

# When challenges never let up:

School district leaders steer through hazards in Baltimore and Chicago

Paul Hill, Sarah McCann, Lydia Rainey, & Chelsea Waite

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In the face of financial, political, and capacity constraints, leaders within the Baltimore City Public School System and Chicago Public Schools are making progress toward closing post-pandemic gaps in student learning. They've had to choose among imperfect strategies while navigating significant and growing challenges. This has meant taking risks, following strategies they might not be able to sustain, and wading deeper into politics than they'd prefer. They've hit the limits of their own systems—and may need to search for new options and forge new collaborations with external partners to move forward.

## Key findings

The executive leadership teams serving Baltimore City Public School System and Chicago Public Schools are using several strategies to help their systems build back after the pandemic.

- To address uneven classroom instruction, **leaders are standardizing key elements of instructional cores and adding instructional staff across their systems, while maintaining some school-level flexibility.**
- To address rapid staff turnover and “newness” at all staffing levels, **leaders are supporting existing staff to become teachers and “building the bench” of new principals, while also promoting school leaders and administrators from within.**
- To address unprecedented student social-emotional needs, **leaders are spending federal pandemic-relief money (ESSER) and other supplements, while hoping to avoid cutting into funding for instruction.**
- To address new local political turbulence and financial strains, **leaders are insulating schools as much as possible by taking the political hits themselves and making concessions to demanding stakeholders.**
- Going forward, leaders in both districts will need to **confront continued enrollment declines, limited central office capacity, constrained teacher labor markets, changes in school boards, shifting local interests, and uncertain state-level financial support.**

The strong leadership modeled in both districts remains at the heart of moving forward, despite the fact they are straining against their capacities. While there may be nuanced differences, all leaders in maxed-out districts will have to search for new options and forge alliances with new partners within school boards, unions, and state-level governments.

## About this project and the American School District Panel

This project is part of the [American School District Panel \(ASDP\)](#), a research partnership between the RAND Corporation and the Center on Reinventing Public Education (CRPE) at Arizona State University's Mary Lou Fulton Teachers College. The panel also collaborates with other education organizations, including the Council of the Great City Schools and Kitamba. The ASDP is the first and only nationally representative sample of school district and charter management organization (CMO) leaders. Panel members participate in surveys and interviews to inform policy and monitor trends over time.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, we began conducting case studies of school districts' responses to staffing shortages, school closures and reopenings, and student learning loss. We have reported on the [various challenges](#) school districts confronted, but have shared relatively little about the solutions district leaders have pursued and how these interacted with trends in schools, the teacher workforce, families, and communities.

This report provides a partial remedy. During the 2023-24 school year, we conducted an in-depth study of the Baltimore City Public School System and Chicago Public Schools. We sought to understand the strategies district leaders employ to support schools, how these strategies work in practice, and the consequent challenges the leaders encounter. We selected these two districts because their superintendents had ambitious but different pandemic recovery plans that showed some early success. We conducted two rounds of interviews with superintendents (in both districts, the superintendents hold the title of CEO), other executive leaders, principals, and outside observers for a total of 37 interviews. We also reviewed numerous district reports and guidance, as well as television and print media coverage. We analyzed these data for cross-cutting themes. Though confident in what we learned about district strategies, we note that our data do not reflect the perspectives of parents, individual teachers, and local voters.

## Introduction

After the pandemic, K-12 leaders in big cities expected children to return to school needing individual attention. To help students catch up, leaders [hoped to provide](#) a combination of classroom teaching that continued to focus on key grade-level standards and intense personalization that emphasized tutoring and other catch-up help. Repeated school closures and spotty student and teacher attendance [derailed district leaders' original plans](#). By the end of the 2022-23 school year, most districts adopted a simpler approach: do all they could to support good, everyday teaching.

The [Baltimore City Public School System \(BCPSS\)](#) and [Chicago Public Schools \(CPS\)](#), two major urban school districts, made the strategic decision to “solidify the core” and pour substantial resources into improving classroom instruction for a few reasons: They observed that teaching desperately needed to be improved, they were deeply committed to ensuring the success of all their students, and they needed to respond to persistent pandemic-era learning losses. These systems maintain a clear vision that builds on past superintendents’ work and key constituent support. They hope that improvements in instruction will restore weakened loyalties among families, teachers, and communities, as well as reverse patterns of absenteeism, classroom disruption, and enrollment loss.

During the 2023-24 school year, we took a close look at the strategies executive leaders in these two systems used to confront the challenge of instructional improvement, and related challenges, such as:

- Supporting large numbers of new (and inexperienced) teachers and other staff,
- Reducing chronic absenteeism and supporting student mental health needs,
- Confronting continued enrollment declines, and
- Addressing the intrusion of new local political pressures.

We also tracked how these strategies interacted with realities beyond executives’ control, including trends in their communities, labor relations, and state and local politics. These challenges are not unique to BCPSS and CPS—but their approaches are instructive for other system leaders.

Early returns suggest these approaches have been, on average, steps in the right direction in terms of student achievement. Both have relied on strong leadership to make progress. However, as the year closes, the two districts are starting to bump up against factors beyond their control: limited central office capacity, serious shortages of teachers and other educators, uncertain state-level financial support, and continued enrollment declines. Leaders in both systems have had to choose among a limited set of possible strategies and continue managing emerging issues to preserve hard-won academic gains.

