

The Case for Canter Middle School

CONTACT: Joy Clendenning, joyclendenning@gmail.com, 773-647-8489

Introduction

Good evening, ladies and gentlemen. You are about to hear a very compelling case to keep open Canter Middle School --a wonderful school that really works. But, before we begin our presentation, we must issue a formal protest. The representatives of CPS just spoke for 28 minutes, completely uninterrupted, to lay out their case.

By contrast, Canter Middle School and its community supporters will not be afforded that same opportunity. Instead, we will be forced to plead our case in two-minute sound bites. Is that fair? Is that legitimate? Does that even meet the spirit of the law? The intention of the law must be to gather all the pertinent data and best proposals regarding this school action.

Most precisely, this process must move us to do the very best we can for the children of Chicago--the children of this community. With that in mind, one can see that there are three distinct parties which must be heard from: CPS, Canter and its community, and the general public. The first two--CPS and Canter--are coherent entities, each with specialized information that the other does not have. The third party--the public--is individualized.

It makes sense that the individualized entity receives individualized chunks of time to speak, say, two minutes per person. But that treatment simply does not make sense for a coherent entity with specialized information. If we are serious about doing the best we can for our children, we need to hear fully not only from CPS, but also from Canter. Therefore, we strongly request that you immediately change the procedures of this hearing: Allow Canter and its community to speak, uninterrupted, for the same amount of time as CPS. In other words, equal time in an equal manner. If we make this change right now, all parties, including the public, will receive their due process. We await your response.

The Law

Given that we must proceed with this unjust framework, let me lay out yet another injustice:

There is no reason for us to be here today because CPS did not comply with the law when proposing to close Canter Middle School.

(105 ILCS 5/34-232 new)states:

(1) On or before March 31, 2013, the chief executive officer shall announce all proposed school actions to be taken at the close of the current academic year consistent with the guidelines published under Section 34-230 of this Code.

(2) On or before March 31, 2013, the chief executive officer shall publish notice of the proposed school actions.

Sec. 34-230 of the law states:

Notice of the proposal for a school action shall include a written statement of the basis for the school action, an explanation of how the school action meets the criteria set forth in the guidelines, and a draft School Transition Plan identifying the items required in Section 34-225 of this Code for all schools affected by the school action. The notice shall state the date, time, and place of the hearing or meeting.

Shoemith Elementary school is affected by the school action to close Canter and did not receive a written plan for its students by March 31, 2013.

For at least 40 years, students who have attended Shoemith elementary school have matriculated into Canter (formerly known as Louis Wirth) for the upper grades. The question, "Where will the Shoemith sixth graders go?" was asked by several people at the "Community Meetings" but went unanswered like all other important questions.

There was no plan submitted to Shoemith school, the Shoemith school community was not properly notified of the meeting and hearing schedule, and parents of 6th graders from Shoemith do not know where their children are to attend 7th grade. CPS did not comply with the law. That alone should nullify the decision to close Canter.

CPS did submit a plan to the communities of Canter, Ray, and Harte. However that plan was incomplete. Parents of Canter's seventh graders still do not know where their individual children are to attend 8th grade.

CPS has no business closing a safe, vibrant neighborhood middle school serving primarily African American families on the South Side of Chicago if there is not a plan for the children. If CPS does have a plan, they have no business keeping it from us. In fact CPS had the obligation to share it by March 31, and they did not.

Therefore, this is an illegal school action and must be terminated. If you agree, as you should, we can all stop right now and go home. I await your response.

Burden of Proof

Let us move on to another point. According to the CPS Board and Mayor Emanuel, the primary goal of CPS is to prepare our students for college and careers. That is a great and laudable goal upon which we can all agree! This goal perfectly links to CPS' adoption of the Common Core State Standards (CCSS).

Canter is one of a handful of schools that was chosen to be an early adopter of the Common Core. We have done much work in this area, and we are better situated than most schools to move forward with this agenda.

If college and career readiness really are the ultimate goals, then **surely** CPS would have presented compelling and relevant data showing that Canter is failing in this mission.

