

CPS students getting more A's — but also more F's as remote learning continues

Nader Issa for Chicago Sun-Times – November 18, 2020

Racial gaps in the rates at which failing grades are handed out to Chicago Public Schools students have widened this school year even as children across the board have received both more A's and more F's than they had this time last year, according to new data released by the school system Wednesday.

CPS officials, who are typically keen to avoid publicizing data that would embarrass the district or show a lack of student progress, used their findings to highlight the growing inequities caused by remote learning as they make their case for reopening schools during the pandemic.

In general, educators have said Black and Latino students, children in special education and those who are homeless and come from low-income backgrounds have had the most barriers to success without in-person learning because of systemic failures such as poor access to computers and internet, an inability to remotely support kids with disabilities and a lack of face-to-face interaction with teachers. Middle-class families, generally speaking, have been more likely to have access to the resources needed to make remote learning viable.

"I worry that unless we act with urgency, we will lose a generation of students," Chief Education Officer LaTanya McDade told the city's Board of Education at its virtual meeting Wednesday. "The way to avoid this is to follow the public health guidance so we can safely reopen schools."

In elementary schools, 5% of the reading grades handed out in the first academic quarter were F's compared to 1.9% in the first quarter last year, with similar figures in math, district records show. On the other end of the scale, A's made up 34% of reading grades, up from 30.8% last year. Math scores were similar. There were fewer B's and C's in both subjects, and students of all races saw increases at both ends of the scale.

Black and Latino elementary students, however, suffered the largest increases in F's in both reading and math, and did not see nearly the same increases in A's as white and Asian American children, expanding an already wide gap.

A grades accounted for 60.2% of math grades and 59.2% of reading grades handed out to white elementary students in the first quarter, while A's made up 24% of the math scores and 23.1% of the reading grades Black students received. White children's A's increased by six to seven percentage points since last year while the number of A's Black students' received went up by three percentage points.

The district's 3,723 elementary students who are homeless received F's at a much higher rate and A's at less than half the rate of their peers.

Similar trends emerged in high school grades, too.

The district also saw a 2.9% drop in attendance in the first academic quarter compared to last year, again largely falling along racial lines. There was a 5% drop among Black students and 2.4% drop among Latino students, who combined make up 83% of the district. White and Asian American children have actually had slightly better attendance than last year. Homeless children's attendance fell 7.3% among homeless children and 4.8% among special education students.

"This is a matter of equity, and it's at the core of everything that we do in Chicago Public Schools," CPS CEO Janice Jackson said.

"The shift here is allowing for multiple options for all of our parents," Jackson said, referring to plans announced this week to reopen schools to some children in January and all elementary students in February.

"Any parent who wants to remain in the remote environment will have the ability to do so. But beginning in January, those parents who need an opportunity or an option for their students to be educated in person will now have a choice."

Chicago Teachers Union Vice President Stacy Davis Gates attributed the grading and attendance disparities to poorly constructed virtual schedules that try to emulate a regular, in-person school and the fact that communities of color have been the hardest hit by the pandemic. She wants to see improvements to remote learning and a more comprehensive plan — with input from more stakeholders — to reopen schools when it's safe.

"Black and Latinx families are literally fighting for their survival," Davis Gates said. "Is it any wonder that our children are having a tough time with school?"

Chicago could reopen schools in January. Here's what they're telling parents so far

Yana Kunichoff for Chalkbeat – November 25, 2020

With a tentative reopening date in place, Chicago has given parents two weeks to respond to a survey on whether they'd consider sending their children back to school buildings.

This isn't the first time parents have been asked to weigh in on in-person schooling, but in recent weeks, Chicago school officials have released more concrete plans and argued with increasing seriousness for a return to school.

To help families make a decision by Dec. 7, the district released a reopening guide that they say will continue to be updated, with information about scheduling and key dates in the phased reopening plan. You can find it [here](#).

Here's what the district's latest reopening plan can - and can't - tell parents about the district's plans for a return to school buildings this year:

The district is laying out several different plans and time frames for an eventual return, but will rely on schools to create specific plans

Chicago families with children in pre-kindergarten or special education cluster programs can choose between full-time in-person, hybrid or remote learning, and can return as early as Jan. 11.

