EDUCATION, UNEQUAL POLICY, AND VISIONS FOR EQUITY[65]

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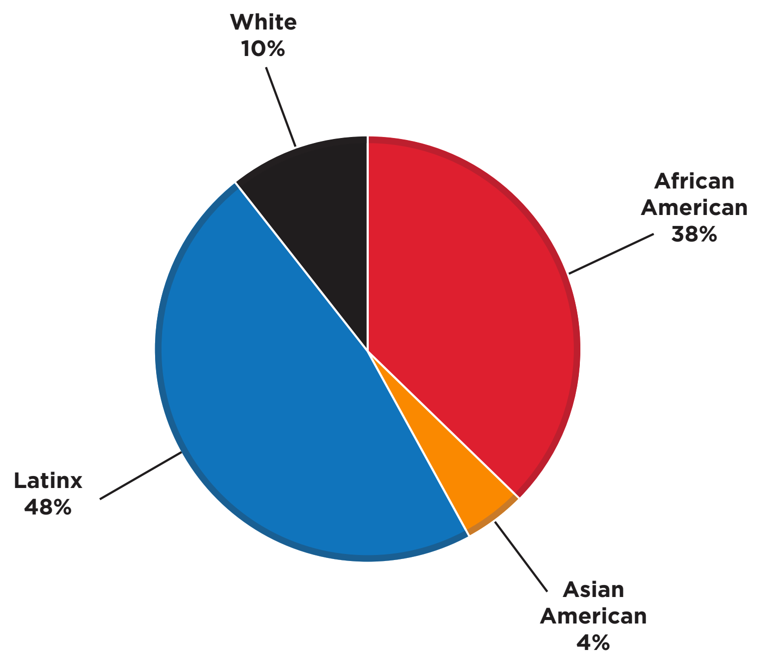
EDUCATIONAL CONDITIONS IN THE CITY

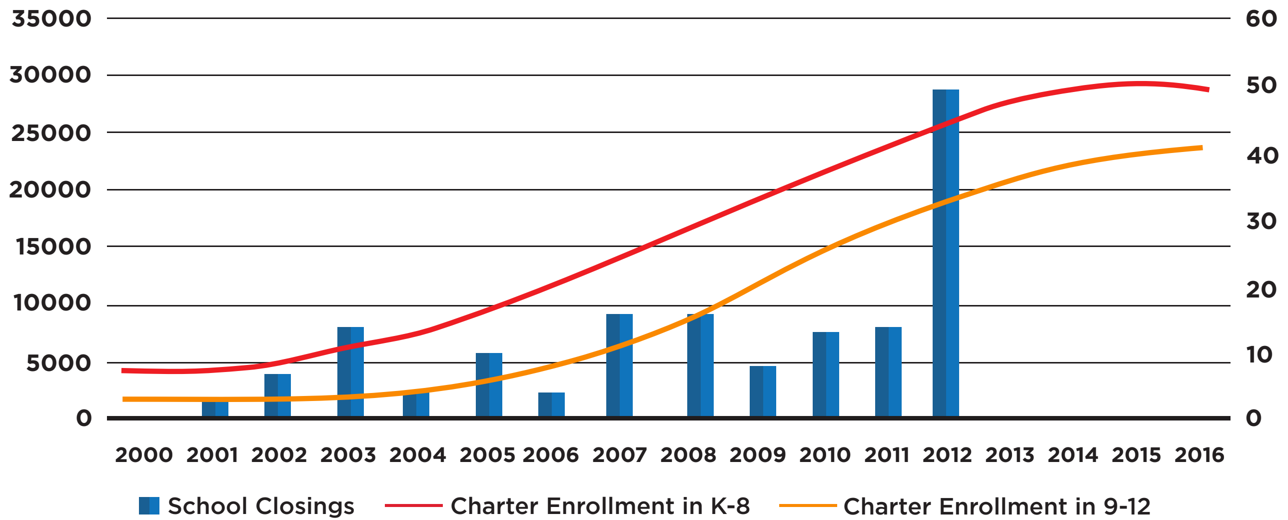
[66]Geography is an important factor in understanding the varying degrees of access to quality schools in Chicago. While a variety of school types comprise the educational landscape of the city, Chicago Public Schools (CPS) plays a formative role in structuring educational opportunities across neighborhoods. The district currently serves over 360,000 students, 86% of which are African American and Latinx. The number of students enrolled in CPS has decreased significantly over the past two decades. Just 10 years ago, for example, district enrollment hovered above 400,000 students.[67] Population loss and the corresponding decline in enrollment has been used to justify school closures that have disproportionally affected South and West Side communities in the city.

