The race for City Hall

Mayor Rahm Emanuel has a reported $9 million to spend on his re-election bid. Is it enough to win, especially among black Chicagoans anxious about schools and jobs?
A campaign for good schools and jobs

By Lorraine Forte 
Editor-in-Chief

Five months from now, Chicago voters will go to the polls to choose whether to send Mayor Rahm Emanuel back to City Hall for another term. It’s no secret that Emanuel is not popular right now among Chicagoans. But whether or not another candidate can ride the wave of discontent into the mayor’s office is still a big question mark. His highest-profile challengers are Cook County Commissioner Jesus “Chuy” Garcia and 2nd Ward Ald. Bob Fioretti, who face an uphill battle to gather enough signatures to get on the ballot, not to mention money to run a serious campaign. But given the mayor’s approval rating of 35 percent in one recent Chicago Tribune poll, don’t write off his challengers yet.

Emanuel has cited the country’s lagging economy as a major factor in his dismal poll numbers. And nowhere is the economic outlook as bleak as in Chicago’s black neighborhoods, where he faces his toughest sell for a second term. Black Chicago turned out in droves for Emanuel, giving him nearly six out of every 10 votes cast in predominantly black wards. That support is now turned on its head: Nearly six in 10 black Chicagoans, according to the Tribune poll, don’t write off his challengers yet. Emanuel has lost African-American support. I see the signs in my own Woodlawn neighborhood, where a community mental health clinic shut down, the jobless hang out at 63rd and Cottage Grove, virtually every street has abandoned homes marked with a red “X” and awaiting demolition, and two schools were among dozens shuttered last year. Yes, there are other hopeful signs. A school that took in displaced children is now a specialty STEM (science, technology, engineering and math) school, the Grove Parc apartments on Cottage Grove are being revitalized, small businesses have popped up—a coffee shop here, a clothing store there—and pothole-riddled streets have been repaved. But perceptions die hard.

Consider the citywide statistics below, compiled with the help of The Chicago Reporter from city, Chicago Public Schools and federal data:

- Chicago has the highest black unemployment rate among the nation’s five largest cities—25 percent, compared to 19 percent in Philadelphia, 18 percent in Los Angeles, 15 percent in Houston and 14 percent in New York City—based on 2013 figures.
- Public sector jobs, traditionally a route to middle-class success for African-Americans, have been vanishing in recent years. But city workers from black ZIP codes account for 40 percent of the 5,000 city jobs lost since 2009 (two years before Emanuel took office).
- Those layoffs don’t include the 1,691 school system employees from black ZIP codes who lost their jobs since 2011.

White households with an income of $100,000 a year now outnumber black households by a 6-to-1 ratio.

Responding to these and other numbers, the mayor’s office points to success stories such as Chicago Neighborhoods Now, projected to target $2.9 billion altogether to projects in seven communities that include predominantly black Bronzeville, Pullman and Englewood.

Whatever the statistics, one thing is clear: There is plenty yet to be done to ensure that all Chicagoans have an equitable share of economic and educational opportunity.

The Mayor’s Popularity

In the black community took a major hit with last year’s closings of 50 schools. Then there’s the rest of Emanuel’s education policies: Charters and other privately run schools have mostly opened in black neighborhoods, often in the face of local opposition; black teachers have been hardest hit by layoffs; and the achievement gap remains widest for black students.

In this joint issue of Catalyst In Depth and The Chicago Reporter, Deputy Editor Sarah Karp examines the potential effect on the mayor’s policies on his re-election bid. Associate Editor Melissa Sanchez explains how the Chicago Teachers Union and its progressive allies are seeking to make inroads in City Hall. Sanchez also talked with former mayoral candidate Miguel del Valle about the upcoming election and the state of Latino political power in the city. And the Reporter’s Ade Emmanuel explores the reasons behind the city’s high black unemployment rate at chicagoreporter.com.

Making a Choice

Many parents opt to send their children to schools they believe offer better learning—that happen to be charter schools or other schools that are run by private operators. But there has been a backlash against their expansion under Mayor Emanuel, by critics who say privatization undermines neighborhood schools and drains them of money and good students.

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Source: Catalyst Chicago analysis of Chicago Public Schools data.

Stay Tuned for Details about “Education: Then, Now, Next. Celebrating 25 years of Catalyst Chicago.” We’ll have a range of activities, from forums around town to an online almanac featuring education highlights. We look forward to your participation in the celebration.
Mayor Rahm Emanuel has reached out to black clergy to try and win support among African-Americans. In September, he was with Rev. Christopher Harris of Bright Star Church for the launch of the Bronzeville Dream Center, a program to combat violence and provide counseling and support to victims. [Photo by William Camargo]

### The race for City Hall

Jobs and schools promise to be top issues in next year’s city elections. The mayor’s education agenda faces its toughest test in the African-American communities that gave him strong support in 2011. **COVER STORY: PAGE 4**

**14 From the classroom to City Council?**

More than a half-dozen educators are running for aldermanic seats in February’s city elections.

**20 Asking the hard questions**

Chicago’s next leader must tackle economic inequality and ensure opportunity for all, says Miguel del Valle. The former Chicago city clerk talks about why voters need a vigorous debate before the mayoral election and what’s at stake.

### DATA GUIDE

**PAGE 11**

- A map shows which Chicago communities have lost the most educators since 2010.
- How attrition among black teachers and administrators compares with that of white and Latino educators
- Do children who choose to attend schools outside of their neighborhoods actually end up at better ones?

