

EDITORIALS

CPS should close schools over two years

The 2013 Chicago elementary school closing list is due any day now.

It should, in our view, call for no more than 30 or 35 under-enrolled schools to be closed this summer. Another round of closures, roughly the same maximum number, should follow a year later.

As this page has said repeatedly, we don't believe that the school system, despite fine intentions and a yeoman's effort to prepare like never before, can humanely relocate mass numbers of kids all at one time. Our view is based on having watched CPS bungle previous closures and the experiences of other school districts around the country.

The sane, humane course is to spread the closures over two years.

Our numbers split the maximum number of closures recommended last week by the Schools CEO's school utilization commission. Chicago has enough high-performing schools to absorb students from 60 to 70 under-enrolled schools, the group said.

Limiting the distance from a closing school to a receiving school to one mile yields 60 schools. Stretching that to 1.5 miles yields 70. One mile seems a better option, especially for elementary students.

And, frankly, we think closing 30 schools



Chicago Public Schools CEO Barbara Byrd-Bennett | RICH HEIN-SUN-TIMES

in one year is pushing it.

It is not at all clear that the potential harm of mass closings outweighs CPS' promised benefits.

♦ CPS has pushed mass school closings as a must for a district facing a \$1 billion deficit. Consolidating schools, CPS says, will free up money so every child can attend a "high-quality 21st century school with updated amenities, more individualized instruction and the programs they need to compete and succeed."

The numbers do not bear that out. Yes, CPS must close schools; it makes no sense to keep open severely under-used schools, especially those with decaying facilities. But the savings will likely not be significant, certainly not against a \$1 billion deficit. CPS has a \$5.1 billion budget. A February Pew Charitable Trusts report, which looked at 12 school districts, said the net savings is less than \$1 million per building, in large part because empty schools are very hard to sell.

♦ Chicago already is trying to sell 24 shuttered sites, Pew noted. CPS is acutely aware of this issue and has made selling or repurposing its buildings a top priority. But it's an uphill battle. And who suffers when a school, often the heart and soul of a neighborhood, closes? It makes any kind of turnaround in a desolate and isolated neighborhood that much more unlikely.

♦ The blunt formula CPS uses to label schools as under-used — a formula that can exaggerate the number of under-used schools — also gives us pause. The formula doesn't factor in when extra rooms are needed for a large special education population, for example, and allows only a relatively small number of classrooms for art and music and the like. Many officially under-

enrolled schools use that extra space for fine arts and enrichment classes or to make space for parents or outside support groups.

Many receiving schools that on paper appear to have room for new students, then, are justified in worrying that they will lose space they have put to good use. Also, in many poor communities, a small, tight-knit school can be a real gift.

CPS officials say they use this formula as a starting point but then analyze the individual needs and uses of each school. And we don't doubt they've done their best to dig in.

But it's not enough. That's why we urge CPS to focus only on its most severely under-used schools, those that are below 60 percent capacity, and those in the worst physical shape. Currently CPS is only planning to close schools with utilization rates below 70 percent.

Grossly under-used schools must be closed, and that must happen quickly, within the next 18 months. It will help CPS' budget modestly, and for many students it's a plus to move to schools with more staff and resources.

But going beyond that will likely cause more harm than good.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Put a lid on it

Could the suburbanites who keep commenting on the violence in Chicago please stop? It's easy to express an opinion from your leafy, cul-de-sac enclaves, but another thing altogether to move back and attempt to make a real difference through home purchasing, mentoring and personal intervention. If all you can contribute to our peace efforts is lip service, keep it.

Ephraim Lee, Grand Boulevard

Chicago gets more than its fair share

Props to state Senate Minority Leader Christine Radogno for exposing disparities in school funding that disproportionately benefit Chicago. Let's see if the governor or state attorney general will do anything about it.

Mike Mannard, Schaumburg



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Opportunities to draw jobs missed

For nearly 13 years I have lived in Chicago and run a small industrial business in DuPage County. The City of Chicago is attempting to increase hiring of local residents on construction projects, but does not look at the bigger picture and make efforts to draw industrial business back within the city limits.

The collar counties offer tax and rent savings,

better infrastructure, better security and a sense of safety, and an abundance of qualified labor.

Because these jobs are outside of Chicago, more people who move to the Chicago area choose the suburbs and collar counties. While the city makes efforts to bring tech and commercial businesses downtown, it overlooks the industry and trade that could bring attainable jobs to residents of under-developed areas and drive population in those areas.

Bryan Feldman, River North

Fountain column deserves another turn

The Sun-Times should re-print John W. Fountain's Thursday column ["Declare war to stop killing babies"] on the front page. Finally, someone has the courage to speak the truth.

Rosemary Cannon, West Lawn

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