CERD Shadow Report: The City of Chicago’s Mass Public School Closings and Their Discriminatory Effect on African Americans

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The International Human Rights Clinic at the University of Chicago Law School works for the promotion of social and economic justice in the United States and globally. The Clinic uses international human rights laws and norms as well as other substantive laws and strategies to draw attention to human rights violations and develop practical solutions using interdisciplinary and empirical research methodologies.

The Chicago Teachers Union is an organization of educators dedicated to advancing and promoting quality public education, improving teaching and learning conditions, and protecting members' rights. CTU represents nearly 30,000 teachers and educational support personnel working in the Chicago Public Schools and, by extension, the students and families they serve.

The University of Chicago Human Rights Program is an interdisciplinary program committed to exploring human rights questions both in theory and practice. It includes a rigorous curriculum, faculty-led initiatives, an internship program, graduate student resources and support, and community events.

The Collaborative for Equity and Justice in Education is a collaborative of faculty members and graduate students and community advisors/partners. CEJE produces research that supports engagement and advocacy of school communities toward equity and justice in public schools.

Blocks Together (BT) is a membership-based community organizing group in the West Humboldt Park (WHP) neighborhood on Chicago’s West Side. Since 1995, BT has empowered residents to work together for systematic changes that bring concrete improvement to their lives.
I. ISSUE SUMMARY

1. The City of Chicago closed 49 public elementary schools in 2013, resulting in the largest wave of public school closings in U.S. history.\(^1\) Prior to 2013, Chicago Public Schools (CPS) had only closed 44 public elementary schools in its history.\(^2\) The schools closed in 2013 comprised roughly 10% of all public schools in Chicago, affecting 30,000 students.\(^3\) The closings disproportionately impacted African American students, reducing access to and depriving them of a good quality education, exposing them to increased risks to their personal security, and precluding meaningful public participation.

2. African American communities experienced the brunt of the closings. The closings were concentrated in the South and West Sides of the City, which encompass traditionally low-income, African American neighborhoods. Roughly 90% of the closed schools had a majority African American student population; 71% had a majority African American teaching staff.\(^4\) African American students constitute 40% of the students in Chicago’s public schools, but 80% of the students impacted by the closings were African American.\(^5\) Just 2% of schools with a minority African American student population were closed.\(^6\) Since the closings, 322 students have gone missing from the CPS system and a total of 871 have left it altogether.\(^7\) Out of those students that left the system, 88% were African American.\(^8\)

3. The closings deprived African Americans students of their right to a good quality and accessible education. Displaced students and students in receiving schools (i.e., schools designated to receive students from closed schools) faced larger class sizes in 2014 than in previous years.\(^9\) For example, a kindergarten class on the South Side had 51 students this year and was held in the lunchroom.\(^10\) One parent noted that a third grade class on the South Side had 40 students and was held in the library.\(^11\) Larger class sizes negatively impact learning, particularly among African American students.\(^12\) Additionally, CPS promised all receiving schools a variety of improvements, but failed to fulfill many of these promises. At the same time, the City invested millions of dollars into opening new charter schools, some of which were placed in neighborhoods where schools were recently closed.\(^13\)

4. The closings also deprived African American students of their right to personal security. Students remain surrounded by violence as they walk to school, especially in the gang-ridden South and West Side neighborhoods. Additionally, there have been reports of altercations and tension in the receiving schools between the new and old students.\(^14\)

5. In the build up to the school closings, the City largely failed to respect the parents of African American students’ right to participate in public affairs. Communities overwhelmingly opposed the closings. In response, the City held open hearings on the issue. However, despite recommendations from hearing officers to keep 13 of the schools open, the City only kept 2 open.\(^15\)

II. CONCLUDING OBSERVATIONS

6. In its 2008 Concluding Observations, this Committee issued the following concerns and recommendations to the United States regarding racial discrimination in education. First, the Committee reiterated a concern articulated in its 2001 Concluding Observations that the U.S. definition of racial discrimination requires discriminatory purpose, while the definition in the International Convention on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination (the Convention) requires only a discriminatory effect. Second, it expressed its concern over the disproportionate concentration of African Americans in low-income neighborhoods “characterized by . . . under-resourced schools and high exposure to crime and violence.”\(^16\) Third, it expressed concern over de facto racial segregation in public schools. It recommended the United States undertake further studies and “take all appropriate
measures . . . to restore the possibility for schools districts to voluntarily promote school integration.”17 Finally, the Committee expressed concern over the “achievement gap.” It urged the United States to “adopt all appropriate measures . . . to reduce the ‘achievement gap’ . . . by improving the quality of education.”18

