

Expanding High Quality Choices and Empowering Local Leaders: A Plan to Continue Gains At Neighborhood Schools Throughout Chicago

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It's my privilege to be here today to talk about the most important priority for Chicago's future: providing a quality education for every one of Chicago's children – no matter who they are or where they live. I'm glad to see so many educators and education leaders from around this city, including Barbara Byrd-Bennett, who has led the Chicago Public Schools to new heights and shares my drive to achieve even greater success for our children.

I'm going to describe some specific steps we can take in the next four years that will continue to improve the education we offer our students. These include improving the quality of our neighborhood high schools to keep more families in Chicago; it includes expanding pre-k and making technology a part of every student's requirement for graduation; empowering principals by giving them more training and support and more freedom from bureaucratic mandates; and strengthening Local School Councils responsible for hiring principals and determining the budgets for their schools.

But before we get into a discussion about the future, I'd like to talk about the foundation that all of us have built over the last four years.

Some of you may know that my parents used to post our report cards on the refrigerator, so everyone who came to our house could see how we were doing. Today, I'd like to post Chicago's education report card on our civic refrigerator.

It's a report card to be proud of, although we have more work to do.

The good news starts with more of our students today graduating from our high schools than ever before. Just three years ago, four out of ten students in CPS were dropping out. Three years from now, eight out of ten students are on track to graduate.

Think about that for a minute: just a few years ago, we had nearly a dropout for every graduate. Now, we're on track to see more than 80 percent of our children graduate. And we have a plan to get that even higher.

ACT scores are also at record highs, with students achieving the highest average scores in CPS history, while outpacing the state in growth for both reading and math.

On the other end of the spectrum, the number of children starting kindergarten ready to learn has nearly doubled – from 25 to 47 percent. This is a strong testament to the impact of expanding pre-k and raising educational standards, but we won't rest until that number reaches 100 percent.

The quality of our schools is rising throughout the city. Nine of the top 25 elementary schools in the state are in Chicago – including the top five. The top four high schools in the state are here in Chicago. Last year's graduating class received a record 800 million dollars in scholarship offers.

And we're making sure every student has access to a brighter future. In one telling example, the number of African American students in Advanced Placement classes is up 40 percent over the last four years.

Test scores for CPS students have continued to climb to record highs – especially in the critical areas of reading and math. In fact, while test scores across the state remained relatively flat last year, Chicago students' test scores improved much more. Think about what that means: most of the gains in statewide test scores were made by the children of Chicago. That would have been unthinkable just a few years ago.

We've also reduced the number of suspensions and expulsions by 34 percent so we can keep more children in school and learning instead of at home or on the streets.

In every metric posted on our civic refrigerator, the arrow is pointing in the right direction.

This is not by happenstance. These measures are the result of more than 20,000 teachers, 600 principals, and countless parents who are working every day to ensure our children get a better education. And they reflect the good work of leaders like Barbara and her team at CPS. They happened because we challenged the system that had been forced on our schools by putting politics ahead of learning.

Our recent progress is due to a new CPS that puts student performance ahead of politics; a new CPS that empowers principals with more independence and rewards them for success; a new CPS that focuses on teacher training instead of evaluating them on test scores only.

This is not just about numbers and metrics. You can see the impact in the classroom.

Each week I try to visit a neighborhood school to teach to a civics class, just like I used to do as Congressman. And with each visit I see firsthand the powerful effect of a strong principal, engaged teacher and involved parents. They are the foundation of our schools and we must continue to support and empower each of them.

And this has benefits far beyond the classroom. An educated workforce is the key to Chicago's future. And every challenge the city faces can be addressed in the neighborhood classroom.

It's also the best way to close the widening inequality gap in our society, where some are doing very well but too many are struggling to reach or stay in the middle-class. More than ever today, you earn what you learn.

That division in our society starts in kindergarten, where half of the children in our city used to get only a half-day of school. Now, every child in the City of Chicago attends a full day of kindergarten. And we're investing more in pre-K, so all children start kindergarten ready to learn.

For years, people talked about the need for Chicago to invest more in early education – but that's all they did. Over the past four years, we changed that history – and we'll continue to expand our efforts until we reach our goal.

