CHICAGO
POLICY CENTER

CPS EXCELLENCE AGENDA

Presented to Chicago Board of Education candidates | July 2026

VISION: All Chicago families enjoy the highest-performing big-city school district in the nation.

CHALLENGE: Chicago Public Schools faces serious problems: poor student performance, an unsustainable debt burden, persistent structural deficits, and a governance structure where outside interests (especially militant teachers union leadership) exert outsized influence over the board's decisions.

COMPLICATION: Without a clear plan on Day 1, a newly elected school board will be forced to react to whatever immediate crisis or interest group is loudest. This is an outcome Chicago students cannot afford.

SOLUTION: Other large school districts have already proven specific reforms work. CPS board members don't have to invent a turnaround model from scratch: They can adopt a tested agenda built on three pillars (academic excellence, financial excellence, board excellence) and govern with conviction and confidence.

ACADEMIC EXCELLENCE

Academic outcomes, not adult interests, are the measure of a successful school district.

1. Require CPS schools only use instructional materials aligned with research-proven methods, like the Science of Reading, which was the basis for the Mississippi Miracle.
2. Require more specific interventions at the district's lowest-performing campuses to ensure student academic improvement, such as the Accelerating Campus Excellence (ACE) program, which is transforming student outcomes in Houston and across Texas.
3. Support a policy to renew high-performing charter schools no later than January (at least six months before contracts expire), giving families certainty and aligning with national standards.

FINANCIAL EXCELLENCE

The first step to getting out of a financial hole is to stop digging. A district that cannot manage its own budget will eventually lose the right to manage anything else.

1. Transition to zero-based budgeting (ZBB) by FY28, where every central office department, network office, and school must justify each line item. San Francisco schools use ZBB, as required by California law. In Philadelphia schools, ZBB recently identified $100M in savings.
2. Pass resolution calling on Springfield to require a state fiscal note and state pre-payment for any pension sweeteners that impact local school districts.
3. Mandate a 14-member vote for all new borrowing. CPS currently requires only 11 votes for borrowing when included in the budget, but 14 votes at any other time.
4. Pass resolution urging Illinois to opt in to the federal education donation tax credit to generate at least $100 million per year in additional funding to support services for CPS families, as New York and Colorado have done.

BOARD EXCELLENCE

The role of a leader is to define reality and to give hope. Newly elected board members have an opportunity to set a new standard for leadership in Chicago's schools.

1. Convene a Blue Ribbon Commission for CPS Facilities Planning, which should:
   - Assess the current facility footprint.
   - Establish an ongoing framework for optimizing school facilities for student success, including core principles of school utilization, neighborhood coverage, and model school staffing.
   - Set a consistent minimum standard for schools in terms of enrollment and performance, as well as a consistent "high bar" standard that triggers school-model replication.
   - Compare CPS' capital financing ability to other large districts [1]

2. The board has an opportunity to set a new standard for fairness and transparency in negotiations on CTU's collective bargaining agreement, which begin in less than two years. This includes:
   - Focusing negotiations on wages, benefits and conditions of employment (the traditional subjects of bargaining) and what is best for students.
   - Considering changes to state law to increase board independence in bargaining (see: 5 ways state law empowers CTU).
   - Using the zero-based budgeting process to identify any changes that are hampered by the collective bargaining agreement, and changes that are not.
   - Opening up all bargaining sessions to the public (only presentations were open in 2024)

3. Adopt a policy requiring board members to complete annual continuing education in school finance and governance, (e.g. Georgetown Edunomics Lab offers a Certificate in Education Finance) with completion publicly reported and enforceable by fines/suspensions.

[1] *CPS capital financing authority is currently capped at $308 million, compared to an estimated $14.4 billion cost to bring current buildings up to standards.*

CHICAGO POLICY CENTER

Contact: Chicago Policy Center Research Associate Gerrin Alexander | galexander@illinoispolicy.org