Well as you heard moments ago --during their lengthy, **uninterrupted** opportunity to present, CPS presented NO such data. Absolutely none. Not one single data point related to college or careers.

They could have presented data that show the percentage of former Canter students that graduate high school on time, and how that compares with other schools. They did not.

What percent of former Canter students make the high school honor roll? They don't say.

What percent matriculate into selective enrollment high schools? They don't say. (The answer--several each year.)

What percent matriculate into two-or four-year colleges? They don't say.

You see the pattern. The CPS presenters did not tell us how Canter performs on the most critical mission of all.

Simply put: The most important data we need to make a thoughtful and appropriate decision for our children is missing. CPS did not present it. Either they do not have the data--which is a clear abrogation of their responsibility--or, they have buried it because it does not support their case.

Bottom line: CPS clearly has NOT met its burden of proof. In a civil proceeding, the burden of proof falls squarely on the complainant--the party bringing the action. Here, the complainant is CPS and the action is closing Canter. CPS has not met its burden of proof based on insufficiency of data; therefore, their action must be denied. Their case must be thrown out.

We suspected this meeting would differ little from the others. Adam Anderson from CPS will tell you that there has been a "rigorous engagement process" of community dialogue and conversation.

WE have attended the utilization commission hearings, the network meetings, the legally mandated meetings, and this hearing. No dialogue took place at any of those meetings either.

The process seemed designed to discourage rather than encourage input. Questions go unanswered and remain unanswered.

Perhaps this shouldn't be a surprise given that early in the school year, an offer to engage in discussion with CPS staff and increase community involvement through a community action council, was met with the response "that's not a model CPS supports anymore."

Tonight we are going to give you the input CPS never bothered to seek about what the community wants in its schools. We will tell you why Canter should stay open.

We come to you together. We are CPS parents. We are parents of infants and toddlers. We are already engaged in promoting a system that will work for our children, our families and our neighborhood. We are CPS teachers, current students and alumni of Canter. We are members of the Hyde Park/Kenwood Community who care about strong neighborhood schools.

We stand before you to support all our schools, but especially Canter and our elementary schools Ray, Bret Harte, and the school left out of the action -- Shoemith -- that all send children to Canter.

In fact, many people of the Ray and Bret Harte communities did not have access to this hearing. Rather, they are required to be at their schools for report card pick-up and they are not allowed into this hearing after the first hour, making the timing impossible.

CPS scheduled this all-important hearing at a time when many stakeholders could not be present. This quite possibly violates the law! We ask you, Hearing Officer, to consider this point very deeply. If necessary, please refer this matter to a judge.

Those of us who could attend, stand before you on behalf of all the children on the south side who benefit from Canter's excellent program and teachers. We are proud that families choose to send their children to Canter. They do this in the model of school choice that CPS has championed for a decade or more. Canter is too rare a phenomenon in CPS. A safe school. In a safe neighborhood. On the South Side of Chicago.

More importantly, Canter is a middle school that works -- a good school, doing good things for CPS students. Tonight we are going to tell you just how good it is.

Utilization

First, however, we're going to address what CPS asserts is its reason for proposing to close Canter -- utilization.

The building is structurally sound and received some TIF funds and CPS funds for upgrades during the past decade. It, like many other good neighborhood schools in the city, draws students from various neighborhoods, because their families choose for them to attend a good school.

In determining utilization this year, CPS is using a flawed formula, which requires 30 students in a classroom. We should be planning space utilization of our buildings based on the class size we want, not the maximum we can pack in, especially when talking about middle-school-age students, who have bigger bodies.

CPS claims that Canter would be fully utilized with a student population of 390. That assumes 13 classrooms with 30 students each. Actually, if we follow federal law governing special education and counseling services, there are 12 classrooms available.

If we put the right number of students in a room--25--then we have full utilization with 300 students. Therefore, with 228 students, Canter is currently 76% utilized, not 58% as CPS claims. The "safe harbor" target for utilization is 80%; Canter is very close to this target.

