

Reader Profile

I am writing to Sean Harden, the President of the Chicago Board of Education. Mr. Harden has spent a large part of his career working to help develop communities that have been neglected. As President, Mr. Harden wants to establish a comprehensive plan to address the district's structural budget deficits while avoiding staff layoffs, cuts to instructional and enrichment programs, and cuts to schools. He has also stated his intent to investigate the problems of declining enrollment and underutilization of buildings. Mr. Harden is interested in ensuring optimal efficiency within Chicago Public Schools and frequently discusses the trade-offs of various policy options. He has a direct and results-oriented style and prefers solutions that have been rigorously reviewed and speak to multiple stakeholder interests. Mr. Harden does not have children himself, so parent-based appeals may not be effective.

POLICY MEMORANDUM

TO: Sean Harden, President, Chicago Board of Education

FROM: Eliana Nowlis, Analyst, The University of Chicago

SUBJECT: Maximizing Efficiency in CPS Building Utilization: Alternatives to School Closures

Executive Summary

Chicago Public Schools (CPS) needs a solution to vacant and underutilized school buildings that does not involve disrupting communities through school closures. Instead, the Chicago Board of Education should pursue solutions that center community needs as well as student outcomes: allowing charter schools to use vacant building space and moving to consolidate underenrolled schools rather than close them.

Background

Chicago's student population has been declining for decades and fell 19 percent between 2013 and 2023, leaving 58 percent of CPS schools underutilized, some with utilizations as drastic as 3 percent (United States Census Bureau 2023; Chicago Public Schools "Facility Standards"). As a result, CPS has closed 169 schools since 2002, including 50 in 2013 (Lutton et al. 2018; Karp et al. 2023). Of these 50 schools, 16 (32 percent) remain in the district's possession, despite efforts to sell them (FitzPatrick et al. 2023). Almost all the schools closed were in neighborhoods that have historically been racially and economically segregated and passed over for development opportunities (FitzPatrick et al. 2023; Briscoe 2020).

Key Findings

Maintaining underutilized and vacant schools is expensive for the district. CPS spends about \$12,500 per student, on average, at high schools with over 1,500 students compared to \$32,000 per student at high schools with fewer than 250 students (Issa et al. 2023). In one extreme example of underutilization, CPS spent \$93,000 per student at Frederick Douglass Academy High School in 2024 (Illinois State Board of Education 2025). CPS is also losing money to vacant school buildings. The district has spent over \$7 million on the basic maintenance, repairs, and security necessary at school buildings closed in 2013 that it still owns (Haeberle et al. 2025). With an over \$9 billion debt and yearly funding deficit, CPS simply cannot afford to maintain vacant buildings (Chicago Public Schools "Debt Management;" Chicago Sun-Times and WBEZ 2025).

School closures are deeply disruptive to students, teachers, and the surrounding communities, and are often met with fierce opposition (Karp et al. 2023). These closures have occurred disproportionately in black neighborhoods and have contributed to feelings of powerlessness and social instability that may have led to black flight from the city (Lutton et al. 2018). Among census tracts with a majority black population, tracts in which a school closed in 2013 lost 9.2 percent of their residents between 2013 and 2018, compared to a 3.2 percent population decline in tracts where schools did not close (Karp et al. 2023). Fewer residents leave neighborhood schools increasingly underenrolled, perpetuating the cycle of underutilization, school closures, and black flight.

One group that could benefit from the use of vacant school buildings is charter schools, which are currently banned from occupying them. This restriction has resulted in the district paying for new charter school buildings in close proximity to vacant district-owned buildings that it must still pay to maintain. In fact, 17 charter schools are located within one mile of one or more vacant school buildings.¹

There is no law or official policy that prohibits charter schools from occupying empty buildings. The district self-imposed this restriction in 2013, when these schools were closed, to address concern over school privatization raised largely by the Chicago Teacher's Union (CTU) (Chicago Public Schools "School Repurposing;" CTU Communications 2012). The CTU claims that charter schools are poorly managed, underperforming, and anti-union, but there are several reasons to question the accuracy of these claims (Chicago Teacher's Union 2025). Charter schools in Chicago must renew their contracts every one to five years, which includes academic, financial, and operational reviews that hold them to high managerial and performance standards (Chicago Board of Education 2024). Moreover, charter schools in Chicago lead to better outcomes for their students, on average, than their traditional public school peers.² Additionally, although it is not required, one third of Chicago's charter schools are unionized (Chicago Teacher's Union "Teachers and Staff at Charter Schools;" Illinois Network of Charter Schools).

¹ See Figure 1. This analysis appended data from multiple sources (Chicago Data Portal; Chicago Public Schools "Property List;" Chicago Public Schools "School Repurposing;" Chicago Public Schools "Facility Standards").

² One study found that students who attended a charter high school in Chicago have an 11 percent higher probability of enrolling in college within six years than their traditional public-school peers (Booker et al. 2014). Another found that students in charter high schools had higher rates of attendance, higher test scores, higher rates of four-year college enrollment, and higher rates of enrollment in more selective colleges (Gwynne et al. 2017).

