Crain's Forum on CPS neighborhood schools vs choice

Commentary: Elected CPS school board has to become every Chicagoan's business

By Janice K. Jackson

Gift Article



Credit: Chicago Public Schools

Englewood Stem High School

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The Nov. 5 ballot marks a historic shift to an elected board for our public schools. While it is the norm for districts nationwide, it will be a first for Chicago. And while the size and structure of our school board is causing warranted concerns, what's done is done. As Chicagoans, it is now our challenge — and our opportunity — to ensure this new governance model works for students and taxpayers.

Let's be real, this will not go smoothly. It certainly hasn't gotten off to a smooth start. But CPS is a resilient system. Hundreds of thousands of students and educators are making real progress despite the hurdles they face. Every side of every public argument sees the potential in our students. We are in this together. So let's cut the absurdity and get to work.

According to Public Agenda, just 37% of Chicagoans are aware the school board election is happening and even fewer (34%) for Black and Latino residents. We have to do better to live up to the promise of a democratic process. Spread the word, do your homework and VOTE for those aligned with your values. Ask your friends and colleagues whether they plan to vote, too.

This board is intended to be representative, but several elements of its design make it harder for parents and everyday Chicagoans to participate. The role is unpaid despite the immense responsibility. Getting on the ballot is confusing and expensive. Undocumented parents are excluded from running or even voting. Policymakers should revisit these restrictions so Chicagoans with the right skills and experience can have real access to participate.



Janice K. Jackson is a graduate of Chicago Public Schools and served the district for more than 20 years, including as CEO. She is now CEO of Hope Chicago.

And we need to ask hard questions on how a 21-member board is productive, or perhaps even functional. Such an unwieldy group will make attracting and keeping a talented leader in the CEO role hard. And what mechanisms can hold a dysfunctional board's feet to the fire? The public needs resources and data to keep the board accountable, most of all, for student outcomes.

Getting this right, or if you prefer, making lemonade, could not be more important for our residents and for our economy. The business community has as big a stake as anyone in our education system. Students and families are your current and future workforce and customers. And great schools can drive economic growth.

According to the To&Through Project, only 30% of the roughly 26,000 CPS ninth graders this year will earn a college degree within 10 years, if current rates hold. That means about 17,000 young people enter our economy each year with no education beyond high school. We have to do better, and we can.

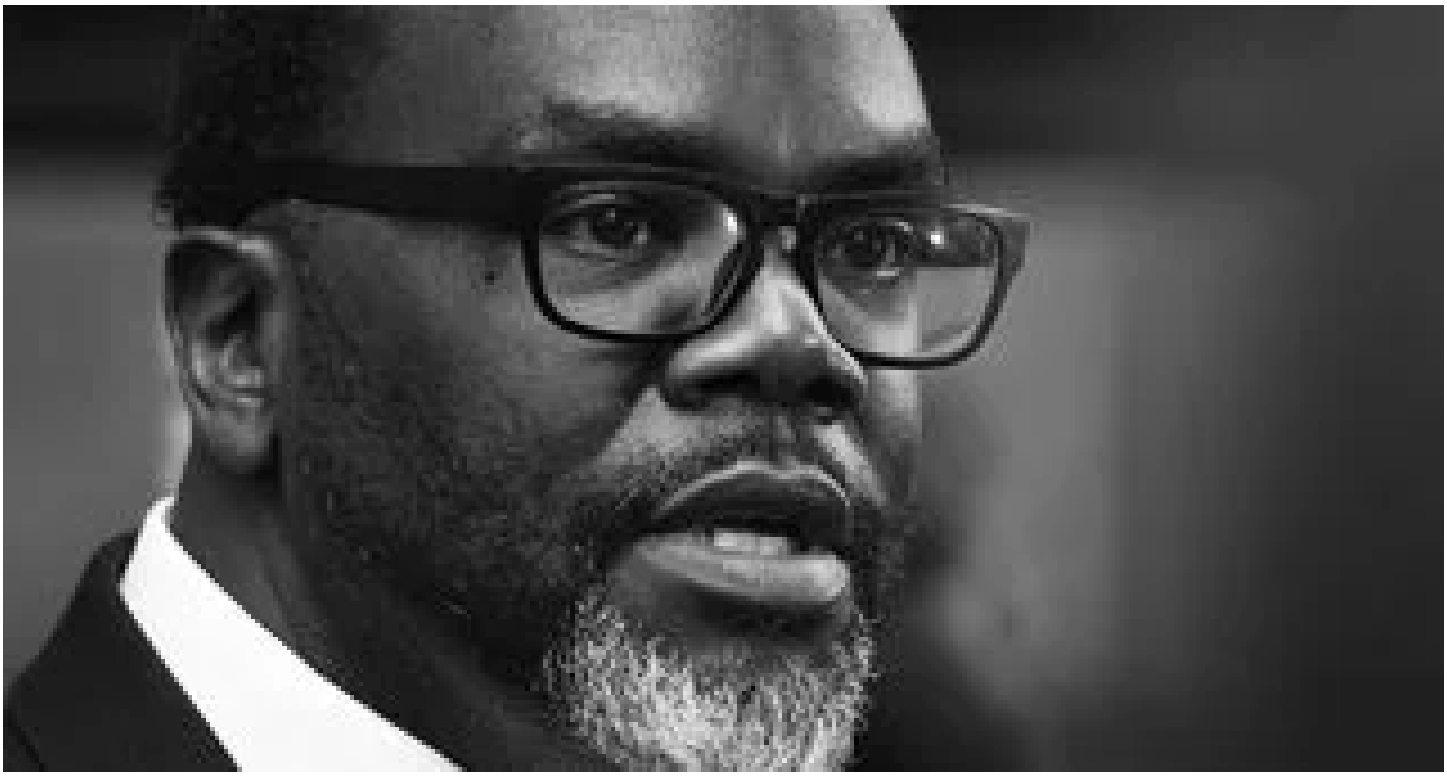
At Hope Chicago, where I am currently CEO, an economist projected that our model to close the racial wealth gap through postsecondary education is likely to return half a billion dollars in fiscal and social impacts to Chicago communities. And Hope Chicago supports just 4% to 5% of CPS high school graduates.

As CPS continues to be a venue for political battles in the coming months, it may be tempting to look away. Do the opposite. Our city's students, teachers and staff continue to show up every day and get their jobs done. It is our job to navigate this rocky road and come out stronger.

By Janice K. Jackson

Opinion, Education

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