

5/5/2024

Dear Mayor Johnson,

We are writing to bring to your attention a critical situation at Pulaski International School caused by the new CPS budget formula. The Regional Gifted Center for English Learners (RGCEL) program at Pulaski International School is a vital resource that provides underserved students with a unique opportunity to excel academically and reach their full potential. The new funding formula significantly disadvantages our school. More specifically, it threatens the future of our RGCEL program, a rare resource for gifted students from underserved communities in Chicago.

The new funding formula is meant to allocate staff and funding based on need in order to improve the quality of education for all students, especially those that are located farthest from opportunity. Pulaski International School is unique from a programming perspective as our school offers two distinct programs: the International Baccalaureate (IB) program and the RGCEL program. Our IB program is a neighborhood school that enrolls a majority of students from within the neighborhood boundaries. The RGCEL program attracts underserved and under-resourced students from Chicago's south and west sides, students who largely are those that are located farther from opportunity compared to the IB program. There are only three RGCEL programs throughout the entire district. The new CPS funding formula relies heavily on opportunity index and class size; this unfairly penalizes the high-needs population served by our gifted bilingual program by weighting it equally with the IB program. This ignores the unique challenges and support requirements of our RGCEL students.

Historically, CPS has acknowledged the need for specialized instruction for gifted learners, including smaller RGCEL class sizes. Our RGCEL program requires dedicated classrooms to maintain its effectiveness. However, the current funding model disincentivizes the RGCEL program by making Pulaski financially responsible for the current under-enrollment. This contradicts CPS' stated commitment to support high-quality, equitable programs for underserved students and creates an unsustainable future for the RGCEL program. Moreover, despite CPS Chief Executive Officer Pedro Martinez's statement on April 8th that "We [CPS] will not balance the budget on the backs of our students and our schools,"¹ this is precisely the situation unfolding at Pulaski.

¹ <https://www.cps.edu/media/community-updates/2024/april/school-budgets/>

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In recent years Pulaski's RGCEL has faced under-enrollment due to several factors that are outside the control of the school (i.e. poor marketing by CPS, lack of district-led recruitment efforts, few testing dates, testing format, lack of transportation etc.), leading to repeated budget shortfalls. Our dedicated community and school staff have tirelessly implemented creative solutions and measures to keep the program afloat. Last year, we finally saw a glimmer of hope when Chief Portfolio Officer Alfonso Carmona pledged a short term-funding strategy to hold us over for two years until a longer-term solution could be determined by OLCE (Office of Language and Cultural Education)/CPS. However, even this short term commitment will be rescinded as a result of the new budget formula, leaving us with a significant funding gap.

This week, we, Pulaski International School's Local School Council (LSC), overwhelmingly rejected the proposed budget in a critical emergency meeting. While we appreciate minor adjustments after the appeal process, the current funding allocation remains woefully inadequate. The proposed budget for 2024-2025 completely undermines the very principles of equity and high-quality education for underserved communities. We intuit that this is likely the first step towards dismantling our RGCEL program, despite the fact that it is specifically designed to create more opportunities and bridge divides between communities.

This funding shortfall comes at a particularly critical time. We are witnessing a positive shift in the RGCEL program's recruitment. This year, applications have doubled, and student acceptance rates have increased significantly thanks to the efforts of our new dedicated RGC coordinator. We are confident that, with the central office's continued support for the RGCEL program (i.e. funding sufficient faculty positions, maintaining a reasonable marketing budget, and a dedicated RGC coordinator) Pulaski will see continued growth and a stabilizing of enrollment. In addition to the expected growth from our current outreach, we see potential growth with the recent influx of Newcomers to Chicago and CPS schools. The RGCEL program is well-positioned to provide these students with the specialized instruction and support they need to thrive in a rigorous and engaging curriculum. The foundational mission and vision of CPS' RGCEL program has always been to support the learning needs of high-ability students whose primary language was one other than English. Pulaski is ready to provide this essential educational opportunity to those students, but we need the district to partner with us to continue providing this resource to our students. Without adequate funding, this opportunity is lost.

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Under the new funding formula, the crux of the issue is using a single Opportunity Index (“OI”) for the entire Pulaski population. Considering the RGCEL population on its own, we estimate the OI to be between 33-35, which is markedly different from Pulaski’s overall OI of 23. Utilizing an OI that accurately represents this population is aligned with the intentions of equity touted by the District. This simple and fair adjustment, coupled with the aforementioned enrollment growth we have already achieved for next year, will result in the granting of the 9 core teachers the program requires without requiring a multi-age classroom. We have been told this is not being done elsewhere in the district, but there is only one other school in the district (Greeley) with the same unique combination of programs. We believe that the RGCEL program should have a separate OI calculation to ensure that adequate funding and staffing is allocated to the program going forward.

Working together, we can find a solution that ensures both financial sustainability and continued educational excellence for Pulaski's RGCEL students and their families. We earnestly urge you to assist us in securing a vibrant and enriching educational experience for our RGCEL students, ensuring their access to excellence for years to come. Thank you for your time and consideration.

Sincerely,

Local School Council

Pulaski International School of Chicago

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