Consolidating underenrolled schools into shared facilities, rather than closing them, may be less disruptive to communities and still decrease the number of buildings the district must maintain. For example, in 2019 CPS opened Englewood STEM High School, which consolidated students from four underenrolled schools in the neighborhood. This tactic was met with positive community feedback and excitement from students, compared to the response to school closures (Kunichoff 2019; Issa 2019; Issa et al. 2025).

Chicago has multiple opportunities for this type of consolidation. 56 charter schools (46 percent of all charter schools in Chicago) are within half a mile of an underutilized public school. Additionally, there are at least 30 instances of three or more underutilized traditional public schools existing within a one-mile radius of each other.³

Recommendations

To improve the district's financial situation while reducing the harm to communities that school closures cause, the Board of Education should:

1. Allow charter schools to move into vacant school buildings: Because this is an issue of status quo rather than legality, a public awareness campaign to highlight the cost to taxpayers of vacant schools and the solutions available would be effective to hold your fellow district representatives responsible, especially as the school board transitions to be a fully elected body (Koumpilova 2025). The campaign should preempt pushback from the CTU by highlighting the positive outcomes at charter schools, the strict oversight that they are subject to, and the ability of their teachers to unionize.
2. Consolidate underenrolled schools into one building rather than close them: To make consolidation appealing to communities, highlight that the resources offered at individual schools would still be available at the consolidated school, and that larger schools would offer students more opportunities. For taxpayers, especially since consolidation has significant up-front costs, emphasize long-term savings from eliminating unused space and the positive impact consolidating schools (rather than closing them) has on neighborhood population retention and future school utilization rates.

³ See Figure 2. These analyses appended data from multiple sources (Chiago Data Portal; Chicago Public Schools "Property List;" Chicago Public Schools "Facility Standards").

