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CPS IG Finds Hundreds of CPS Students Were Automatically Routed into JROTC — a Supposedly Voluntary Program

Chicago — Over the last two school years, hundreds of CPS freshmen have been automatically enrolled in Junior Reserve Officers' Training Corps classes even though JROTC is supposed to be voluntary, a CPS OIG performance review has determined.

At some CPS high schools, JROTC enrollment often operated like a pre-checked box: students were automatically placed in JROTC and they had to get themselves removed from it if they did not want it. Sometimes this was possible; sometimes it was not. Some opt-out procedures were never explained or not easily achieved when attempted.

Table 1: Schools with More Than 90% of 2019-20 or 2020-21 Freshmen in JROTC

High School	Has Attendance Boundary	2019-20 % 9th Graders in JROTC	2020-21 % 9th Graders in JROTC
School A	Citywide	100%	100%
School B	Yes	99%	100%
School C	Yes	98%	100%
School D	Yes	96%	100%
School E	Yes	100%	98%
School F	Citywide	100%	96%
School G*	Citywide	N/A	94%
School H	Yes	92%	92%
School I*	Yes	100%	N/A

*School G's program began in 2020-21; School I's ended in that SY.

Source: OIG Analysis of Freshmen with Semester Final Grades in JROTC or PE at JROTC-Program Schools and CPS Attendance Boundary Data.

Specifically, for two school years in a row, four of 37 CPS schools with JROTC programs enrolled 100 percent of their freshmen in JROTC — a clear sign the program was not voluntary. Another four schools enrolled 91 to 99 percent of ninth graders in JROTC, an analysis by the OIG's Performance Analysis Unit showed.

Thus, more than one in five CPS schools with JROTC programs enrolled all or almost all of their freshmen in JROTC in each of the last two school years.

Many students from schools with high freshman JROTC enrollment rates told the OIG they were automatically put in ninth-grade JROTC. Often this was in lieu of

Physical Education. JROTC can fulfill CPS's PE graduation requirement, but some JROTC students said they were never offered freshman PE.

So, to obtain a needed graduation credit, typically students had to wear a JROTC uniform once a week, participate in JROTC drills, and follow their school's JROTC grooming standards. These were graduation hurdles freshmen in most CPS high schools did not have to navigate.

Students from five neighborhood schools were among those who said they were automatically enrolled in JROTC as freshmen. Several were surprised to learn their neighborhood school required JROTC in ninth grade. That included one girl who said she was unable to opt out of freshman JROTC even though she and her mother raised religious objections to it, based on their Jehovah's Witnesses faith.

The strongest predictor of a high freshman JROTC enrollment rate was the size of a school's total enrollment, with smaller enrollments tending to make such rates more likely, an OIG correlation analysis found. In addition, schools with 90+ percent JROTC freshman enrollment rates were all in underutilized buildings and almost all of them were on the South or West Sides of Chicago. Such rates did not occur on Chicago's North Side, the OIG found.

These findings raise obvious concerns about inequity and appear to be inconsistent with a new [CPS PE policy](#) that calls for "equitable access for all CPS students" to PE. The policy goes into effect next school year.

The OIG issued 10 recommendations as a result of its performance review, and CPS has indicated it largely supports them. CPS's response to each recommendation is summarized in the OIG's Significant Activity Report.

In particular, CPS told the OIG that all high schools must offer students a PE option "consistent with" the CPS PE policy. In addition, CPS said, "no school should automatically enroll any student or class of students into the JROTC program unless it is a feature of the School's program" and the practice is disclosed in recruitment and enrollment materials and on school websites. The one JROTC program school that enrolled all students into JROTC as part of its school design will be offering PE next year, CPS indicated.

CPS has the largest JROTC program in the nation, CPS JROTC leaders said. Over the last three school years, on average, one of every 14 CPS high school students was in JROTC, an OIG analysis indicated.

CPS JROTC is supposed to be "voluntary," local JROTC officials told the OIG. However, an OIG analysis of JROTC and PE final semester grades showed that in the last two school years, eight CPS high schools with JROTC programs have been enrolling an inordinately high percent of freshmen — more than 90 percent — in JROTC. In 2019-20, the next closest JROTC freshman enrollment rate among JROTC program schools was 56 percent; most schools that year had rates of less than 35 percent.

CPS's six military academies were excluded from the OIG's analysis because all their students take JROTC as part of the school design.

Principals offered various explanations for their high freshman JROTC numbers. Most of them involved difficulty finding PE teachers or having to cut PE teachers due to budget constraints. This usually meant freshmen were placed in JROTC in lieu of PE because JROTC is allowed statewide as a substitute for PE — a CPS high school graduation requirement.

A few principals conceded that JROTC saves their school money. That's because CPS Central Office and the U.S. Department of Defense share the cost of JROTC military instructors, while PE teachers are funded with Student-Based-Budgeting dollars used by principals to craft their school budgets. Thus, JROTC instructors are “free” to individual schools while CPS last school year paid nearly \$6 million in salaries and benefits for the 97 JROTC instructors in its 37 JROTC program schools. Last school year, CPS covered 69 percent of such costs while the DoD covered 31 percent.

A former counselor at a school with high JROTC freshman enrollment said that under SBB, the smaller the student body, the fewer options a school can offer. He warned that until CPS solves “the Student-Based-Budgeting problem,” it will not solve the JROTC freshman enrollment rate problem.

CPS told the OIG that “All school budgets support schools’ ability to fund PE offerings.” CPS officials noted that small schools can receive CPS equity grants and have the flexibility of using prior-year enrollment for calculating budgets in a year of an enrollment decline. However, CPS added that after special May 2022 principal training on JROTC, principals may ask for extra funds through their Network Chiefs.

Automatic freshman enrollment in JROTC also could be a way to help schools maintain the minimum JROTC enrollment level needed to keep their JROTC programs. Asked to explain an unusually high freshman JROTC enrollment rate, one CPS principal said ninth graders had been placed in JROTC instead of PE that school year in an attempt to “save” the program, which had been suffering dwindling enrollment. After all, neither the current PE policy nor the new one, effective next school year, expressly prohibits such automatic enrollment of students into JROTC.

CPS JROTC officials said any automatic enrollment of JROTC freshmen was a school “programming issue” rather than a JROTC issue because schools — not JROTC officials — schedule students into JROTC.

JROTC consent forms signed by parents indicated students were attending JROTC voluntarily, local JROTC officials said. However, none of the military instructors at the eight schools with inordinately high JROTC freshman enrollment rates could provide a requested random sample of signed parent consent forms. Some JROTC instructors said they had discarded the forms — in a few cases out of what was described, curiously, as Covid-19 safety concerns.

In addition, the parent consent form used by most of the eight schools contained so little information about JROTC that it did not constitute informed consent when signed, the OIG found. In response, CPS and JROTC have been working on a new JROTC consent form.

Principals of schools with high freshman JROTC enrollment rates spoke highly of JROTC. Among other things, they liked its emphasis on leadership-building skills, its scholarship opportunities and the JROTC field trips it offered “under-exposed” students.

Many students at such schools also gave JROTC high marks. Some liked learning how to be a leader, or marching, or receiving badges for achievement. One even liked the uniforms. “It’s an interesting program and you get to do fun things,” said one student.

But some students did not like or want JROTC. A top complaint was that freshmen should have been given a choice between PE and JROTC. Even students who liked JROTC made such comments. As one explained: “I liked it, but in the beginning I didn’t like being forced to have the class. . . . JROTC is not for everyone. It should not be forced on people.”

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