FIGURE 1: CPS ENROLLMENT BY RACE AND ETHNICITY [B]



At present, Chicago Public Schools operates 421 elementary schools (K-8th grade) and 92 high schools (9th-12th grade).[68] These numbers include the district's 38 elementary school magnet programs and 11 selective enrollment

FIGURE 2: CHARTER SCHOOL ENROLLMENT AND SCHOOL CLOSINGS [C]



high schools, both of which require parents and students to participate in a competitive admissions process in which students are awarded points based on achievement test scores.[69] Thirty percent of available seats in magnet and selective enrollment schools are awarded to the highest-performing students regardless of where they live in the city. The remaining 70% of applicants are admitted using a tier system that considers applicants based on the socioeconomic status of their neighborhood.[70] Still, less than 30% of the 16,500 8th graders who applied to a CPS selective enrollment high school in 2018 were admitted.[71] The high-stakes associated with gaining access to a quality education reflects city-level policy initiatives that have decreased access to and funding for neighborhood schools, especially on the city's South and West sides.[72]

Over the past 15 years, Chicago has experienced multiple waves of school closures.[73] The first of these waves began in the early 2000s with the implementation of the district's Renaissance 2010 initiative. Started in 2004, Renaissance 2010 called for the closure of 60 to 70 neighborhood schools and the opening of 100 "choice schools." As a result of these policies, an increasing amount of the city's young people began to enroll in charter schools, and a significant portion of the district's funding followed. Today, charter schools in Chicago receive the same amount of per-pupil funding as traditional public schools, as well as additional funds for office expenses, security, and subsidies to pay for facilities.[74] In 2018, Chicago Public Schools allocated an estimated $37 million to charter schools.[75]

By 2009, the district had eliminated 73 neighborhood schools while adding 87 new "choice schools," 70% of which were charters.[76] Ninety percent of these school closures affected low-income and working-class African American communities on the city's South and West Sides.[77] Many of the black young adults whom we spoke to were affected by this first wave of closures.

A second wave of closures was unanimously approved by the Chicago Board of Education in May of 2013, resulting in the elimination of an additional 47 elementary schools.[78] Of the 10,708 students affected by this second wave of school closures, 88% were African American, and 10% were Latinx.[79] A third wave of closures was announced in February 2018 when the Chicago Board of Education voted unanimously to close four Englewood high schools over the next three years.[80] Once again, these closures would have disproportionately affected Black students. However, these plans were postponed after community members protested the proposal.[81] It seems that rather than ensuring that all children have access to an excellent education within their neighborhood, the city's policies reflect unequal educational investment in the city's young people.

Navigating Education Resources and Opportunities

For many young people of color, educational opportunities in the city are seriously constrained by policies that have contributed to funding disparities along racial, ethnic, and geographic lines. One study identified Illinois as a particularly troubling case for inequity in educational funding, concluding that the "highest poverty districts receive nearly 20 percent less state and local funding than the lowest poverty districts."[82] In fact, Illinois has the biggest funding gap between low- and high-poverty school districts of any state in the nation by a wide margin.[83]

City-level policies contribute to these inequalities as well. In July 2018, for example, Chicago Mayor Rahm Emanuel

FIGURE 3: PER PUPIL FUNDING BY RACIAL MAKEUP OF SCHOOL [D]

