

# The hollow promise of a better school

In deciding whether to shutter Manierre Elementary School near the old Cabrini-Green housing project, the CEO of the Chicago Public Schools was given a long list of considerations she was allowed to take into account — or ignore.

There is, for one, a multi-generational history of violence between families at Manierre and the school a few blocks to the south, Jenner, to which the Manierre students would be transferred.

Test scores are low at both schools, both of which have high numbers of homeless students. Manierre actually outscores Jenner, but Jenner has stronger growth.

Planned residential development is expected to return children to the area.

And perhaps most important, there has been dramatic investment in recent years in a foundation for growth at Manierre. Most notable is a highly regarded Child-Parent Center, for preschool through the third grade, attached to Manierre that expanded last fall. The center's model — which includes working closely with parents, small classes and extra staff — offers proven, long-lasting benefits for low-income students and, at Manierre, is overseen by nationally known early childhood experts. President Obama even cited the model's history of success in his 2013 State of the Union address.

CPS tells us it's possible to move the state-of-the-art Child-Parent Center to Jenner, but CPC educators say there's no way, putting this U.S. Department of Education-funded program and its \$350,000 annual grant at risk. If all children transfer, Jenner's building will be at 97 percent capacity, CPS says. That leaves no room for this highly successful, growing program.

Did Schools CEO Barbara Byrd-Bennett consider all this



Parent Sherise McDaniel and others protest in front of Manierre School in April to try to stop its closure. | SUN-TIMES PHOTO

before deciding to close Manierre, along with 53 other schools that CPS says are under-enrolled? To be fair, she likely considered much of it, but her team nonetheless concluded that students would be better off at Jenner, and that the savings from closing an underused school justified the decision. The school board votes on all closings Wednesday.

We aren't buying it. Manierre and Jenner students will be worse off in one school.

And we're not alone among neutral observers in thinking so. Paddy

McNamara, one of the retired judges hired by CPS to assess closing proposals, opposes the closing: "When space utilization, academic progress and performance and safety are taken into account," McNamara wrote, "it is clear that the CEO's documentation has failed to support the closing."

For many Manierre parents, safety trumps all else. They told us that their kids have been jumped by Jenner students, that all inter-school basketball games were canceled last year because of fights and that their kids have

gotten Facebook threats from Jenner students since the merger was announced.

"Division Street is a known gang line our kid can't cross," Manierre parent Sherise McDaniel said. Manierre is north of Division, Jenner south. "Our children's lives shouldn't be put at risk."

Jadine Chou, CPS' head of safety and security who knows this community well from a previous job at the Chicago Housing Authority, insists the conflicts can be managed and that many parents she knows look forward to ending a decades-long rivalry. As in all consolidations, there will be a "safe passage" route between the schools manned by community members, including crossing sites for Division, added security staff and equipment at Jenner, and a long list of activities to integrate the two communities.

All receiving schools will use proven strategies to teach social skills and conflict resolution, a development we strongly support. The city also promises to fix up the safe passage routes — boarding up abandoned buildings, fixing cracked pavement, broken lights and the like. In the 35 schools with safe passage routes in use over the last two years, crime near the schools has dropped 20 percent and attendance has jumped by 7 percent, CPS says.

But even if CPS can pull off a safe transition, is it still worth it to move students from one low-performing school to another, particularly when Manierre is poised to take off?

We think not.

There's a long list of schools just like Manierre where CPS board members must ask two simple questions before voting: Is merging two weak, under-enrolled schools worth it? Is it worth it in the face of a significant safety risk?

CPS says all students will move

to higher-performing schools, but in many cases CPS has twisted itself into a pretzel trying to make two schools that are basically academically the same look different. University of Chicago research on previous closings shows that students benefitted academically only if their receiving school scored in the top quartile. Jenner is in the bottom quartile.

CPS' hearing officers flagged several other examples like Manierre. Included in that list, notably, are schools that the judges didn't officially recommend against closing (there are 10 of them) but still voiced serious concerns. The most egregious cases: Delano, Overton, Dumas and Songhai — all schools the board should seriously consider keeping open. The Sun-Times' Lauren FitzPatrick highlighted yet one more in Sunday's Sun-Times, Yale Elementary.

And what about other school mergers where safety is a major concern but the students are truly going to a better school? If CPS adds bus routes, and if the school system executes its safety plans well, we hold out hope these consolidations can be pulled off.

But some should not be attempted, especially when the promise of a better school rings hollow. On Friday, a schools source told us changes to some closure plans are in the works. That's good news, but if it's only handful, that won't cut it.

Retired judge Carl McCormick, in his report opposing the closure of Overton School in Bronzeville, summed up the false promise embedded in far too many closure plans:

"This is tantamount, using a food metaphor, to the promise of an omelet with a crisp waffle," he wrote. "Then what is delivered are broken eggs, whose contents are oozing out and a burnt pancake."