



# **Illinois African Americans For Equitable Redistricting**

## **Public Comments To The Illinois House Executive Committee Regarding the Creation Of the New Chicago Elected Representative School Board Districts April 24, 2023**

The following remarks are written pursuant to our oral presentation to the Illinois House Executive Committee on April 24, 2023.

### **Introduction**

First of all, we thank the members of the Illinois House Executive Committee for your role in bringing the idea of an elected school board in Chicago to reality.

My name is Valerie Leonard. Over the years, I have worked on a number of issues that have impacted my home community of North Lawndale and other disinvested communities around the city. Through my involvement with groups like the Lawndale Alliance and PACE, I helped to advocate for the creation of Chicago Educational Governance Task Force to study the feasibility of an elected representative school board in Chicago back in 2012. During this time, I have also worked with community groups to put an advisory referendum on the ballot in the 24<sup>th</sup> Ward for an elected school board. The measure passed overwhelmingly in every precinct, with results ranging from about 87% to 98%. As the co-founder of Illinois African Americans for Equitable Redistricting (IAAFER), I worked with other African American leaders and multi-cultural groups to advocate for redistricting proposals that would optimize our ability to elect candidates of choice. I am also the Founder of Nonprofit Utopia, LLC, which created the ideal community for leaders who want to start, manage and scale nonprofits. As we work with organizations to build their leadership and organizational capacity, we also provide training and coaching to help them develop policy advocacy campaigns so they can better advocate for their clients and communities.

I am here today on behalf of Illinois African Americans for Equitable Redistricting (IAAFER). IAAFER is an ad hoc group of Black leaders across various sectors that came together in 2020 to ensure that our most recent redistricting process was implemented taking into account issues of concern to Black people around the State.

We have read Public Act 102-0177, HB2908 in its entirety, and have noted the transition of the Chicago Board of Education from a 7 member board that is currently appointed by the Mayor of the City of Chicago, to a board of education that will be fully elected by 2026. The legislation calls for 10 electoral districts for the 2024 elections with 2 representatives each. The Mayor will select the President and 1 representative from each of the 10 districts for the 2024 election cycle. There will be 20 electoral districts established for the 2026 elections, with 1 representative each. The President of the Board of Education will run at large, and will be elected by Chicago voters.

The legislation also calls for the creation of the Chicago Board of Education Non-Citizen Advisory Board with A Chicago Board of Education Diversity Advisory Board to provide noncitizen students with maximum opportunity for success during their elementary and secondary education experience.

### **Our Ask**

Given that the enabling legislation for the Chicago Elected Representative Elected School Board addresses governance issues, in addition to election operations, we respectfully request the following:

1. **Create a standing African American Affairs Committee of the Board of Education to prioritize problems that are unique to African American children and their families.** The committee would interface with other Board committees, CPS and local stakeholders to improve academic outcomes for Black children and create an environment for CPS and its schools that is welcoming to parents and community stakeholders. The Board Committee would be chaired and co-chaired by members of the Board of Education, with advisory members who may be selected from the community, Local School Councils, Parent Advisory Councils, the faith community, the business sector, the civic sector, local universities, etc. This structure would not impact the size of the Board of Education or provide an undue expense to implement.

**Rationale:** The Chicago Public Schools population is nearly a third Black, and our children are suffering from entrenched problems that have only been exacerbated by closing 50 schools in 2013 and shutting down from the COVID-19 pandemic from 2020-2021. Black children, as a group have suffered significant learning loss, trauma, isolation and reduction in social and emotional supports, economic loss and health and safety concerns. Here are some very stark examples:

- a. In 2021, 80% of Black children graduated from high school in 5 years, as compared to 85% of Hispanic children; 91% of White children and 92% of Asian children. (Block Club Chicago, 2021)
- b. African Americans comprised 36% of Chicago Public Schools but accounted for up to 61% of the 19,799 school suspensions in 2021. (Julian Johnson, Esq., 2021) Today, Black children only comprise 29% of the CPS population.(CPS 2023)
- c. African American children accounted for 63% of the 2,244 school referrals to police. Eighty-three percent (83%) of the detainees in the Cook County Juvenile Detention Center are Black. It costs \$4,397 per year to educate a child in CPS (Julian Johnson, Esq., 2021) and \$28,196 per year to detain them in the Cook County Juvenile Detention Center (National Juvenile Justice Network 2011).
- d. Between March 8<sup>th</sup> and March 12, 2021, a daily average of 89% of White students showed up to in-person classes, compared with daily averages of 77% for Latino students and 60% for Black students during that same period. Asian students had a daily in-person attendance average of 83%. (Matt Masterson, WTTW, 2021)

