

Written Statement of Dr. Janice K. Jackson
Chief Executive Officer of Chicago Public Schools
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Introduction

Chairman Sablan, Ranking Member Allen, and Members of the Committee, thank you for your invitation to participate in this hearing. My name is Dr. Janice K. Jackson, and I am the Chief Executive Officer of Chicago Public Schools (CPS), which is the third largest school district in the United States. Before assuming this role in 2018, I served as a CPS teacher, principal, network chief, and Chief Education Officer for this district. I was also a student in Chicago Public Schools from Head Start through high school graduation, and am now the parent of two children who attend CPS schools.

Chicago Public Schools serves 361,000 students in 644 schools, the majority of whom are children of color, and many of whom live in communities that are significantly impacted by violence. The purpose of my testimony is to explain the extent to which that violence, and the subsequent trauma it causes, is negatively impacting the children of Chicago, and share the steps CPS is taking to combat this effect, specifically through the use of social-emotional learning (SEL) and trauma-informed policies and programs.

Violence and Poverty in Chicago

Many of Chicago's students come from low-income families who are struggling under the weight of poverty. Research shows that children living in these situations are more likely to experience multiple traumas during their youth, and that this repeated exposure can lead to long-term developmental risks.

Studies of children living in poor, inner-city neighborhoods document extremely high rates of exposure to trauma. This exposure can include gang and drug activity, house fires, incarceration, the death of a family member, and violence in their communities.

In too many of Chicago's neighborhoods, that violence has become a fact of life. During the first half of 2016, Chicago logged more homicides than New York City and Los Angeles combined. The gun-related homicide rate for the city's African-American male population is 18 times greater than the national average, and homicide is now the number one killer of Chicago's youth.

A recent study by the Erickson Institute reported some startling statistics regarding our city's youngest children. According to this research, 60 percent of children under 5-years-old live in the Chicago communities where the vast majority of homicides—90 percent—are taking place. Many of these children are or will become our students, therefore the effects of this trauma must be addressed at the school level.

Impact of Trauma on Chicago's Youth

Repeated exposure to violence is distressingly common in several Chicago neighborhoods, and many of the victims are children. Research shows that this exposure can literally change the architecture, chemistry, and development of a child's brain, particularly when the trauma is not balanced by healthy relationships with adults.

Left untreated, trauma becomes a form of toxic stress in the minds of our children, leaving them at greater risk for behavior problems, poor mental health, drug and alcohol abuse, and unhealthy sexual behavior. They are also at a higher risk of committing violent crimes and becoming part of the juvenile justice system.

Not surprisingly, children repeatedly exposed to violence are also more likely to struggle in school. The effects of trauma on their education can include low grade point averages, decreased standardized test scores in reading and math, poor school attendance, increased suspensions and expulsions, and a decreased rate of high school graduation.

This is the fate of students exposed to trauma if that trauma is not addressed. Even those children who appear to be managing their trauma exposure successfully are at higher risk of chronic unemployment, depression, alcoholism, and heart and liver disease, among other physical and mental health challenges, once they reach adulthood.

Impact of Trauma on CPS Educators

CPS educators, counselors, and support staff who work with students exposed to trauma are also at risk of being traumatized themselves, both by hearing about what their students have experienced and by witnessing the negative effects of trauma on those children. Symptoms can include fatigue, anxiety, feelings of hopelessness about their work, and in the most severe cases, a diagnosis of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD).

This reaction by educators is known as Compassion Fatigue, and CPS is working to combat that phenomenon with trauma training that includes various pathways to self-care. This training helps our teachers learn to identify signs of secondary trauma, and gives them resources to help address how that trauma is impacting them physically and emotionally. We also recommend that our teachers and principals engage in the same kind of talking circles that are now common among CPS students. In addition to building positive school culture and climate, this method of communication can help build resiliency among our educators and buffer the effects of Compassion Fatigue.

