

With Johnson as mayor, big shifts are expected for CPS

Elected school board, funding changes, testing overhaul among challenges

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After beating eight other candidates to become Chicago's next mayor, buoyed by more than \$2 million in support from the Chicago Teachers Union, Brandon Johnson will take the helm of Chicago Public Schools with his inauguration May 15 — embarking on a four-year term that will see Illinois' largest school district profoundly changed.

With the district's impending

transition to an elected school board and financial disentanglement with the city, certain shifts to come have long been in motion. Others may stem from a schools plan like no other candidate's, in which Johnson — a CPS parent and recent CTU organizer — advocated for a break from business as usual in CPS' testing of students, funding of schools and social services to be provided to students.

In the face of declining enrollment, a looming deficit topping \$600 million and the challenge of wrestling more money from the state, Johnson faces a number of uphill battles. But the policies he proposed while campaigning

aren't nonstarters, according to experts

Whospoke with the Tribune on the potential pathways and pitfalls for the mayorelect's plan for schools.

Alternatives to standardized tests

From toddlers in prekindergarten to seniors in high school, CPS students across the district will receive a range of standardized tests this spring, some state-mandated, assessing students in science and math, and others required by the district as a means to evaluate teachers. The beginning and middle of the school year are similarly shaped by



Then-mayoral candidate Brandon Johnson speaks at a rally at the Chicago Teachers Union Foundation on March 18.



Chicago Teachers Union president Stacy Davis Gates celebrates at Brandon Johnson's election night victory party on April 4.

standardized tests.

Johnson has said such exams carry a damaging presumption that public school students aren't proficient. "How about we actually do something better than a standardized test?" he said during a campaign debate.

Despite heavy reliance on standardized test scores and research showing grades to be a stronger predictor of high school and college readiness, Elaine Allensworth, director of the UChicago Consortium on School Research, said an "interrogation" of the limita-

tions and costs of standardized assessments is overdue.

"We should be having these discussions about what else can we do," said Allensworth, "given the extensive use and given a lot of costs — financial costs, but also the psychological costs on students and instructional time costs."

Standardized test scores are often perceived as strong and valid indicators of students' academic performance, she said. "The truth is, they're partial indicators," Allensworth said. "They give you some information, but there's just a lot about a student's academic preparation that can't be measured on standardized tests."

Allensworth uses a sports analogy: While it may be easy to measure how fast a student athlete can run 100 meters, and to compare students' speeds, that wouldn't provide

a picture of the student's ability to play a sport.

Federal legislation mandates much of the battery of tests CPS students face. But U.S. Secretary of Education Miguel Cardona recently signaled a possible shift from the prominence of standardized tests in assessing students and schools, saying scores should be used "as a flashlight on what works and what needs our attention — not as hammers to drive the outcomes we want in education from the top down, often pointing fingers to those with greater needs and less resources." And U.S. Rep. Jamaal Bowman, D-N.Y., a former teacher and principal, recently introduced the "More Teaching, Less Testing Act," which seeks to "make classroom teaching time a priority over annual standardized test preparation and test administration."

As that reform effort shakes

out, Johnson has room to usher in a new district-level norm, said Paul Zavitkovsky, a former CPS principal and assessment specialist for the University of Illinois at Chicago's Center for Urban Education Leadership.

Zavitkovsky recently served on a CPS advisory committee charged with redesigning the way schools are assessed. The new guidelines, which rely on measures other than standardized tests, such as student, parent and teacher surveys, were recently approved by the Board of Education. But Zavitkovsky said implementation isn't a given.

"Those things have to be codified, operationalized and acted on, in a high-quality way by real people," he said. "Without strong leadership, without wise and thoughtful leadership, and aggressive leadership, even the best policies never get activated in

a way that makes a difference. Money and time get wasted."

The considerable costs of administering standardized tests ought to be taken into account, he said, with the state's contracts with vendors due for renewal in 2025.

"There's an opportunity here to ... make some major changes in the way state wide testing is done," Zavitkovsky said, "not that it would be designed to resolve all problems for all districts, but to think clearly about what the proper role of statewide assessment is — what it can and can't do."

Around that same time, in the 2025-26 school year, a \$628 million funding deficit is expected in CPS as federal emergency COVID-19 funds run out.

Filling the funding gap

Johnson has promised to overhaul CPS' funding system, echoing state legislation — signed into law in 2017 but yet to be fulfilled — committing the state to provide districts funding based on the needs, rather than sheer number, of their students.

The change resulted in a substantial increase in state aid owed to districts with a large proportion of students with higher resource needs, such as English learners and students who have disabilities or are from low-income families, said Mary McKillip, senior researcher with the Education Law Center, which advocates for equitable school funding. But since Illinois legislators have allocated only modest increases to state funding since the reform passed, the state is far from meeting a nonbinding 2027 deadline to provide the full aid promised, she said.

CPS currently receives only a quarter of the aid that the state determines it needs, resulting in a \$1.4 billion gap, CPS CEO Pedro Martinez said at the March Board of Education meeting.

“The goal is great and ambitious and wonderful,” McKillip said of the state reform. “And then the actual enactment ... getting the funds to the schools that’s needed, has been a slow trickle.”

Johnson has said that maintaining the previous funding structure, “creates a huge disadvantage for schools in communities like Chicago, where enrollment and Black populations are declining.” He vowed to “work side-by-side with Gov. J.B. Pritzker and the General Assembly to overhaul the CPS school funding formula and make sure our school communities receive the state funding they need and deserve.”

