FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE JUNE 24, 2014

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CHICAGO EDUCATIONAL FACILITIES TASK FORCE RELEASES NEW REPORT:
“Go Back to the Drawing Boards” on Flawed Master Plan; More Reforms Needed to Oversee, Curb School Actions

(Chicago) – Today the Illinois General Assembly’s “Chicago Educational Facilities Task Force” (the CEFTF) sent its annual report to state legislative leaders, Mayor Emanuel, and the Chicago Board of Education. By state law, the CEFTF must issue an annual Report assessing CPS’ implementation of state requirements enacted in 2011 – that require long-range planning for Chicago’s public school facilities and govern how CPS carries out “School Actions” – Closings, Consolidations, Phase-Outs, Co-Locations, and Attendance Area boundary changes. “As the CEFTF’s Co-Chair, I directed our working committees to put together this analysis,” explained Representative Cynthia Soto; “It’s our responsibility to let policy makers and the public know whether CPS is making better and more equitable decisions. Based on all the public input and our research over the past 2 years, despite some progress CPS still has a long way to go to fulfill the promise of the 2011 reforms.”

AMONG THE CEFTF REPORT’S KEY FINDINGS:

- While CPS generally met the 2011 law’s technical requirements and deadlines, the 10-Year Educational Facilities Master Plan (EFMP) is deeply flawed, lacked broad public input, and wasn’t completed until after CPS closed 49 neighborhood public schools.
- While CPS justified closing 49 schools in 2013 due to an “under-utilization crisis” – too many classrooms and schools for its declining student enrollment – the school district opened 33 new charter schools with 23,368 slots since 2011.
  - Even though the Mayor and CPS say there’s unmet “demand” for more Charters, students uprooted from their neighborhood public schools by CPS’ School Actions and Closings are not “choosing” charters: After the 2012 CPS School Actions only 6.2% of impacted children moved to charters; after the 2013 mass Closings even fewer – 4.8% of impacted children – enrolled in charters.
- Even though CPS had never systematically evaluated the student-level impacts of past School Actions and School Closings, tens of thousands of children were impacted in 2012-2013.
  - Over 21,000 children were directly impacted by CPS’ 2012 and 2013 School Actions and Closings--11,729 in 2013 alone. CPS does not “count” the students already at the Welcoming Schools that absorb displaced students as “directly impacted”. CPS is just beginning to track how students and Welcoming Schools are faring, but there are no Board policies in place to ensure rigorous annual evaluations.
  - 52% of students who stayed in CPS after the 2013 Closings are now attending schools on academic probation, while roughly 25% went to somewhat higher-performing schools this year. (more . . .)
CPS' strategy of closing and restructuring schools may be contributing to the overall decline in CPS' student enrollment.

- CPS' total enrollment declined from 403,000 (2013 school year) to 400,000 this school year. The number of children who didn’t return to CPS after last year's mass closings is equivalent to 29% of the drop in CPS enrollment since 2013: CPS' own data show that after the 2013 Closings, 871 (7.4%) of all directly impacted elementary-aged students no longer attend any CPS school: 549 left the District, 322 are unaccounted for. After the 2012 and 2013 rounds of CPS School Actions, more than 1,200 students no longer attend any CPS school.

- The 2013 School Closings cost taxpayers over $263 Million:
  - $30.2 million to empty and shutter the closed schools, and redistribute or warehouse the contents.
  - $78 million for Instructional and Programmatic Support to Welcoming Schools.
  - $155 million for facility upgrades to repair and equip Welcoming Schools.
  - Additionally, CPS had already spent $196 million to upgrade the school buildings that the district closed in 2013.

The 2011 STATE REFORM LAW HAS HAD SOME POSITIVE IMPACTS

- CPS took new steps in 2013 to support students' transitions to new schools.
  - CPS expanded its “Safe Passage” program and provided some students with transportation.
  - For the first time ever, CPS gave discretionary “School Transition” funding to “Welcoming Schools” to ease students’ transitions, and created “Transition Teams” to craft more detailed School Transition Plans over the Summer of 2013. The law requires School Transition Plans, and the CEFTF advocated for support for receiving schools.

- While CPS’ 10-Year Plan is deeply flawed and falls far short of being a “true” plan compared to national best practices seen in other school districts’ plans, CPS’ current EFMP at least provides a starting point for dialogue with the public about the future of Chicago's public schools.

ADDITIONAL REFORMS in STATE LAW and CPS POLICIES ARE NEEDED

- to ensure more cost-effective, more equitable investment in Chicago's public schools, and that all of our students are guaranteed a place in a quality school. CPS needs input from all stakeholders in the critical decisions about how many and what kinds of schools Chicago's neighborhoods will have in the future:
  - **CPS' 10-Year Master Plan needs a major overhaul.** By 2015, CPS should be required to re-write the Plan and revamp its controversial “Space Utilization” formula – based on greatly expanded public input, detailed analysis of future neighborhood housing and redevelopment trends, and an honest debate over the future role of charters in the district.
  - **In an era when principals', teachers' and students' performance is constantly measured and scrutinized, the outcomes of CPS’s decisions must also be evaluated.** CPS should be required to rigorously evaluate student-level impacts of its past and recent School Actions, Closings, Turnarounds, and Charter expansion-- before undertaking any more of them – to see if and how and which students are actually benefitting.
  - **CPS should be required to give a full, detailed accounting of the “costs” and “savings” of the 2013 School Closings.**
  - While CPS has disclosed more information on facilities and capital spending online, for there to be real transparency, CPS should distribute user-friendly reports at schools, with an annual school-to-school comparison of facility improvement needs and priorities.
  - **CPS’ plans for scores of now-vacant school buildings should be decided by an inclusive community planning process.** Any revenues generated by selling public school buildings should be reinvested in the neediest communities’ schools.
  - The State of Illinois needs to increase its investment in all our public schools, and find more revenue to help pay for school facility modernization and new construction. The State also needs to be more transparent about the details of state funding for school facility improvements.
  - **State law needs to define Turnarounds, Grade Restructuring, all Attendance Area Boundary Changes, Charter expansions and Major Curriculum Restructurings as “School Actions”.** All of these sweeping decisions fall outside the current law – even though thousands of Chicago’s public school students are being impacted.

The CEFTF’s Master Planning Committee Chair Cecile Carroll concluded, “The future of all our schools belongs to all of us. The collective knowledge of parents, communities and partners in educating our children can produce a better and more equitable blueprint for the future of Chicago’s public schools. While CPS has taken some steps in a positive direction, we must keep working until all stakeholders have a chance to contribute to the long-term vision for our children’s education and all of our communities’ schools.”

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