

Blue Ribbon Commission report on the 2011-2012 Magnet and Selective Enrollment Admissions Policy

Background

On December 16, 2009, the Chicago Board of Education approved a new one-year admissions policy for magnet schools, selective enrollment elementary schools (SEES) and selective enrollment high schools (SEHS).

The new admissions policy was developed after a September 24, 2009, federal court decision that vacated the desegregation consent decree that had governed the student selection process in the Chicago Public Schools for nearly 30 years. As a result of the court decision and changes in federal law that occurred during the time the decree was in place, race-based criteria are no longer used to make admissions decisions.

Designed to ensure equity of access to magnet and selective enrollment schools, the new admissions policy introduced selection procedures using socio-economic status as a factor, as well as providing guidelines for other selection considerations, such as proximity and sibling status. The admissions policy was put into effect in December 2009 and applied to enrollments for the 2010-2011 school year. It is referred to here as the 2010-2011 policy.

A Blue Ribbon Commission (BRC) was formed to review the new admissions policy and the resultant student selections in order to evaluate whether the implementation of the policy achieved the following goal:

To maintain, to the extent permitted by law, the diversity achieved by the District prior to the termination of the desegregation consent decree, and to promote socio-economic diversity within schools including, but not limited to, the prevention, reduction and elimination of isolation based upon income levels, parental education levels and other social and economic factors having an established correlation to educational achievement.

In October 2010, the BRC issued a report following its review of the 2010-2011 policy and made recommendations that informed the adoption of an amended policy for enrollments in the 2011-2012 school year. That policy was adopted by the Board on November 17, 2010.

The BRC reconvened this year to review the outcome of the 2010-2011 policy and make recommendations for adoption of any policy changes for 20112-2013 admissions and beyond.

The members of this year's BRC include:

- Alderman Latasha Thomas, 17th Ward, and Education Committee Chairman
- Alderman Michelle Harris, 8th ward
- Anna Alvarado, Principal of Hawthorne Elementary
- Alan Mather, Principal of Lindblom Math & Science Academy
- Cynthia Flowers, Black Star Community PTA and CPS Parent
- Lisa Scruggs Esq. Jenner &Block

The BRC convened in June 2011, and met regularly throughout June and July. The BRC hosted three community forums during this time to understand the views and concerns of the public. Transcripts of the public forums are attached to this report and are posted on the Office of Academic Enhancement website at www.cpscae.org.

The goal of the Blue Ribbon Commission was to (1) evaluate the preliminary results of the 2011-2012 policy and (2) hear the concerns expressed by parents, educators and community members during the community forums.

The BRC continues to recognize that CPS parents and the entire community as a whole will ultimately benefit when every single school within the Chicago Public School system is a viable option for parents seeking academic rigor in a safe environment. Therefore, the system's top priority should be to raise academic standards and the means to achieve them district wide. Until that day, however, the existing policy can and should be improved to ensure equitable access to the system's magnet schools and selective enrollment high schools.

Given the timeframe allotted for its work, the BRC agreed to focus on a limited scope. In addition to the issues that the BRC was tasked with examining, several more came up through community forums and outreach to cpsoae.org that will also be addressed in this report. A summary of the BRC's findings and recommendations are set forth below:

- **Evaluation of tier system and current 30% rank, 70% tier split for selective enrollment high schools**
 - **Background:** In 2009, the Desegregation Consent decree was lifted, creating the need for CPS to move to a new, non-raced based admissions policy. An initial policy was adopted for the 2010-2011 admissions cycle that used socioeconomic criteria with 40% of seats admitted on the basis of pure rank order score, and the remaining 60% of seats admitted on the basis of pure rank order score, by tier.
 - **2011-2012 Policy:** The 2010 BRC could not come to consensus on a course of action for modifying the 2011-2012 policy. However, there was agreement that maintaining the levels of diversity found under the consent decree was important. The Board of Education therefore recommended that the tier system be modified to include a 6th variable—school performance—and to change the ratio of rank/tier to 30%/70% to avoid diminishing ethnic diversity.
 - **BRC Findings:** The 2010-2011 admissions cycle prior to the inclusion of the NCLB seats was different from the 2011-2012 admissions cycle in several ways: 1) shift from 40% rank/60% tier to 30% rank/70% tier and the addition of school performance as a 6th factor in determining tiers, 2) incorporating NCLB into the general process and having a minimum score for NCLB candidates, 3) elimination of cut scores for the schools. These changes all affected diversity, sometimes in conflicting ways. Shifting to 30/70 helped to increase diversity, while the NCLB change resulted in fewer qualified candidates and lower levels of diversity. Eliminating cut scores also increased diversity. After all of these changes, diversity numbers looked fairly stable. However, it is important to be able to look at several years of results to fairly evaluate trends. It is difficult to fairly evaluate results from a one-year policy.