**COVER PHOTO BY GRACE DONNELLY**
When Rahm Emanuel ran for mayor four years ago, African-American voters pulled him across the finish line without a run-off. He won about six out of every 10 votes cast in predominantly black wards—largely on the say-so of his former boss, President Barack Obama. But as the February mayoral election nears, Emanuel’s approval ratings among the voters who carried him to City Hall have tumbled, according to a Chicago Tribune poll.

Some stark numbers underscore the mayor’s slipping support in the black community, based on an analysis of city, federal, state and school data by The Chicago Reporter and Catalyst Chicago. The numbers center on two areas: jobs and schools.

Twenty-five percent of African-Americans in the city were unemployed last year. There are three unemployed black people for every one jobless white Chicagooan.

The unemployment rate for blacks barely budged between 2010 and 2013, yet unemployment among whites in the city fell from 10 percent to 7 percent.

Workers from predominantly black ZIP codes accounted for nearly half, 40 percent, of the 5,000 city government jobs eliminated since 2009, two years before Emanuel took office. More than 1,600 Chicago Public Schools employees in those neighborhoods were also laid off.

Predominantly black community areas lost 20 percent of their teachers, counselors and other members of the Chicago Teachers Union between 2011 and 2014.
The number of privately run schools in black community areas has almost doubled, to 31 percent from 18 percent, since the mayor took office, despite widespread concerns about privatization.

Seventy-seven percent of the $311 million spent on building new schools or annexes has gone to white communities, though the sites serve about 30 percent of CPS students.

The mayor’s team points to programs like Chicago Neighborhoods Now—a mayoral initiative to coordinate economic development, housing and improvements in quality of life—that includes the mostly black communities of Englewood, Bronzeville and Pullman. In Englewood, for example, a city spokesperson boasts of a $362 million public-private investment that is expected to create 500 permanent jobs and more than 3,000 temporary construction jobs, and retain more than 500 jobs. Emanuel’s education supporters emphasize his investment in STEM (science, technology, engineering and math) curricula in neighborhood schools, as well as extra help for failing schools.

But in the South and West Side neighborhoods where most of the city’s African-American population lives, expectations of the mayor have dimmed. Some of the numbers reflect larger economic and social trends. Some reflect the consequences of his policies.

It’s all about the numbers—and how they are perceived.

Source: American Community Survey 2010 and 2013, and data from the City of Chicago Human Resources department, Chicago Public Schools and the Chicago Teachers Union; analyzed by Catalyst Chicago and The Chicago Reporter.
The Race for City Hall
On a Monday evening in September, the normally desolate stretch of 75th Street near Yates Avenue in South Shore was lined with cars. Inside a banquet hall, Charles Kyle sat on a small stage with Karen Lewis and asked her questions about crime, economic development and, most of all, education.

“Renaissance 2010 was a real-estate plan,” Lewis told the crowd in her matter-of-fact style. Lewis was referring to former Mayor Richard M. Daley’s controversial plan, aggressively continued by his successor Rahm Emanuel, to open new schools while closing failing ones in an effort to keep middle-class families in the city. “I don’t think many people understand that.”

Though the mayoral election was months away, Lewis, the head of the Chicago Teachers Union, was gearing up to mount a dramatic challenge to Emanuel in his bid for a second term. As is well-known by now, serious health issues forced Lewis to bow out of the race before she officially entered it.

Yet Kyle, the moderator for the Exchange Ideas community forum, which sponsors events aimed at improving South Shore, says the concerns that drew so many residents out to hear Lewis and cling to her words still weigh heavily on the neighborhood.

Tough lessons for Rahm

Education promises to be a central issue in the 2015 mayoral election, especially in black communities that have borne the brunt of school closings, teacher layoffs and charter expansion.

By Sarah Karp

Students, parents and activists staged one protest after another last year against Mayor Rahm Emanuel’s plan to close 50 schools. The closings have been the most controversial item on the mayor’s education agenda, which is likely to play a significant role in next year’s mayoral election. [Photo by Jonathan Gibby]
Black communities, more so than any other neighborhoods in Chicago, have been dramatically affected by the education reform policies championed by Emanuel. The neighborhoods are simultaneously struggling with crime, high unemployment, loss of wealth as a result of the housing crisis and a dire need for economic investment.

A case in point: Last year, South Shore became a food desert when the Dominick’s grocery store on 71st Street closed, leaving residents with one neighborhood choice: a weekend farmers market. The neighborhood’s dilemma reflects the economic development problems faced by other black communities in the city that want to lure new businesses and jobs. For example, tax increment finance districts, created to spark economic development, have not generated the same level of revenue on the South Side as elsewhere. Among the city’s active TIFs, not a single district on the South Side is ranked in the top 20 for property tax revenue.

Meanwhile, the anger about schools came to a head with last year’s closings of 50 schools, virtually all in black neighborhoods. And it is squarely at Emanuel’s doorstep, a potential threat to his re-election hopes: A shocking 77 percent of black voters disapprove of Emanuel’s handling of schools and only 10 percent agree with the policy of increasing funding for charter schools while cutting budgets for neighborhood schools, according to an August 2014 Chicago Tribune poll.

Education also promises to figure prominently in aldermanic races, where both the teachers union and the group Democrats for Education Reform, which supports Emanuel’s policies, are seeking to field and support candidates who will back their agendas.

Mayoral challenger Bob Fioretti calls Emanuel the most divisive education politician since Michelle Rhee, the former Washington, D.C., schools chief who made national headlines for shaking up the district but became mired in allegations of test-score cheating on her watch.

“For the sake of politics, he gave children the shaft,” Fioretti says.