Like in other districts across the country, BCPSS and CPS strategies require more staff, capacity, and funding than they currently control. School districts are maxed out and can’t cope with the constellation of achievement, attendance, staffing, political, and financial challenges they face. In the words of one district leader, “We’re getting picked on and there’s no one to defend us. We just want to do our job.”

We conclude with recommendations for other districts facing similar dynamics. We recommend searching for new options, forming true partnerships with city and state governments, and collaborating with local universities and nonprofits to help educate all their children effectively. Other actors, including local school boards, teacher’s unions, foundations, and state governments must also find ways to help, not kneecap, local district leaders.

“We’re getting picked on and there’s no one to defend us. We just want to do our job.”

## Background: Factors shaping CPS and BCPSS decision-making

### MAINTAINING PROGRESS AND BOARD SUPPORT IN CHICAGO PUBLIC SCHOOLS

*Numbers to note: During the 2023-24 school year, Chicago Public Schools served 323,251 students across 634 schools, with an operating budget of \$8.49 billion.*

Since 2015, CPS, the nation’s fourth-largest school district, has faced numerous ups and downs. In 2017, a Stanford study identified the city’s schools as the fastest-improving large urban district in the country. Many attributed the results to school-level use of data and a strong belief that results depend on what happens within individual schools.

During the pandemic, the district responded to school leaders’ requests for additional support and increased staff. The pandemic interrupted but did not derail CPS’ winning streak. Despite problems with attendance and enrollment, the city’s schools **made real progress**, closing post-pandemic **learning gaps in reading** (however, student math scores remained lower than before the pandemic). High school graduation rates, which **increased** during and soon after the pandemic as many requirements were waived, **have remained high**. Nonetheless, district leaders were confounded by a number of limiting factors.

#### **Declining enrollment**

CPS **enrollment has declined** by ten percent since the 2019-20 school year due to a **combination of factors**: migration out of the city, declining birth rates, delayed entry into early grades, homeschooling, and student transfers to private and charter schools. Combining current enrollment losses with those experienced pre-pandemic, there were more than 156,000 unfilled seats in the 2023-24 school year, with space to serve over 450,000 students across grades K-12. More than 150 schools were **less than half full** and some had less than 20% of their enrollment capacity. A recent report identifies **five schools with less than 10% enrollment**. The difference between the number of enrolled students and available seats is expected to grow in the coming years.

#### **Roller coaster finances**

Enrollment and staffing trends, combined with the end of pandemic-era federal ESSER funds at the end of 2024, exacerbated gaps between spending obligations and district income. Despite enrollment losses, the **number of employees has grown** from nearly 37,000 in December 2018 to 43,500 in early 2024. State funding had increased markedly since 2019, but it did fall short of what CPS demanded in an unsuccessful 2022 “adequacy” lawsuit. The estimated deficit for fiscal year 2025 is **between \$400 - \$600 million**.

### *Hiring and developing large numbers of new staff*

The district has an active approach to educator talent development, but its pipeline is stressed. Rapid turnover at every level, including the central office, school support networks, and principalships, means that many people throughout the system are new to their jobs.

### *Vestiges of earlier reforms*

In trying to respond to post-pandemic realities, CPS leaders dealt with the remnants of past reform efforts. A 1990 reform giving elected local site councils important powers, including principal hiring, strengthened some schools while leaving others divided and inconsistent. A portfolio-style reform initiated in the early 2000s also reinforced a norm of school autonomy and created new charter schools and district-run schools of choice, which were popular with the Black middle class. These reforms weakened the central office in favor of smaller school support networks and gave schools control over staffing and spending decisions. District leaders think these initiatives don't meet current needs but hope to avoid backlash from their supporters and beneficiaries.

### *Maintaining school board, leadership, and public support*

Politics continues to create uncertainty for the district and schools. In 2023, city voters elected a new mayor, Brandon Johnson, a Black teachers' union organizer. Soon after Johnson took office, he faced a loss of total control of the city's school board. Starting in 2025, the Mayor will appoint 10 school board members, and 10 will be elected by neighborhood. In spring 2024, the elections were pending, and sources could only speculate about the new issues the elected school board would raise—and whether they would support district leadership. Even before the newly-elected group takes office, district leaders report being surprised by board actions to change district policies, such as deemphasizing schools of choice or eliminating school resource officers.

### *Looking ahead*

Chicago Public Schools are running deficits while pursuing aggressive staffing strategies to deal with student engagement and attendance, as well as placing renewed emphasis on quality curriculum. Principals, facing neighborhood unrest, student behavior issues, and teacher force instability, have asked for help, and the district, despite its own challenges, is trying to provide it. Having pledged not to close any district-run schools and mandated by the state to keep schools of choice open, the district is searching for ways to increase spending in the most stressed neighborhoods without undermining schools elsewhere.

CEO Pedro Martinez is bucking an established trend of superintendents getting replaced when new mayors take office. The sustainability of current leadership and strategy depends in part on whether the district, union, and mayor can succeed in their efforts to win major increases in state funding.