III. U.S. GOVERNMENT PERIODIC REPORT (JUNE 2013)

7. The U.S. Government addressed several issues related to education in its 2013 Periodic Report to the Committee. In Article 2 of the Report, it emphasized that it successfully identified and eliminated instances of racial discrimination. In this regard, it noted that the Government worked on approximately 200 school desegregation cases.19 The Government also attempted to address the “school-to-prison pipeline” problem by preventing discriminatory suspensions and expulsions. In Article 3 of the Report, the Government described its efforts to address de facto racial segregation in schools under existing law. Additionally, the Government formed the Equity and Excellence Commission to combat the “achievement gap.”20 In Article 5 of the Report, the Government mentioned its promotion of non-discriminatory policies aimed at ensuring equality of economic, social, and cultural rights, including education.21 The Report did not directly address the school closings in Chicago.

IV. INTERNATIONAL CONVENTION ON THE ELIMINATION OF ALL FORMS OF RACIAL DISCRIMINATION

Article 5(e)(v): Right to Education

8. The closing of 49 public elementary schools infringed African American students’ right to an education free from discrimination. Article 5 of the Convention provides that states “undertake to prohibit and to eliminate racial discrimination in all its forms and to guarantee the right of everyone . . . to equality before the law, notably in the enjoyment of the . . . right to education.”22 General Comment 13 of the Committee on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights establishes that the right to education includes, among other things, the right to an acceptable and accessible education. States Parties fulfill the “acceptability” component of education “by taking positive measures to ensure that education is . . . of good quality for all.”23 The “accessibility” component of education has three overlapping dimensions: non-discrimination, physical, and economic. States Parties fulfill the “non-discrimination” dimension by ensuring that education is accessible to all “especially the most vulnerable groups, in law and fact, without discrimination on any of the prohibited grounds.”24 Parties fulfill the “physical” dimension of accessibility by ensuring that education is “within safe physical reach and at some reasonably convenient geographic location (e.g., a neighborhood school).”25 The school closings have disproportionately prevented African American students from receiving a good quality and accessible education because the closings resulted in increased class sizes, harmed the learning environment of receiving schools, led to the wasteful use of resources, and contributed to unequal funding of education in the school district.

9. Students displaced by the school closings face larger class sizes in receiving schools, some of which are now overcrowded.26 Larger class sizes negatively impact learning, especially for African American students.27 “Larger class sizes have lasting negative effects: lowering high-school graduation rates, reducing the chance that students take college entrance exams like the ACT or SAT, and lowering the chance of college enrollment and completion.”28 Parents from affected South Side schools reported that in the receiving schools some classes had over 40 students, but had no classroom that could fit that number of students, forcing lunchrooms and libraries to be used instead.29
10. CPS promised events to introduce students from closed schools to receiving schools. These plans were not adequately implemented. Teachers reported resentfulness among students affected by the closings. Altercations between displaced and receiving students have occurred at several of the receiving schools. Tension has also resulted from continual comparisons between each group of students. Some parents removed their children from receiving schools during the year due to these issues. These problems have harmed the learning environment in receiving schools, reducing the quality of education of students affected by the closings.

11. The primary justification for school closings was to improve the educational environment for students. However, a significant number of receiving schools are on probation for poor performance. Currently, over half of the students displaced by school closings are attending a school on probation. Additionally, 34% of displaced students were moved from a better performing closed school to a lower performing receiving school.

12. Although CPS promised receiving schools updated resources and capital investments, it has only partially fulfilled its promises, leaving displaced African American students in under resourced schools. For instance, CPS investments have created new science labs, but not science programs, leaving the new labs empty or used for non-science purposes. Although CPS established new libraries in all schools, only 38% of receiving schools have a librarian. Additionally, only 20% of receiving schools have a technology teacher despite upgraded computer labs. Newly purchased iPads for receiving schools did not include any training and therefore many could not be used. In addition, CPS did not adequately secure its investments, resulting in the theft of $100,000 worth of iPads at one school. Finally, some schools still lack Internet access, despite promises to provide WiFi in all classrooms.

13. An accessible and nondiscriminatory education requires equitable spending policies for schools. General Comment 13 states: “Sharp disparities in spending policies that result in differing qualities of education for persons residing in different geographic locations may constitute discrimination.” CPS has disproportionally closed schools in African American neighborhoods and then moved to open charter schools in those same neighborhoods. However, charter schools are open admission schools, meaning that admission is not based on geography. Charter schools thus do not serve the community in which they are located. There is a significant disparity between CPS’s spending per child enrolled at a new charter school and CPS’s spending per child moved to a receiving school in the wake of the school closings. Over $2,000 is spent per child during the start-up period of a charter school versus only $230 per child during the transition period of the closings.