- e. Approximately 88% of school actions (ie, school closings, turnarounds, removing principals, etc.) have occurred at predominantly African American Schools. (CTU, 2013) These actions alone have disrupted student learning and further destabilized Black communities that have endured decades of disinvestment.
- f. A WBEZ investigative report has found that since the pandemic, the need for mental health services has increased, particularly for students from very low income families, many of whom are Black. The state is failing to ensure thousands of children get any follow-up help after mental assessments, let alone the type of intensive behavioral health support many need. Senator Lightford has called for public hearings and the creation of a 15-member task force to better understand the problems explore the issue, (including operational, programmatic and financial issues surrounding the program). (Sarah Karp, WBEZ, 2023)

These problems persist despite the fact that there are board committees to address the needs of all CPS students and their families. We need a standing committee that is laser focused on moving the needle on the issues that keep Black students from meeting their potential. We have attached a proposed governance structure, including the new African American Affairs Committee.

**2. Adopt our mapping proposal, which was developed taking into account the following criteria:**

- a. Each district must be compact, contiguous and substantially equal in population and consistent with the Illinois Voting Rights Act, pursuant to Public Act 102-0177.
- b. Communities of interest will be kept intact to the fullest extent possible
- c. School Board electoral districts will be aligned with other political and educational districts to the fullest extent possible. This will allow community residents and local leaders to coordinate policy advocacy efforts that may require interaction with multiple layers of government.

To this end, our map includes 10 districts, each comprised of 5 contiguous wards. To the extent possible, wards are clustered together by their majority/plurality racial composition. Our map includes 4 majority/plurality Black districts, 3 majority/plurality Latino districts and 3 majority/plurality White districts. Because ward boundaries were vetted for compliance with the VRA during the most recent redistricting process, we expect the proposed map to pass legal muster. We have attached 2 scenarios for your review.

While we believe this map can pass legal muster, there are limitations. For example, Chicago is 29% Black, 29% Latino, 33% White and 8% Asian and others. The CPS population is approximately 36% Black; 47% Latino, 11.0% White and 6% Asian and others. Our methodology resulted in a map with 40% of the districts that are majority/plurality Black; 30% that are majority/plurality Latino and 30% that are majority/plurality White. At the root of this challenge is the fact that the law requires that elected representative school board boundaries be apportioned based on the Census and that districts must be of approximately equal size. This is a situation that is worth further exploration with the Legislature and expert demographers and legal counsel.

## **Need for Greater Transparency**

We could not help but notice that, for some reason, the Illinois Legislature has password protected the overwhelming majority of public meetings that concerns the State's business, including the video of the April 24<sup>th</sup> hearing on the ERSB boundaries. When I raised the issue with staff, thankfully, I was provided a copy of the recording and was told that I will get a copy of the transcript when it's ready. While we are happy with the level of responsiveness to our request, we believe that, in the true spirit of transparency, the video to the hearing, and every video of public hearings conducted by our State Legislators, should free and clear of any password protections. Our Legislature is conducting the State's business, and the State of Illinois citizens, who are footing the bill for the live streaming and hosting of the videos, should be able to access these videos. Password protection effectively locks us out of our own business. We respectfully request that the Illinois Legislature stop the practice

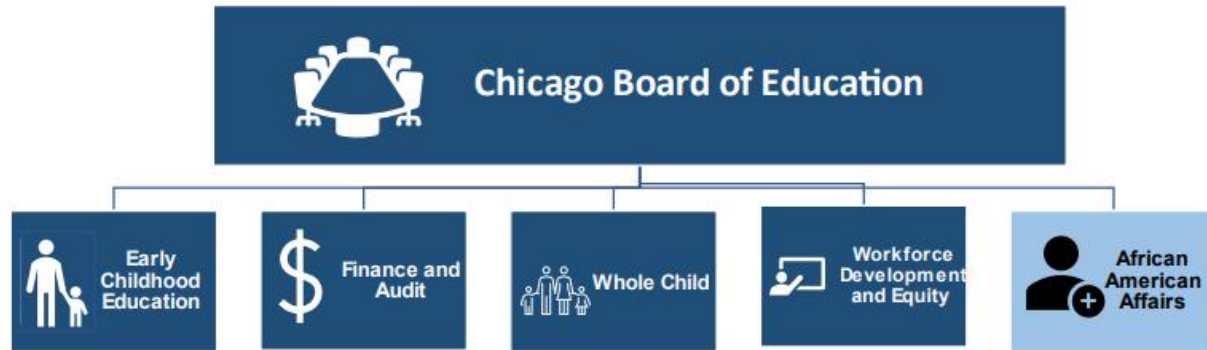
On a similar vein, we noticed that, although staff is collecting written comments on the ERSB, none have been posted for the public to view. It is very important to have public discourse on these issues. That includes having access to alternative mapping proposals and ideas presented by various members of the public and stakeholder groups. We respectfully request that you post all written comments and mapping proposals on the ILGA.gov site, as the Senate has done.

