



December 14, 2015

## A NEW Austin High School

We have an opportunity to right an injustice that was done to the Austin community several years ago. The Chicago Public Schools (CPS) proposes a significant change to the secondary education options available to the greater Austin community by consolidating the three small school high schools into one Austin High School unit. The manner in which the Austin High School unit is reimagined and resourced is of particular concern to me, as I have been advocating for a new comprehensive high school for Austin since 2006-07, when the previous Austin High School was closed.

As the transformation of this school community begins, and as a representative of the citizens of the 8th District, including Austin on Chicago's West Side, I envision that this new high school model will be designated as a Sustainable Community School. The designation means the school will be equipped with wraparound supports, an emphasis on blended learning and constructivist teaching models and not on excessive testing, a culturally relevant curriculum and robust parent and community participation in governance and everyday programming for the school community. The following points represent concrete measures needed to reimagine the NEW Austin High School as a Sustainable Community School:

- Immediately create a democratically elected Local School Council (LSC) - not an appointed Council, and not just an advisory model.
- Establish in the school an advanced placement (AP), international baccalaureate (IB), and college prep curriculum that is relevant, critical, action-based and child-centered that meets the needs for all learners.
- Upgrade the school with modern computer equipment for blended learning (in which a student learns at least in part through delivery of content and instruction via digital and online media with some element of student control over time, place, path, or pace). Austin VOISE had this but fell away from it.
- Upgrade the art and music spaces, and ensure there is a well-functioning library with a certified librarian.
- Ensure that staff at the three schools follow the students to the newly created unit, just as in 2013, per the Chicago Public Schools – Chicago Teachers Union (CTU) collective bargaining

agreement. Currently all teachers at Austin Polytechnical Academy (APA) and Austin Business and Entrepreneurship Academy are officially laid-off and will be told between March and June if they have jobs. We should be able to say NOW that all jobs are safe. Because APA and Business are officially being closed and VOISE Academy will remain open but renamed, a modification of the CTU agreement is needed to keep all jobs.

- Maintain, support and improve resources and programming that were invested in the recent years by various labor organizations to enhance vocational training at Austin Polytech – we must not allow this vital curriculum to migrate to another school. The Department of Labor grant for Manufacturing Renaissance runs out in 2 years with no plans to support it – plans are needed to maintain and improve funding. CPS also needs to support the necessary staff salaries to keep Austin High School vocational training going.
- Implement properly staffed, trained, and certified Restorative Justice and social emotional programs reaching into the students' homes to eliminate the school to prison and poverty pipeline.
- Modernize the athletic programs with the building of a multi-purpose track and football field.
- Create a free and universal daycare and pre-K program for local families and/or high school students with children, and assist students who need childcare for their children.
- Enhance and improve medical, behavioral and social services to students and their families at the existing in-school clinic - with better coordination with current CPS nursing staff - to better identify and overcome medical, mental health and social barriers faced by students and families to ensure the student's success in school.
- Add extra staff for Special Needs Services for all students who are three grade levels below grade level to ensure all students are college-ready.
- Limit class size to no more than 28 - some classes are above 35 now - so teachers can more effectively teach, especially when many students have serious learning problems not previously identified.
- Reinforce the work of teachers who are convinced that they can have an impact on their students in spite of any challenges that the students may face – social challenges must be addressed, but they cannot be used to write any student off.
- Ensure there is a cadre of substitute teachers who know the students and can teach a class during teacher absence.
- Emphasize: strong and stable leadership for the high school; high expectations for students; and an orderly pleasant atmosphere for students, staff and families.
- Follow CPS rules to choose the new administrator for the NEW Austin High School, as those rules may not be presently followed.

- Ensure adequate security so consequences for infractions are not ignored because of a shortage of security.
- Make available programming space more easily available to local after-school programs and community organizations providing youth-centered activities, as well as adult GED options.

We have an incredible opportunity to create a true lighthouse in Austin by providing the community with a sustainable community school. In the interest of advancing justice, fairness and equity, when we enrich the NEW Austin High School with resources and invest in the school community, we will have a positive impact on the whole community. I look forward to working with all interested stakeholders to help to marshal the necessary support and resources for a great, successful community high school in Austin, and I encourage everyone to work with the Austin Community Action Council to help with the ongoing developments of our restructured school.

Sincerely,



La Shawn K. Ford  
State Representative-Eighth District