

Dear members of the Senate Special Committee on the Chicago Elected Representative School Board and the House Working Group:

I am a CPS mother and third-generation CPS graduate. I am a former teacher, former school and district leader, current advocate for educational justice in my role at Kids First Chicago, and a Latine woman from Humboldt Park.

As the Springfield legislative session draws to a close, the clock is ticking on the delivery of district maps for the CPS School Board elections that will begin next year. Since 2021, Kids First Chicago has been working with our Elected School Board Task Force (ESBTF), composed of CPS parents, to determine parents' priorities for the new school board. After three years and conversations with hundreds of parents, it is clear what they want: fair racial representation so that the elected board looks like and understands the student body they serve.

CPS parents think it is critical that the school board should reflect their students, have shared experiences with them, and understand the communities they come from. The student population is nearly 90% children of color, yet Chicago as a whole is 33% White. Specifically, Black students comprise 36% and Latine students 47% of CPS, and they deserve representation that respects their outsized proportions of the student population compared to the city population.

Kids First Chicago has been involved in these discussions about creating school board districts solely for the purpose of making sure parent voices are heard in this process. We do not harbor any political aspirations, we do not intend to run candidates in these districts, and we are not considering the political leanings of voters. We are attempting to center parent voices in a debate that is too-often dominated by political interests.

If lawmakers lose focus on racial equity as a top priority when drawing these district maps, it is very likely that Latine families will be underrepresented. Putting too much emphasis on neighborhood cohesion or maintaining nearly identical populations in each district will only result in a map that perpetuates Chicago's racial power imbalances and fails to adequately represent the largely Black and Brown CPS student population. I was one of those students. My children are those students.

For evidence, look no further than a map that was submitted for consideration last Friday that creates at least nine plurality white districts (and only 4 Latine), based on the critical metric of voting age population (VAP). A revised version of the map was submitted on Wednesday that changed that number to seven white districts based on VAP, which is the same composition of the first draft released by the House and Senate committees working on these districts.

Parents rejected the first committee draft because it did not do enough to represent CPS demographics, and they will likely reject this version for the same reason. Racial representation matters. Both of these versions try too hard to maintain community boundaries and as a result fall far short in racial representation.

Our Elected School Board Task Force undertook the development of a district model that would create a balance in size and racial composition, while maintaining compact districts that would meet legal requirements.

[This version](#) created eight plurality Latine districts, seven Black, and five White, that had contiguity and reasonably compact shapes, while staying within the allowable 10% population variance. They maintained 15%-point margins for districts representing protected minority groups, increasing the chance that a candidate with shared ethnic identity could win in those districts. The task force decided to submit this version to lawmakers as an example that these goals could be accomplished in a way that respected CPS demographics.

We are not trying to promote this map and this map alone – we simply submitted it as an example for lawmakers to consider as they craft their own maps. We encourage these committees to keep working to create districts that will best represent our students, not political interests. CPS parents do not want and do not deserve a school board that will repeat mistakes of the past, one that will result in harmful decisions being made by people who do not reflect the communities most served. Our school board must represent the students it serves, and we should strive for a racially equitable district map in order to make that a reality.

We, parents, believe that they are our students, so it should be our school board.

Natalie C. Neris, Ed.D