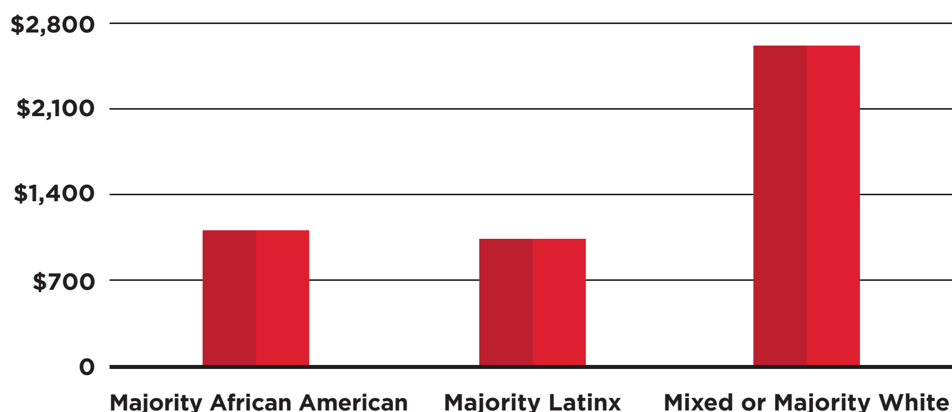
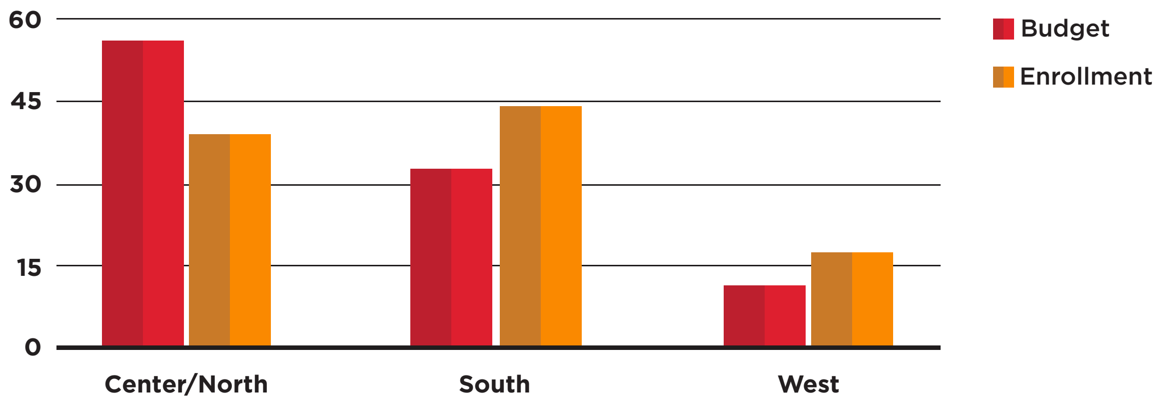


FIGURE 4: PERCENTAGE OF SPENDING BY SIDE OF CITY [D]