McKillip said districts in New Mexico, North Carolina and Pennsylvania have had to sue to receive the state funding they’re owed.

Illinois’ system is “penalizing districts that have a higher proportion of low-income students, which is a lot of rural Illinois,” she said. “It’s frankly not fair that you have some students in districts that don’t have the resource problems, because they’re able to raise the local funding needed ... and really under-resourced communities that, year after year, aren’t getting the funding they need. That’s really hurting the students who are in those schools, not getting the education that they should be receiving — and not because the district doesn’t want to.”

From fully staffing bilingual and special education programs to “infusing schools with mental health profes-

sionals,” many of the policies Johnson advocated for on the campaign trail would require new funding, which he’s said could be raised through “co-locating revenue-generating facilities such as child care and health clinics” in underutilized schools.

“Every school should have a library and librarian, adequate clinicians and counselors, thriving arts offerings and sports programs and teams,” his platform states. “The mayor of Chicago has an obligation to be actively fighting in partnership for the revenue required to fulfill those basic needs.”

The director of Illinois Families for Public Schools, Cassie Creswell, said while she hopes the legislators who supported Johnson’s campaign can help him procure more funds, underlying state finance issues present a problem.

“It’s tough because in Illinois we do not collect enough revenue to pay for what the state needs. ... Until we have that, making up that (\$1.4 billion) CPS is short from the state is not super likely and realistic,” she said.

According to the Center for Tax and Budget Accountability’s analysis of the state’s 2023 general fund budget, Illinois fails to generate enough revenue growth to keep pace with the cost of providing core public services.

There are other state policies that financially hamper CPS. Martinez said further pension funding reforms are needed, with CPS being the only district in the state required to fund its own teacher pensions.

“Pensions will take any new revenues we have, state or local, next year. There’s nothing that’s going to be available for the classrooms in any new

revenues that we get,” Martinez told the school board in March, citing “significant inequities” in state policies. “We do need to call this out.”

Board members also said that unlike other districts, CPS’ ability to raise new funds for capital projects through a local referendum, for example, is limited.

Whether funding efforts bear fruit, Creswell expects Johnson’s leadership — from the board members he appoints to district transparency and engagement of parents — to catalyze a change in CPS’ institutional culture.

“The problems that the district faces are way more complicated than what a single mayoral administration and one good mayor could fix,” she said. “But, to have someone who’s experienced the system as a parent, not just a teacher and organizer,

that’s unprecedented — someone that you can expect to actually hear concerns ... who cares and has some power to do something about it.”

Reversing declining enrollment

A decade after former Mayor Rahm Emanuel closed 50 schools despite community and CTU outcry, Johnson has said he aims to turn around the district’s yearslong enrollment decline.

“If we can build sustainable community schools alongside quality affordable housing, we will reverse the trend,” he said.

With a moratorium on school closings set to end in 2025, Johnson has proposed a process by which schools struggling with enrollment can identify root causes and be given an opportunity to grow

their enrollment. He's also suggested better program design could help increase student ranks.

Jason Dougal, president of the National Center on Education and the Economy, said there's only so much any district can do in the short term to affect enrollment, which is often shaped by larger forces such as businesses entering or exiting a community and, as is the case in Chicago, declining birthrates and population loss.

But when it comes to attracting and retaining families who may otherwise opt for home schooling or a private school, the district's value proposition makes a difference, said Dougal, whose organization studies high performing schools in the U.S. and around the world.

"Are they engaging students in a way that makes them want to come to learn, and are

they providing a learning environment in which students can gain the type of critical thinking skills, the communication skills, the collaboration skills, along with the fundamentals of math and English, science and history disciplines, in order to be successful in a future that, quite frankly, none of us know exactly what it's going to look like," he said.

Creating a more professional environment for teachers can help stem enrollment losses, Dougal said. "When students are engaged in a rigorous, challenging environment, where they're growing, they tend to stay. ... They love to come to school. The same is true of people with their jobs, including teachers."

Johnson faced criticism before his runoff victory about whether he could remain impartial and operate on behalf of taxpayers in negoti-

ating with CTU, whose contract expires in 2024. Until recently a paid organizer for the union, Johnson's campaign was predominantly funded by the CTU and affiliated unions.

"I have a fiduciary responsibility to the people of the city of Chicago, and once I'm mayor of the city of Chicago, I will no longer be a member of the Chicago Teachers Union," Johnson said.

Zavitkovsky, the UIC researcher and former CPS principal, said he hopes Johnson's deep relationship with the union will be a benefit to students: "There's some really important opportunities here to direct resources and direct policy attention toward ongoing teacher learning," he said. "There's just no way to be able to get at this goal of making deep learning accessible to all our students without a broad, union-supported,

district-supported commitment to stepping back and saying, 'What aspects of our existing teaching and learning processes are actually working against (that goal)?"


Dougal added that while the social support Johnson backs is important for retaining students, it may not be possible to overcome the budgetary strains of operating severely underpopulated buildings.

"Kids can learn ... better if they feel safe, they feel nurtured and nourished, physically and emotionally, and they've got good medical care, they can see properly — they need all of those things," he said, adding that's part of why a school closure can "destroy" a community. "People try to avoid it as much as possible. But the economics of declining enrollment could force politicians to have to make those types of decisions, even when they had said, 'I would


never close a school.'"


But for Johnson, who participated in a 2015 hunger strike to pressure CPS to reopen Dyett High School, school closings during his administration seem unlikely.

"This is personal for me," Johnson said in his victory speech. "Investing in people is at the heart of this campaign because I've seen what disinvestment looks like."

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