



Changes and Challenges

How Stakeholders Can Support Chicago Public School Students in a Shifting Governance Landscape

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Introduction

Chicago has become a rare model for urban school district improvement. Labeled three decades ago as “worst in the nation,” the city’s schools were elevated in 2018 as making the “fastest academic progress” among large U.S. districts, with “all racial groups making similar improvements.”¹ That success stems in part from an active and expansive network of nonprofit organizations, advocates and grassroots community leaders, business leaders, and philanthropic funders that work together, often in partnership with the district, to strengthen education citywide.

Today, Chicago Public Schools (CPS) faces many of the same challenges as other large districts: enrollment declines,² chronic absenteeism,³ a looming fiscal cliff,⁴ and students struggling socially, emotionally, and academically in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic.⁵ CPS also faces a challenge most other districts don’t: a major change in its governance from an appointed to a much larger elected school board between now and January 2027.

But amid these challenges and uncertainties, an opportunity arises to recapture the spirit of progress that created steady improvement in CPS over more than 30 years. It’s a moment for everyone who cares about education in Chicago to come together around shared solutions that ensure CPS students — particularly the district’s large population of Black, Latino, and low-income students — get back on track after the upheaval of the past several years.

This brief provides an overview of the changes and challenges to Chicago’s public education landscape pre- to post-pandemic, drawing from desk research and interviews Bellwether conducted with more than 20 Chicago- and Illinois-based education advocacy and civic organizations and funders. It also provides student-centered recommendations that serve as a road map to 1) create consensus and collaboration, 2) elevate community voices, and 3) build an informed electorate.

Chicago Public Schools by the Numbers

4th largest urban school district in the country⁶

623 schools serving pre-K through grade 12⁷

319,769 students

38% Black and **47%** Latino students

76% low-income students

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Turning Chicago's Educational Challenges Into Opportunities

Navigating the shift to an expanded, elected school board while also overcoming historical *and* new challenges facing students is no easy task — but stakeholders across CPS have successfully worked together to navigate tough challenges before. An honest, shared understanding of where the district has been over the past decade and what lies ahead is the first step toward effective ongoing collaboration.

Pre-pandemic (2010-2019)

In the years leading up to the pandemic, CPS experienced a mix of successes and challenges.⁸ CPS faced enrollment declines as well as state and local fiscal difficulties. The district's K-12 enrollment decreased by 11% from 379,553 students in the 2010-11 school year to 336,629 students in the 2019-20 school year.⁹ CPS was consistently under-resourced at the state level compared to many other districts; a new statewide funding formula in 2017 improved funding adequacy but still fell short.¹⁰ Across the city, many Chicago neighborhoods disadvantaged by historical racial segregation experienced disinvestment, particularly those on the South and West sides.¹¹

Across the country, mental health challenges in young people had been increasing prior to COVID-19,¹² and the same was true in Chicago, where parents identified their children's mental health as a top concern for at least two years prior to the pandemic.¹³

Academically, CPS was achieving gains aided by citywide efforts to improve school leadership and support teacher training and development.¹⁴ Across student groups, Chicago saw increasing National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) scores that peaked in 2017-2019, with some areas such as reading for grade 8 students beginning to drop off by 2019.¹⁵ A 2017 report found Chicago students were learning and growing at a "faster rate than 96% of all school districts in the country."¹⁶ CPS

students also made gains in graduation rates, ACT scores, and college enrollment.¹⁷ Unfortunately, amid this growth, long-standing racial, ethnic, and socioeconomic achievement gaps persisted.¹⁸

Despite pre-pandemic academic gains for most students, some families in Chicago felt let down by CPS. They thought the 2013 closures of 50 under-enrolled neighborhood schools were “chaotic” and created “challenging social dynamics.”¹⁹ Many community members believe these school closures contributed to declining populations and abandoned properties in some communities and left a notable sense of distrust for CPS.²⁰ Subsequent school consolidations and closures exacerbated this distrust.²¹ Chicago Teachers Union strikes in 2012 “took many by surprise” and shifted dynamics, as did additional strikes in 2019 that “turned life upside down for families.”²²

