing financial catastrophe as a result of the end of pandemic relief funds for education, Davis Gates maintained that state funding was a possibility.

"We're just going to make it—and who loses? What politician doesn't get reelected because they gave more money to schools? You have Tim Walz right now who is running to be the vice president of the United States of America. He's a governor. And do you know what he did with his budget last year? He is centrally funding social workers, one for every school in the state. ... So if you have a person who is vice president, or who will be vice president—I mean he better be, because it's all over if he isn't, but you know, vice president of the United States, who can figure it out as governor, we can figure that out here in Illinois."

In reality, Davis Gates is merely setting up a kind of good cop/bad cop routine with Pritzker and the state legislature in preparation for the union ramming through an agreement suppressing wages and agreeing to whatever cuts are required. Lurking behind Davis Gates' demagoguery is a clear understanding that educators, and workers more broadly, are deeply opposed to these cuts and expect the Johnson administration to fight back against them.

Notably, on the Joravsky podcast, Davis Gates also referred to ESSER (Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief) funding, the emergency money made available to school districts during the first years of the pandemic as the "Biden benchmark," and made clear her support of the presidential candidacy of Vice President Kamala Harris. In fact, the decision by the Biden-Harris administration to allow ESSER funding to expire while more than 1 million people are infected with COVID-19 every day, has precipitated a massive public school funding crisis, which threatens the jobs of more than 380,000 educators across the country.

The revelations of the plans for mass school closures and layoffs makes all the more necessary the independent organization of rank-and-file educators, working class parents and students to fight these savage austerity plans. The fight to defend the social right to free and high-quality public education requires the mobilization of the whole working class against both big business parties, which are squandering nearly a trillion a year on war, including funding Israel's expanding genocide and the US-NATO proxy war against Russia.

The struggle to defend public education cannot be left in the hands of the CTU bureaucracy, which is actively colluding with Johnson and the Democrats. That is why we urge teachers, school employees, parents and students to join and build the Chicago Educators Rank-and-File Committee.

To join, fill out the form below:



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