For other grades, families can choose between a hybrid or remote learning options. Students up to eighth grade could return as early as Feb. 1. For middle school students, schools are expected to let families know by Jan. 18 if they'll offer in-person instruction this school year. There is no date for when high school students would return to buildings.

In all of those cases, the reopening plans will vary by individual schools, and therefore likely look different in every school and grade level.

Families who submitted their responses to an October district survey about a return to school don't need to resubmit their response, but other families will be expected to respond by Dec. 4.

In the summer, when positivity rates were around 4%, 41% of elementary school parents and 38% of high school parents told the district that they did not feel comfortable with their children returning to school. Of Black and Latino families, only 20% said they would plan to send their children to school, according to district figures

Teachers may be required to instruct both in-person and remote students at the same time

Some teachers could be required to teach in-person students and remote students simultaneously, according to the reopening plan. District officials say that arrangement will help

ensure students receive the mandated amount of real-time instruction and could build connections between students.

To do that, teachers could assign work to both groups at the same time or ask the groups to trade off between real-time instruction and independent learning.

This would be Chicago's first time using simultaneous instruction, but the approach is already in place in classrooms around the country, and has been one solution to the COVID-19 induced staffing crunch.

But teachers have also said the logistical juggling the approach requires makes their quality of instruction is lower.

The district's safety plan includes pods, face coverings, and daily screenings

Charter and child care programs that have offered some form of child care this fall say clear and consistent protocols around symptom screenings and mask wearing are essential for a safe reopening.

The reopening plan says students and staff will take daily symptom screeners as well as temperature checks for anyone entering the building. They'll also be given face masks that they'll be expected to wear at all times unless eating. In-person students will be structured into pods along with their educators, which will minimize interaction between different groups of students. The district has also invested millions in sanitizer, soap, and disinfectant sprays.

The school district has hired staff to do contact tracing District officials are tracking COVID-19 cases at schools at cps.edu/reopening2020. They also plan to hire 400 additional custodians by the time all grades return, according to the plan.

The district plans to randomly test employees for COVID-19: The city will provide the district with 30,000 rapid tests, for employees interacting directly with students who are not showing symptoms of the illness. If employees test positive, they will quarantine and officials will trace their contacts with members of school communities.

Pre-K and PE programs will take special precautions

Some teachers who work with the pre-kindergarten and cluster program students say their work often makes it difficult to socially distance.

In pre-K classrooms, teachers will be expected to clean all materials and toys between use, and, where possible, students will be assigned personal cubbies, materials, and cots.

Educators who teach art, PE or library studies in-person will interact with a minimum of ten pods or only work with certain groups of students each quarter. Those teachers will likely visit classroom pods to minimize the movement of students through the school.

There are still a few things that could stand in the way of reopening.

The first, and most important, is whether Chicago's COVID-19 rates will be at a threshold that allows for reopening. Chicago's rolling seven-day positivity rate is nearly 13%, and officials are worried there could be a spike after the holidays.

The district will consider reopening this winter against a new metric: While officials had earlier cited daily case counts and rolling positivity rates, the district now says it will examine "case doubling time" — the number of days it takes newly diagnosed cases to double.

Dr. Marielle Fricchione, with the Chicago Department of Public Health, said recently if the city is at last week's case doubling time of 12 days in January, the district will put its reopening plans on hold until that metric hits 18 days.

The plan hinges on a turnaround in the recent sharp spike in coronavirus cases and the district's ability to enlist enough educators to work in person. About 42% of pre-kindergarten and special education cluster program teachers reported in October that they are willing to return without accommodations.

The city's teachers union, which has been critical of any plans to reopen school buildings, particularly amid climbing COVID-19 rates, could also be an obstacle. The union has said the district has failed to negotiate with teachers, and weighed strike action ahead of a planned reopening this fall.

Teachers are expected to submit their intent-to-return forms by Dec. 14 and those returning to classrooms will return to buildings Jan. 4.

