



**TESTIMONY BY CHICAGO LAWYERS' COMMITTEE FOR CIVIL RIGHTS
BEFORE THE ILLINOIS SENATE EDUCATION COMMITTEE
MARCH 26, 2019**

Submitted By:

Candace Moore, Senior Staff Attorney, Education Equity Project
Ami Gandhi, Director of Voting Rights & Civic Empowerment
Jenny Terrell, Skadden Fellow
Chicago Lawyers' Committee for Civil Rights
100 N. LaSalle St., Suite 600
Chicago, Illinois 60602
Phone: (312) 888-4190 | E-mail: cmoore@clccrul.org

Local School Councils (LSCs) are the only elected positions for Chicago Public Schools and are therefore the only positions that provide some measure of direct accountability to voters, given that Chicago's school board members are appointed. LSCs were formed 30 years ago as part of a landmark school reform law, to provide a mechanism for grassroots involvement in our schools. The drafters envisioned that all Chicagoans would have the opportunity to get involved in our democratic process and have a voice in how schools are run. This model has stood the test of time as one of the nation's strongest models of participatory democracy in schools. Here in Chicago, educators, parents and community members are afforded real power in making decisions about the leadership, budgets, and curriculum of their schools and are key to holding our schools accountable to providing a great education for all students.

Unfortunately, many residents face barriers to participation and in recent years our community members' participation in LSCs has plummeted. After the last LSC election in 2018, the majority of LSCs had vacancies,¹ presenting a missed opportunity for parents and neighborhood residents to inform decisions at schools and for schools to better leverage the assets of the community. Even for those LSCs who have members, the elections are typically not contested. The shortage is greatest among parent candidates², and many vacancies are in communities with high percentages of black and brown families – the very people whose perspectives we need, for the benefit of our schools and our children.

There are many causes for this lack of participation in LSCs. And not all problems with CPS can be solved immediately. But one thing we can do now is make the LSC membership process more streamlined and fair for all Chicagoans who are willing to serve, while of course also remaining vigilant about the safety and well-being of students. We should not deter parents and community

¹ Majority of CPS Schools don't have enough Local School Council candidates, Chicago Sun-Times (April 16, 2018), available at <https://chicago.suntimes.com/news/majority-of-cps-schools-dont-have-enough-local-school-council-candidates>.

² Local School Council elections a true test for democracy in Chicago, Chicago Sun-Times (April 16, 2018), available at <https://chicago.suntimes.com/opinion/local-school-council-elections-a-true-test-for-democracy-in-chicago>.



members from serving on LSCs by subjecting them to overly harsh background check requirements, which are part of our state's outdated and contradictory laws.

As it stands, the current law and subsequent policies have the effect of jeopardizing some of our most vulnerable community members and ultimately discouraging their participation, especially those navigating the immigration system and those looking for second chances after contact with the criminal justice system. Long-standing flaws in both our criminal justice system and immigration system disproportionately impact people of color and can unnecessarily cut-off people from opportunities to meaningfully engage in our society. This was never the intention of the original law and in fact, LSCs have historically presented a unique opportunity for a diverse set of community members, educators, and parents to come together, learn how schools work, and make important decisions about the future of their schools. For many, joining the LSC is a gateway to becoming a more civically engaged resident of our city and often is an opportunity to reflect on the power of their own voice.

A great example is community organizer Erica Nanton, who was elected as a community member of the LSC at Southside Occupational Academy, a school in Englewood that teaches job skills to 16 to 21-year-old students with special needs. When interviewed about her journey to become a LSC member, she said, "It ended up not being about how much money I had. It ended up being about how much I was able to listen and talk to the parents."³ Erica has spoken about her apprehensions in running and about how she almost backed out before the election.

We need more community members to run for these positions, not fewer. We need elected officials, including elected officials at the hyperlocal level, to be as diverse as the communities they serve and to meaningfully consider the voices and interests of people of color. CPS is a district comprised of nearly 90% students of color. We need to ensure that parents and community members who represent these students can have access to providing critical leadership to our schools. While we work to ensure the safety of all our students, we also have the responsibility of ensuring that policy solutions result in the type of inclusion that reflect our values as a city and district.

Chicago Lawyers' Committee for Civil Rights (Chicago Lawyers' Committee) has operated as Chicago's preeminent nonprofit, nonpartisan civil rights legal organization since 1969, and we work to secure racial equity and economic opportunity for all. We provide legal representation through partnerships with nearly 50 member law firms. We also collaborate with grassroots organizations and diverse coalitions to implement community-based solutions that advance civil rights.

³ New Local School Council members face challenging task of filling vacancies, Chalkbeat (July 5, 2018), available at <https://chalkbeat.org/posts/chicago/2018/07/05/new-local-school-council-members-face-challenging-first-task>.