Figure 1: Charter Schools Within One Mile of a Vacant CPS Owned School Building

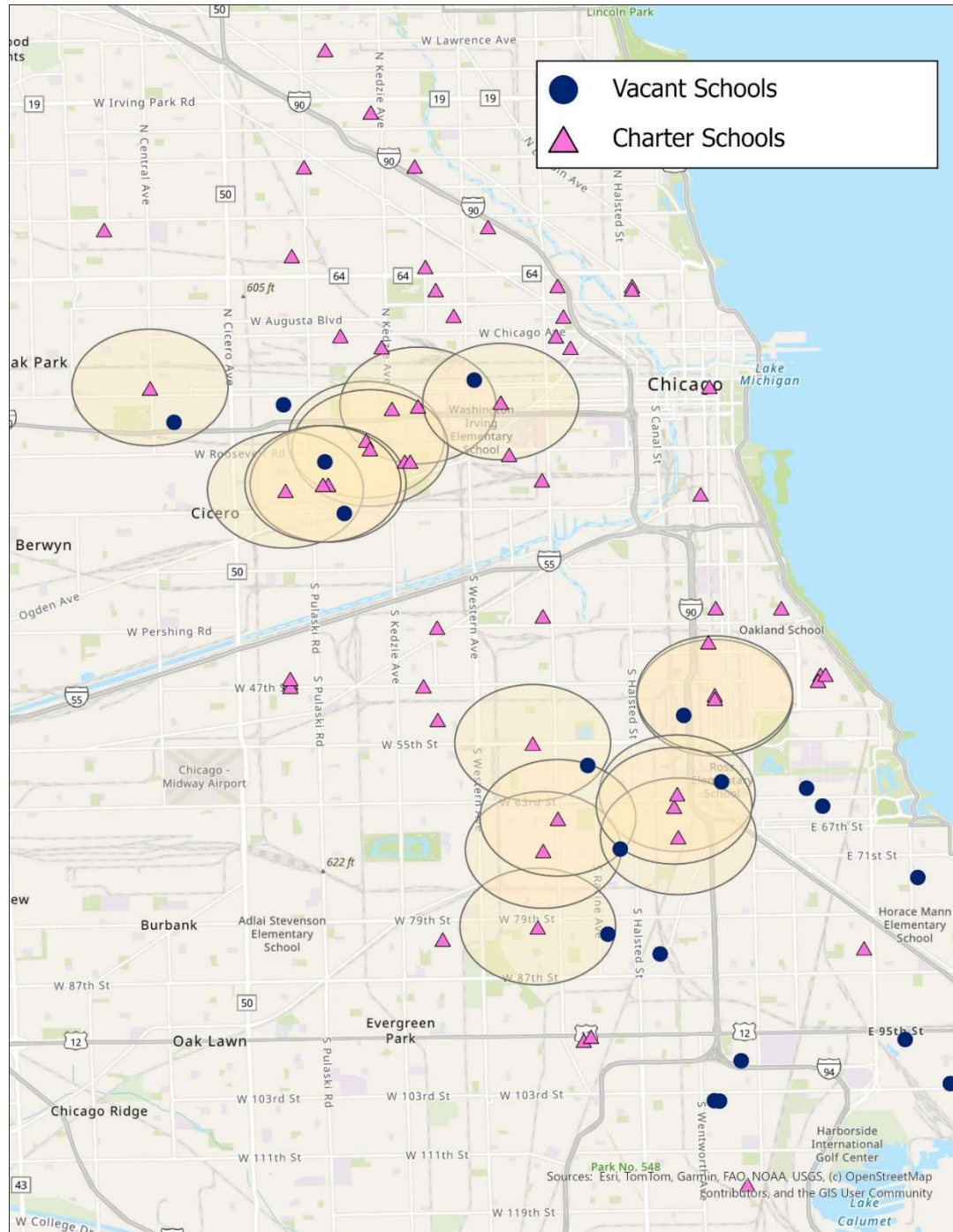
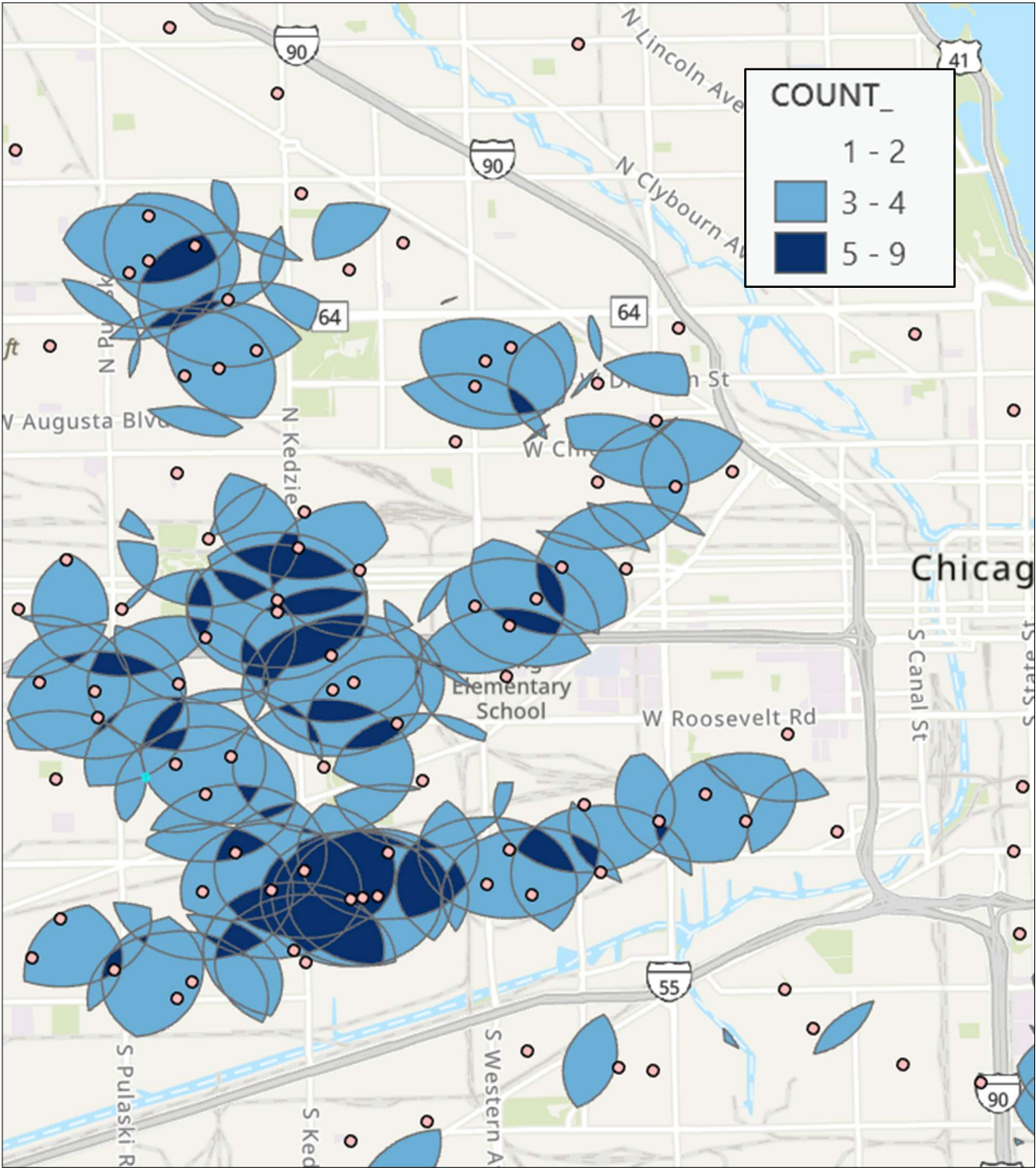


Figure 2: Number of Underutilized Traditional Public Schools Within a One Mile Radius



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