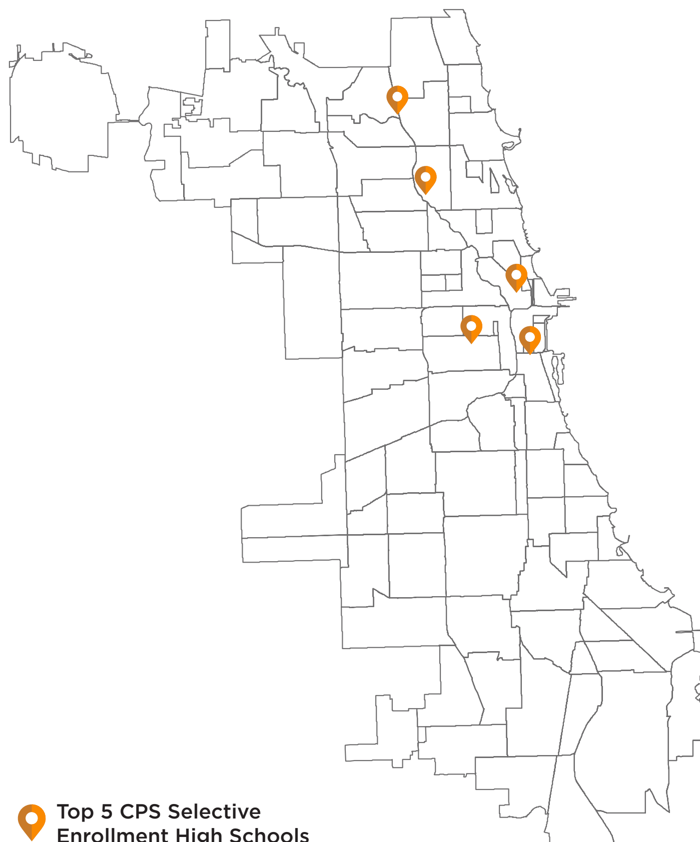


announced a new $989 million capital budget for school repairs, renovations, and new construction for CPS. However, relative to the number of students enrolled, the budget disproportionately funds North Side schools. Though more students are enrolled in CPS schools on the city's South Side, these campuses were promised less money for educational improvements.[84] Furthermore, the figures above indicate that mixed or majority-white schools received more than double the amount of money per student from the district than majority-black and majority-Latinx schools.[85] While city leaders attempt to address educational challenges by stressing the realities of population loss and low standardized test scores, these conversations seldom consult the voices of the students most affected by their decisions. In our conversations with young adults, we found that race, ethnicity, and geographic positioning in the city shape their ability to access educational opportunities. These conversations provided us with new understandings of how the city influences the educational experiences and corresponding perceptions of inequity among young adults in Chicago.

Black youth in particular discussed the lack of adequate funding for basic resources such as textbooks and technology. An African American man, Noah, 24, explained how the lack of resources at his high school contributed to his sense of educational inequity in the city. *"I remember from my own school experience, there had been times when our water was cut off and we had no lunch and our principal bought us Burger King out of her own pocket. We used old textbooks from years ago. I know in the ... I don't want to just say white communities, but communities that's more funded. You can tell where the money being put. They don't have to deal with that. They got laptops in their class, they got new books and new supplies and everything. A lot of teachers [here] have to fund stuff out of their pocket or raise money to do stuff like that. You got to think it*

is worse." For young African Americans like Noah, limited access to well-funded neighborhood schools represents one critical manifestation of community disinvestment that is especially salient when compared to the educational opportunities afforded to students on Chicago's North Side.

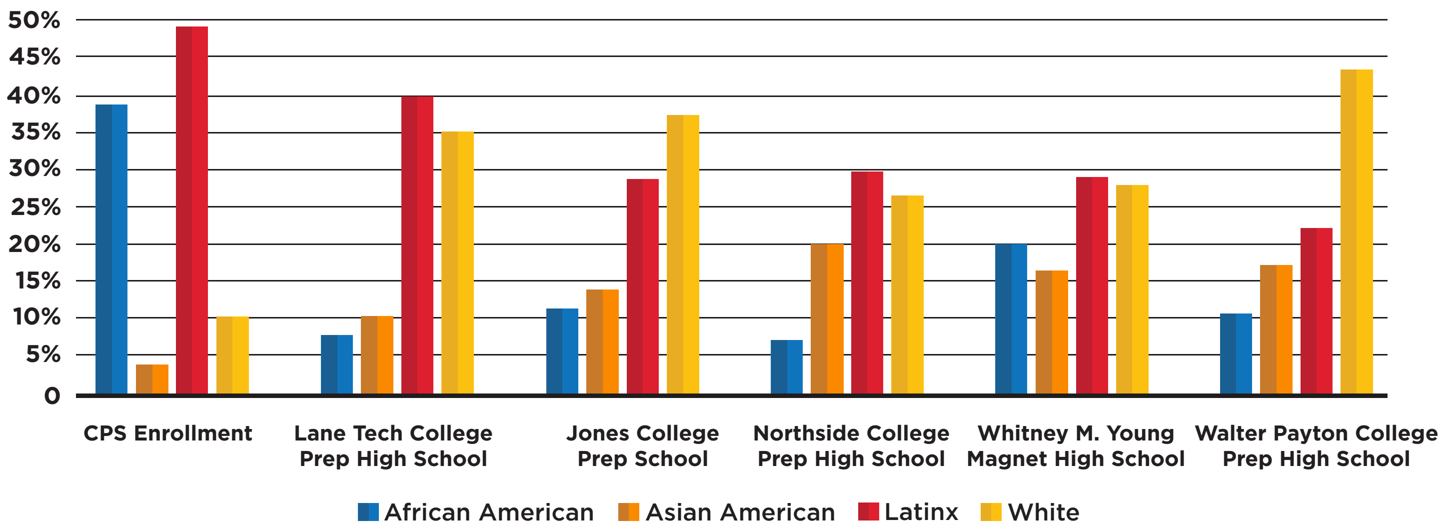
FIGURE 5:



Young people in Chicago also experience varying degrees of access to the district's most exclusive high schools. While Chicago Public Schools operates 11 selective enrollment high schools located throughout the city, the most exclusive and high-performing of these schools (Jones College Prep, Lane Tech, Northside College Prep, Walter Payton, and Whitney Young) are concentrated on the city's North Side.[86] This trend is reflected in the racial and ethnic makeup of these schools as well. White youth in particular are overrepresented within the district's most exclusive high schools, while black and Latinx students are underrepresented relative to the district's overall racial and ethnic makeup. Most strikingly, while white students only comprise 10% of the district's students, they represent 44% of enrolled students at Walter Payton, the highest ranked Illinois high school in 2018.[87] Contrastingly, Latinx students make up 48% of the district's students, but only comprise 22% of Payton's student population.[88]

Our conversations with young Chicagoans also touch upon enrollment disparities across groups. Young whites are much more likely to apply to and attend highly selective high schools. While there may be many reasons for making such a choice, one is the belief that neighborhood schools will not provide students with a quality education. [89] One white Chicagoan, Sydney, 21, shared why she decided to apply to a selective enrollment school: ***"I remember my mom saying that I wasn't allowed to go to my neighborhood school … because I was smarter than that. I didn't perceive that as racist or classist at the time.*** *I just thought, 'Well, I can't go [there], because I don't want to be dumb, and I want to*

FIGURE 3: PER PUPIL FUNDING BY RACIAL MAKEUP OF SCHOOL [E]



go to a good college." While white youth sometimes described the challenges associated with gaining admission at exclusive schools, they also mention that they were able to navigate these hurdles with the help of parents, private tutors, and teachers.

Many of the Asian American and Latinx young adults we interviewed pursued educational opportunities outside of their communities as well, but experienced a different set of challenges than those described by young whites. These individuals emphasized the importance of pursuing educational opportunities while highlighting the trade-offs that come with attending schools in different parts of the city. Camila, a Latina, 24, shared this sentiment. After receiving a scholarship to attend a private school, she began to feel more distant from her life in Pilsen: *"I would come to Pilsen and I could barely recognize people and it was horrible. I just completely disconnected from my community when I left to another high school. I had to leave my community to get a better education"* Similarly, one Chinese American, Amy, 25, shared the ways in which educational spaces outside of her neighborhood affected her sense of