Another challenger, Jesus “Chuy” Garcia, spoke to an audience of teachers union members at a recent dinner and told them that a belief in the importance of neighborhood schools is what sets him apart from Emanuel. Garcia recounted his involvement in a hunger strike that led to the creation of Little Village High School.

“We stood up for our children and protected them,” Garcia told the audience, after receiving Lewis’ crucial endorsement. “Instead of closing our schools, I believe in successful community schools.”

Schools CEO Barbara Byrd-Bennett says she has not seen the polls that show dissatisfaction with the mayor’s policies. And she strongly disagrees with the notion that neighborhood schools have suffered from disinvestment under Emanuel. The district has spent “tens of millions of dollars” putting new STEM (science, technology, engineering and math) curricula and International Baccalaureate programs into some neighborhood schools, while providing extra help to failing schools, Byrd-Bennett points out. “These things have made a tremendous difference,” she says.

T he dissatisfaction with Emanuel’s education agenda is local evidence of a rising tide against the current version of “school reform.” In New York City, for example, Mayor Bill de Blasio rode to victory on campaign promises that he would curb charter expansion and standardized tests, and forge better relationships with teachers and parents.

Chicago’s mass school closings became symbolic across the country of the disinvestment in neighborhood schools that has come as a result of the privatization movement, says author and education historian Diane Ravitch. “No one had ever done that in one day in America,” she says of the 50 closings. Ravitch, who is also on the education faculty at New York Uni-
Mayor Rahm Emanuel announces playground improvements at Kelly Park in Brighton Park. Over the past few months, as Emanuel gears up for the mayoral campaign, he has announced a number of school and park playground improvements. [Photo by Emily Jan]

University, is perhaps the most outspoken and well-known critic of the reform movement that she once strongly supported.

The public is also increasingly resistant to the use of standardized tests, another hallmark of reform. More and more, people have begun to realize that standardized tests are used to justify the closing of neighborhood schools and privatization of school systems, Ravitch says.

A recent report by the National Center for Fair and Open Testing, known as FairTest, examined the anti-testing movement. According to the report, in New York City, 60,000 children and their parents refused to take federally mandated state tests in grades three through eight in 2014, up from a few thousand in 2013. More than 1,000 children and families opted out in both Chicago and Colorado, FairTest found, and smaller numbers of families did so in other regions.

Meanwhile, the charter movement is now more than a decade old and the public is starting to ask hard questions about it, notes Peter Cunningham, who was press secretary for Arne Duncan when Duncan ran Chicago schools and followed him to the U.S. Department of Education.
“We are further down the path,” says Cunningham, who now runs an organization called Education Post. “Is it enough to say that 29 percent of charter schools out-perform traditional schools? Maybe it should be 40 percent or 50 percent. It is not acceptable for charter schools to be worse.”

CEO Byrd-Bennett says she is “absolutely agnostic [about] the type of school” and wants to talk instead about high-quality schools. She also points out that her administration has held charter schools accountable by creating a warning list for those not performing well, and closing two charters during her tenure. But the mayor and Byrd-Bennett will not commit to curtailing charter expansion altogether.

These days, Emanuel talks little about charter schools, perhaps recognizing that they are not politically popular. No new ones will be approved for next school year, putting the timetable for the approval process outside the timeframe for the run-up to the mayoral election.

Providing a good education for his son has always been a priority for Charles Kyle and his son’s mother, Kyle says. But the issue really hit home when he began to look at schools as his son was nearing kindergarten age. He went to visit Madison Elementary School, which he had attended until sixth grade. Along with familiarity, proximity was a factor: Madison is located less than a block from where he lives.

Kyle says he would have liked to show his commitment to the neighborhood by sending his son to the local school. But he just wasn’t impressed. “The kindergarten classroom didn’t have sight words on the wall,” he says. The school’s test scores are average to below-average.

Fewer than half of the children who live in the attendance area go to Madison, which has space for up to 750 students, but enrolled only 233 students at the time Kyle visited.

So when Kyle’s son was offered a seat at Murray Language Academy, a magnet school two neighborhoods away in Hyde Park, the decision was easy.
Park, he reluctantly accepted it. Murray has high test scores and also offers foreign language classes—French, Spanish, Japanese and Mandarin Chinese—every day.

Kyle’s experience is replicated in families throughout South Shore: About 8,000 school-aged children live in the community, but instead of attending the neighborhood schools, they are spread out among 364 schools across the city. That means more than half of the city’s public schools have at least one student from South Shore, according to a Catalyst Chicago analysis.

Yet the exodus hasn’t resulted in children traveling to substantially better schools. Among those children who leave the neighborhood to attend school, only 21 percent are enrolled in top schools. A larger number, 25 percent, are enrolled in schools with test scores that are among the worst in the city. African-American students are more likely to travel to mediocre or poor-performing schools than any other group of children.

The phenomenon is not new. For years, the number of students traveling outside their neighborhood to school has been on the rise. And one point in Emanuel’s favor is that

Teacher attrition by home address since 2010

- More than 50 fewer teachers in the neighborhood
- 20 to 50 fewer
- 1 to 19 fewer
- Number of teachers increased

There are 44% fewer black teachers and 22% fewer black administrators in Chicago Public Schools than there were a decade ago. The number of white teachers and administrators has fallen by 11%, while there has been a 10% increase among Latinos.

Source: Chicago Teachers Union member information and Illinois State Board of Education teacher service records; analyzed by Catalyst Chicago.