At Canter 25 students "fit" in a classroom due to the size of the classrooms and due to the size of the kids. This is more appropriate for adolescents. Research indicates that low-income, African American and urban students benefit most from smaller class size. Canter's population is 83.3% low income and 91.4% African American.

At Canter, we can arrange desks in a circle with up to 25 desks to conduct the kind of instructional model that works best for student learning. As you will see in our discussion of performance coming up soon, our results show this model works.

Based on an ideal middle school class size of up to 25 students in a classroom, Canter can fit 300 students in the building, and would be happy to provide its outstanding learning experience to more students than are currently enrolled.

Canter is a wonderful old building which could be well-utilized by 300 students. In fact, when Canter had more than 300 students enrolled, visitors commented on how crowded it felt in the classrooms and the hallways. Again, we are talking about large, adolescent bodies.

The building is also already utilized in other ways not quantified by the CPS utilization formula; for example, a community group uses the building one evening a week. Canter's central location means it could be a valuable community resource. CPS has talked about using the building to generate revenue by leasing it to a third party. Another option would be to reorganize Canter's space in order to rent out a certain number of rooms to community partners who need meeting, office or event space. This would also provide a mutually beneficial partnership with the school.

Our students, families, and communities should not be punished because we have had so many CEO's at CPS over the past 5 years or because the state legislature blindly extended the deadline so that now CPS is considering the largest number of closings ever in a timeframe shorter than ever.

The win-win way to ensure Canter is fully utilized would be to have Shoemith become a K - 5 (not overcrowded) school and have Canter be a 6, 7, 8 Middle School. When Canter was Louis Wirth it was 6/7/8 and that made it easier to maintain enrollment. This would solve a problem for Shoemith as well. **Please note:** we are making a concrete proposal here, for Shoemith to be a K-5 school which feeds to Canter as a 6/7/8 school.

It would allow Shoemith to have two kindergarten classes instead of just one kindergarten class and two classes at all other grade levels. This year, Shoemith had over 40 kindergarteners enroll at the school, which forced the school to have one kindergarten class and two split K-1 classes to accommodate for the large number. If Shoemith could become a K-5 school, it would become a more well balanced school with the same number of classes in each grade level.

Canter's enrollment would increase. Families would have access to schools for children at every grade level within a three-block academic campus. Children could continue to benefit from the Shoemith/Canter/Kenwood continuum that has served the community well for generations.

Community and process

Speaking of the community, as mentioned earlier, the CPS school closing process was disempowering. CPS did not engage this community. CPS did this without asking us. They didn't ask the people who send their children to the schools in our community. They didn't ask the people who work in and dedicate their lives to the schools in our community. They didn't ask the leaders in LSC's, PTA's, or PAC's. They didn't ask the people who live in our community.

Among us are people who grew up in Hyde Park, a teacher who has attended or taught in neighborhood schools for 32 of his 45 years, people who have or who plan to send multiple generations of their family's children to local schools. We are people who choose to make Hyde Park and Kenwood home and we never intend to live anywhere else. We volunteer in schools to keep them strong, not just for our own children, but for all the future citizens CPS schools are educating.

If CPS had asked us, if they had been willing to have a real conversation, to listen in longer increments, and respond to our questions, they would have understood that we are a community capable of making good decisions for our children. All we want is what our children deserve--no more, no less.

There are many possibilities for CPS to work with us to improve Canter. For instance, we could help CPS design a recruitment and enrollment plan to increase enrollment. Canter has impressive ISAT results, passionate teachers, motivated students, and some excellent academic programs. CPS needs to get the word out about the great things Canter is doing. Make it known that Canter is a strong and viable neighborhood option and actively recruit families to increase enrollment. There is an active community in Hyde Park who have a vested interest in lifting up neighborhood schools. Tap into this group, engage us in the work of transformation and we will roll up our sleeves and help Canter become a school that fits snugly into the K-12 academic campus that stretches across these three Hyde Park-Kenwood blocks.

We want schools like Canter that work and we are here to engage with CPS to make that happen. Let's take a look at why keeping Canter open is so important.