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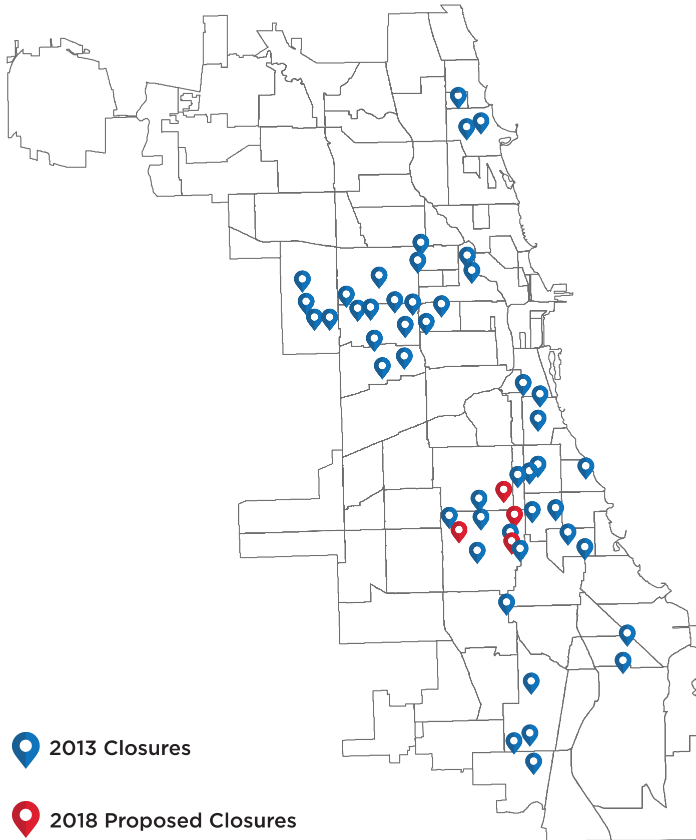
identity. *"I think when I was growing up and changing schools so much, I kind of wished I was at [a predominantly Asian American neighborhood school in Chinatown-Bridgeport] because I felt so not Asian ... I tried to push away my Chinese American identity. ... In fourth grade, I didn't speak Chinese. I just refused to be Chinese at*

FIGURE 7:



home for an entire year—stuff like that. There was stuff where I didn't want to be a 'typical Asian American."

Still others discussed logistical challenges that arise from attending a school outside of their neighborhood. Alma, a 28-year-old Latina, decided to leave her selective enrollment high school due to long commutes and went on to attend a charter school closer to home. *"When I went to Lane Tech, I went there for two years, and it was a great opportunity. Unfortunately, because of the distance from here to there, it was a lot for me. A little bit more than I could personally handle, so I changed schools to a charter school. That one was also a really great school. [There are] instructors there that I still connect with, that I still admire, and help me."* The experiences of individuals such as Camila, Amy, and Alma suggest that policymakers should be more attuned to the tradeoffs that come with attending school outside of one's neighborhood.[90]

School Closures

In May 2013, the six-person, Mayor-appointed Chicago Board of Education voted unanimously to follow the Mayor's and district's recommendation to close 47 elementary schools and one high school.[91] Like previous school closures, low-income communities of color on the South and West Sides of the city were disproportionately affected by this decision.[92] Parents, students, and teachers protested the closures, arguing that children should have access to quality public schools within their own neighborhood.[93]

In our conversations, we found that young adults across Chicago shared these sentiments. Young people in Pilsen, Chinatown-Bridgeport, and Englewood felt that school closures reflected a lack of concern for their communities from the city's leadership and from Mayor Emanuel in particular. White youth were also critical of the board's decision; however, they tended to discuss these policies in abstract terms, with many having avoided the negative consequences of school closures by enrolling in "choice schools."

Young Latinxs living in Pilsen tended to view the concentration of school closures as a testament to the lack of value Chicago's policymakers ascribe to their community. One Mexican American, Ricardo, 23, shared his reasoning regarding why Chicago's South and West Sides were most heavily affected by school closures: ***"I mean, racism, capitalism, greedy people, and politics in this particular city, because white students' educations are more valued than black and brown.*** *Their lives are more valued than us."* For young Latinos like Ricardo, school closures fuel distrust in government and heighten racial inequalities that exist across neighborhoods.

Similarly, young adults living in Chinatown-Bridgeport viewed school closures as a signal that city leaders did not value their community. While many Asian Americans felt that they benefited from access to the various magnet programs promoted by CPS, they were frustrated by the lack of a neighborhood high school. Like young Latinxs in Pilsen, young Asian Americans scrutinized the city's leadership. One Chinese American, Jason, 24, identified the role of the mayor specifically: *"I have heard a lot of things about Rahm Emanuel. He's been pushing education [funding] towards richer neighborhoods as opposed to poorer neighborhoods. And because of that, the poor neighborhoods are losing schools where the richer neighborhoods are gaining schools. ... That causes a disparity. ... If you don't have an option for school, how are you supposed to be able to get an education?"*

"I mean racism, capitalism, greedy people, and politics in this particular city because white students' educations are more valued than black and brown."

