

Community Meeting for the Proposal to Close Songhai Elementary School

April 6th, 2013 10:00-12:00

Location: Harlan Community Academy 9652 Michigan Avenue

CPS Staff in Attendance: Annette Gurley, Dr. Markay Winston, Harrison Peters, John Scott, Joseph Sobus, Valerie Butron, Natalie Hill, Terri Kelly, Gail Ratliff, Thyatira Towns, Reynardo Martinez, Chuck Swirsky, and Anisha Joshi

Brief Summary: The purpose of the meeting was to receive public comments on the proposal to close both Louis Armstrong Math/Science Specialty School and Horatio May Community Academy, in accordance with 105 ILCS 5/34-230. There were two registered speakers in attendance. There were two sign language interpreters and one Spanish language translator in attendance. The speakers' comments focused on information contained in the handout and the procedural aspect of today's meeting. There were approximately 30 community members present at the meeting.

CPS Presentation:

Annette Gurley, CPS Network Chief, welcomed those in attendances and introduced every CPS staff member involved. She emphasized that the goal of the meeting was to take information back and share comments with the Barbara Byrd-Bennett, the CEO of Chicago Public Schools. She went over the documents that are provided for all the community members which included a map of the school, investments and supports provided to the schools as well as the map of the potential future boundary.

Dr. Markay Winston, Chief Officer of Diverse Learner Support and Services, explained the meeting rules and procedures. She thoroughly explained the handout given out to the community members.

The meeting opened for public comment on time.

Public Comment:

Ruby Dowsey, LSC Chairperson

Ms. Dowsey's was most concerned with student safety and children potentially crossing train tracks. She refers to a student who recently died crossing train tracks (116th and State St.). Ms. Dowsey discusses the importance of continuing the school partnership with the Chicago Bulls and other organizations that have changed the climate at school. She also wants to preserve the

relationships that current children have with their teachers and believes this would have an impact and impede their learning.

Tashiee Johnson, Parent (children attend Songhai)

Ms. Johnson's concern was the safety of her children. She is worried that students will not properly adjust at their new school given the new environment with different teachers and staff. Her son has an IEP so she wonders if the new school will meet his special needs. She is also interested in understanding how safety and security will support the rivalry between the students from Curtis Elementary and Songhai Elementary. She also expressed her doubt on how Curtis teachers will be able to handle all the students and their hostility towards the actions.

Laverne Richard, Teacher

Ms. Richard has built a rapport with her students and community. She was concerned with the possible fights between the two schools and gangs that are present. She claimed that at the school, the administration is working hard to support students. The school has several partnerships with other organizations.

Terri Watson, LSC member

Ms. Watson stated that with the new proposed change she would have to pass 11 vacant homes. She expressed that she was afraid for her safety. She stated she has the best principal for her child. She stated every eight grader graduates from Songhai Elementary.

Kathy Murray, CTU member (Former teacher at Songhai Elementary)

Ms. Murray mentioned that during her service as a teacher at Songhai Elementary, she stated there was a lock down due to the rivalry between students from Curtis Elementary and Songhai Elementary. In 2002, she witnessed a lockdown of Songhai Elementary because Curtis kids threatened to hurt Songhai students. Ms. Murray also emphasized the fact that the train tracks are an issue of safety.

Desma Atwood, Parent

Ms. Atwood was concerned about her child's commute and the fact that she would have to walk 10 blocks to go to a new school. She expressed her deep relationship with the school and what it has to offer and believes moving to Curtis will only cause more problems. She liked that teachers personally call her to update her child

Patricia Boughton, CTU Representative

Ms. Boughton stated that she has close ties to the school and is familiar with the history of the neighborhood including the rivalry between the schools and dangerous railroad tracks.

Susan Garza, Community member

Ms. Garza claimed that CPS has put over 30 million into charter schools. She talked highly of the principal, sports programs and other activities. She believed that walking 10 blocks to get to Curtis is too far and dangerous. She was also skeptical of the community meetings because CPS representatives don't seem to provide answers or clarity for the questions asked.