Blueprint for change or another blow to North Lawndale? A call to close 3 schools and open another has split a Chicago community in need of rebuilding.

Hannah Leone for the Chicago Tribune – November 30, 2020

From her family's home in North Lawndale, a young Rochelle Jackson saw her Chicago neighborhood burn during the 1968 riots sparked by the assassination of civil rights icon Martin Luther King Jr.

"Our neighborhood was decimated, because people were upset," Jackson said. "I watched the fires from my back porch as a little girl. I remember what the neighborhood used to look like."

She remembers, too, what it was like to walk to a school where each classroom was filled with students, first at Mason Elementary and later Farragut High. Then how it felt to realize disinvestment was occurring in her neighborhood, which more than 50 years later has yet to recover from the riots.

She wants to see her community thrive, and has faith in a proposal that would close three elementary schools and consolidate their students into one new school with modern facilities, cutting-edge academic programs and resources for families.

Two North Lawndale groups, the Community Coordinating Council and Community Action Council, submitted a proposal this month to Chicago Public Schools for a new, "state-of-the-art" STEAM elementary school to serve 650 to 700 students. The STEAM model adds social studies and arts programs to STEM fields of science, technology, engineering and math.

The proposal is billed as the product of a community-led process for the next step of the North Lawndale quality-of-life plan launched by NLCCC in 2018.

But not everyone in the community supports the idea, and some were taken aback by their neighbors' intent to close Lawndale Community Academy and Sumner Math and Science Community Academy in Lawndale, as well as Crown Community Academy of Fine Arts near the border of Lawndale and Little Village.

Many parents, students and staff believe shutting the schools would dismantle three distinct communities and put children in harm's way by sending them through gang activity or violence to get to school. The North Lawndale Parent and Community Coalition is petitioning CPS not to consider the proposal.

While dissenters prefer investment in existing facilities and question if a new building will really prove less costly, proponents say there simply aren't enough students at the three schools, which are each less than a third full, and children would be best served by combining resources.

The proposal's authors contend that closing those schools is "inevitable," and that their plan presents "an excellent opportunity for children to receive an altogether new educational experience."

This tension has drawn interest from local and state lawmakers, with Ald. Michael Scott, Cook County Commissioner Dennis Deer, state Sen. Patricia Van Pelt and U.S. Rep. Danny Davis among those supporting the proposal.

But state Rep. Lakesia Collins asked the Board of Education this month to “slow down this process and make sure that the parents, the staff and the students have say-so in what happens in their community.”

“I’ve been hearing from both sides,” Collins said. “...It seems to be that they both want the same thing, they want to both lift up North Lawndale, but they’re looking at this through two different lenses.”

Though organizers have been holding community meetings for more than four years, project director Betty Allen-Green said Wednesday that the leadership team might ask CPS to pause the process until the pandemic is over and they can gather more feedback in person, particularly from parents at schools directly affected.

Haunted by school closings past

When the North Lawndale Community Action Council formed “as a vehicle of empowerment for families and community members to impact change and improve local schools,” its vision was for every North Lawndale student to get a rigorous, quality education. Under the umbrella of CPS, CACs work on strategic plans for education in their neighborhoods. The community coordinating council, or “N-L-Triple C” as it’s known colloquially, includes local groups, business owners, elected officials, educators and neighbors who want to help guide comprehensive planning.

Corporate, nonprofit, government and higher education partners have provided money and expertise to the proposal, which includes ideas such as Shedd Aquarium educators leading a marine biology lab at the new school and the Black Ensemble Theater helping teachers educate through theater arts, among other examples.

Though the CPS network chief for the area is on the leadership team for the proposal, the district has been neutral, outlining a process that would require public hearings and a vote by the Board of Education.

“CPS believes that parents and community members must be the catalyst for any potential school transformation,” district spokesman Michael Passman said in a statement. “We have committed to listening to members of the North Lawndale community who are seeking to strengthen their schools, and we will consider moving forward only if their proposal gains significant parent and stakeholder support and they demonstrate a credible path to improved student outcomes.”