Ultimately, we are focused on helping more Chicago students get to college – because, in today's world, that's the ticket to the middle-class.

Through our Colleges to Careers program, we have turned our City Colleges from teaching students what they should have learned in high school to preparing them for good-paying jobs and good careers.

And to make sure that more CPS students can take advantage of this progress, we have started the Chicago STAR Scholarship – offering free college tuition to any public school student who graduates with a B average or better. It's the first scholarship of its kind in any major city in the country.

It's a simple concept: No student should be denied the opportunity to go to college because their family lacks the resources. This scholarship is an investment in their future – and in Chicago's future. This is the bargain we're offering to every student: you do the hard work and earn that B average, and we'll give you the chance to succeed.

In all of these areas – from expanded pre-K and full-day kindergarten to higher test scores and graduation rates – we must continue our progress.

There are two specific areas that I want to focus on during the next four years.

The first is expanding high-quality education choices throughout the city, from pre-k through high school, in every neighborhood school. The second is further empowering principals, teachers and parents to work together to improve their local schools.

We all know that pre-k is the best way to make sure that every student starts kindergarten on the right foot. Already, our first year of expanded pre-K in Chicago has resulted in nearly doubling those children ready to learn on their first day of kindergarten. We also know that most students start dropping out of college in third grade if they haven't been given the right supports by the time they reach age three.

Our effort to raise the quality of pre-k was just recognized by the Federal Department of Health and Human Resources, which announced earlier this week that Chicago would not have to re-compete for our pre-k funding from Washington.

New York City has to re-compete. Los Angeles has to re-compete. But the quality of our pre-k education – which was built through a year-long community process that many of you were part of – has made it an educational model for the nation. We now have guaranteed funding of 600 million dollars over five years, meaning that nearly 50,000 Chicago children are guaranteed high-quality pre-K and infant and toddler programs each year for the next five years.

But we're not going to rest on our laurels. Over the next four years, we will up the ante on our commitment to early education. We will triple the number of full-day pre-K programs – from 100 classrooms today to 300 classrooms by 2019 – providing opportunities for 4,000 more children in all parts of the city while continuing to raise the educational standards in those classrooms.

This focus on early education must be met with an equal investment in our high schools. Too many Chicago high schools simply haven't achieved the level of quality that parents demand – and students deserve.

A strong high school system is critical to provide our children with the tools they need to succeed and, frankly, to keep families in Chicago rather than moving to the suburbs.

You and I know that, when children reach 4th or 5th grade, parents across Chicago start worrying about their access to high-quality high schools. Too many families leave our city because of that concern.

This is what led us to expand high-quality high school options through STEM schools, International Baccalaureate or IB schools, selective enrollment schools, military academies and magnet schools. Of Chicago's 92 traditional high schools, half now fall into those categories.

During the next four years, we will work to increase the number of neighborhood high schools with a specialty focus. Our goal will be that every family in Chicago lives within three miles of one of these high-quality choices. This will include additional IB and STEM programs, service-learning and fine arts programs, schools that focus on personalized learning, and schools paired with colleges, universities, or industry partners.

In short, Chicago's parents deserve to know that there are quality public high schools in the city for their children. And with many outstanding choices, they can pick the model that's best for their kids.

ALL of our high schools should be centers of excellence, providing rigorous instruction and robust support systems led by excellent staff. We will not be satisfied until this commitment is met for each and every high school throughout our city.

Let's face it: Our economy is changing and we need more schools that can provide our students with the knowledge to compete for the jobs of today and tomorrow.

In our first term, we launched a STEM strategy that will train 1,000 teachers in science, technology, engineering and math skills – and triple the number of students that receive STEM credentials by the year 2018.

We also began to implement the most comprehensive computer science education plan in any major school district in the country.

Our strategy includes teaching foundational computer science skills in elementary schools, offering at least one computer science class at every high school. In the second term we will take this strategy to the next level – by making computer science a graduation requirement.

To better prepare students for college and careers, the final year of high school must be designed to set up students for success. To accomplish this, we will build upon our growing dual credit/dual enrollment program, which provides students with opportunities to earn City Colleges credit while still in high school.