We heard many recommendations on this issue, with suggestions that included both extremes— from 100% rank order to 100% tier. The BRC believes the district should strike a balance between these two extremes. The BRC wants these programs to

maintain their academic strength and excellent record of achievement, but also believes that diversity is an important part of the historical success of these programs.

One concern that was heard from the public on this issue is that there are high scoring students that are not being selected under the current system. Looking at the data, however, it was found that only 92 students who scored above 800 were not selected by at least one of their choices. This represents about 4%, which is on par with numbers seen under the consent decree. Out of these 92 students, 49 (53%) of them only chose one or two schools, a decision that made it more difficult for them to receive an offer.

At one community forum, it was suggested that CPS move to a 100% rank order system, similar to the one in New York City. New York uses no socioeconomic or racial factors in selections. In 2010, 5,261 students were admitted to NYC's top eight schools. Of these, 7% were Black, 8% Hispanic, 57% Asian and 28% White. The school district itself is about 40% Hispanic, 32% Black, 14% White, and 14% Asian. Blacks and Hispanics are severely underrepresented in these top NYC schools. NYC has tried to solve this in multiple ways, including test prep programs specifically for underrepresented minorities. They have been unsuccessful so far.

When presented with data showing CPS going to 100% rank, the BRC found that reducing the tier percentage does have a direct effect on reducing diversity, which the BRC does not support.

- **BRC Recommendation: The BRC recommends maintaining the existing tier structure and percentages for rank and tier in selective enrollment schools. Further, the BRC recommends that CPS continue to publish periodic reports on results, allowing the public to continue to evaluate and monitor both SES and racial diversity in these most highly coveted schools.**

- **Principal discretion for magnet schools**
 - **Background:** Historically, magnet school principals were given discretion to offer 5% of their available seats to students of their choosing. There were no guidelines for this process in terms of what would qualify a student to be an eligible candidate, and there was no official application process. This was fundamentally different than the process in place for selective enrollment high schools which included guidelines and an application process. Additional controls were imposed on the selective enrollment high school process in 2009 and 2010.. In 2009, CPS determined that any future principal discretion process would have to follow the same rigorous standard that was developed for Selective Enrollment High Schools. CPS was not able to develop guidelines and process for magnet schools for the 2010-2011 policy and PD was eliminated at that time for magnet schools

 - **2011-2012 Policy:** The 2010 BRC could not come to consensus on appropriate criteria for Principal Discretion in magnet schools. Two items that were identified by magnet principals as common uses for PD were written into the policy. This included twins/multiple births, and siblings at non-entry grade levels. The BRC recommended further deliberation on appropriate guidelines going forward.

- **BRC Findings:** The BRC found that the most common uses for PD seemed to be the following: twins/multiple births, families who leave for a period of time and then come back into the system, increased diversity, siblings of current students, teacher's/staff children, and preschool students.

The BRC feels that many of these concerns have been addressed within the magnet school admissions policy already: twins are linked together on the application, giving them a better chance of getting in together, all siblings gain entry if there are seats available and increased diversity is addressed by the tiers. The issue of families who leave for a period of time and come back is addressed by the existing CPS Transfer and Enrollment policy.

One outstanding concern includes preferring pre-school students and children of teachers and staff. At CPS, with the exception of a few programs that are designed to start in preschool, preschool students do not automatically matriculate to kindergarten. In addition, several types of preschool programs are offered, including Pre-K for all, HeadStart and tuition-based preschool programs. The problem with offering preschool students preference into kindergarten is that parents who are better off financially could essentially use a tuition-based program to gain access to a high-demand school. This is unacceptable in a public school district. If instead only Pre-K for all programs were preferred, the admission criteria for pre-k would have to be aligned to the current policy to make sure that rules are both consistent and fair and equitable. As these programs are run by multiple entities, CPS cannot guarantee entry rules, and so the BRC would not recommend offering preference for pre-k students.