A great diaspora

More than a decade after school officials said they wanted to make Chicago a “district of choice” that offered families a variety of good schools, the number of students who attend their neighborhood school has declined dramatically. The phenomenon is much more prevalent among children from predominantly black communities. They also reap fewer benefits, though, as black students tend to end up at the lowest-performing schools in the city.

Who travels and where they end up

- 44% of students travel elsewhere
- 38% travel
- 32% travel
- 28% travel

Note: School quartiles are based on 2014 state test scores
Source: Chicago Public Schools, U.S. Census data.
a smaller percentage of students are now making the trip to low-achieving schools than under Daley, according to a Catalyst analysis.

Still, Byrd-Bennett says she is “very worried” about the numbers and says the district needs to do a better job of sharing information with parents. “Sometimes schools appeal to parents because they are quiet or calm, but they are not high-quality [educationally],” she says.

Last year’s school closings may have aggravated the trend: Two-thirds of the schools designated to take in displaced children experienced a significant drop in state test scores—an indicator that children from closed schools perhaps fared no better academically in their new ones.

Another bone of contention in black communities is the diminishing public input and control of decisions about schools in African-American neighborhoods.

When Emanuel walked into office, only three of the schools in South Shore and South Chicago, the community next door, were run by private entities. Now, eight of 21 schools, or about 38 percent, are either charter schools, contract schools or turnaround schools, which are managed by the non-profit Academy for Urban School Leadership.

A telling example is evident in South Shore. Val Free, executive director of the South Shore Planning Coalition, recalls the opening of Great Lakes Academy, a charter school that is technically in South Chicago but draws South Shore students.

Free feels that Great Lakes was forced upon the community unnecessarily. Virtually all the neighborhood elementary schools in the surrounding area are underutilized. While many are low-performing schools, one of them, Powell Elementary, earned the highest academic rating last year.

“Why would you try to dilute Powell by adding a charter?” Free says. “It seems like sabotage.”

Neither the planning coalition nor the South Shore Community Action Council—one of several such entities created by CPS to weigh in on school decisions—supported the Great Lakes plan. Yet school board members approved it and the charter opened its doors last school year.

Free says her group asked the charter operator to sign a community benefits agreement that would stipulate having a certain number of people from the neighborhood on the school’s board, in the classroom and in other jobs, such as janitorial.

Great Lakes Charter operator Katherine Myers was resistant, Free says. At one point, the charter did offer spots on the board to community members. Yet when Free was nominated to serve, Myers refused because Free had opposed the opening of the school.

Despite how she felt about the school, Free says she would have been fair on the board out of a desire to have the students get a good education. (Myers did not return numerous calls from Catalyst.)

Henry English, the head of the Black United Fund, which supports local non-profits and is active in the community, says he is disappointed when he sees the teachers walking through the doors of Great Lakes.

“They seem short on experience,” he says. “Great Lakes did not hire any teachers from the community… that is for sure.”

The impact of school actions—closings, turnarounds in which most teachers end up losing their jobs, and charter expansion—on the black teaching force is a major flashpoint for many in the black community. African-American teachers have borne the brunt of layoffs as a result of closings, since the teaching force at shuttered schools was largely made up of veteran black teachers, according to an analysis of Illinois teacher service records. Meanwhile, the new, privately run schools have tended to hire younger, white teachers.

Citywide, 1,134 black educators—teachers, social workers and school counselors—are gone from the CPS payroll in recent years, according to CTU data. (The numbers include retirees.) In South Shore, the number is 91. These job figures help fuel antagonism toward charters and turnaround schools.

What typically has happened to schools in South Shore and other black communities is the exact opposite of what has taken place in white and Latino communities.

Take Lakeview, a mostly white North Side community that, like South Shore, sits on the lakefront. Here, 70 percent of children attend their neighborhood school. Of those students who travel outside the community, nearly 90 percent land at a high-achieving school. No charters or contract schools operate in Lakeview. No schools have closed or undergone a turnaround. And since 2011, 140 additional teachers are working in schools in the neighborhood.

The contrast in what has happened in different communities has been by design. Andrea Zopp, a school board member and head of the Chicago Urban League, told a City Club audience recently that charters and other privately run schools were opened in neighborhoods that needed “quality options.”

District officials have also maintained that school closings were intended to make the school system more efficient by shuttering buildings with too few children, and that the closings were done at one time to minimize disruption over multiple years.

But the closings were still a bitter pill for many to swallow. And as for choice, education organizer Jitu Brown of the Kenwood Oakland Community Organization argues that what people want is good neighborhood schools, not a million options to sift through. Brown is also national coordinator for Journey for Justice, an alliance of activists who have fought against school closings, turnarounds and charter expansion in communities of color.

“It has ripped black communities apart, and people are becoming more sophisticated and angry,” Brown says.

Last year, Kyle worked in an afterschool program at Fiske Elementary in Woodlawn, a school designated to take in displaced students from Sexton. Kyle says that the students in his program felt as if they were being moved around like pawns on a chess board.

“No one asked them what they felt about the merger,” Kyle says. “They didn’t have a choice at all, and they felt abandoned by the staff at their old school.”
South Shore High School was built right before Mayor Rahm Emanuel came to office. Though it is a selective enrollment school, it has yet to attract and keep higher-achieving students in the neighborhood, a goal that residents hoped for. [Photo by Grace Donnelly]

The first few months at Fiske were rough, Kyle recalls. Students fought and the staff struggled to maintain discipline. Eventually, the environment calmed down. But Kyle worries that the disappointment the students had in the education system will linger.