Just four years ago, only 300 of our students were in this program. We grew that number to 2,600. Now, we have set a new goal of 6,000 students each year who will benefit from dual credit and enrollment by 2016. And our plan is to provide high school seniors with even more options to use their last year in high school to prepare for their next step. By establishing stronger connections with the City Colleges, universities, corporations and nonprofits, we will enable our seniors to choose additional coursework, apprenticeships, and real-life exposure to jobs and careers.

In a second term, we will maintain our momentum in reaching record high graduation rates by ensuring that more of our 9th graders arrive ready for high school. We're on track to an 84 percent graduation rate in just three years, but to take that rate even higher, we have to do more.

One successful initiative cited by the University of Chicago Education Institute is our Freshman Connection program, which provides incoming 9th graders with an extensive summer experience of academic and enrichment support before they arrive at their high schools. Because of its success, we are going to expand that program to reach every incoming 9th grader in the system who needs it.

Through these improvements we will ensure that when parents gather at the dining room table to determine whether they should keep their children in Chicago's public schools, they have the certainty of a strong neighborhood public high school to keep them in the city. They

will know that a degree from Clemente or South Shore or Back of the Yards or Taft or Westinghouse or Sarah Goode means their children will have the education to succeed in college, career and life.

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The second area we will focus on in the next four years is further empowering school leaders and parents to improve their local schools.

We know that a strong principal can make a huge difference in a school's academic performance. We see it time and again. That's why we are empowering principals with more authority to innovate and help their students achieve academic success. And we're changing the evaluation systems to support academic growth and hold principals and staff accountable for results.

As a result, CPS principals today have a greater ability to customize their use of time, people and resources. They have real authority to hire teachers and structure their staff in a manner that makes the most sense for their schools.

With this new authority and accountability, many of our principals are achieving impressive results.

D'Andre Weaver took over as principal at Gwendolyn Brooks in the Pullman neighborhood in 2012. His students have shown the highest year-over-year increases in average ACT scores in the district.

The percentage of Gwendolyn Brooks students on-track to graduate has gone from 92.6 to 97.4 percent, while the first-year dropout rate has been cut in half. And Principal Weaver has accomplished all this while redesigning his school's curriculum, with a new emphasis on a STEM education.

Another example is Principal Lori Campbell of Piccolo Elementary School on the West Side. Piccolo had been a Level 3 school – the lowest level – since 2008. Principal Campbell and her teachers engineered a complete turnaround in just two years. Today, Piccolo is a Level 1-Plus school and in the 96th percentile in math improvement, having more than doubled the percentage of students meeting or exceeding state standards.

Principal Campbell has now moved to Marshall High School, where we are confident in her ability to replicate this success.

Then there is Barton Dassinger, who started as Principal at Chavez Elementary School in Back of the Yards in 2010. His leadership took Chavez from a Level 2 to a Level 1-Plus. And he's done it with a steady increase in student attendance, as well as a significant increase in the percentage of students meeting and exceeding state and national standards in reading and math.

We need more leaders like these who are empowered to bring our schools and students to the highest levels. We are working hard to find and train such leaders for the tough job at hand.

With four partners – Harvard, Loyola, UIC and New Leaders for New Schools – we are now training 75 to 80 new principals each year, which is quadruple the number in the past. During the next four years, we will more than double our partners for principal recruitment, retention and training by adding six additional universities to this list.

This will ensure that we continue to have a pipeline of strong leaders coming into CPS neighborhood schools, ready to do the job on Day One. It also ensures that we can end the age-old practice of "stealing" an effective principal from one CPS school to move them to another – because every school deserves a great leader.

Barbara has also launched a Principals Fellowship program, in collaboration with Northwestern University's Kellogg School of Management, which picks 25 of our most talented principals each year for executive leadership development.

These are all important steps in our drive for improvement. But we need to do more to help our principals, teachers and students to succeed.

Beginning next school year, we will launch a new designation for schools with strong leaders who consistently show educational excellence. In my regular meetings with principals and teachers, I constantly hear about the time-consuming mandates coming from the central office. I know Barbara hears this also, and raises it with me at our weekly meetings.

Under this new program, schools that have achieved a top-quality designation for three years running will be granted Independent School status and will be freed from requirements from the central office.

These Independent Schools will have the freedom to innovate around curriculum and instruction. The freedom to allocate resources that meet their school-specific needs. The freedom to direct professional development in their schools.