The other outstanding issue concerns children of teachers or staff. This issue was raised by several schools, including extensive petitions from parents of current students. This effort should be considered a credit to the teachers at these schools—that current parents feel so passionately that the staff and teachers of these schools should gain preferred admittance indicates how well respected and liked they are. The BRC sympathizes with these teachers, who, like all parents, have to make tough decisions about how to fully participate in their children's education while holding a full time job. However, this issue is really an employee benefit issue, and as such is outside of the purview of the BRC. This issue should be referred to Human Capital to be addressed as an employee benefit issue.

- **BRC Recommendation:** **Because the key uses for principal discretion are addressed through policy, the BRC does not recommend instituting principal discretion for magnet schools at this time. The outstanding issue of preferring the children of teachers or staff should be referred to Human Capital if this is an employment benefit that teachers want to pursue.**
- **NCLB in Selective Enrollment High Schools**
 - **Background:** In the 2010-2011 admission cycle, 100 students from NCLB schools were admitted to 4 Selective Enrollment High Schools after the first round of admissions. These children were high performing students from low performing schools. Some of

these students did not apply or test, and so could not be compared directly to the students who were given acceptance through the regular process. Many expressed concern that these students would not be able to keep up with the other students, and that the bar was being set too low.

- **2011-2012 Policy:** The BRC wanted to make sure that the NCLB process was aligned with the regular admission process in the 2011-2012 policy. In the policy, the processes were aligned by having eligible students contacted to let them know a preference existed. 5% of seats were held at those schools that qualified as receiving schools.
- **BRC Findings:** Reports from SEHS principals indicate that some of the current NCLB students (from the 2010-2011 admissions cycle) are struggling. While some are performing well, there is concern for the long term success of some of these students given their first year of performance.

In the 2011-2012 application cycle, CPS imposed a minimum score of 650; consistent with the minimum score needed to get in for all general education students (with the exception of PD selections). This limited the number of eligible students, and only 30 were made offers, with 25 accepting. The remaining seats were redesignated as general education seats.

- **BRC Recommendation:** **The BRC feels that the NCLB program should continue, with the students receiving continued support and ongoing monitoring. This year's class will be a much better measure of the success of this program as all students actually took the test and can be compared on an even playing field. It is important that these students find success in these rigorous programs, and if that is not happening, the program should be reexamined. One key to make sure these students are successful is making sure they meet the minimum cut score of 650. The BRC also recommends creation of a longitudinal program that both identifies and grooms children in under performing schools from the primary years to prepare them to take on this challenge.**

- **Magnet School Reenrollment**

- **Background:** Historically, if a family left a seat at a magnet or selective enrollment school for any reason, the child would lose their right to that seat completely. This means that regardless of their reason for leaving, if they left a magnet seat the only ways to get back in were through the regular lottery process or through principal discretion.
- **2011-2012 Policy:** This did not change under the 2011-2012 policy. However, because principal discretion was no longer an option for magnet parents, several cases were brought forward from parents who wanted to be able to return to their school of choice after having an out-of-town opportunity.
- **BRC Findings:** Several examples were brought forth as to when this becomes applicable. These included work opportunities, sabbaticals, military deployment, and some extenuating circumstances such as domestic violence.
- **BRC Recommendation:** **The BRC notes that the rules for reenrollment are addressed in the Transfer and Enrollment Policy. This policy already covers**

issues under homelessness and other special circumstances. The BRC recommends reexamining the policy to make sure it includes language that covers military deployment. While the BRC feels great sympathy for a family weighing a great career opportunity or other life choice, knowing that the child will have to reapply for their magnet or selective seat needs to be part of their deliberation.

- **High School Magnet School Proximity Percentage**

- **Background:** Historically, 30% of seats were held for students within the proximity at magnet schools. This proximity lottery was eliminated if more than 30% of the entire school was found to live within the 2.5 mile proximity boundary. This number was increased under the 2010-2011 policy to 40%, giving an even higher percentage of neighborhood children access to these citywide programs. Because 2.5 miles is a big area, the question was raised if that percentage should be even higher to give the students better chance of entry.
- **2011-2012 Policy:** The percentage did not change under the 2011-2012 policy. However, a “trigger” was added that would eliminate the proximity lottery. If 50% of the school was within the proximity, AND 50% of the school was any one race, the proximity lottery was eliminated for that school.
- **BRC Findings:** There are 4 magnet high schools. One has an attendance boundary, so it does not have proximity area. Out of the remaining three schools, two generally exhaust their proximity waitlist by the beginning of school. The remaining school generally makes offers to 40-60% of their proximity waitlist. **BRC Recommendation: The BRC recommends maintaining the proximity percentage for magnet schools at 40%.**