Like others, Free has mixed feelings about the closings. The schools were failing and “not producing global citizens,” she says. Free, like so many parents, decided not to send her son to a neighborhood high school; instead, she enrolled him at the Chicago Military Academy at Bronzeville, a good 6 miles from South Shore.

Yet what didn’t make sense to her, and still does not, is that immediately after closing schools, neighborhoods with a lot of half-empty buildings got new schools thrust on them.

Byrd-Bennett acknowledges that some community groups are still unhappy about the closings, but adds that parents of displaced students have told her they are pleased with the education their children are getting.

According to CPS statistics, 74 percent of welcoming schools saw their enrollment fall by more than 10 students. Byrd-Bennett said she is not familiar with those figures.

When Emanuel talks about schools now, he emphasizes new programs and statistics that have improved, like graduation rates. The five-year graduation rate this year was 69 percent, up from 58 percent when he came into office.

Kyle says the statistic does not resonate for him or people in his community. Despite areas of South Shore that are wealthier, the community still has blocks crowded with abandoned apartment buildings, boarded-up businesses, high unemployment and too many young guys hanging out with nothing to do all day.

The graduation rate for black males in Chicago still hovers at about 50 percent and is still the lowest compared with other racial groups. A shocking 92 percent of black male teens in Chicago are unemployed, according to a January 2014 Chicago Urban League report.

Sitting at a coffee shop one day, Kyle looks out the window and points to a young man whose shoulders are slouched as he peers down the block. Kyle says the boy’s name is Donte and he worked with him at Fiske. “I told him to go home, but look, he is back out there,” he says.

The combination of dropouts and high unemployment means that illegal activity is commonplace. This reality intertwines with other concerns, including education and the ability to attract businesses to the neighborhood.

It becomes a cycle that is hard for a community to break. “I never saw a good school surrounded by a depressed community,” says Kyle.

karp@catalyst-chicago.org
In South Chicago, an elementary school counselor tells her neighbors that City Hall needs to begin paying attention to the working class. In Avondale, a social studies teacher says an elected school board and a higher minimum wage are essential to improving neighborhoods. In Austin, a special education teacher says she doesn’t want to work at another school that gets turned around or closed.

These Chicago Public Schools educators are each running for aldermanic seats, pushing a progressive agenda with the ambitious goal of unseating incumbents in the February 2015 elections. Though Chicago Teachers Union President Karen Lewis is no longer considering a run against incumbent Mayor Rahm Emanuel, at least eight CTU members have entered the political fray.

You could call it the political year of the teachers.

The CTU House of Delegates, which will endorse aldermanic candidates in stages, voted on Nov. 5 to endorse Cook County Commissioner Jesus “Chuy” Garcia for mayor, along with three of the teacher candidates: Sue Sadlowski Garza, a counselor at Jane Addams Elementary, running in the 10th Ward, which includes South Chicago; Tim Meegan, a social studies teacher at Roosevelt High School, in the 33rd Ward on the North Side; and Tara Stamps, a fourth- and fifth-grade teacher at Jenner Elementary, in the 37th Ward on the West Side. More endorsements will come next month.

Though it has historically been difficult to unseat sitting aldermen—especially those who aligned themselves with City Hall and, in turn, received mayoral backing—the candidates hope that widespread dissatisfaction with Emanuel and his allies will set the stage for grassroots change in February.
Pro-union stickers adorn the bumper of school counselor Sue Sadlowski Garza, one of three aldermanic candidates to win an early endorsement from the Chicago Teachers Union.

[Photo by Grace Donnelly]
“EVERYTHING I’VE DONE UP UNTIL NOW has been instrumental in getting me ready for this moment,” says Sadlowski Garza. “I was really inspired to run by Karen Lewis’ [potential] bid … but had been prodded to do this for a while. I think we really have the potential to change the entire political landscape of the city.”

Candidates have until Nov. 24 to gather signatures and file nominating petitions to run.

On a personal level, Sadlowski Garza and other candidates say events such as the historic 2012 teachers’ strike (the first in Chicago in more than two decades) and the protests over last year’s massive school closures convinced them that they won’t see the changes they want in schools and neighborhoods unless the political system is radically transformed.

On a broader level, the decision by CTU members to run for public office speaks to the union’s wading more deeply into electoral politics. The shift started in 2010, when the progressive Caucus of Rank-and-File Educators (CORE) was first elected into the union’s leadership. The new CTU prides itself on being a “social movement” union concerned with social equity and economic justice, not just the bread-and-butter issues that impact members in schools.

As such, the union and its progressive allies in labor and community organizations consider politics as critical to advance that mission. It’s a strategy that is also playing out on a national level, as progressive unions work to elect pro-labor candidates.

“This is not about one race,” Lewis herself reminded supporters in September. “It’s about building a movement so that our city can be what it’s supposed to be—a city that responds to every single person, a city that responds to every single neighborhood.”

IN A WAY, IT’S NOT SURPRISING that Sadlowski Garza is running for office. She grew up in a radical union home in South Chicago, the same working-class neighborhood where she still lives and works. Her father, Ed Sadlowski, was a steelworker and local union leader who nearly won the presidency of the national United Steelworkers in the 1970s.

“As a child, I spent a lot of days getting woken up at 6 in the morning, dressing in the dark to hand out pamphlets,” says Sadlowski Garza. “I was taught that when you see a picket line, you raise your fist and beat your horn—and then you go to the doughnut shop and bring the guys doughnuts.”

Unionism might be in her blood. But Sadlowski Garza, who worked as a “lunch lady” and teaching assistant before becoming a counselor, says her personal awakening didn’t come until the 2012 strike. There’s a telling photo of Garza from one of the last days of the strike: Pulling out of a parking lot in her silver 2004 Mercury Grand Marquis, which is covered in union signs, Garza is waving her fist out of the car window.