## CAPITALIZING ON LEADERSHIP LONGEVITY IN BALTIMORE CITY SCHOOLS

*Numbers to note: In the 2023-24 school year, BCPSS served 75,811 students across 162 schools with an operating budget of \$1.7 Billion.*

Baltimore City schools haven't had it easy in the past nine years. Starting with the riots after Freddie Gray's death in April 2015 and moving through the pandemic, the city has suffered disruption and severe rates of COVID-related illness and death.

Throughout these crises, BCPSS have worked to support families and keep children engaged in school. The district sought to make instruction more effective and rewarding by adopting new reading and mathematics curricula and adding literacy coaches to every school—and it plans to add math coaches. While student attendance and learning rates remain far too low in district leaders' eyes, BCPSS's [rate of improvement](#) on Maryland's most recent report card (based on test scores, college readings, and attendance) outpaced the rest of the state.

English Language Arts results now exceed pre-pandemic outcomes, with 25% of BCPS students in grades 3-8 proficient. Mathematics proficiency scores are low, with 9.1% of students in grades 3-8 proficient as measured by state exam scores.

The high school graduation rate is [increasing slightly](#), and the district reported that early-learning students demonstrated [equal or higher kindergarten readiness](#) compared to peers in other programs. Still, much like CPS, BCPSS leaders were limited by a number of factors.

### ***Absenteeism and declining enrollment***

BCPSS schools closed during the pandemic in March 2020 and didn't reopen until September 2022. Though the city schools offered online instruction, student engagement was spotty. It remains so, as 54.1% of students missed 10% or more of school days in the 2023-24 school year, though [recent chronic absenteeism rates](#) appear to have fallen slightly in 2024. Like many districts with declining enrollment, BCPSS also has an oversupply of schools. Though school closings have historically sparked opposition, in recent years, two pairs of under-enrolled schools have voluntarily merged to ensure key neighborhoods have at least one financially stable school.

### ***Record-breaking finances***

Currently, the district's [per-pupil funding](#) is the second highest in the state at \$21,094. Unlike other big city districts, BCPSS is not anticipating a spending cliff in 2024-25 because it avoided spending federal ESSER money on ongoing expenses and should receive an estimated \$146 million per year in new state [Kirwan Blueprint](#) funding, which allocates dollars to schools based on student need. At the same time, [uncertainty](#) about the state's ability to continue core education funding and BCPSS's [ability to qualify for it](#) raise questions about the district's funding stability.

### ***Continued staffing shortages***

Since the end of the pandemic, teacher staffing has continued to be a challenge, as 40% of all district teachers are new. Baltimore continues to compete with regional rivals when hiring, particularly DC and its Maryland and Virginia suburbs. The result, despite repeated efforts, is a challenge in maintaining talent in the schools and central office.

### *Vestiges of earlier reforms*

As BCPSS district leaders strive to cope with the city's many troubles, they also deal with vestiges of past reform efforts. The district has seen several reforms, including a widely-admired [strategy](#) initiated by Superintendent Andres Alonso from 2007 to 2013. Alonso's initiatives included enrollment-based funding to increase school freedom of action, family choice, and openness to new small schools including [charter schools](#). Long after he left, these policies remain, and principals continue to expect control of school budgets and hiring.

After Alonso's departure, the school board thought to replace his reforms with a new union contract that included [performance-based pay provisions](#) for teachers; these remain on the books but have been little used. The district also introduced school principal accountability: principals in low-performing schools that did not improve over multiple years could be replaced. These measures were put on hold during the pandemic but are slowly being reinstated in the 2023-24 school year.

### *Leadership longevity and maintaining school board public support*

A contentious mayoral campaign is highlighting sharp divisions in the city, and its implications for the schools are unpredictable. The school board, which has historically supported current CEO Sonja Santilese, spent months negotiating whether to offer her a new contract before signing a one-year extension in June 2024. Top district administrators expressed some apprehension about the future.

Though the Superintendent has enjoyed reliable support among parents and voters, low absolute levels of student performance (despite recent upticks) have exposed her to criticism from the right. Starting in 2017, a local Fox News station initiated a series called Project Baltimore that searches for stories that might embarrass both Baltimore County and Baltimore City Public School districts. Though some stories were minor and isolated, some reflected real problems (e.g., student fights). Another critical voice comes from a market-oriented think tank that [frequently calls for Santilese's resignation](#).

Without frequent polls on the subject, it is difficult to know how much public support remains for BCPSS and Santilese. Supporters of the Superintendent fear that negative media attention is seeping into schools and will eventually take its toll. But for the time being, district leaders are focusing on helping school leaders, improving instruction, and making the best use of available talent.

### *Looking ahead*

Baltimore Metro's economic, social, racial, and political problems inevitably end up on the district's doorstep. While an infusion of new state money from the Kirwan Blueprint could strengthen the school improvement efforts described below, it is unclear if the district can change school outcomes fast enough to maintain the necessary support from the city's political class, including the school board. Santilese's current one-year extension—much shorter than the local norm of four years—raises additional questions about how long her strong leadership will continue.



## Findings: BCPSS and CPS maxed out their available resources to implement pandemic recovery strategies

During the 2023-24 school year, we interviewed senior leaders in both BCPSS and CPS, not only about system-wide instructional improvement but also about how to support large numbers of new and inexperienced teachers, reduce continued chronic absenteeism, and address increasing student mental health needs—all while confronting new local political pressures. In the following sections, we describe the strategies leaders adopted to address these challenges. They understood that their strategies came with known issues and were actively trying to mitigate them while also addressing new issues as they arose. Each section describes a challenge each system faced and how leaders addressed it, as well as unresolved issues that leaders are still trying to manage.

