

### Desegregation Mission Improbable

By Al Swanson

Chicago, IL, Dec. 23, 2004 (UPI) -- A 1980 federal desegregation case may result in more than 300 minority students in Chicago attending schools with the whitest enrollments next semester, but it's too late for integration in the nation's third-largest public school district.

It's a matter of demographics. Around 91 percent of the 431,000 students enrolled in the city's public schools are non-white. The opportunity to achieve racial balance system-wide evaporated over the last generation as white families moved to the suburbs throughout the 1960s, '70s and '80s -- but a 24-year-old desegregation battle is still being waged in the courts.

Two weeks ago U.S. District Judge Charles P. Kocoras gave Chicago's public schools 10 days to find seats for African-American and Hispanic children in substantially white public schools.

The judge said administrators failed to offer any racial transfers to integrate schools last fall.

"It's hard to believe there are no open seats," said Kocoras after CPS said it had done everything within its power to promote integration.

Federal officials calculated there should be between 1,600 and 4,400 slots for racial transfers at 39 substantially white neighborhood schools.

Schools Chief Executive Officer Arne Duncan vowed to take a second look promising to "do what's legal, practical and educationally the right thing for children."

The Chicago Public Schools Wednesday offered 308 minority students the opportunity to

transfer into 33 elementary schools with white enrollments of at least 40 percent -- some magnet schools that attract the best students and score highest on standardized tests.

The system has more than 600 schools and spent \$2.5 billion for education last year.

Each of the 33 schools is being asked to accept nine new minority students, none more than 15, but students would not be bused to classes unless there is an existing bus route operating. Parents have until Jan. 14 to apply for the 308 slots, which will be decided by lottery.

Some of the slots identified were not used by students who qualified for transfers from their poor-performing neighborhood schools under the federal No Child Left Behind Act.

CPS officials say they are confident the proposed compromise will satisfy the Justice Department.

"We are absolutely committed to integration and meeting the goals of the consent decree, but we don't want to compromise educational quality," said Barbara Eason-Watkins, chief education officer for the Chicago Public Schools. "Most of these schools are full or near full, but we have managed to identify a few additional slots without excessively overburdening schools."

Using a lottery to determine educational opportunities for 308 kids in 2005 falls tremendously short of goals envisioned by those who sued to integrate Chicago public schools 24 years ago.

The American Civil Liberties Union, which monitors the desegregation case, said more empty seats may be available and that CPS should have canvassed each individual school.

While there has been significant improvement in the decade since Mayor Richard M. Daley took over a big-city public school system labeled the worst in the nation, integration in Chicago has mostly been mixing black with Latino students.

With just 9 percent white enrollment, not enough white students remain. In 1980, 19 percent of public school students were white.

An all-time high of 45.3 percent of Chicago public school students scored at or above grade level on the Illinois Standards Achievement Test in 2004, an improvement of 3.5 points, and the district dropout rate declined to 11.9 percent.

Duncan is hoping the Renaissance 2010 initiative to reconstitute or replace 100 under-performing schools with charter, contract and performance schools next fall will spur further improvement.

But thousands of minority students who don't win January's lottery to attend a better school may simply be out of luck. Kocoras recognized that and ordered the district to reallocate some desegregation funds to racially isolated schools.

Members of Congress sent a letter to outgoing U.S. Secretary of Education Rod Paige Wednesday objecting to the department's decision barring the public schools from directly providing tutoring services to struggling students.

CPS said it might have to discontinue tutoring for 56,000 children in the middle of the school year. The NCLB law prohibits teachers in districts in need of improvement from providing tutoring services to students. The district would have to use much more expensive private vendors for tutoring.

Reps. Rahm Emanuel, D-Ill., George Miller, D-Calif., Jan Schakowsky, D-Ill., Jesse Jackson Jr., D-Ill., Danny Davis, D-Ill., Luis Gutierrez, D-Ill., Bobby Rush, D-Ill., and Sen. Dick Durbin, D-Ill., called the Education Department's decision "a tremendous waste of resources."

"Many of the same teachers who tutor within CPS are often hired by private vendors at a cost of about four times as much per student -- meaning far fewer students will actually benefit from

these services as a result of the department's action," the letter said.

An analysis by the Chicago Tribune found the gap in school district spending per student in Illinois is growing after narrowing in the late 1990s.

More than 80 percent of school districts ran deficits in the 2002-2003 academic year.

The top 10 percent of school districts in the state spent an average \$12,705 a year per student, while the bottom 10 percent of districts spent \$5,746 per pupil.

Affluent Lake Forest north of Chicago spent \$20,173 per student last year, compared to just \$4,829 per student in the Will County school district 70 miles south.

Chicago spent an average \$5,336 per student in elementary schools and \$6,980 per student in high schools.

Reliance on property taxes divided the state between educational haves and have-nots.

The state contributed 29.9 percent of school funding in 2003, one of the lowest contributions of any state government in the country. Legislation has been introduced to overhaul the school-finance system by hiking the state income and business taxes.