During a recent public meeting on the proposal, conducted via Zoom, CPS chief portfolio officer Bing Howell commended principals at Crown, Lawndale and Sumner and said he understood the strong connection many people have to their schools.

Howell, who was involved in the closure of Frazier Preparatory Academy last school year but was not at CPS during notorious mass closures, said he wanted “to acknowledge that because of school closures in the past and how they were done, conversations like these are even more challenging.”

For some children, it could mean the second time they will have to find a new school. After CPS closed Frazier, citing the charter school’s poor performance, its students scattered to dozens of buildings, Lawndale, Crown and Sumner among them.

Speaking at the Board of Ed meeting this month, a Sumner student said bringing the Frazier students in “seemed like a good idea at the time, but it caused quarrels among the children. We weren’t on the same level as far as learning and it slowed down class time. ... Now we are trying to combine three different schools with three different types of neighborhoods, three different types of children, three different types of teaching styles. They won’t equal each other.”

Schools three quarters empty

Even after taking in Frazier students, the three schools are woefully empty. Last school year, Crown was at 31% capacity, Lawndale 24% and Sumner 20%, according to CPS. Enrollment has continued to dwindle. Though highly rated, Sumner has only 235 students in a building meant for 1,380. Lawndale has 207 students and Crown just 178.

Under the proposal, one of Lawndale’s buildings would be demolished to make space for the new school, a location chosen for its proximity to transportation routes and Douglass Park. Lawndale and Crown, two lower performing schools, would merge with Sumner, whose principal would lead the new school.

Leaders of the theoretical new school would be tasked with implementing a new curriculum, blending three school cultures and absorbing students who have been performing below standards. “This final task is perhaps the most daunting, and will likely require several years before STEAM Partnership Academy students meet CPS Academic Goals,” the proposal states.

It recommends that CPS provide job security to all staff from the consolidated schools and encourage them to apply for positions at the new school, but also suggests a broader recruiting strategy.

More than two decades after she graduated from Lawndale, Shavon Coleman returned in 2005 as a teacher assistant. That was shortly after the death of her grandfather, who taught physical education there for 41 years and was familiar in the community as “Grandpa” or “Pops.”

“Are you telling me that in a community where I was born and raised and I’ve decided in my adult life that I need to give back to, who made me who I am, you’re telling me I have to reapply to do that?” said Coleman, who opposed the consolidation plan.

The drop in students over the years “really is disheartening, but the enrollment is the way it is due to disinvestment in our school,” Coleman said.

“It would be great if they want to rebuild the schools, but who are they building it for? Who do they consider the community? Are they going to displace people? We don’t trust them,” Coleman said. “We shouldn’t have to close schools to invest in the Black neighborhoods.”

The last time Lawndale was threatened with closure, Brandy McMahan’s daughter was in eighth grade and her son in prekindergarten. Now a seventh-grader, David Green said it didn’t feel good when he heard about the proposal from his mom. David said he gets along well with his teachers and classmates and “Lawndale is the only school I’ve known.”

One of more than 100 schools considered for closure in 2013 under former Mayor Rahm Emanuel, Lawndale was spared after a series of protests.

“We fought a good fight that time,” said McMahan, who remains firmly against closing any school. Instead, she thinks each school deserves support. Lawndale has a theater and a pool that could use updates, and it already has science and computer labs, she said.

Among those who joined the “Save Our Schools” movement seven years ago were Betty Allen-Green and Leonard Moore, two former CPS principals now in leadership roles with NLCCC.

“I was on the front line fighting to help keep those schools open,” Allen-Green said. “The utilization rate was much better than what it is now and parents weren’t moving out of the community as rapidly as they are now, so we felt, keep the schools open.”

But their efforts could not preserve the local Henson or Pope elementary schools, among 50 citywide ultimately included in that round of closures.

Losing Pope was difficult for former student Areulia Davis. Her high school, Harrison in South Lawndale, closed in 1983.

“I was very upset,” Davis said. “When people ask me where did I go to school, I really have no alma maters. My elementary school was closed down. My high school was closed down.”

