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Education a driving force in the 2015 Chicago mayoral election

In the ongoing race for Chicago mayor, education has proved to be one of the decisive factors between incumbent Mayor Rahm Emanuel and his top opponent, Jesus “Chuy” Garcia. The two candidates have differed significantly on this platform – Emanuel has come under fire for his handling of Chicago Public Schools but emphasized the need for continued progress, while Garcia has called for drastic changes to the city’s education system.

Emanuel failed to secure his re-election on Feb. 24, receiving only 46 percent of the vote in the mayoral primary, while Garcia obtained 34 percent. Now, Emanuel will face off against Garcia in a runoff on April 7. This is the first time an incumbent mayor has been forced into a runoff in 20 years.

The result was “a very big deal” and likely came as a surprise to many, according to WGN-TV political analyst Paul Lisnek. Lisnek cited several factors that pointed to Emanuel winning the primary election, such as low voter turnout, which favors the incumbent, and Emanuel’s control of the airwaves with a heavily-financed campaign. However, controversies over education issues left Emanuel vulnerable to Garcia’s progressive platform.

Emanuel’s campaign website states that “the Chicago Public Schools are making steady progress” but that “there is much work left to go.” Among his published goals on chicagotogether.org are growing graduation rates and test scores, increasing college preparatory courses for CPS students, doubling down on science, technology, engineering and math education and ensuring that families have access to quality neighborhood high school programs.

Meanwhile, Garcia denounces “the so-called ‘reforms’ offered by Mayor Emanuel” on his campaign website, chicagoforchuy.com. His plans for the city’s education system include moving toward an elected school board, increasing availability of bilingual and dual-language programs and significantly reducing class size. According to the site, Garcia also wants to limit

standardized testing to the “barest legal minimum,” stating that there’s more to a good education than being on par with grade level math and reading, such as “reasoning, critical thinking, creativity, and human relationships.”

In fact, Garcia’s education platform was key in turning him into a serious contender for mayor. Garcia has been involved with the city for more than 30 years, starting out as the Water Commissioner and Alderman of the 22nd Ward under Mayor Harold Washington in the 1980s. He went on to become an Illinois State Senator in 1993 and is currently the Cook County Commissioner for the 7th District. However, according to Lisnek, Garcia was initially not the most recognizable candidate going in to the election – this changed when the Chicago Teachers Union (CTU) threw its support behind him.

Many Chicagoans initially expected CTU President Karen Lewis to challenge Emanuel and run for mayor. However, in October 2014, Lewis was hospitalized due to a brain tumor and never entered the race due to health concerns. After “a lot of discussion and debate,” the CTU then chose to back Garcia, said Jennifer Johnson, the CTU Quest Center Special Projects Facilitator for Teacher Evaluation.

“Our union felt that Chuy has had a real record of progressive politics and has run a really community-based campaign,” Johnson said. “His views align with our views, and we don’t think he would make decisions as unilaterally as Rahm without input from the union, from students and from parents.”

Johnson added that the CTU’s “overwhelming” support for Garcia was valuable given its role as “a trusted voice in education” for Chicago citizens, and Lisnek agreed.

“At the time Lewis bowed out of the race, it was when her popularity was high,” Lisnek said. “She hadn’t really had a lot of challenges at that point, and so she was able to bring that

level of confidence and positive attitude people had toward her and transfer it over to Chuy. It just kind of catapulted him into that second place position.”

Despite his lack of teacher support, Emanuel touted his many successes with the Chicago Public Schools system leading up to the primary election. Under his watch, graduation rates increased by 11 percent and hit a record 69.4 percent for the 2013-2014 school year – he plans to get that number up to 85 percent by 2019. Attendance rates and average composite ACT scores have also been on the rise. Additionally, Emanuel drew attention to his increase of access to pre-kindergarten and kindergarten, as well as his lengthening of the school day and school year.

However, Lisnek pointed out that an election “is all about perception” and that despite Emanuel’s variety of statistics, “the feeling people have in their gut is that success is low.” Johnson added that the statistics were misrepresentative of actual progress under Emanuel and that policies like the extended school day exemplified the mayor’s “incredibly heavy-handed” approach to education in the city.

Emanuel’s overall lengthening of instructional time in 2012 added about 2.5 years of education through graduation for a child beginning in kindergarten. Daily class time increased by 52 minutes in elementary schools and 46 minutes in high schools. The school year was also extended 10 days from 170 to the American standard of 180. However, these extensions did not include extra pay or resources for teachers and staff, leaving many of them upset by the change and culminating in a heated contract dispute.