In closing, we thank you for your time and consideration. If you have any questions regarding this statement, please feel free to contact Valerie F. Leonard, Co-Founder, Illinois African Americans for Equitable Redistricting, at 773-571-3886 or [valeriefleonard@msn.com](mailto:valeriefleonard@msn.com). Our proposed board structure and mapping proposal are attached.

*Valerie F. Leonard*

Co-Founder  
Illinois African Americans for Equitable Redistricting

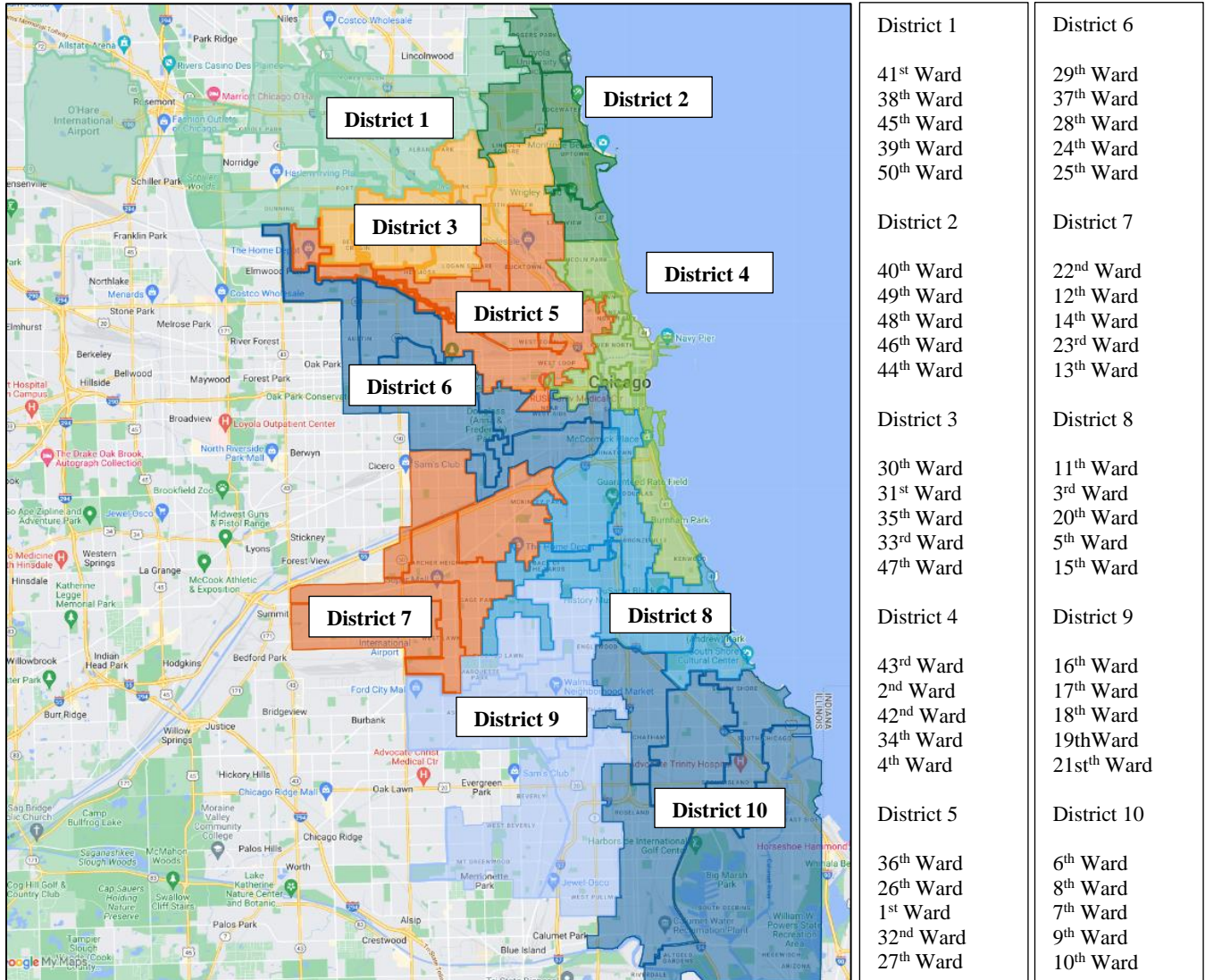
# Proposed Chicago Board of Education Structure





# Illinois African Americans For Equitable Redistricting

## Proposed Elected School Board Boundaries for Chicago Public Schools Alternative 1



Author: Valerie F. Leonard, Co-Founder, Illinois African Americans for Equitable Redistricting.  
Data Sources: City of Chicago Data Portal, Google My Maps