All of these are keys to a successful school.

We should empower our excellent principals and teachers to provide the best possible learning environment for their students. And we can incentivize them by promising that, if they continue to improve, they will get the freedom and independence they have sought and earned.

The importance of great principals and teachers is only rivaled by engaged and committed parents. They should have a greater say in how their local schools are run. That is why Barbara and I have empowered Local School Councils to make the best decisions for the children in their neighborhoods. In a second term, we will continue that effort so parents and community leaders can have a bigger impact on the future of their neighborhood schools.

Local School Councils, or LSCs, have been around since 1988. They are made up of parents, teachers and community members. And they are uniquely positioned to make the most critical decisions regarding their neighborhood schools.

As I just mentioned, CPS is implementing new and innovative strategies to recruit, retain, and reward high-performing school principals. Since LSCs have the power to choose school principals, this focus on principal quality elevates the importance of LSCs.

And with the recent advent of student-based budgeting, money for schools now follows the students. This allows for school-level decision-making about how best to allocate those funds, which LSCs must approve.

Despite their critical ability to hire principals and determine budgets, too many of our LSCs across Chicago are languishing today. In the last election for local school councils, not a single parent filed to run at 86 different schools – that's nearly a fifth of all schools with LSCs.

I don't believe these parents are uninterested in their children's education. I DO believe they haven't been given the information and tools to make a difference for their local schools.

So during the next four years, we will work with CPS and community organizations across Chicago to communicate the importance of LSCs and encourage more parents to get involved. And we will provide LSC members with information and expertise, so they are better prepared to carry out their critical roles.

Ultimately, assuring the quality of education in each individual school is the most important thing we can offer to Chicago students and their parents. But we also must have the resources to provide the education they deserve.

As everyone knows, CPS is facing a tremendous budget challenge – one that has built up over decades. Over the past four years, we've cut \$750 million from central office operations – all in an effort to keep cuts away from our classrooms.

We still have a long way to go – especially in dealing with the pension shortfalls that threaten the future of Chicago's schools. And we'll be looking to our new governor and legislature to do right by Chicago and finally address the inequities that have existed for far too long.

The most glaring inequity is that Chicago taxpayers are the only ones who are responsible for pension payments for teachers across the state, not just those in our own city. Think about that – Chicago taxpayers not only pay for our teachers' pensions, but also for the pensions of teachers in Naperville, Winnetka, Rockford, and Decatur.

That's unfair, unaffordable and not sustainable. And it's not in the interest of Chicago's children.

That extra pension tax comes on top of a woeful lack of state support for education. Only Mississippi and Alabama provide a smaller share of education dollars for their students. We might envy their football teams, but not their education systems.

It's time for Illinois to reorder its priorities and put education first. Governor Rauner has made a commitment to do that. I welcome that, and I will be sure to hold him accountable so that this problem is addressed in his very first budget. I stand ready to work with him and the legislature to achieve his important campaign pledge.

In the past, Chicago mayors went to Springfield in a position of weakness. They had to ask for support for a school system that was lagging educationally.

That's not the case anymore.

Despite serious financial challenges, CPS has been making steady progress – with the help of principals, teachers and parents across the system. For the first time in decades, we're putting the children first. Now, we want Springfield to hold up its end of the bargain.

Changing a system that short-changed our students was difficult, but necessary. Every metric now shows that we are moving in the right direction.

If these changes were easy, they would have been made long ago. But now that we've made the hard choices to improve our schools, our children are seeing the results.

We're seeing it in our children starting kindergarten ready to learn because of the investments we've made in their early, pre-k years.

We're seeing it in more of our students going to class, taking AP courses and graduating from high school.

We're seeing it in students achieving record test scores – from their ACTs to those measuring new national standards.

We're seeing it in more of those graduates completing community college and moving on to four-year colleges and careers.

We're seeing it in more graduates winning scholarships and completing their college degrees.

Now is not the time to turn back the clock on all this progress. Now is not the time to let politics back in and block the path to success.

Our progress over the past four years is plain to see, like a report card on a refrigerator. Now our job is to keep working so more Chicago students can succeed for the rest of their lives.

Our children only get one shot at a good education. Our responsibility as adults is to make sure that it counts.

Thank you.