**Article 5(b): The Right to Security of Person**

14. Under Article 5(b), States Parties to the Convention undertake to prohibit and to eliminate racial discrimination in “the right to security of person and protection by the State against violence or bodily harm.” General Comment 13 of the Committee on the Rights of the Child establishes the right of children to be free from violence including, but not limited to, transit between home and school. Chicago’s school closings impacted African American students’ right to security of person by exposing them to increased risks of physical harm.

15. The majority of school closings occurred in the predominately African American South and West Side neighborhoods. These neighborhoods have high levels of violence and gang activity. Approximately half of the 1,054 youths murdered in Chicago over the last five years have been killed within the census tracts of the closed schools. One study suggests that the closings aggravated gang conflicts prior to their implementation. The Chicago Board of Education (CBE) attempted to provide “Safe Passage” routes to children scheduled to attend schools in gang-controlled
neighborhoods. The program enlists community members to watch students on their way to school, but it has not entirely eliminated the risk of violence on these routes. A recent double shooting on a “Safe Passage” route highlights the ineffectiveness of this program, as does the rape and beating of a 15 year-old female student just half a block from a “Safe Passage” route.

**Article 5(c): The Right to Take Part in the Conduct of Public Affairs**

16. Article 5(c) of the Convention provides that State Parties undertake to prohibit and to eliminate racial discrimination in the enjoyment of the right “to take part . . . in the conduct of public affairs at any level.” The Human Rights Committee explains in General Comment 25 that “[t]he conduct of public affairs . . . is a broad concept” that “covers all aspects of public administration, and the formulation and implementation of policy at . . . local levels.” The Human Rights Committee further established that “no unreasonable restrictions should be imposed” on such participation. The process by which the City closed 49 public schools and the existing appointment structure of the CBE infringed the rights of African American parents and community members to take part in the conduct of public affairs.

17. The CBE held public hearings for community members affected by the closings. However, participation in hearings required Internet access with registration to speak restricted to early morning sign-on times. Many African Americans in affected neighborhoods lack Internet access. Consequently, many found it difficult to obtain speaking spots and to participate fully in the public meetings. Requiring parents and concerned community members who lack access to the Internet to apply online in order to participate in public hearings amounts to the imposition of an “unreasonable restriction” on their participation.

18. In contrast to most other school districts in the United States, the CBE is not democratically elected, but rather appointed by the Mayor. During the public hearings, the overwhelming majority of parents objected to the school closings. Independent officers hired by CPS to rubber stamp the closings also recommended that 13 schools remain open after hearing objections raised during the hearings. However, the objections of parents and the recommendations of the independent officers were largely ignored by the CBE. Eleven of the 13 schools recommended to remain open by the officers were closed. The right to participate in the conduct of public affairs cannot be realized if public bodies are not responsive to the needs of affected communities and are not held accountable to those they are intended to represent.

**Article 2(1)(a): Obligations of States Parties**

19. Under the Convention, States Parties undertake “to engage in no act or practice of racial discrimination . . . and to ensure that all public authorities and public institutions, national and local, shall act in conformity with this obligation.” The U.S. Senate made its advice and consent to the approval of CERD subject to the following understanding: “[CERD] shall be implemented by the Federal Government to the extent that it exercises jurisdiction over the matters covered therein, and otherwise by the state and local governments. To the extent that state and local governments exercise jurisdiction over such matters, the Federal Government shall, as necessary, take appropriate measures to ensure the fulfillment of this Convention.” Consequently, the United States must take appropriate measures to ensure that the City of Chicago does not contravene the Convention in light of the issues discussed above.

V. THE CERD COMMITTEE GENERAL COMMENTS


VI. OTHER UN BODY RECOMMENDATIONS


23. General Comment 13, Convention on the Rights of the Child, CRC/C/GC/13.70

24. General Comment 25, International Convention on Civil and Political Rights, CCPR/C/21/Rev.1/Add.7.71


VII. RECOMMENDED QUESTIONS

27. We urge the Committee to ask the United States the following questions:

   a. What will the United States do to address the de facto racial segregation in Chicago Public Schools?

   b. What is being done to investigate the discriminatory impact of the school closings, especially on the quality of education African American children are receiving?

   c. What will the United States do to ensure security for students impacted by the closings as they walk to school through areas of heightened violence and gang-activity?

   d. What will be done to investigate and address the lack of meaningful public participation allowed by the City of Chicago in the decision to close 49 public schools?