Cynthia Solomon, Teacher

Ms. Solomon was worried that her students are not going to have a fine arts program at Curtis Elementary. She has worked very hard to secure a partnership between the school and Art Institutes in Chicago. This year Songhai Elementary received 10 fine arts scholarships. She also mentioned that many schools do not offer a pre-K program but Songhai has had one for a bit.

DJ, Student

DJ believed students will get killed and does not want to attend Curtis Elementary. He claimed that there was great hostility between Curtis and Songhai. DJ has family members who will be attending Curtis if this proposal is approved and will protect them if they are mistreated in anyway.

TW, Student

TW felt that he already has strong ties with his school and does not this transition/change to take place.

Amme Nowlin

Ms. Nowlin disagreed with the proposal and had concerns around safety and specifically noted that the train tracks would be dangerous. On State and 115th there are also viaduct crossings which are clear safety concerns. She also disagreed with the community meeting process and believed no one was answering her questions. She was concerned about the status of the LSC after the school is closed and wants students to receive fair representation.

Lynette Johnson-Watts, Teacher (20 years)

Ms. Johnson expressed that teachers at Songhai Elementary work together and care about their students. She works Saturday so she can support her students. She believed the proposed plan will not bring change in discipline or scores. She cited the AUSL school she worked at, Bethune where violence did not stop even after the takeover of the new operator.

Susan Zupan, Writer for SubstanceAbuse.net

Ms. Zupan was concerned that CPS representatives making decisions are not from Chicago and have not lived there long enough to make informed decisions.

Ebonie Kendricks, Teacher

Ms. Kendricks noticed that scores were increasing at Songhai and believes CPS should give the new principal a chance to prove herself. She was worried that students will have difficulty getting access to different programs, activities and classes. She wanted the contract and relationships with partners to continue (e.g. 24th Century).

Felecia Moore-Cummings, Community Liaison

Ms. Cummings questioned whether students at Curtis will welcome students from the rival school. She worries for the safety of her child.

Brian Arceneault, Teacher

Mr. Arceneault claimed that the school has been transformed by the Principal, Ms. Pirtic. He expressed that the school's scores have increased

Reverend Leon Walton

Reverend Walton lives in the neighborhood and has found that the teachers at Songhai have invested a lot into the school. He believed that the school is underutilized because there have been not been enough investments/resources provided to the school which makes the demand of that school and programs less likely.

RA, Student

RA has been at Songhai since he was in Pre-k. He does not understand why his school is closing and appreciates all the work the teachers at the school have done for him.

Telisa Dantzler, Teacher Assistant (22 years)

Ms. Dantzler's children, brothers, and sister went to Songhai Elementary. She appreciated the targeted morning instruction offered at the school. She strongly suggested that community members shouldn't have to fight to keep their school and was against the proposal.

Conrad Carey, Custodian

Mr. Carey noticed a significant difference since he started working at Songhai. He believed the reading program in the morning is run very well and that if students move they will be placed in a bad neighborhood since there are a lot of shootings near Curtis Elementary.

James Howkins, Security

Mr. Howkins claimed that children feel safe at Songhai Elementary and was concerned because many gangs are currently recruiting.

Djuanne Evans, Teacher (3 years)

Ms. Evans noticed many changes at Songhai including better discipline behavior of children and increased scores. Ms. Evans focused on teaching Common Core strategies and wants to give students a chance.

Darlene Vitek, School Clerk

Ms. Vitek was concerned because students have expressed their fear to transfer to a new school. She claims her students have school choices but this doesn't seem to be the case for students in Songhai. He was impressed with Ms. Pirtic and Ms. Atkins and was proud to be part of the school.

IE, Student

Student discussed how he enjoys rehearsing the anthem in the morning

Hannah Evans, family member

Student noticed improvement in behavior and grades of her brother.

TP, Student

Student was concerned about safety and commute to new school as well as the displacement of his teachers.

Corina Rodriguez, 8th GradeTeacher

Ms. Rodriguez believed that moving students to another school will induce a lot of stress. She is very close to her co-workers and supports the principal.