- **Redefine Proximity Area for schools on the city edges**

- **Background:** Magnet schools offer preference for students within their proximity area. Proximity is defined as a 1.5 mile radius circle for magnet elementary schools (**school at the center**), and a 2.5 mile radius for magnet high schools. There are a number of **schools** located along the cities edges that have parts of their proximity circle either located outside of the city or in Lake Michigan.
- **2011-2012 Policy:** The 2011-2012 policy did not address this issue.
- **BRC Findings:** All magnet high schools and 12 magnet elementary schools have portions of their proximity boundaries either outside of the city or in Lake Michigan. Increasing the number of students that can compete in these proximity lotteries could help increase diversity at the schools, and capture a new population of students to compete in these proximity lotteries.
- **BRC Recommendation: The BRC recommends redefining the proximity percentage to address the following issue: if a school has more than ¼ of its proximity area outside of the city, increase the proximity area by ½ mile.**

- **Redefine eligibility requirements for students with disabilities for magnet high schools**

- **Background:** The criterion for students with disabilities to be eligible for the magnet school lottery is to have a combination stanine of 10, in reading and math. This compares with the general criteria of a 5 stanine in reading and a 5 stanine in math.
2011-2012 Policy: The 2011-2012 policy did not change this requirement.
- **BRC Findings:** Generally, Magnet high schools maintain percentages close to the recommended level of participation by students with disabilities. This is accomplished through a combination of general admission and low incident cluster programs where students are placed in schools by the Office of Specialized Education and Supports (Please check their name for accuracy.). Further study is needed to determine what percentage of students with disabilities (and a combination 10 stanine) are applying to magnet programs, and if that's a representative portion. Further, if and what part of the admission cycle may create a barrier to applicants.
- **BRC Recommendation:** **The BRC recommends that CPS conduct a root cause analysis to determine if there are barriers in the application process to students with disabilities. Further, the BRC recommends clear communication of the process to parents of students with disabilities, utilizing case managers encourage interest and applications, and to better identify strong candidates.**

- **Multiyear policy**

- **Background:** After the lifting of the Desegregation Consent Decree, CPS passed a one year policy to ensure a thorough public review and vetting of the process. The 2010 BRC was brought in to review the policy, and 3 public meetings were held where initial results were reviewed with the public.
- **2011-2012 Policy:** The 2011-2012 was approved by the Board of Education in November of 2010, and was also a one year policy for the same reasons.
- **BRC Findings:** One key reason for the one year policy is that it builds in a time to review the immediate impact of the policy. However, it is not ideal nor the intention of the BRC to continually recommend a one year policy.

The review of this year's data gives the BRC confidence that CPS is, within the limits of the law, trying to maintain the diversity achieved by the District prior to the termination of the desegregation consent decree. However, the BRC feels that it is important to continue to keep a close eye on diversity to make sure that the gains under the consent decree are not eroded.

At the public forums, parents asked for stability. They consistently mentioned concern with the continuous policy changes, and noted a desire to know what the policy would be on an ongoing basis.

- **BRC Recommendation:** **The BRC recommends maintaining a consistent policy for several years. However, CPS should publish periodic status reports to allow for public monitoring of the process, and should be continuously monitoring for large shifts in diversity levels requiring re-evaluation of policy.**

In conclusion, the BRC would like to acknowledge several issues repeatedly mentioned during the community meetings that were not within our purview. These included:

1. The need for more magnet schools, particularly in areas of the city that currently have very few options.
2. Improving the neighborhood schools within every community.
3. Increasing the number of high quality seats throughout all neighborhoods in Chicago.

These are goals that the BRC strongly believes in, but which fell outside of the scope of this project. We would like to encourage CPS to take the concerns expressed into consideration in future planning.

In addition, the BRC believes CPS needs a strong communication campaign educating the community/parents on the policy, results, process changes like the online application, and how to apply. This is a critical step that can help parents better navigate the process to gain equitable access to these programs for all students. Informing parents if a second admissions round is to be held at selective enrollment high schools would help to reduce parental frustration. Clearly communicating how waitlists work at magnet schools will also help parents put their chances into perspective.

Finally, the BRC would like to emphasize the importance of transportation to the success of these programs. Transportation is critical to maintaining diversity at these magnet and selective programs. Without transportation, these citywide programs will lose their ability to attract students throughout the city, and will soon re-segregate. The BRC urges the district to prioritize maintaining transportation for these programs.

Respectfully submitted,