VIII. GENERAL RECOMMENDATIONS

28. We urge the Committee to recommend that the United States:

   a. Conduct a federal investigation into the Chicago school closings to, among other things, ascertain an appropriate remedy;

   b. Implement legislative, executive, or judicial remedies to address the racial discrimination in Chicago Public Schools;

   c. Implement security measures to ensure adequate protection for students impacted by the closures who must walk through gang-controlled areas on the way to new schools;

   d. Take appropriate measures to ensure meaningful public participation of parents and community members in future decisions to close public schools.
perform better, and pupils to learn more”).


3 CHI. TEACHERS UNION, TWELVE MONTHS LATER: THE IMPACT OF SCHOOL CLOSINGS IN CHICAGO 3 (2014) [hereinafter CTU].


5 CTU, supra note 4, at 3.

6 ILL. GEN. ASSEMBLY’S CHI. EDUC. FACILITIES TASK FORCE, FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS REGARDING THE IMPLEMENTATION OF IL P.A. 97-0474 AND PLANNING FOR THE FUTURE OF CHICAGO’S PUBLIC SCHOOLS 56 (2012-2013) [hereinafter CEFTF].

7 Id. at 99.

8 Id., supra note 5, at 8.

9 PARENTS 4 TEACHERS. PARENTS FROM SHUTTERED SCHOOLS UNHAPPY THIS YEAR 2 (2014).

10 Id.


13 CTU, supra note 4, at 9.

14 Id. at 3.


16 Id. at ¶ 17; See Parents Involved in Cnty. Schs. v. Seattle Sch. Dist. No. 1, 551 U.S. 701 (2007) (which limited the ability of U.S. public school districts to address de facto segregation by prohibiting the use of race-conscious measures as a tool to promote integration).

17 Concluding Observations, supra note 16, at ¶ 34.

18 U.S. DEP’T OF STATE, UNITED STATES PERIODIC REPORT TO THE COMMITTEE ON ELIMINATION OF RACIAL DISCRIMINATION, ¶ 20 (2013).

19 Id. at ¶¶ 41-45.

20 Id. at ¶¶ 145-146.


23 Id. at ¶ 6(b)(i).

24 General Comment 13, supra note 23, at ¶6(b)(2)


27 Special Rapporteur on the Right to Educ., Normative Action for Quality Education, ¶ 54 A/HRC/20/21 (2012) (“Class size and pupil-teacher ratio is another important indicator of quality of education…Reducing very large class sizes helps teachers to perform better, and pupils to learn more”).

28 Id. at ¶ 28.

29 UNIV. OF ILL. AT CHI. COLLABORATIVE FOR EQUITY IN JUSTICE & EDUC., ROOT SHOCK: PARENTS’ PERSPECTIVES ON SCHOOL CLOSINGS IN CHICAGO 11-13 (2014) [hereinafter CEJE]; see also CTU, supra note Error! Bookmark not defined., at 9.

30 CTU, supra note 4, at 9.

31 Id.

32 Id.

33 Id.

34 CHI. PUB. SCHS., SCHOOLS CONSOLIDATIONS REPORT, 1 (2014) [hereinafter CPS].

35 CEFTF, supra note 7, at 61.

36 Id.

37 Id.

38 Id. at 62.

39 CEJE, supra note 30, at 9.
International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination) ¶ III.


CTU, supra note 4, at ¶ 35.

Sarah Karp, CPS Won't Take Recommendations Against Closings, CATALYST CHI. (May 7, 2013), http://www.catalyst-chicago.org/notebook/2013/05/07/21041/cps-wont-take-recommendations-against-closings (Catalyst Chi. is published by the Community Renewal Society, a respected civil society organization which focuses on local public affairs).

Sarah Karp, CPS Won't Take Recommendations Against Closings, CATALYST CHI. (May 7, 2013), http://www.catalyst-chicago.org/notebook/2013/05/07/21041/cps-wont-take-recommendations-against-closings (Catalyst Chi. is published by the Community Renewal Society, a respected civil society organization which focuses on local public affairs).

Id. at ¶ 35.


Id. at ¶ 6.

Sarah Karp, CPS Won't Take Recommendations Against Closings, CATALYST CHI. (May 7, 2013), http://www.catalyst-chicago.org/notebook/2013/05/07/21041/cps-wont-take-recommendations-against-closings (Catalyst Chi. is published by the Community Renewal Society, a respected civil society organization which focuses on local public affairs).

Id. at ¶ 6.

Id.

Id. at ¶ 35.


Id.; see also General Comment 13, supra note 23, at ¶ 16 (right to technology in educ.).

Id. at ¶ 35.

Id.; see also General Comment 13, supra note 23, at ¶ 16 (right to technology in educ.).