CPS' Response to Trauma

Children are resilient, and that resiliency is what makes healing possible. This is why Chicago has prioritized SEL right alongside instruction in reading, science and math. SEL exercises those critical skills that help children direct thoughts, feelings, and actions in a way that leads to their sense of mastery and success. When implemented correctly, SEL supports can keep negative social forces from permanently harming the physical and mental health of our children. Simply put, it can serve as an antidote to the effects of trauma that are plaguing CPS students.

CPS is actively working to address the impact that exposure to trauma is having on our students and school communities. We are using a combination of safety initiatives, staff trainings, and SEL

learning supports to help students who have been exposed to trauma begin to heal and move toward a place where they can reach their full potential.

Safe Passage

Since 2009, the CPS Office of Safety and Security has partnered with community-based organizations to recruit people who will patrol designated routes in certain Chicago neighborhoods as students travel to and from school. People like Ricky Jones, who sees his job as more than keeping students safe. He believes it is about building positive relationships in his community, and about connecting with children who need the support and guidance of caring adults to help keep them on the right path.

Safe Passage began 10 years ago with 35 CPS schools and has grown to serve 80,000 children in 166 schools. There have been no serious incidents along Safe Passage routes involving a student while workers have been present, and attendance at schools with this program have experienced a significant boost. Additionally, according to an analysis of crime statistics by the Chicago Police Department, crime along Safe Passage routes during school hours has decreased by 32 percent since 2012.

Summer for Change

In 2019, CPS launched the first-ever Summer for Change (S4C) program for students at high risk of being impacted by violence. These youth had the opportunity to earn a stipend, participate in enrichment opportunities, and access mentoring and trauma-informed therapy during their summer break from school.

Two students who participated in S4C were Rodney and Kimyatta, both of whom live in a world where trust is scarce and anger is overly abundant. These youth describe their Chicago communities as places where “no one can be trusted, because everyone lies.” For these children, and others like them, trusting relationships with adults are extremely rare.

The S4C program gives these children that which they are missing—caring, trustworthy adults who they can truly open up to. Rodney and Kimyatta were successful in the program and have expressed their desire to continue with it throughout the school year if funding is available. Rodney has even expressed an interest in becoming a teacher, and I have pledged to help guide him through that process.

We also offered these students a \$200 per week stipend to attend this program. This was not charity. Rather, we acknowledged these children live lives without a safety net and could simply not afford to forsake the opportunity to earn a living. Children recruited for this program have the greatest need and are at the greatest risk of falling victim to the cycle of violence. Providing them with a financial incentive simply lowered the barrier to entry for them to access critically needed trauma-informed therapy and other positive outlets during their summer break.

Not one of the 430 students who participated in the 2019 S4C program was a victim of violence while in the program this summer. Our hope is that this program has contributed to an overall reduction of almost 50 percent in gun violence victimization among students enrolled in our Options Schools compared to the summer of 2018.

Staff Trainings on Trauma

Since 2016, the CPS Office of Social and Emotional Learning has provided training to our educators and community members on creating trauma-sensitive schools. Participants learned about the prevalence and impact of trauma on Chicago's youth and created plans for the implementation of trauma-informed practices and policies. Elements of this training have since been folded into the district's trainings on school climate.

A cadre of CPS social workers, counselors, and other support staff also offer a whole-school training on trauma awareness. Educators who have gone through this training learn how to better recognize the signs of trauma in their students and develop effective strategies for supporting their needs. These educators also learn how working with students who have been exposed to trauma can impact their own lives, and develop a self-care plan to reduce their stress. Since 2016, more than 1,000 CPS educators have completed this whole-school trauma training.

Move to Restorative Discipline Practices

One intervention that has shown promise with students affected by trauma is our move toward restorative discipline practices. These practices are focused on building positive relationships among youth and strengthening the bond between educators and their students. This method has moved CPS away from punitive, exclusionary practices like suspension and expulsion and focused instead on working with students in school to identify the root causes of negative behavior, one of which can be exposure to trauma. This change has contributed to a sharp decline in the number of expulsions and out-of-school suspensions issued by CPS and has helped us achieve the lowest drop-out rate in district history.