However, the decade prior to the pandemic did include bright spots. CPS continued to benefit from a longtime partnership with the University of Chicago Consortium on School Research.²³ The Consortium created a grade 9 “on-track indicator” designed to flag high school students early enough for intervention to keep them on an academic path to graduate. It is a notable example of a scalable tool that contributed to increased graduation rates in CPS during this time frame.²⁴

The nonprofit sector in Chicago grew stronger in this decade with increased participation from active and committed civic leaders and organizations, and a robust philanthropic and advocacy community working together to address systems-level change on shared education issues.²⁵ Leaders from the education sector and beyond used a citywide collective approach to systems-level change for students by reaching out directly to the mayor’s office and its appointed board.

Pandemic (2020-Spring 2022)

The COVID-19 pandemic created long-lasting disruption of school operations that stretched across three CPS school years, from spring of 2019-20 into early 2021-22.²⁶ While schools officially opened fully in the fall of 2021, there were pockets of closures with periods of virtual learning into early 2022.²⁷ Pre-K through grade 12 enrollment declines continued across CPS, and postsecondary enrollment by CPS graduates, once on the rise, also declined.²⁸ Statewide, chronic absenteeism rose in Illinois to 21% in the 2020-21 school year and continued to rise to 30% in the 2021-22 school year²⁹ with CPS hitting 45% later in that same school year.³⁰

Students, isolated from daily routines and social interactions by virtual schooling, experienced increasing rates of mental health challenges during this time. Historical data show that health inequities disproportionately impact low-income and minority populations, with increased mental health problems caused by a range of economic, political, and social conditions, including racism.³¹ A CPS survey conducted in 2021 found that students were experiencing depression at the highest rate since 1991.³² It also found that one in three CPS LGBTQ+ students “considered attempting suicide.”³³ To counter these trends, CPS launched a “Please Stay” suicide prevention and mental health program during the pandemic for students in grades 7-12.³⁴

Academic gains that began to slow prior to the pandemic further declined. Across Illinois, students experienced double-digit drops for meeting state learning standards;³⁵ in Chicago, less than one in five grade 3 students met or exceeded state standards in math and reading.³⁶ NAEP scores had increased in Chicago over the previous decade, but students' declining scores during the pandemic erased those gains.³⁷ Racial, ethnic, and low-income achievement gaps, which had remained relatively constant even as all student groups achieved overall academic gains, increased during the pandemic, particularly for Black students.³⁸ In certain subjects and grade levels, these gaps grew wider than they had ever been since NAEP began testing students in 2002.³⁹

During the pandemic, CPS was allocated \$2.8 billion in federal Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief (ESSER) funding,⁴⁰ which it spent on academic recovery, social and emotional supports, expanded summer and before- and after-school programming, and other student services.⁴¹ While many school leaders and families appreciated the flexibility to provide improved services and counselors to students, others argued too much was spent on existing staff and not enough on supporting increased student needs.⁴²

An Elected School Board for Chicago Public Schools

After many years of effort by lawmakers,⁴³ Gov. JB Pritzker signed legislation in 2021 to create an elected school board in Chicago.⁴⁴ The law calls for 21 school board representatives elected from districts across Chicago to be mapped by April 2024.⁴⁵ Of the law — which was designed to improve accountability, democracy, and community influence — Gov. Pritzker noted that “an elected school board will help students and their families have a strong voice in important decisions about the education system.”⁴⁶

Chicago is slated to begin this transition in November 2024 with the election of 10 members representing specific districts.⁴⁷ They will work alongside the mayoral-appointed president and 10 board members, creating an expanded 21-member board. The original law called for the city to elect the remaining 10 board members and an at-large board president in November 2026, to be seated in January 2027.⁴⁸ Chicago's elected board size of 21 members is much larger than its peers, as most districts operate with boards of five to 15 members. Boards in Illinois average seven members, with board sizes of five and seven common in districts of some of the biggest states in the country (e.g., California and Texas).⁴⁹

Post-pandemic (Summer 2022-Present)