Performance

Canter's committed principal, staff and teaching team help students achieve critical developmental outcomes and increase performance. CPS will try to lead you to believe otherwise. Its performance policy report identifies Canter as a level 3 school on probation. However, there are significant flaws in this assessment. First, it relies almost exclusively on ISAT scores, which look at the number of students who reach a specific threshold regardless of whether they came to a school with significant delays. Only 14.3% of the standard is based on student growth!

But everyone knows that the whole purpose of education is to help students grow. Therefore, CPS performance policy is standing on its head--completely upside down. Special education students comprise 15.7% of Canter's population. The ISAT test it relies on does not capture the growth of students who start with the lowest performance and improve multiple grade levels because -- though Canter teachers may help them advance two, three, or even four grade levels from where they came in -- some don't quite make it to the seventh grade level.

The charts we attach here use the ISAT numbers more appropriately and they show a dramatically different performance picture. Using cohort data for the most recent three consecutive years and following 7th graders to 8th grade, the percent of Canter students meeting or exceeding grade level requirements on the ISAT increased. It increased in both reading and math. It increased in all three years. Overall on the ISAT, Canter's composite scores outpace the CPS average. Canter is not an underperforming school! It is BETTER than many CPS schools.

Moreover, comparing all schools in the 60615 zip code that currently serve 7th and 8th graders, Canter performs very well. In fact, Canter outperforms every school but Murray; that means outperforming Burke, Kozminski, Overton, and Reavis. In both reading and math, for the past two years, Canter is second only to Murray. Moreover, no data exists for 7th and 8th grade for either of the receiving schools, Ray or Bret Harte, because they haven't had 7th or 8th grade for a decade.

By the way, Canter accomplishes all this with a high percentage of students with disabilities--the very group that tends to perform lowest of the ISAT test . It seems strange to close down the second best school in the the whole zip code!

It might be worth noting, at this point, that the overemphasis the Board places on ISAT data is quite troubling. ISAT is a flawed and out-moded test which is currently being replaced by the PARCC test, which is aligned to the Common Core State Standards. CPS has told us repeatedly that the PARCC test will provide a more detailed and accurate picture of student knowledge and skills. That is the future metric that CPS, Illinois and 44 other states will be using. It seems eminently more reasonable and appropriate to wait for the new and better data before we shut down 54 schools and massively disrupt the lives of over 30,000 children and their families! Especially in a case like Canter: If CPS has a school that works well and has special programs to offer, leave it alone--give it a chance to show what it can do on the PARCC test.

Special Programs

Of course, there is much more to Canter than test scores! Canter provides a myriad of special programming that enriches and deepens the overall learning and growth of its students. If Canter is closed, it is impossible to fully replicate or replace this experience.

Algebra

The goal of Canter's Algebra Program is to have students earn freshman algebra credit as 8th graders and put them on track for advanced placement math courses in high school. This is a great way for Canter students to distinguish themselves and improve their chances for getting into the college of their choice. To do this, students must pass a rigorous district wide algebra test at the end of the school year.

Canter has seen increasing enrollment in algebra, with 19 of 25 students in the course passing the exit exam in 2011 and 18 of 26 passing it in 2012. **These passing rates are competitive with many well-respected schools.**

This year's algebra class numbers 32 students.

If Canter is closed and its students are split between Ray and Bret Harte, it is unlikely that they will receive an algebra class: there simply will not be enough students in either building who are ready for this rigorous program.

Illinois Mathematics and Science Academy Fusion

Canter has provided the intensive Illinois Mathematics and Science Academy Fusion program for several years. IMSA Fusion is an award-winning STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, and Math) program. IMSA Fusion is recognized among the top programs in the nation by Change the Equation, *STEM Works*, a corporate-led initiative to identify and expand effective STEM teaching to best prepare for a powerful and diverse STEM pipeline for the global future.

One important goal of the Fusion program is to increase access for students historically underrepresented or underserved in STEM opportunities. As such, low-income minority students are targeted for program participation. Because the deadline for application has long since passed, Ray and Bret Harte will NOT be able to offer this program to Canter students who have been displaced by school closure. This will be a huge loss to Canter students.