### **FINDING 1: BCPSS and CPS are standardizing key elements of the instructional core while acknowledging the limits of what their central offices can provide**

During the pandemic, uneven instructional quality and requests for help from principals led central office leaders to question their districts' prior commitments to school autonomy. On school visits since the pandemic, leaders in both districts have seen firsthand that decentralization has led to big differences in instructional focus and coherence across schools. The CPS CEO summed it up: “[Our history with school-level autonomy] hasn't allowed us to be very systemic in terms of implementing these consistent practices and strategies.”

During and immediately after the pandemic, district leaders were flooded with requests for help from school principals. Many school principals were new to their jobs and overwhelmed. Schools needed help finding staff, reconnecting with children and families, responding to learning loss, and dealing with disruptions related to mental health. As the CPS CEO described, “Our principals said, ‘Me working as an individual school isn't working ... I need the system to come in and help me,’” which was “unheard of,” given a long history of decentralization and principal autonomy. Similarly, after BCPSS's central office began offering centralized services during the pandemic, one leader said, “We got feedback from most schools saying, ‘Actually, could you just continue to do this?’”

**“Our principals said, ‘Me working as an individual school isn't working ... I need the system to come in and help me.’”**

### **Strategies**

Leaders in both systems saw these requests from principals as windows of opportunity to centralize key elements of schools' education programs while allowing for some school-level flexibility. Both districts are now deliberately rebalancing toward more centralization of instruction through curriculum, assessments, and instructional coaches.

Both districts have introduced new central office measures designed to ensure all schools are using high-quality instructional materials (HQIMs) and approved diagnostic assessments (achievement tests and other measures of student need). In CPS, district leaders strongly suggest (but stop short of mandating) that elementary schools follow a district-created

framework called Skyline, which clarifies what should be taught to students at a given time of the year and provides instructional materials and related teacher instructions. A senior district leader explained, “We don’t impose this on everyone, as some schools are already following well-structured curricula. But when we see big inconsistencies within a school, we press them to use Skyline.” Another senior leader, citing their long history with decentralization and local control, noted, “Nothing gets mandated in Chicago.”

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In Baltimore, one district leader said, “It was a battle...but worth it” to get schools to adopt their new instructional materials. The central office focused on getting high-quality instructional material into schools with the highest percentages of novice staff, recognizing that it was a better application of effort than enforcing a change in every school, including those where veteran teachers were already getting results. One leader reported, “We gave some schools the opportunity to go ‘off the grid’... [if they] cover the whole cost themselves.” The effort has largely been successful, and the district is now focusing on aligning teacher professional development to the curricula. Central office leaders in Baltimore acknowledged that some schools and principals are simply “outliers,” achieving results that could be stunted by enforcing compliance with a district-wide standard approach. District leaders favor earned autonomy in cases like these. As one said, “It’s not worth the energy to pull back” a school getting results through a different formula, even if that formula isn’t replicable because it’s dependent on specific principals or teachers.

Leaders in both systems have succeeded in getting schools to use common diagnostic assessments. They then use these data to decide how to deploy resources and support staff. In CPS, these assessments have not been mandated—schools can select their own assessments—but district leaders said that more than 90% of schools have begun using the common diagnostic assessments offered.

Both CPS and BCPSS are trying to balance the benefits of school-level decision-making with central office standardization by allowing schools that meet predetermined criteria to opt out of the preferred curricula, tests, or coaching. As the CPS CEO said, the central office defines the elements of what’s required, “sort of like a recipe.” The recipe helps define the boundaries of what is “strategically sound” and “research-based.” But schools can make certain adjustments within those parameters: “You might be baking one type of cake, [and] you might be baking a different type of cake.” The district’s Skyline curriculum is not required if a school shows it uses other HQIMs that meet the district’s criteria. BCPSS’s CEO said the district is “still working through kind of what’s worth controlling for and what’s not”—too much control could squash local innovation but too little could perpetuate uneven instructional quality.

CPS and BCPSS are also betting that more instructional support staff coordinated by their central offices will boost instructional quality and drive more standardized instructional practice. In Baltimore, the district responded to inconsistent instruction by providing coaches designated to help teachers and school leaders improve reading. The program was so successful principals have asked for the program to be replicated] in math. In CPS, each regional school support network houses a team of interventionists who are deployed to schools to work directly with teachers. The district also built up a tutoring corps of 700 tutors early in the pandemic.

### *Unresolved issues*

In both districts, recentralizing important curriculum and instruction decisions relies on a key assumption: that the central office has instructional expertise otherwise lacking within the schools. However, leaders in both systems report that their systems may have reached the limit of support the central office can currently provide to schools for a few reasons. First, central office capacity issues are a key barrier—both districts have vacancies in key positions, which is causing work to slow. Second, in BCPSS, turf disagreements between central office departments distract from instructional improvement. Third, not all schools may find additional central support helpful. “What I still firmly believe from the decentralization era is that central offices need to judge their effectiveness by how well schools feel like their presence is useful or supportive,” said one BCPSS leader. Similarly, in CPS, a senior leader told us there’s nothing more they can centralize, in part because schools wouldn’t find additional help useful.