Across town, in the Austin neighborhood on the city’s impoverished West Side, Tammie Vinson says the strike generated a welcome uptick in activism among teachers. That summer, Vinson and other black teachers [who have been hardest hit by layoffs stemming from closings] revitalized a fledgling Black Caucus within the union.

“The CTU has been like a beacon of hope,” Vinson says.

Vinson, a special education teacher running in the 28th Ward, had been organizing against so-called “school actions” (turnarounds, in which the entire staff has to reapply for their jobs, and closures) since 2008. That year, the school where Vinson worked, Mary McLeod Bethune Elementary, was turned around. Vinson lost her job and moved on to Emmet Elementary. Emmet closed last year.

“With both schools, we were actively fighting, mobilizing the parents, going to the board, strategizing for ways to keep it opened,” says Vinson, who now teaches at Oscar DePriest Elementary.

Then, in the neighboring 37th Ward, there’s Stamps, the daughter of a longtime Chicago housing and civil rights activist, Marion Nzinga Stamps. “I was kind of born into revolution and activism. This is what I inherited,” Stamps said at a forum on social justice activism and violence in September.

Next door in the 29th Ward, community activist and parent Zerlina Smith is running for alderman. Smith was an active parent leader in last spring’s boycott of the Illinois Standards Achievement Test (ISAT) at Maria Saucedo Scholastic Academy, where her daughter attends
preschool. She says CTU staffer Jackson Potter, who is widely considered the union’s de facto political strategist, became her mentor.

Other teacher candidates are Dianne Daleiden, a math teacher at North River Elementary School, running in the 40th Ward on the North Side; Guadalupe Rivera, a bilingual teacher at Morrill Elementary School, in the 16th Ward on the Southwest Side; Ed Hershey, a science teacher at Lindblom Math & Science Academy, in the 25th Ward on the Southwest Side; and Marcia Brown-Williams, a recently retired teacher, in the 9th Ward on the Far South Side.

Like the other teacher candidates, Brown-Williams says schools aren't the only issue on her agenda. She's concerned about bringing economic development to her neighborhood, reducing crime and adding affordable housing for families. The 9th Ward includes parts of Altgeld Gardens and Roseland, two communities that are in dire need of an economic boost.

“Don't get me wrong, I’m a big proponent of education,” says Brown-Williams, who resigned from her job in June because of what she considered a “bullying” atmosphere against teachers at her school. “But if you have economic growth in your neighborhood, then you have better schools, more parent involvement and more businesses involved.”
THOUGH SOME OF THE CANDIDATES went through the union’s summer organizing program, union leaders say there was never a concerted effort to get educators to run for office.

“But there was a political conclusion that was drawn going into the school closings fight,” reflects CTU Vice President Jesse Sharkey. “People saw their aldermen taking cowardly positions and just going with the person in power as opposed to supporting the teachers.”

Conversations about forming an independent political organization in Chicago and planning what its agenda would be began during CORE’s annual convention last year.

“We were asking ourselves, do we step out and form an independent political movement or do we work with the Democratic Party?” remembers Meegan, who is running in a ward that includes Avondale and Albany Park. “I’ve mostly voted Democrat my whole life but I’m no longer interested in supporting the party. ... Nobody is representing the working class anymore.”

What was born out of those and other discussions is United Working Families, an independent political organization made up of the CTU, SEIU Healthcare Illinois and the community groups Grassroots Illinois Action and Action Now. Although they share similar names and visions, the group isn’t officially connected to the Working Families Party in New York and New Jersey, which helped progressive Democrat Bill de Blasio win last year’s mayoral race in New York City.

United Working Families’ mission is to support progressive candidates in the 2015 municipal race who agree to champion an elected school board and a $15 minimum wage as part of their campaign platform. (Emanuel is opposed to an elected school board, but supports a $13 minimum wage to be implemented gradually over the next few years.)

Kristen Crowell, the group’s executive director, says United Working Families will likely make early endorsements for the city’s incumbent progressive aldermen. It will also train and vet the nearly three dozen progressive candidates before making endorsement decisions. With those endorsements, of course, will come financial backing.

Crowell notes that United Working Families will have a long-term strategy that goes beyond a single election cycle. That means continuing to hold accountable—and support—progressive candidates who win their races. Plus, she adds, “We need to shift the culture of how we work together after the elections.”

Crowell is known in progressive circles for her role in helping to put together organized labor’s recall effort against
Wisconsin Gov. Scott Walker, whose policies ended most collective bargaining rights for public sector employees. A year ago, Crowell moved to Chicago from Wisconsin, in part to get away from what she describes as a depressing political atmosphere that formed after the recall failed.

Crowell was attracted to the movement she saw building in Chicago since the CTU strike. “There’s hope here,” she says. “The fight is alive and well.”

In the coming weeks, United Working Families will form a political action committee that can start serious fundraising. Crowell says she expects the PAC will be able to easily collect donations from organized labor and “lots of progressive small donors” from across the country.

IT’S NOT UNHEARD OF for union members or labor leaders to run for political office. Among the aldermanic candidates in the 11th Ward, for example, is John Tomiello, who spent more than a decade working to unionize state court reporters. (“It’s not just Rahm,” he says. “It’s the City Council. They’re anti-union.”) And a handful of former local teachers union presidents have been elected to the state legislatures in Missouri, Virginia and Wisconsin.