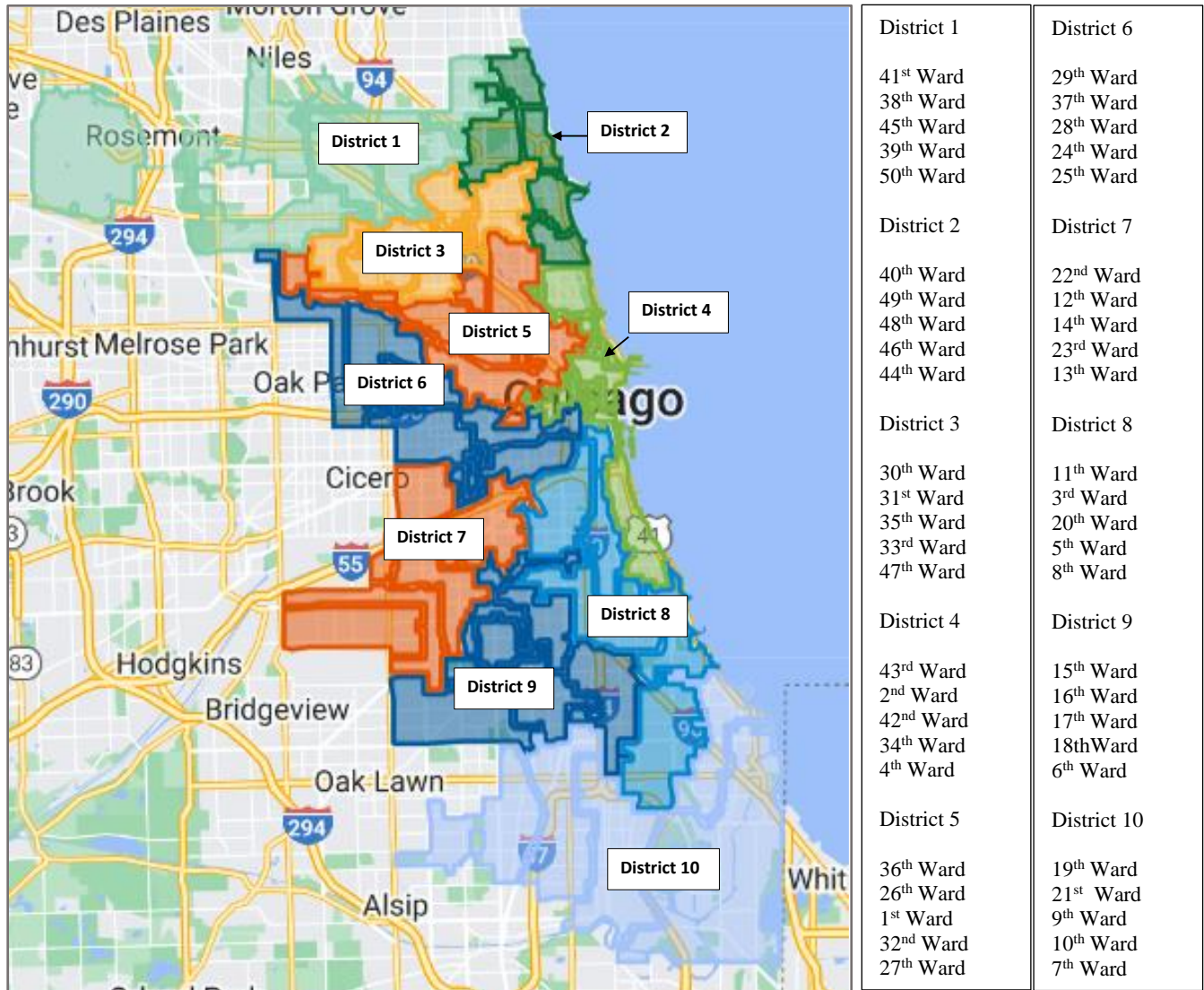
This map was drawn to align CPS Elected School Board districts with specific wards for greater accountability and coordination with members of the City Council while maintaining racial equity and balance. Ward boundaries were vetted for compliance with the VRA during the most recent redistricting process. Districts in blue were generally developed using boundaries for wards that are majority or plurality Black. Districts in orange or yellow were generally developed using boundaries for wards that are majority or plurality Latino. Districts in green were generally developed using boundaries for wards that are majority or plurality White. A link to the map on Google My Maps is found below.

<https://www.google.com/maps/d/edit?mid=1p6oaDMbREAjXzekNERRgdtLgJrHMySk&usp=sharing>



# Illinois African Americans For Equitable Redistricting

## Proposed Elected School Board Boundaries for Chicago Public Schools Alternative 2



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