Yet she supports the proposal, because the schools that would close would be replaced with North Lawndale’s first new school in nearly 60 years, according to the proposal.

“It’s basically about bringing a quality education to a neighborhood where there are children. I don’t care if they have it in the back of a Jewel parking lot.”

Proponents like Moore say they “believe in the schools in North Lawndale. We have great principals, we have great teachers. We just felt that this time, having a declining enrollment ... we should have a new school.”

Roughly half of CPS schools are classified as underutilized, according to an analysis of CPS data. Mason, where Rochelle Jackson spent her elementary years, now has one of the lowest utilization rates in the city, lower than any school targeted by the proposal, with 94 classrooms for barely 300 students.

When Allen-Green became principal at Herzl Elementary, she had about 1,300 students. When she retired in 2007, she had 800. Now there are 471.

Much of the continued enrollment loss is tied to people leaving the city. But in North Lawndale, an increasing number of youths also attend schools in other parts of the city, and neighborhood schools have been further drained by the proliferation of charter schools.

Of all the city’s community areas, North Lawndale has the most charter campuses and highest percentage of students enrolled in charter schools, according to NLCCC.

North Lawndale and four other community areas — Austin, Garfield Park, Pilsen and Little Village-Marshall Square — make up CPS’ West Side region. Last school year, there were 37,444 students enrolled but 30,743 empty seats in the region, where enrollment loss outpaced the trend districtwide and where less than 30% of students attended their zoned schools.

“This exceptionally high percentage of students seeking better educational options underscores the need for a new, compelling, and highly relevant school option,” the proposal states.

A neighborhood’s long decline

Once part of Cicero Township, North Lawndale was annexed by Chicago in the late 1800s and became a Jewish enclave. Industry flourished and its population grew throughout the Great Migration, though many white families left. When the population peaked in 1960 at 125,000, 90% of residents were African American, and it remains a predominantly Black neighborhood.

Yet disinvestment and racist housing practices began to take a toll, neighbors recall. Property damaged in the 1968 riots was not a priority for city leaders for a long time, Jackson said. The International Harvester plant, where 14,000 people once worked, closed in 1969, followed by other big employers including Homan Square’s Sears, Roebuck & Co. — the retail giant’s headquarters before it moved to the Sears Tower. Residents sought prosperity elsewhere, and today only 33,000 remain, more than 40% living below the poverty threshold. A quarter of residents did not graduate high school.

“We kept saying in another year they’re going to come back and somebody will help us rebuild,” Jackson said. “Nobody ever came for us so, 50 years later, here we are.”

In 2000, with the redevelopment of Homan Square underway, Mayor Richard M. Daley declared a \$4.2 million YMCA center marked “the rebirth of North Lawndale.” Then came the 2008 recession, and the 2013 school closures, along with rising violence and fracturing gang structures.

North Lawndale is in the Chicago Police Department’s 10th District, where 237 shootings have been reported and 55 people have been killed so far this year. That’s more than 2016, which had been the city’s deadliest year since the 1990s.

McMahan has watched the relentless violence drive neighbors out of state.

“We are living in violence. It is very important to keep our kids in their own community,” McMahan said. “A lot of dads, uncles, brothers are involved in kids’ lives. That’s how, if you make a kid’s brother have to cross in different gang territories, they get caught in crossfire.”

Already, danger surrounds the schools. People have been shot within a block of school buildings multiple times in just the past two weeks. A question posed on district surveys — “Do students feel safe in and around the school building and traveling to and from school?” — earned a safety rating of “weak” for Lawndale and “very weak” for Crown and Sumner.

About 11:30 a.m. Nov. 12, a man was critically wounded in a drive-by shooting while on a sidewalk near Lawndale Community Academy. The spray of bullets damaged a window at the school and two cars nearby, police confirmed. If it weren’t for remote learning, children may have been inside.

“The STEAM school shouldn’t go there. Nobody’s welcome over there. They’re killing each other,” said Katina McNulty.

