



November 28, 2017

Schools Should Be Strengthened, Not Closed

Once again, we hear rumors that Chicago Public Schools is considering the closing of more of Chicago's neighborhood schools. Just two months ago, the Austin community received a formal written letter stating there would be no school closures in the Austin community. The Austin community stood up early to speak against any additional school closures in Austin, and we received word that Austin will be spared any closing with this new round of closures. Austin's unity will impact the decisions of CPS, and we should hold CPS to their word and not expect any school closures in Austin. We must continue our fight for more funding to strengthen our schools, not close them.

This year the General Assembly passed and the governor signed into law on August 31 the most significant change in school-funding formula in Illinois in decades, sending an additional \$450 million to CPS. We need to work and fight hard to make sure that the West Side receives its fair share of this increase in funding – we need to hold CPS accountable to get what we need on the West Side.

As a ranking member on the House Appropriations Committee for Elementary and Secondary Education, I continue our fight for more funding and better resources for West Side schools. This legislative session I introduced and passed legislation that the governor signed into law in September that closes the loophole that allows Illinois Lottery money to go elsewhere other than to education (HB213, now Public Act 100-0466).

I've had the honor of meeting with different groups interested in improving education for years, even before I became a state representative 10 years ago. Since 2006, I have been working with community organizations like the Westside Health Authority for a new high school for Austin and I have also introduced legislation to fund the building of a new high school in Austin. This summer, I helped to organize a group that wanted to hear about the vision and help to shape the vision for education on the West Side. On September 15, 2017, we met with and delivered a letter to Dr. Janice Jackson, Chief of Education for Chicago Public Schools, asking her to meet with our group to help to form the vision. We didn't receive a response regarding our request, but even in September we heard that CPS had conversations about the possibility of closing more schools in Austin.

Back in September, the whole idea of closing more schools caused outrage in Austin, and this outrage could have been easily prevented had our earlier request for a meeting been honored. CPS later had to respond on October 5th by sending a letter addressed to the Austin Schools Community from CPS CEO Forrest Claypool and Chief Education Officer Janice Jackson. This letter from CPS stated, "We are writing

to put a stop to the false rumors that Chicago Public Schools is trying to close four elementary schools in the Austin community. This is absolutely untrue.”

It is great that the Austin community has a written commitment that CPS does not plan to close schools or build new schools without the input of the community, which is why I am excited about the West Side being engaged and fighting to help write our very own school improvement plan along with CPS. As I have said before, for the first time in my political career I have a great deal of hope that our community action will lead to real, positive and lasting improvements in education on the West Side.

As we fight to improve schools in Austin, we have to make sure that our school system must work in the best interest of our students. As a teacher by profession, I stand with the principals, teachers, LSCs, PTAs, faculty, staff, and parents to do everything we can to fight so the State Board of Education and Chicago Public Schools provides both an educational environment and a curriculum that help our students excel.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'LSF', with a stylized flourish at the end.

La Shawn K. Ford
State Representative-Eighth District