In Englewood, young African Americans were also frustrated by the city's shortsightedness regarding school closures, and they discussed the effects of these policies on their daily lives. In particular, they described the ways in which the consolidation of schools across neighborhood boundaries heightened the potential for violence on commutes to and from school and during the school day. One young man, David, 22, described this trend: *"In high school they made five schools into one. That made it worse. That's why I couldn't really go to school. I almost had to drop out because they put them all together. People from different neighborhoods had to come together and every day it was shootings. We had to fight every day. That actually makes it worse in Chicago, putting all the schools inside of one. I just seen four months ago*

they were trying to do the same thing to some schools in Englewood, put them all inside one." While city leaders frequently suggest that consolidating limited resources into fewer schools increases opportunities for students,[94] young people in Englewood see these policies as short-sighted and a source of violence.

Young white Chicagoans living throughout the North Side discussed school closures from a more distant perspective. White Chicago transplants tended to be aware of school closures through their consumption of news or from their educational experiences, but they did not experience the repercussions first-hand. They were critical of closing schools in the abstract, yet were quick to invoke the language of the city's policymakers to rationalize these policies. These discussions focused more on the academic performance of students and the district's limited resources, rather than systemic inequality. One white Chicagoan, Shane, 24, exemplified this fact: *"**I think that closing the schools—I don't wanna say needed to be done, but like, if you're got very few students in the schools, you can't effectively run a school that's built for 2,000 people with 400 people.** It's just not providing the quality of education that you need ... you need to provide that quality of education for those neighborhood schools."* Unlike young people of color in the city, school closures were less personal for the young white Chicagoans we interviewed. These conversations highlight the ways in which race, ethnicity, and neighborhood boundaries shape how individuals experience and evaluate public policy decisions.

What Does a Better Education Look Like?

Young people in the city are well aware of the challenges related to educational access in Chicago. While millennials are frequently cast as apathetic observers of local politics, our conversations suggested the opposite: young Chicagoans possess nuanced and highly developed ideas regarding how to improve the city's educational conditions. Many of these individuals experienced the effects of school closures and the day-to-day realities of inequitable access to educational resources first-hand, and they are uniquely equipped to provide useful insights to the city's education policymakers. While their experiences were different across neighborhoods, young Chicagoans shared remarkably similar visions for education in the city.

> **"I think that closing the schools—I don't wanna say needed to be done, but like, if you're got very few students in the schools, you can't effectively run a school that's built for 2000 people with 400 people."**

They desire a more equitable funding structure that reinvests in communities most affected by school closures, well-trained and culturally aware teachers that are committed to the well-being of their students, and educational resources that better prepare young people for college and the workforce.

Developing a more equitable school funding structure was the policy intervention suggested most often by young adults across the city. Young Chicagoans felt that a larger portion of the city's resources should be allocated to fund public schools, and that these resources should be distributed in a way that takes preexisting inequalities into account. Alexa, a 20-year-old African American resident of Albany Park articulated her vision for educational funding, *"I think schools just need equal funding. I know they say they all get the same amount. But then at Payton—we called it 'Friends of Payton'—there were outside people who sponsored us, who gave us more money. People are more willing to do that for North Side schools.* ***I just feel like all schools need equal attention. People need to be more compassionate about people who grew up with not much.*** *I don't know what people can do to improve education in the city, really, other than actually caring about people and providing them what they need."* Manuela, a 22-year-old Latina in Pilsen shared a similar sentiment: *"I received a great education from Walter Payton College Prep, but I don't think that there's equity in the education. I don't think other high schools [received] the same amount of funding, or attention, or access that selective-enrollment schools receive, specifically Walter Payton. So even though I think I received an awesome education, I am supercritical about its existence."* Alexa and Manuela articulated a theme shared by many young Chicagoans: educational funding must be more equitable across neighborhoods.