For the first time since 2011, CPS enrollment at the start of the 2023-24 school year was slightly up, which many attribute to a large influx of migrants to the city.⁵⁰ This demographic shift also increased the percentage of English language learners to 25% of the CPS student population, up from 20% in 2020, requiring more specialized teachers and additional resources.⁵¹ An increasing number of under-enrolled schools remains a challenge; as soon as a moratorium on CPS school closures, passed as part of the elected school board legislation, expires in 2025, it could lead to contentious school closures like those in 2013.⁵²

As the pandemic wound down, students continued to experience trauma, depression, fear, and other mental health struggles.⁵³ Chicago students also grappled with mental health conditions associated with living in communities affected by gun violence and crime. In some Chicago ZIP codes, young males, particularly those who are Black and Hispanic, had a “notably higher risk” of dying from firearms than U.S. armed forces members who served in Iraq and Afghanistan.⁵⁴ Five police districts alone accounted for 42% of Chicago’s homicides in 2021, all districts where CPS students live.⁵⁵

Although CPS redoubled efforts to address mental health and academic challenges, resources for these types of supports could be jeopardized by budget pressures and a looming fiscal crisis as federal ESSER funding sunsets in 2024.⁵⁶ CPS finances are “fragile,” with the city shifting financial obligations onto the district, including non-teacher expenses as part of its overall governance changes.⁵⁷ By 2026, CPS projects a \$628 million deficit.⁵⁸

Advocates also are navigating the uncertainty of new CPS policies and a change in city leadership. A new data transparency policy adopted in April 2023 by the school board after significant stakeholder engagement requires the establishment or revision of several metrics, pausing the release of certain data (such as the rating of schools).⁵⁹ This gap in educational data points, combined with the election of Mayor Brandon Johnson in 2023, leaves advocates uncertain about accessing information and communicating with leadership. The old, familiar system of building relationships with CPS leadership or the mayor’s office as an advocacy or partnership pathway feels unfamiliar now.⁶⁰

Capitalizing on an Inflection Point to Better Serve Chicago's Students

CPS, like many school districts across the country, is at an inflection point. A strengthened, student-centered, and healthy education ecosystem relies on engagement and collaboration across stakeholders, including schools and districts, labor groups, parents, students, community groups, nonprofits, news media, philanthropy, civic leaders, and advocates, among others. Every stakeholder invested in CPS must ask how their actions center the success of students, even and especially amid continued change. CPS students deserve the support of a city, a school system, and organizations that focus on what is best for young people now and in the future. Research shows that students are more likely to meet and/or exceed academic outcomes and exhibit improved social skills and behavior if their community centers their needs, which can be particularly challenging during times of political change.⁶¹ CPS students are no different.

To meet the need for continued and expanded student-centered supports for CPS students, Chicago- and Illinois-based, education-focused civic and advocacy organizations must adapt. A series of in-depth interviews and desk research conducted in fall 2023 revealed three key policy recommendations to safeguard student learning and social-emotional supports amid a shifting environment as Chicago moves to an elected school board.

1. **Create consensus and collaboration.**
2. **Elevate community voices.**
3. **Build an informed electorate.**

The following are examples of what could be done differently or strengthened for each policy recommendation.

1. Create Consensus and Collaboration

Although Chicago organizations do occasionally work together to drive change, there are few established, citywide coalitions that bring all parties together to focus on student experience and outcomes. **Stakeholders should build consensus to drive change.**

At the state level, early childhood education stakeholders in Illinois have found success working together to advance shared policy priorities. Early childhood-focused organizations formed coalitions to help identify policy positions and collaborate so that individual organizations take point on issues that impact their served populations. For example, the Latino Policy Forum is active on early childhood issues and participates in numerous settings and coalitions on behalf of Latino children, families, and service providers across the state.⁶² At the city level, early childhood advocates and providers held mayoral forums in advance of the 2023 election to amplify the need for high-quality early childhood programs throughout Chicago.⁶³

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Given the urgent needs of CPS students and the potential volatility of governance shifts, as well as the probable fiscal crisis as pandemic-era federal funds expire, increased consensus-building and collaboration among organizations can more efficiently align messaging and overall impact. For example, Advance Illinois is an independent, nonpartisan policy and advocacy organization working across the state to build equitable and healthy public education systems supporting student achievement.⁶⁴ Chicago may benefit from the creation of a new organization to facilitate coalition-building and advocacy for CPS students and families.

