
Beyond Elected or Appointed: Educators Reimagine the Chicago Board of Education

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TO: Illinois General Assembly, Mayor Lori Lightfoot, Chicago Board of Education

The Issue: Lack of Representation, Transparency, and Accountability

Chicago Public Schools is the only district in Illinois with a school board appointed by the mayor. In 2019, many candidates, including now-Mayor Lightfoot, campaigned on a popular promise to support a school board elected by voters.¹ With the promised Board of Education reform not implemented to date, and as the Board has weighed in on consequential issues such as distance learning and police presence in schools, a move to an elected body continues to be at the forefront of conversation.²

To better understand Chicago educators' visions of an equitable, effective composition and structure of Chicago's Board of Education, Educators for Excellence-Chicago spent the summer of 2020 gathering data on the issue. Through over 100 surveys, six focus groups led by teachers, and a teacher-leader working group, the data collected represents every region of the city with varying years of experience and roles within their schools. While we found that the majority of educators included in our study support an elected or hybrid (partially elected, partially appointed) Board, these conversations and surveys found far more nuance than the debate in the media would suggest. **For educators, the heart of this issue is not whether the Board is appointed or elected, but rather how well it serves the greater school community** – students, their families, teachers, and school staff. Above all, educators identified an urgent need for a Board that includes **more diverse and representative perspectives, adopts more equitable and transparent practices, and has greater accountability to the communities it serves and employees it oversees.**

As legislators begin a new session and consider legislation for an elected Board of Education, there is an opportunity to address these issues by:

- Ensuring greater representation on Board decisions by including a current classroom teacher on the Board and engaging in broader, more accessible community feedback;
- Increasing transparency through more consistent updates on Board decisions and decision rationale; and
- Creating a community advisory council with powers to act as a watchdog for accountability.

¹ Perez Jr., J. (2019, April 19). 90% of U.S school boards are picked by voters, but not in Chicago. Here's why that could change. Retrieved from <https://www.chicagotribune.com/news/ct-met-chicago-elected-school-board-debate-20190418-story.html>

² Cherone, H. (2020, June 30). Vote to Keep Police in Schools Triggers Renewed Call for Elected School Board. Retrieved from <https://news.wttw.com/2020/06/25/renewed-call-for-elected-chicago-school-board>

The Solutions: Legislative and Local Action

Include Greater Representation on Board Decisions

- **The Board must include at least one dedicated seat for a current classroom teacher.**
 - Of educators surveyed, 99% favored having a current classroom teacher on the school board.³ Teachers are ultimately tasked with executing most board policies and are firsthand witnesses to whether these policies are working. Mandating an educator seat through Assembly legislation would enable a vital feedback loop between those executing and those deciding the policies. Besides the expertise teachers have in curriculum design and instruction, educators possess knowledge of the struggles faced by students and parents from all sides of the city and can bridge barriers between underserved communities and policymakers. One way to identify this teacher could be through a Local School Council Advisory Board (LSCAB) appointment. The majority of Local School Council (LSC) members are elected by their respective communities with LSCAB members being voted on by LSC members. Granting the LSCAB the responsibility to appoint the teacher board member would ensure a level of community representation.
- **An elected Board of Education structure must include and enforce campaign finance caps.**
 - Roughly 80% of CPS students identify as economically disadvantaged; additionally, Latinx students make up the largest demographic of students (47%) with Black students representing the next largest population (37%), and 19% of the entire student body identifying as English Language Learners.⁴ With such diverse student backgrounds, it is critical for the Chicago Board of Education to embody the racial, geographic and socioeconomic diversity present in Chicago's classrooms. However, educators are worried about powerful interests preventing accurate representation, making Board races unfair and inequitable. As a solution, 58% of surveyed educators indicated a need for campaign spending limits as a way to curb special interests from dominating seats.⁵ Any legislation directing a shift to an elected Board structure must also include school board campaign finance limits and guarantee they are enforced by the Chicago Board of Elections.
- **Provide an accessible, inclusive community input process that allows for more feedback on decisions and policies.**
 - **More inclusive monthly meetings:** Increased public participation is only possible if the Board of Education addresses issues of inaccessibility. In an audit of school board protocol, researchers found that the "structure, timing, and location of regular Board meetings minimize public participation."⁶ To increase participation, the Board must hold more regular meetings in the evening, consistently providing childcare and language interpretation. Meetings and listening sessions for public comment should be held at transit-accessible locations across the city in order to expand the public's ability to participate. Additionally, during the COVID-19 pandemic, the number of public speaker

³ Educators for Excellence-Chicago. (2020). Chicago Board of Education Survey.

