Document B:

A Response to the Board of Education’s Arguments

Excerpted from “Research Brief on School Closures” by CReATE, March 2013 (Brief #5)

A $1 Billion Budget Deficit?
CPS claims they are facing a $1 billion deficit in their budget for the school year 2013-2014. However, CPS’s past history of budgeting should give caution. Comprehensive Annual Financial Reports from the school years 2011-2012 and 2010-2011 show that CPS has a recent history of overstating their budget troubles. In the 2011-2012 school year, the Chicago Board of Education (BOE) approved a budget with a $214 million deficit. However, CPS ended the school year with a $328 million surplus. And again, the BOE approved a budget anticipating a $245 million deficit for the 2010-2011 school year, but the district ended that school year with a $328 million surplus. In both cases CPS’s budgeting was off by $500 million dollars.

Closing Schools = Solution to the Budget Problem?
Nonetheless, CPS estimates that they will save between $500,000 to $800,000 annually for each school closed. According to these estimates, if CPS closes up to 80 schools, it will gain between $40 million and $64 million from savings achieved by avoiding building upkeep and operational expenditures like heat and daily maintenance.

Not Enough Students in CPS?
Chicago Public Schools claims that Chicago’s population loss is the reason why schools are underutilized. CPS officials point to Chicago’s population loss over the last decade (resulting in 144,035 fewer children living in Chicago from 2000 to 2010) as creating 139,000 empty seats in CPS. However, according to a WBEZ analysis of CPS’s Racial/Ethnic Survey data, the school system only reported a loss of 31,500 students during this period.

What is “Under-Utilization”?
Utilization is based on the physical size of a school and the number of students occupying a classroom. The Chicago Board of Education has determined that 30 children in a classroom is the ideal or most efficient class size for Kindergarten through eighth-grade classes. Classrooms under 30 students are deemed underutilized. By these standards, CPS estimates that 50% of its neighborhood schools are underutilized, and nearly 140 are half empty.

It is questionable whether 30 students per class should be the standard for the ideal utilization of a classroom. The Student Teacher Achievement Ratio (STAR) program initiated in Tennessee in the late 1980s has yielded the most comprehensive and credible studies on the impact of class sizes. In the STAR program, students and teachers were randomly assigned to two types of classes: a small class with an average of 15 students or a regular class with an average of 22 students. After four years, researchers determined that the difference of seven students had significant impacts on student achievement. Students from the smaller classes outperformed students from larger classes by the equivalent of three additional months of schooling in the first year. Studies of STAR also determined that African American students, lower-income students, and students from urban areas benefitted the most from smaller class sizes. Additionally, CPS’s calculations of utilization fail to account for students with disabilities, although in many of the targeted schools 20-30% of students are challenged by a learning disability. These students require a class size of 10 to 15 students, but the 30-student formula does not take this into consideration.