In addition to collaboration among citywide policy and advocacy organizations, Chicago neighborhoods, local school councils, and community organizations are important advocates for their communities. These organizations can **build collective narratives** about shared struggles common to diverse and geographically scattered neighborhoods while also promoting effective solutions. For example, at the neighborhood level, communities have a history of coming together to advocate for school operations such as decisions related to new schools or school closures.⁶⁵ Similarly, through connections facilitated by Kids First Chicago, North Lawndale collaborated with other neighborhoods facing similar challenges to advocate for changes at the district level.⁶⁶

These types of collaborations and collective narratives will be increasingly important with CPS' shift to a larger, fully elected school board. Neighborhoods will need advocacy strategies to reach 21 board members representing local constituencies instead of only seven appointed citywide members. Building collective narratives will help more CPS communities and advocates advance unified messages for policies and solutions that impact students. As Chicago shifts to an elected governance model, with board meetings slated for CPS neighborhoods, partnerships and consistency in key messages will be critical for local advocates' success.

Many education organizations in Chicago seek **greater involvement from business leaders and non-education groups** in support of shared, overlapping priorities. Chicago's business community has a history of engagement in education, but in recent years it has been focused on other issues such as safety. Building a coalition of groups with shared interests in the health and well-being of *all* Chicagoans, including its pre-K through grade 12 students, can lead to better lives for all. Engaging

business and non-education groups is particularly relevant to holistically addressing an array of challenges within Chicago that impact students and entire communities. For example, safety through gun violence prevention is an issue that bridges sectors citywide.⁶⁷ Current partnerships are exploring ways to increase out-of-school safe spaces for students and families that indirectly support education and learning.⁶⁸

Another strategy Chicagoans can consider is **finding time and space for authentic collaboration across organizational types**. Grassroots and grasstops organizations often work in silos due to differing priorities, processes, and access points to influential decision-makers. While grasstops organizations generally have access to more resources, grassroots organizations often are attuned more closely to community needs, including within historically underserved communities of color. In interviews with Chicago grassroots organization leaders, some felt that collaboration with grasstops counterparts did not allow for time to genuinely involve their organization members.⁶⁹ These conversations would benefit from an approach to collaboration that includes shared decision-making and a recognition that these bonds and trust take time to authentically build.

2. Elevate Community Voices

Authentic stakeholder voices provide critical context for CPS board members to better understand the students, families, and communities that they serve. These voices are central to decision-making and efforts to elevate and promote a diverse array of ideas. An example of community and multi-partner organizations coming together was the Rethinking Safety Campaign led by Voices of Youth in Chicago Education (VOYCE).⁷⁰ This effort was driven by community concerns that schools were “hardened” with school resource officers and surveillance cameras rather than improved with social workers, counselors, and trauma-informed supports.⁷¹ By convening “over 650 youth, parents, and other stakeholders,” VOYCE created a plan “to dramatically change school safety, particularly for [Chicago’s] Black and Brown communities.”⁷²

Since the mapping of CPS districts has yet to be finalized due to a lack of early consensus, there is concern that the board may not be representative of local and community populations, particularly communities of color.⁷³ The elected CPS board must **include broad representation** of students and families across Chicago. For example, an established mechanism for community involvement is the Local School Councils (LSCs). These school-level boards hold authority over selecting and evaluating principals, making budgetary decisions, and approving a school’s academic plan.⁷⁴ LSCs traditionally have at least 12 elected adult seats, which often include a school’s principal, six parents, two community members, two teachers, and one non-teaching staff, in addition to at least three non-elected student representatives, bringing together diverse stakeholder voices in school decision-making.⁷⁵ Previously, the appointed CPS school board would work in conjunction with LSCs, but the new elected board structure will require a different approach to retain the same level of community engagement and an equitable share of voice.

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School board members will be representing specific LSCs within their districts, so the two should work together. Creating additional channels of communication between LSCs and the school board could mitigate concerns by safeguarding community board representation.