⁴ Center for Illinois Politics. (2019, April 12). An elected school board in Chicago might really happen this time. Here's why it's so complicated. Retrieved from <https://www.centerforilpolitics.org/articles/an-elected-school-board-in-chicago-might-really-happen-this-time-heres-why-and-how>

⁵ Educators for Excellence-Chicago. (2020). Chicago Board of Education Survey.

⁶ Lipman, P., Gutstein, E. (. Gutierrez, R. R., & Blanche, T. (2015). Should Chicago Have an Elected Representative School Board? A New Review of the Evidence (pp. 1-38, Rep.). Chicago, IL: Collaborative for Equity and Justice in Education.

slots was reduced from 60 to 15 to accommodate the virtual structure of online meetings.⁷ If monthly public speaker opportunities are decreased, there must be other, widely-broadcasted opportunities for public commentary.

- **Ongoing input process:** Chicago educators want more community involvement in decision-making, with over half identifying teacher and stakeholder involvement in developing policies as necessary.⁸ The district and the Board must create regular workshops and action teams that draw on community members to develop, propose, and evaluate policy as a way to bolster community and stakeholder buy-in on Board decisions.⁹ Moreover, the Board's communication must go beyond extractive approaches to stakeholder engagement (wherein officials gather information from community members and do not consistently follow up on how they have used that information), and work to build long-term, trusting reciprocal relationships.

Increase Transparency

- **Provide Board-related updates on decisions and the decision-making process virtually.**
 - 70% of teachers in our survey viewed the current Board's communication as either not transparent or slightly transparent.¹⁰ The Chicago Board of Education must increase communication of all plans and initiatives regularly, emphasizing decision-making processes and rationale to their constituents in order to mitigate transparency issues and create consistency in transparency. Additionally, the Board should adjust its bylaws to create guidelines on how the Board defines key terms (such as "equity") to clarify their decision-making and community engagement processes. Doing this would provide clearer expectations of Board proceedings for the community.

Create Stronger Accountability Structures

- **Establish a community advisory council for the Board as a system of checks and balances.**
 - Developing an accountability system through the Mayor's office that is emblematic of Chicago's diversity would encourage genuine public input and increase representative participation in policymaking. When asked how the school board should be overseen, 61% of educators wanted oversight through a community advisory council.¹¹ This group could act as a watchdog, with the formal power to evaluate the Board on how well they uphold their bylaws and have the authority to gather regular feedback from communities to distill and share with the Board and the public. This advisory council should also hold the power to recommend courses of action if protocols are not followed, and prompt formal action either through the Illinois State Board of Education or through legal means. Granting these policy levers and evaluation power to the advisory council would ensure a level of meaningful, community-driven oversight.

⁷ Issa, N. (2020, March 23). CPS board to meet virtually due to coronavirus, but public speaker slots cut dramatically. Retrieved, from <https://chicago.suntimes.com/coronavirus/2020/3/23/21191306/cps-board-education-meeting-coronavirus-covid-19>

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Lipman, P., Gutstein, E., Gutierrez, R. R., & Blanche, T. (2015). Should Chicago Have an Elected Representative School Board? A New Review of the Evidence (pp. 1-38, Rep.). Chicago, IL: Collaborative for Equity and Justice in Education.

¹⁰ Educators for Excellence-Chicago. (2020). Chicago Board of Education Survey.

¹¹ Ibid.

Next Steps

Reforming the Chicago Board of Education is a unique opportunity for the City of Chicago to have more equitable representation and improve transparency. Educators and community members are knowledgeable and relevant stakeholders who must be given a more critical role in policy development. Regardless of the Board's structure, state legislators and the Mayor must adjust the Board's processes in order to uplift our district's – and our city's – values. Any legislation changing the current structure of the Board must include elements of representation, transparency, and accountability or else run the risk of merely changing how the CPS Board of Education members are chosen and nothing more. As you and other elected officials decide on legislation for an elected Chicago Board of Education, Educators for Excellence-Chicago urges you to take this educator feedback and recommendations into serious consideration.