But those who study organized labor and politics say that what’s happening with the CTU and the upcoming elections is part of a larger national trend. In locales as diverse as Vermont; Minneapolis; New Haven, Conn.; and Jackson, Miss., among other places, progressive unions have encouraged their members to try to unseat incumbent Democrats who don’t value labor concerns.

“It reflects the disenchantment with [President Barack] Obama, six years of lowered expectations and disappointments” in the Democratic Party, says Steve Early, an author and former union organizer who studies labor movements. “People are trying to intervene at the local level, where mobilized union members and local issues can energize voters and you can overcome the disadvantage of not being able to spend as much on politics.”

In Chicago, unions have historically held an important role in fundraising and getting out the vote for candidates who were friendly to organized labor. With few exceptions, that meant joining the Democratic Party coalition and supporting that party’s candidates. Trades unions were especially loyal to City Hall because of the benefits of prevailing wages and yearlong work; in addition, unions tended to support the incumbent politicians who controlled the city’s purse strings.

Things started to change after 2006, when then-Mayor Richard M. Daley exercised his first and only veto on the so-called “big box” ordinance. Unions—including now-mayoral contender Bob Fioretti—over incumbents who had Daley’s backing.

The trend has accelerated since Emanuel’s election in 2011 as “labor unions have become disaffected with City Hall, thinking that it doesn’t represent them,” says Dick Simpson, a political scientist at the University of Illinois-Chicago and former city alderman.

Still, organized labor is divided. The city’s trade unions and the Teamsters have already given the mayor and his PAC hundreds of thousands of dollars—even though the deadline for candidates to file isn’t until Nov. 24. It’s too early to tell who many of the other unions will support.

IN SEPTEMBER, the CTU’s House of Delegates voted to allow union staff to provide some technical help to members who are considering electoral runs. The teachers union poured money into both campaigns, while also encouraging members to write their own checks, help out at phone banks and knock on doors, says Stacy Davis Gates, the CTU’s political director.

“To be perfectly honest, this past spring was the most intense amount of work we’ve done for an electoral cycle before. It was intense, intentional and focused,” she says. The upcoming electoral work promises to be more intense.

Meanwhile, the teacher candidates are putting in long hours after school and on weekends to gather signatures they need to qualify as candidates. It’s a lot of work, admits Daleiden, but people are getting the message.

Daleiden tells voters she wants to fight the privatization of public schools and “stop corporations from siphoning public money from public assets.”

“I’m not out there knocking on doors to save my job in a public school,” she says. “I’m knocking on doors because I think children deserve quality schools and we all need to stand up to this as community members.”

msanchez@catalyst-chicago.org
When he ran for mayor back in 2011, former Chicago City Clerk Miguel del Valle was considered a favorite among progressives but a long shot to win. He got 9 percent of the vote, coming in a distant third place behind Rahm Emanuel—who won outright with 55 percent—and Gery Chico, with 24 percent. Del Valle and Chico split much of Chicago’s Latino vote.

Since then, del Valle has largely stayed out of the headlines, though he’s keeping busy. Gov. Pat Quinn appointed him to the Illinois Commerce Commission in February 2013. In addition, he remains deeply committed to education issues, which he championed as a state senator. He chairs the Illinois P-20 Council, which advises the state on how best to align the educational system from preschool to college; is the vice chairman of the Illinois Student Assistance Commission; and sits on the boards of the education advocacy group Advance Illinois and the Federation for Community Schools.

In a recent interview, del Valle gave his take on the upcoming election—including the 11th-hour entry of Cook County Commissioner Jesus “Chuy” Garcia into the race—and the state of Latino political power in the Windy City. The following is an edited version of the hour-long conversation.
Why aren’t you running this time around? Because I don’t have millions of dollars. I already went down that path. Gery Chico raised more than $3 million and he still couldn’t compete with the $12 or $13 million that Rahm spent. And the business sector here in this city, the corporate sector, is firmly behind the guy who they feel is best going to protect their interests. You think the business folks out there want to hear what I have to say?

How is this race different from the one in 2011? In 2011, it was an open seat. No incumbent, so there was no record to look at. And you had four candidates that really competed and stayed in it until the end. There were lots of small organizations out there that sponsored candidate forums. I went to most of them. Rahm Emanuel went to none of them. And while we were spending our time in these forums, sometimes with just a handful of people in the audience, Rahm Emanuel was running his television commercials. He had a voice that could be heard in people’s living rooms throughout Chicago and there was really nothing to counter that.

What were the issues back then? At those forums I, along with other candidates, talked about the neglect of our communities and the need to elect a mayor that would prioritize neighborhood development over downtown development. When you look at tax-increment financing (TIFs) and other methods for stimulating economic activity, we see that not nearly enough has happened in the neighborhoods. Yet those tools that were established to develop blighted areas were used downtown. So those kinds of issues needed to be talked about. Certainly the schools needed to be talked about. Back then, I talked about how we were developing a dual system of public education. And that’s exactly what’s happening with the dramatic increase in charter schools and the reduction in resources to neighborhood schools.

Has anything about these issues changed under Emanuel’s tenure? They’ve been accelerated. Look, there have been some jobs created. But they’re jobs in information technology, in the financial sector. I don’t see a whole lot of folks from my neighborhood working on LaSalle Street. And while this administration says we’re developing more International Baccalaureate programs and magnet schools, the fact of the matter is that some of that is being done to accommodate the newer population. I’m not saying that it shouldn’t happen. What I’m saying is there has to be a balance.