McNulty, who has a fifth-grade son, cares for a handful of Sumner students during the day and said it would take at least a half-hour for many to walk to Lawndale.

The plan proposes that transportation would be provided to students who live more than five blocks from the new school. McNulty worries that the greater distance could make it difficult for parents without cars to visit the school or provide a backup for students who miss the bus.

“It’s so easy for people this does not impact at all,” she said. “It directly impacts my child, my children in day care.”

At the Nov. 18 Board of Education meeting, parents who oppose the plan said many of their neighbors weren’t even aware of it.

NLCCC members described ongoing outreach efforts and said they sincerely want the whole community to be part of the process.

Jackson, who sits on a steering committee for the quality-of-life-plan, said it's taken time to line up supporters.

"We still have naysayers in the neighborhood who don't believe we can rebuild the community without us getting pushed aside," she said. "I get that. At the end of the day it's about these kids ... and they deserve to have a new school in the neighborhood, they deserve everything children on the North Shore get."

'Close the bars' and open schools, Fauci says

Alexander Nazaryan for Yahoo News – November 23, 2020

The nation's most visible public health official offered a stark choice to communities around the country facing difficult choices about how to proceed safely through what could be the most treacherous months of the coronavirus pandemic.

"If you have a choice between closing the schools and closing the bars, close the bars," Dr. Anthony Fauci, director of the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases, flatly told Yahoo News on Monday morning.

That guidance comes just days after New York City, the nation's largest school district, announced that it was shuttering classrooms and returning to fully remote instruction. Its resumption of in-person school earlier this fall, albeit partial, was widely regarded as a success.

The schools in New York closed despite positivity rates remaining low within the school population, at 0.19 percent. Instead, they were shuttered because the city at large met the 3 percent positivity rate that Mayor Bill de Blasio had said would trigger an automatic closure.

The city's positivity rate appears to be driven by people congregating in bars, restaurants and other social spaces. Over the weekend, for example, authorities shut down a sex party in Queens.

Many other districts are moving in the same direction, potentially relegating children to months more of classes on Zoom. That has led some to wonder why schools are being forced to bear the pandemic's brunt, when it is adults in adult spaces who seem to be spreading the virus.

Evidence strongly indicates that schools are not the sites of significant viral transmission, either between children or between children and adults. That is especially true for younger children, who tend to struggle the most with online learning. The risk appears to increase with age, for reasons that are not yet entirely understood.

Fauci explained to Yahoo News that teachers may be unwilling to teach in a "hot zone," even if schools themselves remain islands free of the airborne pathogen. "They're concerned — understandably concerned — about coming to school in a person-to-person way as opposed to virtual."

In cities like New York, Washington, D.C., Chicago and Los Angeles, powerful teachers' unions with deep ties to Democratic leadership could embolden teachers to "make their intentions known by their feet," as Fauci put it, and simply say they will not show up to teach in person.

In July, nearly 20 percent of teachers told Education Week that they "won't return to work if their district does reopen school buildings." Given the relative difficulty of hiring, certifying and training teachers, an informal educators' strike could cripple reopening plans. Teachers'

reluctance to return to in-person instruction has hampered plans for Washington, D.C., to bring some students back into the classroom.

The unions have insisted they do want to return to in-person instruction, but many leaders say it is not yet safe to do so. “You could wind up almost having to have a school that doesn’t open, not on the basis of the science of the kids getting infected,” Fauci said, “but perception on the part of the teachers that they are at risk.”

One union in Fairfax County, Va., a suburban district across the Potomac River from Washington, D.C., has called for school to remain virtual until August 2021. That call was derided by some as overly cautious.

President Trump first called for schools to reopen back in July but offered public educators none of the funding they said they needed to reopen safely. His involvement served only to politicize the issue, with many Democrats coming to oppose reopening schools at least in part because they had come to regard any aspect of Trump’s response as toxic.

Fauci himself has been a frequent critic of the president, who has in turn said that he would fire the renowned immunologist. On this one issue of schools, the two men appeared to be in agreement.

“To the best of your capability,” Fauci told Yahoo News, “try to keep the kids in school.”