Art

The art program at Canter, under the direction of Ms. Rodriguez, is stellar. All students receive expert instruction in a wide range of techniques. The hallways of Canter are filled with student-generated work. We invite you to come by and take a look; you will be impressed.

Chess

The chess club at Canter has grown by leaps and bounds over the past several years. Canter participates in tournaments all around Chicago, including the official CPS tournament. Three years ago, we took second place in the South Regional; this year, we fell one point short of moving on to the citywide finals. In addition, individual players have won medals in the individual competitions. For more details, please see the testimonial letter submitted by Michael Cardinale, president of the Youth Chess Foundation of Chicago.

College Tour

For five years Canter has taken all of its students on tours of area colleges and universities. These are full-fledged tours given by those institutions of higher learning. We have taken tours of Univ. of Chicago, De Paul, Northeastern Univ. Triton College, and many others. The tour guides are always impressed by the seriousness with which our students conduct themselves--asking the types of questions that high schoolers might ask. This is a wonderful opportunity which Canter offers its 7th and 8th graders.

School Climate

Test scores aren't Canter's only strength. Take a look at the 5Essentials survey, based on more than 20 years of research by the University of Chicago's Consortium on Chicago School Research that examines what makes schools successful. Canter rates as highly effective in the areas of "collaborative teachers," "involved families," and "effective leaders" on the 5 Essentials. It receives the highest designation of "organized for improvement."

More importantly, it achieves higher ratings in this area than either of the receiving schools in this proposed action. Achieving this rating on the 5 Essentials is one of the strongest predictors of school success.

The school culture at Canter centers on the relational trust between all stakeholders. Any assessment of school success must include qualitative indices of human development which are the direct result of the school's cultural climate.

Canter is safe and organized. It is an emotionally supportive space. Teachers, administration, and parents are a unified front in establishing and enforcing clear, consistent rules and boundaries. Students from other areas flock to Canter because of its reputation.

Parent involvement is intense. The staff take extra measures to call and interact with every single parent to give them updates on their child's progress: academically, socially and emotionally. From in-school visits to after school meetings to event planning, parents are active participants. Ongoing feedback creates a feeling of 'family', as many report there. We would like to direct the hearing officer to the part of the CPS binder, which contains the court reporter's transcripts from the meetings last Monday and Friday as evidence of the strong sense of family at Canter.

Canter is a culture of collaboration. Teachers are organized in teams and co-plan curricula. They consult each other and share resources, both in and outside of school, working to address student issues, including the many kids with special needs. Classrooms are designed for maximum student collaboration-- arranged in groups and circles. Lessons build-in participation that supports both content mastery and social development. As referenced earlier--one could maximize space with 30 students arranged in rows--however, this age group requires more carefully designed spaces. A culture of collaboration balances autonomy with social awareness in decision making, problem solving, and abstract thinking. Students exercise these skills outside of class.

Canter believes in affording individual attention, crucial for this age group. This is a culture of care. Teachers use their daily advisory periods to check in with student concerns and progress. Canter is a school where the “extended day” is really extended: Teachers come early and stay late. They make themselves available after school for tutoring running a plethora of enrichment activities, such as, chess, yearbook, art club, drama, IMSA Fusion (a STEM program), as well as basketball, flag football, track, and cheerleading.

Canter exemplifies a culture of leadership . In fact, Canter is a Leadership Academy. Through coursework, students develop skills like empathy, perspective taking, and planning for the future. Students develop competence, identity, and explore beliefs. Such values are re-enforced across the curriculum. Every student participates in a service project chosen by his/her homeroom. One such project was inspired by a fellow student with sickle cell disease. A series of fundraisers, culminating in a 3-on-3 basketball tournament, is now a yearly event. By planning these projects, students prepare themselves for their service requirement in high school.

Canter is a small school designed to meet the social and emotional needs unique to an adolescent , at risk population. The climate reflects the values of safety, individual support, collaboration and leadership. Many students have found a second chance here, and we know you’ll hear from some of them tonight.