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Young Chicagoans also placed a great deal of value in teachers who are invested in the well-being of their students. These educators are culturally aware, build meaningful relationships with their students, create engaging lessons, and are connected to the communities in which they teach. Robert, a 20-year-old Asian American resident of Chinatown-Bridgeport highlighted the role of cultural competence in building meaningful relationships with his teachers: *"I took this class [that explored cultures like mine]. And that's how I formed a bond with [my*

teacher], and we just kept talking about all things [related to our culture] because she is actually from the neighborhood that I grew up in, too. And so, I really resonated with her story and she resonated with mine." Similarly, Destiny, a 25-year-old African American resident of Englewood, explained the impact of teachers who are able to make learning accessible for their students. *"My [high school math] teacher. He made learning, like, put a whole 'nother twist to it. He made it interesting. He made it fun. That's a way of him catching our attention, you know.* ***If a lot of teachers made learning fun and made things a little bit more interesting for the younger crowd, I think education would be a little bit better."*** How can Chicago Public Schools identify teachers of this kind? Across neighborhoods, young people stressed that recruitment strategies must prioritize hiring teachers who are properly trained, engaging, and care about the communities in which they teach. However, they also stressed that teachers of this kind require fair compensation. The district must commit to investing in educational professionals who are passionate about educating young people all across Chicago.

Finally, young people across the city stressed that more resources must be allocated to free after-school programs that better address the unique needs of the district's students. This is especially important to take into consideration in light of state and federal-level budget cuts that have decreased funding to youth programs across Chicago.[95] While young adults across neighborhoods discussed the importance of extracurricular activities, such as visual and performing arts and athletics, young people of color tended to emphasize the need for additional academic support. In Pilsen and in Chinatown-Bridgeport, for example, a number of respondents suggested that more must be done to invest in after school programs that provide resources such as tutors and additional support for English-language learners. Gabriella, a 22-year-old Latina and resident of Pilsen, captured a sentiment shared by many of the bilingual participants with whom we spoke: *"I know going into third grade, I really didn't know any English at all, and my parents had to go hunting for a private tutor to teach me English, like the vowels, everything that had to be learned. I was a third grader, not knowing anything, I was confused during the whole class … I'm like, 'I'm here. Yes, I'm here, but I don't know anything you're saying, anything.' And there would be times where I come*

"If a lot of teachers made learning fun and made things a little bit more interesting for the younger crowd, I think education would be a little bit better."

home crying because I didn't understand anything." Given the unique educational challenges that emerge across Chicago's neighborhoods, increased access to after-school programs that provide additional support offers one avenue for investing in the future of the city's young people.

Conclusions and Policy Recommendations

Neighborhoods play a formative role in shaping the educational opportunities available to young adults in Chicago's educational landscape. The white Chicago natives in our study overwhelmingly attended exclusive, selective enrollment, and private schools located on the city's North Side. As a result, these young people discussed the challenges facing Chicago Public Schools from a more abstract perspective, having benefited from funding policies that prioritize mixed or majority-white, North Side schools.[96] While some of the young people of color we interviewed also gained access to exclusive schools, they tended to discuss the ways in which pursuing educational opportunities outside of their neighborhoods created a sense of distance between them and the communities in which they grew up. Still, many young people of color, especially African Americans in Englewood, experienced the day-to-day challenges of educational disinvestment in Chicago's neighborhood schools first-hand.
Faced with geographical isolation and limited educational mobility, young people of color, and Black youth in particular, possessed a deep sense of distrust in local government and a sense that city leadership does not care about communities of color. While many of our interviews with young adults about education in Chicago were critical in nature, interviewees also pushed back against the notion that young people are apathetic about local politics. Young adults across Chicago articulated tangible policy solutions that should be considered by city leadership in order to address the educational challenges facing the city. These solutions include reinvesting in neighborhood schools; adopting a more equitable approach to funding that takes preexisting racial, ethnic, and geographic inequalities into account; developing a pipeline to recruit and retain well-trained, culturally aware, and passionate educators who are invested in Chicago; and increasing access to free after-school programs that allow young people to explore their interests, obtain additional academic support, and prepare for college.

RECOMMENDED CITATION

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