



For Consideration By: The Illinois Senate Special Committee on the Chicago Elected Representative School Board, in hearing, April 17, 2023, at 6:00PM.

Hello, I'm Cassie Creswell, director of Illinois Families for Public Schools and Chicago Public Schools parent. Thank you to Chair Lightford and the Committee for holding hearings on this topic.

The legislation that created the elected representative school board for Chicago was the work of essentially a generation of community organizing against those—mostly exceedingly wealthy individuals in the business community—who oppose self-determination and self-governance for the public schools of our city.

An elected representative school board was extremely popular with Chicago voters when it was on the ballot in referenda in 2012 and 2015. A strong well-resourced public school system benefits all Chicagoans, whether we have school-aged children or not, because public schools are a foundational element in a thriving pluralistic democracy.

Illinois Families for Public Schools is strongly in favor of the structure of the school board, as it stands currently in statute, with 21 members, 20 of those elected from districts.

The size of the board was discussed and negotiated extensively over many years and multiple General Assemblies.

More districts means smaller districts which makes campaigns less expensive and more accessible to grassroots candidates. Given the racial, ethnic and class segregation in the city and the composition of the electorate, smaller districts also mean a board that is more representative of the city and the school district's student body demographics. And smaller districts mean board members who are more accessible to their constituents, including public school families.

Dividing the city into 20 districts means one elected member representing around 130,000 constituents. Here's some relevant comparisons:

- Other school boards in Illinois almost all have seven members. But 90% of those boards' districts are very small with fewer than 4500 students. That's less than just the largest single CPS high school.
- Elgin U-46 is the second largest district in the state. There are 160,000 registered voters in the district and 35,000 students, about 1/10th the size of Chicago. It has a 7-member elected board.
- About half of our property taxes in Chicago are controlled by the Chicago Board of Education. We have 50 aldermen and a mayor to levy and allocate the portion that goes to the city.

- Cook County Board has 17 members and a president with an operating budget roughly similar to that of CPS.

A board with fewer than 20 elected districts will not be sufficient to serve our city's needs.

Lastly, though these are not the subject matter of this hearing, we have three other requests of the General Assembly:

Local School Councils, though they are not a substitute for an elected representative school board at the district level, are a crucial governance structure in their own right. They need and deserve the support to fulfill the original vision of them when they were created 35 years ago by the Illinois General Assembly. Increasing involvement in LSC elections and operations is a way to strengthen individual schools and the district as a whole during this time of governance transition to an elected board and beyond. There has been some helpful legislation to strengthen LSCs in recent years, and the General Assembly should continue this work.

Board member compensation: We urge the Illinois General Assembly to pass legislation to pay board members. These elected board members will be responsible for levying and spending billions of dollars of revenue; for educating hundreds of thousands of Chicago children; and for representing 130,000 constituents, including students, families, teachers, taxpayers, and voters. Making this an unpaid position also limits who can serve. And let us note that in a district of more than 40,000 employees, the difference between paying fewer than 21 board members vs 21 is minimal and a spurious argument for decreasing the board size.

Campaign financing: We urge the Illinois General Assembly to address the cost of elections by creating some mechanism for public financing of campaigns. This exists around the country in various jurisdictions and in various forms. Hand-wringing about how expensive elections has been continuous since the earliest discussions of an elected board. Legislators now need to tackle this problem, and there are plenty of precedents out there to draw on.

Respectfully submitted,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'C. Creswell', with a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.

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