

School reform too important to rush

February 25, 2008

Chicago Schools CEO Arne Duncan is right. He is on a mission to radically reinvent the city's weakest public schools by closing them down, changing everything about them, and reopening them as new, improved schools. His Renaissance 2010 plan, launched in 2004, has been painful, ugly and messy, but necessary.

When we're talking about kid's lives, tinkering along the edges no longer cuts it.

But being right, and doing it right, are two different things.

On Wednesday, the Chicago Board of Education will vote on Duncan's latest, massive round of 19 proposed closures and overhauls. This plan, announced just a month ago, is far too ambitious and rushed for a fair vote Wednesday. Delaying the vote a month won't hurt anyone and will, we hope, give CPS a better chance to get it right.

We fear that CPS — never to be mistaken for a nimble bureaucracy — is taking on far more than it can handle.

Duncan's plan includes a "turnaround" this summer for eight failing schools. This is seven more turnarounds in a single year than CPS has tried before. These kids would return to the same building next fall, but everything else would have changed, including the principal, most or all teachers and the curriculum. An additional 11 schools with low enrollment would be closed, consolidated or phased out starting in June.

Over the last month, hundreds of affected parents, teachers and kids have raised crucial, valid concerns about these plans, including some school closures that are questionable. But it's not clear if CPS has been listening.

The school system held 19 hearings in February. But the official hearing reports, as well as transcripts of hundreds of impassioned pleas from parents and students to save their schools and teachers, didn't get to CPS board members — the ones casting the votes — until Friday or today.

Board members have been briefed by CPS staff, but didn't go to the hearings. It certainly might have helped them to hear the pain of a proposed school closure firsthand.

"My teachers taught me right from wrong. . . . They don't care about a paycheck, only about a student's outcome," said Sherese Quarles, a student at one of three small schools at Orr High School. Duncan wants to merge the three into one, minus all or nearly all the existing teachers.

All but five of the hearings were held downtown, often during snowstorms and in the afternoon, making it difficult for parents to attend (and forcing many to shell out exorbitant parking fees). One parent likened his school's hearing to "the functional equivalent of spitting in the wind." On Friday, the Chicago Teachers Union leadership told us they considered the hearings a "sham."

"We're not saying no to change," said Matt Jacob, who works for the union's parent organization, the American Federation of Teachers. "Some may be good choices to close but some aren't. . . . Let's slow this train down and think this through."

Duncan says CPS has listened as never before. Besides the hearings, he said, he and his staff have hosted countless meetings and conversations with parents, school staffs and local school council members.

And he says he's responding. Before Wednesday, Duncan plans to lay out adjustments to nearly all 19 school closing proposals — changes inspired by what he and his staff have heard. Examples include phasing out one school rather than closing it abruptly and giving kids at closing schools more seats at new, replacement schools.

But Duncan says he won't bend on his core principles: these schools need radical change.

"No one cared about these schools for years . . . who was saying 'speed up the rate of change? Nobody," he said. "Then you try to do something better, and they say 'slow down.' "

But slowing down a bit — briefly, wisely — is a different matter. Get it right, Mr. Duncan. Do it right.