### **FINDING 2: BCPSS and CPS are dealing with staff “newness” at all levels through bench-building and promoting from within**

In both BCPSS and CPS (like districts across the country), teachers, principals, and central office administrators switched jobs or schools/districts, retired, sought jobs in new sectors, or dropped out of the labor market entirely following the pandemic. Schools and districts have had to work around vacancies, including during the school year when new hiring is difficult.

ESSER and grant funds allowed the creation of new staff positions, like classroom interventionists and paraprofessionals. Shifts to greater instructional centralization in both cities meant both central offices had to hire large numbers of instructional support staff. A district leader in Chicago noted, “We’ve added interventionists, we’ve added lead coaches, we’ve added counselors and social workers, we’ve added tutors ... The downside of that is the supply of teachers can’t keep up with the demand [of] the district. And so we have more vacancies than we’ve ever had. And those are disproportionately in the highest-need schools because we’re in a decentralized system.”

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The result, despite desperately hard work on the part of incumbent administrators and teachers, has been disruption and “newness” at every level, from schools up to the executive levels of the central office. As a leader in CPS described, “What we’re finding is that when there is such newness at multiple levels, you don’t have that historical knowledge. And so people are making meaning, [meeting] people, learning systems while we are also doing the big work of supporting schools ... They’re able to work through those things, but it’s just new.” Educator turnover stressed every part of the district. Even when districts succeeded in keeping classrooms operating and key leadership positions filled, many rookie teachers, principals, and administrators struggled to learn their jobs and cope with unprecedented challenges.

### Strategies

Both districts have strategies to support existing staff to become teachers and “build the bench” of new principals. Both have partnerships with several local teacher preparation programs and new teacher mentorship opportunities designed to attract and retain new teachers. Leaders in both systems were similarly optimistic about programs to support instructional assistants in earning teaching certificates. As one BCPSS leader explained, “They know the kids, they don’t balk at training, they actually want the training, and they already know how schools run, and they understand those pieces. So we are hoping to really broaden that stream of folks.” In CPS, a leader said, “What we realized immediately was that this is an exceptional diversity strategy for us because some huge percentage of our paraprofessionals are Black or Latino ... and they are good bet for retention for us because if you’ve been a special ed classroom assistant for six years in one of our schools, you know what, you’re getting the work ... and have deep connections to the community.”

Both systems have robust principal-pipeline programs as well. The superintendent in BCPSS told us, “We had no principal bench two or three years ago... so now we actually do have a pipeline... We’re not perfect in it, but the capacity doesn’t keep me up at night anymore. Year two or three, I was like, ‘Oh God, do we even have the people to do this?’ I don’t [have] to ask that anymore.” This leader went on to describe how they moved the pipeline program out of the overtaxed HR department and into the Equity Office because they wanted to approach the development of principals with an equity frame—and because that department had more capacity to grow the program.

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One way the districts are filling leadership vacancies—and trying to circumvent some of this newness—is by promoting from within. They hope individuals already working in the system can learn their new jobs quickly. This strategy follows a long-established preference: as one CPS district leader said, “Chicago likes [its] own people. That’s just the culture of the city ... When we have had top leadership rise through the ranks, there’s just a respect for that in this city.” Both districts also emphasized the importance of preparing individuals in deputy roles to succeed the chief or executive who might get promoted or leave the district.

### Unresolved issues

Promoting from within has also created turnover and vacancies as effective teachers and leaders move up—what one BCPSS district leader called a “double-edged sword.” When principal supervisors and strong principals are promoted to higher positions, they leave vacancies in their wake. Similarly, instructional coaches and other central office administrator positions offer attractive pay packages and working conditions, pulling effective teachers out of their schools altogether.

Executive leaders in both systems are aware of these tradeoffs. As a BCPSS leader explained, “We’ve tried to balance it because if you stand in the way of employees who are really ready

to do their next thing and block them from being able to move to a central office role, you lose them to something else. And at the same time, we don't want to be pulling people from schools.”

In particular, principal supervision roles have been a revolving door in both districts. All the principals we spoke to reported that their districts have had multiple principal supervisors post-COVID. One CPS principal described, “We've had three network chiefs since the pandemic, and ... all of them have been elevated to higher positions ...

The pipeline continues to be tapped to fill these network chief positions.”

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Larger numbers of staff in schools also exacerbated another related issue: some schools are under-enrolled. Leaders in both systems recognized that some schools had become very small and expensive on a per-pupil basis. BCPSS hoped to support the most challenged schools with new principals and coaching for teachers—or to follow the lead of principals in under-enrolled schools who had initiated consolidating their campuses into a single financially viable school. In CPS, district leaders sought to abandon pupil-based funding (where a fixed dollar amount follows every child to the school they attend and the school pays salaries and other costs from this money) in favor of staff-based funding (where every school is fully staffed according to a district-set model, and the district underwrites the cost). They also promised extra teachers and support staff to under-enrolled schools.