The concern about board representativeness is rooted in uncertainties around recruitment and training of school board members, election rules and regulations, and questions around incorporating student, parent, and community voices. Some critics point to school board races in states like California, where private interest groups and political action committees spend millions of dollars to get representation on the board.⁷⁶ Others point out that undocumented residents will not be permitted to vote, and without compensation, low-income residents may not be able to run for a district seat, meaning the board may not truly represent the students and families it serves.⁷⁷ Chicago must work across the sector to make sure that all voices are heard amid a new elected board structure; LSCs are a good starting point to build authentic channels to elevate community voice.

3. Build an Informed Electorate

An informed and engaged electorate is a critical lever to enable CPS and its new board to better represent the needs of *all* its students and families. Information is needed not just to inform voters before the election but also on an ongoing basis so that Chicago residents and organizations can advocate for the needs of students.

One way that Chicago organizations have historically advocated for change is through using **publicly available data** to illustrate where there are opportunity gaps for students. In the current system, access to data is difficult because CPS adopted a new data transparency and accountability policy in 2023 to replace its previous accountability rating system.⁷⁸ The metrics for the new system have yet to be established, and with that comes uncertainty about when and how data will be collected and shared. Advocacy organizations rely on publicly available data and data-sharing agreements to identify areas of need within the school system. Similarly, program providers rely on data to select partners and evaluate program success. The uncertainty of the new system obscures potential policy needs and leaves program providers unclear about selecting partner schools to maximize their impact.⁷⁹

Nonpartisan organizations serve an important role in using the available data. These organizations can provide thoughtful analyses to help others better understand the data. For instance, the University of Chicago’s Consortium on School Research plays a valuable role by creating indicators, such as the freshman on-track indicator, to understand and monitor progress.⁸⁰ Additional trusted, nonpartisan voices may be increasingly important given the potential for increased partisanship with an elected school board.

News media also plays an important role in informing parent and community member voters about Chicago schools and districtwide issues. Increased funding in support of local education reporting would benefit CPS leaders, families, teachers, and students. The media coverage for education issues and changes in Chicago is important but, by most accounts, inadequate to fully inform the public.⁸¹ Major print outlets (e.g., Chicago Sun-Times, Chicago Tribune) focus most education coverage on political stories, with less emphasis on teaching and learning. Other outlets (e.g., Chalkbeat Chicago, WBEZ, Block Club) are constrained by capacity challenges but often effectively partner to disseminate education stories more broadly. Increasing education coverage at both the city and neighborhood levels would keep Chicagoans more informed of education changes, challenges, and improvements, while raising awareness of school board and policy shifts among elected officials and CPS leaders.

Conclusion

Chicago faces a pivotal moment with increased student need amid a shifting political landscape as its elected school board comes to power. To support students and communities, education organizations must work together to identify policy priorities and solutions that center the needs of students and do so in a way that authentically elevates the voices of the communities they serve. The elected school board also highlights the need for better information — through data and the media — about the successes and challenges in Chicago schools.

State and local education funders can help by providing flexible funding to give civic and advocacy organizations — grassroots and grassstops organizations working together — the time and space to authentically collaborate with one another and to be nimble in what activities they undertake within a rapidly shifting and uncertain context. Organizations can use those spaces to center decision-making on what is best for *all* Chicago’s students and schools, including the decision to create new organizations if needed.

Many Chicagoans recall being labeled the “worst” schools in the nation in 1987, followed by the city’s collective push for continuous improvement over several decades that led to notable student gains, including a period of student growth that exceeded nearly all districts in the country.⁸² Chicago leaders must draw on key foundational pieces already in place to build toward a better public education system by recapturing the momentum and reversing recent declines. Chicago has faced down challenges before. Whether it can weather this new era depends on its ability to create collaboration, elevate diverse voices, and build an informed electorate in the interests of *all* its youngest citizens. ✦

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About Bellwether

Bellwether is a national nonprofit that exists to transform education to ensure systemically marginalized young people achieve outcomes that lead to fulfilling lives and flourishing communities. Founded in 2010, we work hand in hand with education leaders and organizations to accelerate their impact, inform and influence policy and program design, and share what we learn along the way. For more, visit bellwether.org.

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