This was just one of several educational controversies that riddled Emanuel’s time as mayor and have come back to haunt him in his fight for another term. Perhaps the most salient disagreement for voters surrounds Emanuel’s closing of nearly 50 public schools in 2013, which

displaced nearly 12,000 CPS students. Shortly after the closings, Emanuel pushed to open seven new charter schools, which are publicly funded but privately run.

Mike Milstein, a recent University of Illinois at Chicago graduate and Regional Field Director for Emanuel's campaign, said Emanuel's decision to close the schools was "tough, but necessary. Despite the backlash Emanuel knew he was going to get, he stuck to his guns."

Milstein also spoke of how it made sense to close some of the schools due to Chicago's decreasing population, which has led to many neighborhood schools being underfunded and under capacity.

However, Johnson took issue with the closings, saying they were not an appropriate educational policy and did not help solve CPS' budget problems. She also criticized the mayor's turn to charter schools as a reflection of his tendency toward privatization.

"The growth of the charter schools has created a sabotage situation where kids are being funneled into this kind of shadow system of education," Johnson said. "Then CPS will say the neighborhood schools are underutilized or under enrolled. They're setting the district up for failure."

This view is at the heart of Garcia's education policy, which calls for a halt to both school closings and the continued growth of charters at the expense of the city's public schools. Katy Hogan, Northeast Regional Field Director for Garcia's campaign, said Garcia's stance reflects his greater degree of sensitivity to Chicago's neighborhoods.

Regardless of whether the decision was right or wrong, Lisnek said the school closings have ultimately become one of the biggest sources of anger at the mayor and largely influenced voters in the primary.

“I think that especially the African-American community is most angry at Emanuel because he closed those schools pretty much in minority areas,” Lisnek said. “It’s easy for Garcia or anybody else to come in and be the hero and say he’s going to turn everything around.”

Garcia has also gained popularity due to his stance on the school board, yet another topic on which he and Emanuel do not see eye-to-eye. CPS is currently the only school district in the state with an appointed school board, which has allowed Emanuel to hand pick board members. Garcia believes that citizens have a constitutional right to elect and vows to “restore democracy with an elected school board,” according to his campaign website.

“The members of the board are now business folks and finance folks, and Chuy recognizes that the people who are affected by CPS policies need to have a voice in policy,” Johnson said.

Despite the appeal of Garcia’s educational promises, some remain skeptical of whether he’ll be able to produce results, especially given CPS’ current budget deficit of more than \$876 million.

“The Emanuel supporters have talked about all the budget problems in the city and the fact that Garcia has offered no budget on anything. We don’t know how he’s going to pay for anything,” Lisnek said. “I don’t think you’d ever see Garcia reopen any of those schools. I also sort of wonder how fast Garcia will move to make the school board elected and give up some of his own power and influence if he becomes mayor.”

Garcia’s pledge to reduce standardized testing also brings up questions, as it may conflict with state-mandated requirements. In Illinois, students are required to take both the Illinois Standard Achievement Test and the Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and

Careers test. Student growth on these measures must be incorporated into evaluations of teacher performance.

“If you’re going to measure student growth, it needs to be done with actually valid measures that help teachers make actual changes,” Johnson said. “It would be a tough thing for Chuy to tackle, but I think there are channels he could utilize. It would be hard for the state board to deny a substantial amount of funding to a district that serves such a large number of students in poverty and has a documented lack of resources.”

With the race whittled down to two candidates from a field of five, and many questions still unanswered, it’s clear that both Emanuel and Garcia can no longer get away with relying on succinct talking points. Delving deeper into the issues, particularly those related to education, will be key in winning over voters before the runoff.

“In the primary, you only had time to ask everybody one question because you had to let five people speak. The issues always got sidestepped,” Lisnek said. “Now they don’t get to just say, ‘Hey, look, I gave you kindergarten,’ and then move on. We need to say, ‘Excuse me, we have time to ask the question you didn’t answer.’ It’s time to push it.”

According to a Chicago Tribune poll taken on March 6, both Emanuel and Garcia have gained votes since the Feb. 24 primary election. Emanuel has maintained a double-digit lead, with 51 percent to Garcia’s 37 percent. 11 percent of respondents remain undecided.