### **FINDING 3: BCPSS and CPS are using ESSER to support student SEL needs—while also trying to prevent raids on resources needed for instruction**

Coming out of the pandemic, educators at every level of the Chicago and Baltimore school systems were acutely aware of student mental health and behavior issues. Teachers, principals, and central office leaders in both systems reported that students were experiencing more behavior problems, mental health referrals, and steep increases in chronic absenteeism. Leaders knew these challenges existed pre-pandemic, but most report that the pandemic significantly exacerbated them. A senior leader in CPS noted a “significant increase in behavioral and discipline issues.” Leaders in both systems also reported increased community violence and rapid escalation of conflicts between parents spilling into schools. The BCPSS CEO told us, “Before we would try to overlook [community violence]. You can't overlook [it] anymore.” Relatedly, chronic absenteeism remains an issue in both systems.

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#### **Strategies**

Pre-pandemic, both systems had begun to explore and add additional support for student “wholeness” or mental well-being. And while the lion's share of the leaders' attention remains focused on improving student academic performance, by and large, leaders in both systems have responded to these needs by substantially expanding in-school support for students,

relying on ESSER and other supplemental funds, such as grants, to pay for them. Both systems are trying several different approaches to support students, hoping a clear winner arises and can be maintained long-term.

CPS added counselors in every school and the Office of Social Emotional Learning offers several group programs for students. The schools we visited offered student support groups, one-on-one time with teachers, and engaging extracurriculars (sports, school plays, etc.). Some principals hired additional counselors and case managers to support students, reporting that they had retained significant autonomy in how they met students' SEL needs.

In BCPSS, leaders are supporting student mental health through additional counselors, while also paying attention to improving culture and climate, often through added enrichment activities and programs. Many schools have used newly allotted state funds to hire additional art and music teachers and support for athletics.

Relatedly, BCPSS has made a big push to improve student attendance through partnering with community organizations and by supporting schools to use available data to identify patterns in their students' absences, as well as trying new ideas to improve attendance (using "plan-do-study-act" cycles). The district significantly expanded its re-engagement efforts from approximately 650 students a year before the pandemic to approximately 2,485 students in the past year. The district found "a nice sweet spot" between their staff and community organizations and leaders who have proximity to families and neighborhoods to serve four times as many students.

In tackling persistent student mental health and absenteeism challenges, leaders in both systems have had to resist "external pressure" to continuously expand their services beyond core academics. As a BCPSS senior leader told us, "In the pandemic, people saw schools feeding kids, schools trying to find housing. People want us to be anti-violence preventers ... so I do think one of the biggest obstacles is just now everybody wanting schools to do everything, particularly in under-resourced communities."

**"In the pandemic, people saw schools feeding kids, schools trying to find housing. People want us to be anti-violence preventers ... so I do think one of the biggest obstacles is just now everybody wanting schools to do everything, particularly in under-resourced communities."**

### *Unresolved issues*

Striking the right balance between offering academic catch-up help so students are ready to learn and providing non-academic services has been challenging, especially when the systems are asked to dip into their academic budgets to achieve the latter. Leaders in both districts acknowledged the unresolved tension between supportive services and academics. District leaders in CPS, following the lead of the local teachers' union, generally support the "community schools" model (where schools provide rich wraparound services to meet children's mental and physical health needs and become a community hub for family support with social services, food, and other necessities), but said they were not willing to cut into their academic funding to support all the needed services. A senior leader in CPS said, "I don't feel it's right ... that I have to choose between a nurse, a counselor, and a social worker, and a teacher ... that's not a great place for me to be when I'm thinking about 'Where do I put resources?' When, again,

I want to make sure that we continue to invest in our classrooms.”

Determining which SEL programs to continue versus retire as ESSER funds expire is an unresolved issue in both systems. In CPS, this challenge is more acute as a budget crisis looms. Leaders in both systems are trying to target support programs more accurately via a school assessment system designed by the Chicago Consortium for Schools Research (the 5Essentials survey). However, leaders in both systems worry about the representativeness of the resulting data due to survey fatigue and low response rates on the part of students and staff. Both systems have also created composite scores to understand and compare schools using more than traditional academic measures. BCPSS’s “wholeness composite score” and CPS’s “Opportunity Index” are both works in progress, but they represent efforts to move beyond test scores to figure out what schools need and how to best support them. As one BCPSS leader said, “[We] recognize that the traditional academic measures are insufficient to be able to support what the vision of our community is for what we want young people to be able to do.”

“I don’t feel it’s right ... that I have to choose between a nurse, a counselor, and a social worker, and a teacher ... that’s not a great place for me to be when I’m thinking about ‘Where do I put resources?’”

#### **FINDING 4: BCPSS and CPS are insulating schools as much as possible from local political and financial turbulence**

Both Baltimore and Chicago have histories of colorful, hardball, and sometimes corrupt politics. Though the school systems are seldom the prime focus of conflict among neighborhoods and various factions, they are not exempt from it. In both cities, mayors have taken over the schools from time to time; superintendents have led bold reform efforts only to depart when public and elite opinion turned against them; teachers’ unions have used strikes and strike threats to protect their members and claim increased shares of school funding; and charges of neglect, especially from the Black community, have riled voters and forced changes in district policy.

All these factors, plus a more contentious relationship between some parents and their schools and declines in enrollment and student attendance, are present post-pandemic. Community tensions are intensifying in both cities.

