

EDITORIALS

# What a 'half-empty' school really looks like

This is what one "half-empty" Chicago public school looks like:

Just about every classroom at Garvey Elementary, a cozy and well-loved Washington Heights school, is in use.

In fact, during a visit on Monday to the school, where colorful and neatly displayed student projects and artwork line bright yellow walls, we didn't see a single room going unused.

Garvey has air-conditioned classrooms, a well-stocked library, a garden, an art room, a computer lab, several small science labs and the kind of discipline and order in the classroom and hallway that tell a visitor this school has its act together.

These are the things CPS says it wants all schools to have. Of course, most of these strengths and amenities were conveniently left off the fact sheet the school system distributed about Garvey.

On paper, Garvey, with roughly 300 students, is about 50 percent used. Staff say a few rooms aren't fully used. That's how it landed among the 54 schools proposed for closure. It's to be consolidated with Mount Vernon Elementary, three blocks to the south in a quiet residential neighborhood of bungalows on the Far South Side.

This page strongly supports closing severely underused schools. It's right for those schools, and it's right for CPS to redirect money from underused schools to enhance other schools, as it plans to do.

But, as we've said repeatedly, 54 closures by this summer — affecting 109 schools and about 30,000 kids after receiving schools are added in — is far too many. It is too massive an undertaking to do at all at once.

Two kinds of mistakes are inevitable in such a rush: mistakes while relocating such an unwieldy number of students and mistakes in closing the wrong schools.

Like Garvey.

On our visit, children sure didn't look "trapped," as the mayor and the schools chief like to say about students in under-enrolled schools. We didn't see much flab, either. On a tour of the small building with a parent — the principal wasn't involved — we saw an intimate school making good use of its space. Parents at many other schools, including Trumbull and Courtenay, also are making good cases for their schools.

Hearings on each proposed closure start Saturday. We urge CPS to listen — which it has done so far in this process — and remove more names from the closure list.



Parent Christa Thomas says Garvey Elementary should be saved. | SUN-TIMES PHOTO

CPS says Mount Vernon, a large, recently renovated building, is at 44 percent capacity. It likely has space, but merging it with Garvey makes little sense, especially since Garvey looks better academically.

Yes, Garvey is a "Level 3" school, the lowest rating, and is on probation, while Mount Vernon is a Level 2 and not on probation.

But Garvey is new to probation just this year, while Mount Vernon was on probation from 2005 to 2011. And get this: Mount Vernon progressed to Level 2 in large part

because its scores and attendance have grown — an important achievement — but they have grown to be just below Garvey's level.

At Mount Vernon, 74 percent of students meet state standards. At Garvey, it's 77 percent. Garvey's scores have stagnated, the reason it dropped from level 2 to 3 — which is a cause for concern not closure.

Moreover, students and teachers gave significantly higher marks to Garvey than to Mount Vernon in a survey of school culture. In the University of Chicago research-backed survey of key indicators of school success, Garvey outpaced Mount Vernon in every area, earning a "strong" rating, for example, for ambitious instruction and school safety to Mount Vernon's "weak" ratings.

Our tour guide, parent Christa Thomas is deeply invested in her school's success and knows almost everyone there. She teaches an after-school dance class at Mount Vernon, where she says the culture is much rougher. A strong rivalry between the schools and gang issues are also a great concern.

She refuses to send her children there and is fighting to save her school.

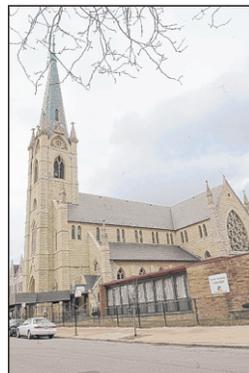
"They're taking kids from a calm, family environment and putting them in a stressed one," she said. "This is not a wasteland."

## LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

### Save St. James church

As a Friend of Old St. James and former parishioner, I beg you to consider the case against this beautiful, historical, architectural and spiritual monument. Day by day, new evidence comes to light that suggests St. James has been "framed" — for example, the fact that the church was never condemned by the city, the reality that the estimate for repair — \$12 million — is vastly inflated, the discovery that the land promised for a new church building isn't even up for sale!

As of now, the agents of destruction are accelerating the demolition process. Aware of new evidence that calls for an instant reprieve, those who stand to benefit from the tear-down have



BRIAN JACKSON-SUN-TIMES

become relentless in their determination to topple this house of prayer.

Please, before it is too late, please review the facts and figures; please look carefully at who will prosper by reducing St. James to rubble. One thing is for sure: Neither the parishioners nor members of the community stand to gain anything but grief from the wrecking ball. A church restored, however, brings the hope and possibility of new dreams, of wider social outreach, of greater possibilities. Please join your voices to those of The Friends of St. James on Wabash. Only your intervention

can let this dream become reality; only your intervention can stay the execution!

Elizabeth-Anne Stewart,  
South Loop

### Speak out on climate change

I am very pleased to see Sen. Mark Kirk's statement in favor of gay marriage. Both his own statement, and the coverage in the Sun-Times suggest that he was brought to this position largely by his own close brush with death and a new appreciation for what is important in life. Good for him!

I hope he will now apply the same new outlook to the problem of global warming. Kirk has to be among the many Republicans who know very well that climate change is an urgent problem. But these Republicans have been intimidated by the fossil fuel-funded denier crowd. Please, Sen. Kirk, let your new courage shine through. Acknowledge that climate change is serious. The simplest step to address this on a large scale is a carbon tax.

Doug Burke, Oak Park

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