

Community Meeting for the Proposal to Close Graeme Stewart Elementary

April 8, 2013; 5:00-7:00pm

Location: Amundsen High School: 5100 N. Damen Avenue

CPS Facilitators: Tim Cawley, Chief Administrative Officer and Sebastian De Longeaux, Chief Procurement Officer

CPS staff also in attendance:

Craig Benes, Chief of Elementary Schools, Ravenswood Ridge Network

Phil Salemi, Deputy Chief of Elementary Schools, Ravenswood Ridge Network

Luis Garcia-Juarez, Local School Council Relations

Arnie Rivera, Deputy Chief of Staff to the CEO, Chicago Public Schools

Brief Summary: The purpose of the meeting was to receive public comments on the proposal to close Stewart Elementary School, in accordance with 105 ILCS 5/34-230. CPS officials reviewed the proposed action. There were about 25 community members in attendance and 8 speakers. The speaker comments focused on a variety of topics including: Brennemann's readiness to welcome students, student safety, future use of the Stewart building, and the district's willingness to listen to parent and community input.

CPS Presentation

Tim Cawley, Chief Administrative Officer, welcomed those in attendance and introduced the meeting. He introduced the sign language interpreters and Spanish translators. He asked if anyone required Spanish translation. No one raised their hands. Mr. Cawley then presented an overview of the proposal and reviewed the materials available to meeting attendees. Sebastian De Longeaux, Chief Procurement Officer then explained the meeting rules and procedures. The meeting was opened for public comment at about 5:14pm.

Public Comment

Sarah Abedelal, Principal of Brennemann Elementary School

Ms. Abedelal stated that Brennemann has the capacity to serve extra students. Further, she noted that the school has a newly renovated library, computer lab and writers café. She also said that teachers receive professional development through the CPS Literacy Initiative and that each of the teachers is developed in a meaningful way that impacts student achievement. She said that Brennemann is ready to be a welcoming environment.

Reggie Spear, Representative of Stewart Teachers and Students

Mr. Spear asked why the meeting was not held at Stewart Elementary School and said that more parents could be involved if the meeting was in the community. Mr. Spear also said that he was concerned about student safety. He said that students are afraid to walk 2-3 blocks and to be in

school with students who they have had conflict with in the past. He asked for clarity around safety.

Tim Cawley noted that if people have questions, there are numbers and contacts on the handouts to address questions.

Glenn Richards, Community Member

Mr. Richards stated that he does not understand the rationale for the proposal. He noted that the performance scores are very similar and that he doesn't think there is one with a clear advantage. He said Brennemann looks like a modular type building and Stewart looks solid and large. He questions the logic of closing the Stewart building and states that he sees that it requires a large amount of renovation investment. He wants to find out the plans for the Stewart structure.

Tim Cawley introduced Commander Elias Voulgaris of the Chicago Police Department and spoke of the relationship between CPS and CPD.

Stavronla Marissis, Community Member

Ms. Marissis lives down the street from Stewart. She questioned why the community meetings were being held and said that the community message at the prior meetings was no school closings. She said that the Board of Education is not listening. She said that the messages from the district do not make sense and are contradictory. She said Stewart is vibrant and that she likes to live in the area because she gets to be by the school. She asked what will happen to the building if it is closed and stated that she does not want to walk by a vacant building as that would be bad for the community.

Lory Richards, Community Member

Ms. Richards is a resident of the Uptown community. She stated that her observation is that Brennemann can take on 300 extra students and that there are 250 moving from Stewart to Brennemann. She said a new townhome and condo complex is being built on the Maryville Grounds and that there would probably be more than 50 kids moving in. She asked where they would go to school.

At 5:30pm Sebastian De Longeaux invited attendees to sign up to speak.

Karen Zaccor, CPS teacher

Ms. Zaccor is a CPS teacher and is not affiliated with Stewart or Brennemann, instead, she affiliated with all schools. She believes all schools should stay open. She said CPS is not interested in what parents have to say. She said it is only logical that parents should question why they should attend. She asked to have a dialogue and said that school closings feel pre-determined.

There was no public comment from 5:33-5:49pm.

Marc Kaplan, Community Member

Mr. Kaplan is a local school councilman from Uplift Community High School, the school that Stewart and Brennemann feed into. He stated that the reason the room at Amundsen is empty and that Truman was packed was people do not believe in the sincerity of the Board of Education. He said that 20,000 parents, teachers, students and community members believe these closings will be a disaster. He said the closings do not add up and asked how the Board of Education has money to bribe kids and parents with air conditioning and iPads. He said a developer purchased the Salvation Army land near Stewart and that he believes this developer has already had discussions with the Board of Education to buy Stewart school. He said to expect more protests like the one that occurred on March 27th.

There was a pause in public comment from 5:52pm until 6:16pm

Steven Serikaku, CPS Retiree

Mr. Serikaku grew up near Stewart School. He said he wonders if CPS is concerned about children who go to school in Chicago because they have been underfunding schools forever. He said that schools were underfunded in 1974 when he started and were underfunded when he retired. He said now it is even worse. He asked why CPS is not in the forefront of trying to get more revenue. He said Illinois is 50th in the nation for funding. He asked why CPS isn't demanding TIF funds. He said that if CPS is to close schools that at least, the welcoming school should hire as many teachers from Stewart as possible. After all, seeing a familiar face would be the most welcoming thing to a child. He also said that CPS will need more wrap around services.

There was a pause in public comment from 6:19pm to 6:45pm

Debby Pope, Retired CPS teacher

Ms. Pope taught for 20 years, most recently at Gage Park and that she now works for the Chicago Teachers Union. She said she was speaking against the closure of Stewart because it is an important institution and because it has a rich history. She said it is a small learning community and that many students get extra attention. She said the building is not modern or technological. She said it is wrong to close Stewart. She said that this is about putting test scores above human needs. She stated that the district is doing this for expediency and perhaps for real estate profits. She said the closure is not what is best for students. She urged the Board of Education to reconsider on behalf of children in Chicago.

There was no comment from 6:47pm to 7:00pm.

At 7:00pm Tim Cawley thanked attendees for their comments and closed the meeting.