Middle schools

Canter exemplifies the critical nature of middle schools. Canter offers a middle school approach in a neighborhood that has 3 other public schools that are K (or pre-K) to 6th grade. This specialty focus is best for adolescents and how they learn, since teenagers develop so uniquely.

A middle school creates the best transition for high school, as the staff is able to use their professional development and training days to further their expertise on the adolescent mind and to honor a common mission. A middle school offers “practice” for the freedoms and social expectations that students are abruptly confronted with in high school. 8th graders need to practice having the controlled freedom in the halls like high schools offer, learning about the responsibilities that come with freedom, not waiting in line to use the bathroom as an entire class.

As many parents and teachers can attest , adolescents are unique, diverse creatures who have extremely different psychological, emotional, and social needs than elementary students. There is a place for strong middle schools like Canter even if CPS moves toward a general strategy of K-8 schools.

CPS consistently supports unique models that work throughout the City. Supporting Canter as a middle school that works is critical. In CPS planning for the 10-year Facilities Master Plan, mandated by the 2011 state law they reference the Hyde Park Community Area. In the Hyde Park Community Area there are several small school buildings that can work together in the neighborhood to support students. Schools such as Shoemith, for example, are an ideal size to house pre-K through grade 5 programs, while Canter is an ideal size for grades 6, 7, and 8. CPS should support Canter, a middle school that works.

Safety and Location

It is vital that you see Canter in the larger context of the community before you make your recommendation to the Board. For this reason, you must consider the location of Canter Middle School closely.

Canter sits in an ideal location, at the border of Hyde Park and Kenwood, two safe, thriving neighborhoods on the south side of Chicago. It is sandwiched between our neighborhood high school, Kenwood Academy, and our wonderful Blackstone Library. It is three blocks from Shoemith Elementary School, the main feeder school for Canter. The majority of Shoemith graduates go on to attend Canter. Their parents value the safe location of Canter and its proximity to Shoemith, which allows older siblings to pick up and drop off younger siblings at school.

Parents also appreciate the proximity to Kenwood Academy, which allows older and younger siblings to commute safely together on the bus from all over the south side. You see, many of the children whom Canter serves do not live in the immediate attendance boundaries of the school or even come from the feeder schools. Now, CPS will try and tell you that this is another reason in favor of closing Canter-it does not attract all of the students from the neighborhood.

However, think about what this actually means. Canter has room to take in students from outside of the Hyde Park and Kenwood area. We serve students from neighborhoods all over the south side. These students and families are attracted to Canter because it is a safe school, in a safe neighborhood, on the south side of Chicago.

Families choose Canter for many reasons, but one that you will hear about again and again is that the neighborhood schools for many of our students are unsafe-because the very neighborhoods where they are located are unsafe. Imagine that! Located on the south side and close to several major bus lines and the Metra, Canter is close enough for families and students from all over the south side to get to, but snugly cocooned in a safe neighborhood.

Conclusion

At a time when violence and gang activity is an epidemic in our city it makes NO SENSE to close a safe school, in a safe neighborhood on the south side of Chicago. It makes even less sense, when you factor in the data you heard earlier about Canter's solid academic performance. As CPS repeatedly has stressed during this process, it is imperative that children from all over Chicago have the opportunity to attend a safe, high performing school. Canter is one of those schools and must not be closed.

We submitted as evidence a binder that includes this testimony covering multiple reasons Canter should stay open. We questioned whether CPS met the mandates of the law regarding school actions. The binder also includes supportive testimony from Canter alumni, State Senator Kwame Raoul, and the Hyde Park-Kenwood Community Conference.

The closing of Canter would be an injustice -- to students, families and to Chicago's communities. Canter is a school that is doing what parents and community members want. With a family atmosphere, a strong educational experience, solid pedagogy and a committed team of administrators and teachers, Canter is helping its students achieve great things. Canter is a safe school in a safe neighborhood on the South Side of Chicago. Canter should remain open.