July 30, 2020

Dr. Janice K. Jackson, LaTanya D. McDade, Dr. Michael Deuser, and Molly Burke

Chicago Public Schools

42 W. Madison St.

Chicago, IL 60602

Re: CPS Reopening Plan

Dear Dr. Jackson, Ms. McDade, Dr. Deuser, and Ms. Burke:

Thank you for your leadership during this difficult time. Your action has helped ensure the safety of our youth, families, and communities. As we look ahead, we will again need strong leadership to ensure that we recover fully and quickly—and that includes making sure our youth have the support they need to catch up and re-engage in school and community life. In that vein, our coalition offers the following comments to strengthen the Chicago Public Schools‘ *School Reopening 2020: Preliminary Framework* and to ensure the full needs of youth are met. Afterschool for Children and Teens Now (ACT Now) is a statewide coalition that works to ensure that young people in Illinois have access to quality, affordable afterschool, community school, and youth development programs. ACT Now includes over 1,800 members, giving voice to Illinois families, educators, business leaders, community advocates, youth organizations, and policymakers.

Afterschool and summer learning programs have long provided supplemental education and support to help close academic and opportunity gaps among students most in need. Studies show that afterschool programs are sparking students’ interest in school leading to better school attendance, grades, standardized test scores, and behavior.[[1]](#footnote-1) Further, Chicago is a national leader in the community schools movement. Community schools are public schools that partner with families and community organizations to provide well-rounded educational opportunities and supports for students’ school success. [[2]](#footnote-2) Even though all community schools might function somewhat differently, all community schools have for pillars or components in common: 1) integrated student supports; 2) expanded and enriched learning time and opportunities; 3) active family and community engagement; and 4) collaborative leadership and practices.[[3]](#footnote-3) Data collected from community schools show that they are effective in improving grades, test scores, and attendance rates in schools.[[4]](#footnote-4) The Community Schools Initiative (CSI) in Chicago has also found that community schools can close gaps in educational attainment.[[5]](#footnote-5)

During this crisis, afterschool programs and community schools are trying to continue supporting some of the most vulnerable students and families – connecting families to essential items and services, conducting remote programming, and in some cases in-person programming for the most vulnerable youth or youth of essential workers. Moving forward, afterschool programs and community schools will be crucial in supporting Illinois families as we rebuild following this crisis.

Learning gaps are likely to widen between demographic groups and special populations. The current virtual learning environment is expected to make them even more extreme. Academic content that was not delivered due to school closures can best be supplemented by trusted afterschool partners that have demonstrated expertise in how to keep students engaged in learning and supported socially and emotionally.

As parents return to work, they will need afterschool programs and community schools. Before the pandemic, parents already relied heavily on afterschool programs to keep their children safe and engaged while they work, with 4 in 5 saying it helped them stay employed. Parents will need those same supports to be able to return to the workforce.[[6]](#footnote-6)

If the city‘s education system, economy, and future workforce is to rebound quickly, using federal, state, and city supports to maintain staff, and keep afterschool and summer programs running and serving additional students will be essential. Our recommendations for the CPS reopening plan are as follows:

*CPS Reopening Plan Recommendations*

1. **Out-School-Time Reopening Plan**: The CPS reopening plan only includes one mention of out-of-school time programs (OST). As stated above, OST support will be critical in supporting students and families in the coming school year. Many schools are already preventing partners from offering programs and services. 70% of afterschool programs rely on school buildings as their program setting. We ask CPS to encourage principals to maintain these partnerships and to work closely with community-based organizations. CPS should create an OST specific reopening plan and incorporate the voices of afterschool programs in creating any future plans for OST. Afterschool programs and community-based organizations are in need of greater direction, communication, and collaboration with CPS.
2. **Social Emotional Learning**: We were excited to see that CPS recognizes the social and emotional needs of students during this time. Afterschool programs and community schools have a long track record of meeting these needs, given their close personal relationships with students and families and their flexibility outside of the standards-drive school day. Community-based organizations and afterschool programs are eager to learn about the plans for this work. We encourage CPS to include community-based organizations in this planning to capitalize on their expertise and efficiently use resources in this space.
3. **Family Engagement**: Family engagement is an essential component of community schools and afterschool programs and the learning process as a whole. Last year’s CPS volunteer policy greatly inhibited programs‘ ability to serve the needs of families and include families in their child’s education. This reopening plan may go even further in hampering family engagement by preventing families from coming to school buildings to participate in the learning process. Further, many of these organizations run adult workshops and classes from the school building. CPS must address the many ways families engage with school buildings in its finalized plan and encourage principals to make accomodations for this work.
4. **Technology/Acceptable Use Policy**: Afterschool programs and community schools faced immense challenges in providing remote services this past spring and summer. Students in CPS went months without the critical services these organizations offer due to the delay in CPS releasing an OST technology policy and due to the barriers created by this policy. We recommend that all organizations funded through the Community Schools Initiative automatically recieve a Tier 2 designation. Further, we ask CPS to recondsider the requirement to have a CPS representative in all OST remote learning. Educators have many new responsibilities for this school year and do not have the capacity to also monitor all OST remote sessions. Moreover, technological devices made available to students for school day learning must be made available for all OST programs as well.
5. **Equity Concerns**: CPS must think broadly about the equity issues involved in this pandemic. For example, not all familes have access to the resources necessary to clean masks daily. CPS must also come up with plans to connect students learning remotely to food resources, especially older youth who will be learning remotely every day. Students in CPS rely on a variety of services recieved in connection with the school building and school-day. CPS must broadly consider the full needs of youth in their final reopening plan.
6. **Student Cohorts**: If students‘ school-day cohorts mix in OST programs, the spread of COVID will be exacerbated. Principals should collaborate with OST partners in creating their cohorts.

We welcome further collaboration and discussion with CPS in order to ensure a successful and safe school year for all Chicago students and their families.

Sincerely,

ACT Now Coalition

CC: Chairperson Miguel Del Valle

1. Durlak, J.A. & Weissberg R.P. (2010). *Afterschool programs that follow evidence-based practices to promote social and emotional development are effective*. Retrieved from <http://www.expandinglearning.org/docs/Durlak&Weissberg_Final.pdf>. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Partnership for the Future of Learning. (n.d.). *Community school playbook*. Retrieved from <https://communityschools.futureforlearning.org/assets/downloads/community-schools-playbook.pdf>. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. *Ibid.* [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Oakes, J., Maier, A., & Daniel, J. (2017). Community schools: An evidence-based strategy for equitable school improvement. Palo Alto, CA: Learning Policy Institute.  [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. *Ibid.* [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Afterschool Alliance. (2014). *America after 3PM*. Retrieved from <https://afterschoolalliance.org/documents/AA3PM-2014/AA3PM_National_Report.pdf>. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)