In Chicago, long-standing conflicts between the city and the Black community have included fights over school funding, staffing, and the closing of under-enrolled schools in Black neighborhoods. These narratives were influential in the election of Mayor Brandon Johnson in 2023. In Baltimore, Project Baltimore has caused district leaders to feel like they operate in a fishbowl and are often forced to deal formally and in public with problems that they would normally solve quickly, informally, and internally.

#### **Strategies**

In both cities, district leaders are trying to avoid inflaming political issues further and to protect schools from turbulence. School and central office staff hope that going along and avoiding tensions with teachers’ unions and other powerful figures will keep political and financial issues from flaring up and intruding on the schools—and will head off superintendent firings, teacher strikes, or state sanctions.

In Baltimore, this is evident in district leaders' defensiveness, even when small problems occur. A senior leader described, "The scrutiny is real and it is a distraction." The central office must respond to FOIA requests and antagonistic press coverage and even re-run inaccurate analyses done by critics (about false accusations of grade inflation, for example) to

**"The amount of time we spend defending our work is time away from investing in systems ... is just the extra tax of having the extra burden of needing to prove yourself."**

keep these distractions from affecting educators and students. The time tradeoff is real, too: "The amount of time we spend defending our work is time away from investing in systems ... is just the extra tax of having the extra burden of needing to prove yourself." This environment shapes how leaders plan for new challenges and opportunities (for example, how they will spend ESSER funds) knowing that they will have, as one leader put it, "a target on my back."

BCPSS's CEO contract negotiations, a contentious mayoral election, recent turnover in the state superintendency, and increasingly vocal criticism of district leadership on the right add to political stresses on the district.

In Chicago, district leaders have acceded to the demands of the teachers' union and mayor by greatly increasing funding for under-enrolled schools, pressing local nonprofits to fund wraparound social services to develop community schools, reducing support for selective enrollment and charter schools, and ignoring current budgetary limits in favor of spending higher amounts that keep all schools open and avoid teacher layoffs.

### *Unresolved issues*

Chicago is awaiting a transition from a mayor-appointed school board to one with many members elected from city districts. The new board could include people dedicated to preserving existing schools of choice, which could increase tension with the mayor and teachers' union. Though district leaders intend to follow strategies that "everyone" can support, opposition could arise against policies that break the budget or draw so much funding out of schools of choice that they cannot operate. A possible forthcoming change in leadership would disrupt much and produce few benefits.

In both districts, saying "yes" to powerful officials and interest groups also entails financial risks. Though BCPSS can rely on Kirwan funding to soften the financial effects of enrollment declines, the district, like CPS, emphasizes increased staffing as a core element of its school improvement effort and will face escalating costs.

CPS district leaders worry that a fiscal reckoning is coming, due to declining school enrollment and the end of federal pandemic subsidies. District budget analysts expect a deficit of nearly \$400 million to arise by the end of the 2024-25 school year, setting off a fiscal crisis that might destabilize school staffing and force the district to cease operation for a period.

Yet, district leaders are not planning to operate on less money. CPS hired permanent staff on temporary federal money and is now creating generous staff-based school budgets that assume increases, not reductions, in force. District deficits might balloon from hundreds of millions into billions. This could lead to two possible outcomes: a bailout from the state or federal government, or a return to strict state control of the district and subsequent abandonment of the staffing strategies driving current spending.



## Summing up: When challenges never let up and systems are maxed out, district leaders must find new options and develop new alliances

District leaders in Baltimore and Chicago are playing the hands they have been dealt. They face unprecedented challenges including persistent pandemic learning loss; sporadic student and teacher attendance; community turmoil spilling into schools; the constant need to replace departed teachers and administrators; and intense political pressures from unions, elected officials, and pressure groups. They have been pursuing strategies that make sense but exceed their districts' current resources and capacities.

In the coming months, BCPSS and CPS leaders will confront important unanswered questions about the strategies pursued, including:

- ***Will they be able to maintain standardization of instruction?*** The district leaders we studied are on firm ground assuming that better-structured instruction can benefit student learning. In practice, however, new curriculum structures might work better in some schools than in others, depending on teacher capacity and cooperativeness, as well as student and teacher attendance. Uneven student and teacher attendance, where every classroom is composed of students who have missed different bits of instruction, can disrupt an orderly plan.
- ***Will increased staffing work as hoped?*** District leaders need to tap new talent pools if they want to hire a lot of new teachers and support staff. It is unclear what it will take to maintain schools' internal coherency with new staff members or whether current coaching and mentoring efforts will suffice. District leaders will need performance data and candid feedback from principals about how effective new hires are and what those new hires struggle to do.
- ***Will leaders' plans survive deficits and city politics?*** District leaders are counting on hiring new staff even when revenues are likely to fall. They are also caught between financial demands from their teachers' unions and skepticism from state legislatures about increased spending. Local politics is also a wild card as new mayors, school boards, critics in the media, and parents whose schools are threatened by enrollment declines and district priorities can undermine leaders' public approval. The districts' current strategies could become untenable as conflict around school policies and spending increases.