So when you’re doing all of this and creating the 1871s [a hub for digital startups] and the high-tech sector and trying to attract all of this economic activity, you’ve got to have activity going on at the neighborhood level. You’ve got to plan for attracting more manufacturing jobs. You’ve got to train folks in the neighborhood high schools for college and careers, but also ensure that they have opportunities to develop some skills to go into advanced manufacturing.

Aren’t some of these job trends inevitable, though? We’ve seen an economy that has a very small percentage of people doing better than ever, while the rest of us, the middle class, is shrinking and the low-income population growing. Chicago is a reflection of what’s happening nationally in many respects, but it’s up to the political leadership to tackle these issues head-on and advocate for the kinds of policies that allow you to improve some of this.

Some folks will say this is inevitable and just the normal natural flow of things. To a certain extent that’s true. You can’t stand in the way of progress, some will say. I don’t want to stand in the way of progress. I just want to make sure everyone is brought along.

We need to hold every elected official accountable for what they’re doing to ensure that promise of opportunity remains for all.

What’s been the impact on Latino neighborhoods? This is the sad part. When Latinos had no political representation, those of us who demanded political representation stood together and fought. We won some of those battles, and today we have political representation even though from a demographic standpoint we’re still underrepresented. But we’ve kind of reached a critical mass. We’ve been able to create Latino caucuses, yet sometimes it feels like we have less power than we did before, because Latinos and elected officials have focused on their own careers and agendas and have made accommodations with the power structure that allowed lots of things to happen around them. Look at the kind of residential development that has taken place in the West Town area or in Pilsen.

Yes, many of these elected officials advocate on issues like immigration reform, but the holistic approach that we envisioned back when we had no political representation has gone by the wayside.

How do Hispanic voters feel about Emanuel? I know a lot of people appreciated his promise to welcome a number of undocumented Central American children who’d been detained at the Mexico-US border earlier this summer. Look, he’s going to make himself attractive to them. That’s the sad part about politics and the huge amount of money that is involved. You have candidates that because of their multi-million dollar war chest are able to create new images of themselves in the voters’ eyes and the past is forgotten.

It would have been nice if he had taken those kinds of positions when he was in the White House and in Congress, where he actually advised his colleagues not to go anywhere near immigration reform. Rather than thinking of what he did or failed to do during those years, they’re going to think, ‘Wait a minute, he said he’d take the Central American kids? Therefore he must be our friend.’ That’s human nature.

Cook County Commissioner Jesus “Chuy” Garcia recently threw his hat into the mayoral race. What do you think? We’ll have a much livelier discussion around the key issues, which is what is desperately needed in the City of Chicago.

How much do you think he’ll be able to pull in the Latino vote? There are lots of Latinos who will support a Latino name on the ballot the same way African-Americans supported Barack Obama for the U.S. Senate in the state of Illinois and in the presidency. It’s about empowering an electorate.

But Chuy’s reach is broader than that. When he supports an increase in the minimum wage, this affects all people, all residents. This is not a Latino proposal, but
a proposal to benefit all Chicagoans. That’s the case whether we’re talking about the minimum wage or how TIF dollars are used or the repression caused by the abuse of the placement of street cameras that originally were for the purpose of increasing safety but have been used by this administration for the purpose of generating revenue.

Do you support him? I’ll vote for him. I was ready to vote for [Chicago Teachers Union President] Karen Lewis, but she’s not in the race; Chuy is in the race. I’ve talked with him at length. It’s a big job just getting him on the ballot but I’m hoping some labor groups get behind him, that teachers and others will get behind him. The dynamics are always different. Their personalities are different. Karen had a different kind of base than Chuy does. How those two meld has yet to be determined.

Did you think Lewis had a shot against Emanuel? The dynamic Karen brought in was that there was no other African-American out there working it. And because she took on Emanuel as Chicago Teachers Union president and beat him, a lot of people out there said, ‘Wow, if she beat him once she can beat him again.’ There was a feeling out there that Karen would be the most competitive. Not that she would necessarily win, but there would have been a competitive race where these issues could be debated. Where you could force Emanuel to answer the question: How are you going to uplift these neighborhoods? Give us your plan for a second term. Those are the kinds of hard questions that need to be debated within an electoral process, because after it’s over, those tough questions are not going to be asked. The City Council, filled with lapdogs? They’re not going to ask those questions.

Are you saying that even if Karen ran and lost ... It’s an essential component of our democracy to have a competition and electoral process that allows for a debate on issues that are of concern to people. If you don’t have that opportunity, then we all lose.

Ald. Bob Fioretti is running on a progressive platform. What do you think is going to come of his campaign? Well, I’m glad he’s there. He’s a nice guy. But he doesn’t have the standing that Karen had. I’m sure that Bob is going to raise some of these issues. But having personally gone through this many times over a 25-year period, it’s not enough to raise questions—it’s how are you able to get people to listen. And how do you engage a wide audience that then translates into having a lot of questioners out there? People asking those questions in the barbershop, at the grocery store, in front of schools where they’re waiting for kids to get out when the bell rings.

What advice would you give to Rahm right now, if he would listen? Well, he doesn’t listen.
Welcome LSC members

Dear Local School Council Member,

Welcome to Catalyst Chicago or, in the case of continuing LSC members, welcome back.

Catalyst is an independent, nonprofit news organization that has covered the progress, problems and politics of school reform in Chicago since 1990.

We are pleased to offer you a variety of FREE products and services—from printed publications to public forums.

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Then share your experiences by commenting online about our stories.

Questions? Contact Community Editor Victoria Jones at vjones@catalyst-chicago.org or (312) 673-3866.

Best regards,

Linda Lenz
Founder & Publisher

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