Both the CPS Student Code of Conduct and the Administrators Guidelines for Effective Discipline have also been updated to reflect the fact that exposure to trauma may impact a student's brain development, learning, and behaviors. The language in these policies now identifies trauma as a possible root cause of negative behaviors and reflects our commitment to a trauma-sensitive approach to student discipline.

SEL Interventions for Students Exposed to Trauma

The CPS Office of Social and Emotional Learning provides training in targeted trauma interventions that are implemented by school counselors, social workers, and psychologists. These include:

SPARCS (Structured Psychotherapy for Adolescents Responding to Chronic Stress) – A skill-building program for students in grades 6-12 who have been exposed to trauma and may be living with chronic stress.

Bounce Back – A program for young learners in grades K-5 who have been exposed to trauma and who need help managing anxiety and coping with post-traumatic stress.

CBITS (Cognitive Behavior Intervention for Trauma in Schools) – A group intervention to help reduce symptoms of depression, anxiety, and PTSD in students in grades 3-12 who have been exposed to trauma

Lumity – A pilot program that helps students in high-risk situations prepare for success after high school.

These and other SEL programs are designed to help children learn to control their emotions and take responsibility for their behavior. Take Kayla, who is growing up without a mother or any other female adult in her household. This has caused her to become isolated and has resulted in Kayla getting into many conflicts with her peers while at school. Her participation in the SPARCS program has allowed Kayla to begin turning things around. She is learning to talk through her emotions and decision-making processes, and is developing coping skills that will allow her to better manage stressful situations. Kayla has now become a strong advocate for the SPARCS program, as the interventions provided have helped her learn to slow down her reactions and better manage situations that before would have seen her immediately lashing out.

Then there is Rayshawn, who was working to complete high school while caring for himself and his younger brother. Their mother is incarcerated and the boys have moved frequently, struggling to make ends meet while keeping up with school. The stress of this situation caused Rayshawn to turn to substances, so while he did graduate from high school, it was difficult for him to get a job.

We ensured Rayshawn enrolled in the Lumity program so that he could work through his issues and build the skills to be successful in the workplace. Rayshawn also entered into a treatment program for substance abuse and has now landed a permanent job with a software application company.

Impact of Federal Funding on Supporting Students Exposed to Trauma

Chicago has been fortunate to receive federal grant support to help us manage the needs of children exposed to trauma. One such grant has provided us with the Healing Trauma Together (HTT) program for the past three years.

This program targets high school students living in communities that are particularly prone to violence. The goals are to facilitate recovery from trauma, improve mental health, and create safe and supportive learning environments for students. Interventions include the training of staff and parents to recognize the signs and symptoms of trauma along with individualized and group therapy for students struggling with chronic stress.

The CPS HTT grant expires on September 30, 2019, however we have received a grant of \$100,000 from the Michael Reese Trust to continue this work in the coming school year. This grant will allow us to keep the SPARCS program going in our 10 HTT high schools as well as implement it in an additional 10 schools. It will also make it possible for our district to work with more trauma leaders on developing resources and tools for our teachers to use in their classrooms.

I am grateful for federally-funded opportunities like the HTT program. The impact on our students is significant, particularly as they continue to cope with the reality of violence in their communities. To keep this vitally-important work going, CPS and other school districts around the country will need additional federal funding for programs like this one—programs that allow our professionals to identify those students whose lives have been upended by trauma and provide them with the supports they need to heal.

Conclusion

Trauma is a complex community health issue that requires an integrated solution. Resources must be leveraged from all stakeholders, including schools, community partners, and government. There is a serious need for increased federal funding to combat this epidemic. Only when our country's leaders unite behind this cause can the range and quality of treatment services for students exposed to trauma fully meet their needs and put them on the road to recovery and a productive, fulfilling life.