## RECOMMENDATIONS FOR SUPERINTENDENTS AND OTHER LEADERS

While questions remain for CPS and BCPSS, leaders elsewhere would do well to emulate the steadiness and selflessness of leadership in these two districts. They don't let their focus wander from supporting schools, children, and teachers. They pursue strategies that respond to schools' needs but don't expect every district action to work out as intended. Instead, they use hard data and keep close contact with school leaders, flexing when needed. They work with and through other educators and make sure their central offices send consistent messages to the schools. They own problems rather than burying them. They remain in charge but acknowledge setbacks and don't continue actions that prove ineffective. And, both have other good ideas:

BCPSS has used site-based budgeting to create incentives for groups of under-enrolled schools to share resources and even consolidate. CPS has shown great imagination in developing new ways of recruiting and preparing teachers. All of this is worthy of emulation.

But the persistence of grave problems despite strong leadership is sobering. Leaders in school districts across the country will find themselves similarly straining to restore learning losses, hire and retain staff, pay for central office-driven improvement strategies, greatly improve student attendance and teacher morale, manage fractious labor relations, and deal with political and financial challenges.

The vast majority of district leaders can't hope to succeed by living within current district routines. When their central offices lack the staff to impose a uniform curriculum, they will need to allow schools that have other sources of academic support and teacher training to access them. When faced with unrelenting staffing challenges, district leaders will need to consider radical restructuring of the teacher role to make the job more enticing to new candidates. When declining enrollment makes some schools too small to provide sound programming, district leaders must close them rather than drain resources from better-functioning schools. When spending commitments lead to massive deficits, responsible district leaders must both campaign for more money and make sure they have a way to live within current limitations.

Leaders must also acknowledge that they will need to seek help from beyond the bounds of their maxed-out systems, primarily from their states but also from their city governments, foundations, and local public service agencies. Districts simply don't have the resources or power to respond to all these challenges by themselves, and much depends on whether other entities can and will respond. They need to seek help from their state governments, philanthropies and local nonprofits. Those entities need to respond in ways that help districts but do not encourage them to persist in unsustainable staffing or spending commitments.

**State governments have the greatest potential of any entity to help overwhelmed school districts.** They can:

- ***Provide political cover and regulatory relief for strong local leaders.*** States can buffer superintendents by providing some financial relief and transformation advice for districts that can demonstrate solid fiscal and academic plans and realistic strategies. State leaders can help by reviewing and endorsing plans and creating regulatory flexibility (e.g. by suspending any policies or contracts that prevent innovative staffing arrangements, screening teacher recruits for math knowledge, or requiring classroom use of innovative instructional materials) so superintendents can focus on improving schools.
- ***Balance engagement with pressure.*** State leaders need to track progress in challenged districts and maintain close, collaborative relationships with superintendents and key civic leaders; they should not be surprised when a financially or educationally challenged district runs into trouble. States can buttress local leaders by publicly visiting a district, acknowledging its problems, and endorsing plans. In some districts, states may need to pressure local school boards and interest groups by keeping the possibility of takeover on the table. Though takeovers can be difficult to execute well, the possibility of one can increase a local superintendent's ability to execute on an improvement strategy. State

leaders can also openly consider and making alternative provisions for students, such as authorizing high-performing public charter schools and mandating tutoring and other evidence-based solutions for struggling students, and supporting community-led initiatives to address student needs, such as partnerships with local hospitals and other employers to train youth for living wage employment.

- ***Help districts forge new alliances to adopt new strategies.*** States could facilitate partnerships with employers, social services, and higher education institutions by providing tax incentives and grants. They could encourage (and remove regulatory and contractual barriers to) new teacher roles, including working in teams and using AI to ease teacher workloads and better address diverse student needs. They could bring in nonprofit teams of high school transformation experts. They could give national foundations, some of which have nearly given up hope that districts can be transformed, new reasons to support city-state partnerships.

#### **Other entities can also make important contributions.**

- ***Regional and national foundations*** can help by creating incentives for new teachers to work in central city districts, and pay for research and development on SEL programs and curricula that support and do not compete with rigorous instruction. Foundation grants could also help schools pay for independent expertise and assistance and help when central office staff is tapped out.
- ***Local nonprofits*** can work with district leaders to focus on social and instructional support when central offices can't fully meet the nonacademic needs of students and families. Service organizations that don't already work closely with schools can help both to engage individual students in crisis and provide social and recreational opportunities on or near school grounds.
- ***School boards*** can do a much better job buffering schools from disruption by partisan political agendas and not scapegoating district leaders for problems no district can solve alone. They can also work with city and state officials to bring in more support for students and families.

The challenges facing big city schools today exceed the capacities of districts as currently funded and governed. But a broader coalition, marshaling the resources of states and cities, foundations, nonprofits, and social service providers, could help deal with today's unprecedented challenges. However, without smart and consistent district leadership, help from outside is unlikely to be sufficient.

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The [Center on Reinventing Public Education](#) (CRPE) is a nonpartisan research and policy analysis center affiliated with Arizona State University's [Mary Lou Fulton Teachers College](#). We develop, test, and support bold, evidence-based, system-wide solutions to address the most urgent problems in K-12 public education across the United States. Our mission is to reinvent the education delivery model to prepare all American students to solve tomorrow's challenges. We conduct this work in partnership with other leading organizations in our field and funders who support our mission. Since 1993, our research, analysis, and insights have informed public debates and innovative policies that enable schools to thrive.