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Contact: IG Nicholas Schuler at (773) 534-9400

CPS IG Calls for End to Free Montessori Pre-K Perk Now Given Residents of CPS's Wealthiest Attendance Area

Chicago — Children living in the most affluent attendance area in CPS are receiving special priority access to two years of free, full-day Montessori pre-kindergarten, worth an average \$30,000 in the private market, the Office of the CPS Inspector General has found.

CPS should stop giving families residing in the Oscar Mayer Magnet attendance area in Lincoln Park special access to such a perk for three- and four-year-olds, according to a Significant Activity Report released today by CPS Inspector General Nicholas Schuler.

A performance review by the OIG's Performance Analysis Unit found it unjustifiable that CPS's wealthiest attendance area should receive a unique inside track to free pre-K, let alone two years of free, full-day Montessori pre-K.

In response, CPS said it plans to conduct a 10-year demographic analysis of Mayer by August 1 to determine whether the district should discontinue Mayer's pre-K funding in the 2019-20 school year or change Mayer's boundaries. Any boundary changes would be made with community input and not voted on until the February 2019 Board meeting.

"We are grateful for CPS's swift response and glad the district clearly is taking our report seriously," Schuler said.

A UNIQUE PERK FOR CPS'S MOST AFFLUENT ATTENDANCE AREA

CPS usually awards free pre-K based on an applicant's need. Only children residing within the boundary of Oscar Mayer Magnet, at 2250 N. Clifton, get special priority access to free, entry-level pre-K based solely on their attendance area.

This is the result of CPS's decision to let Mayer keep its attendance boundary when Mayer was converted in 2008 to a magnet school with an entry-level program of Montessori pre-K for three-year-olds. Currently, siblings and attendance area students get first dibs on all seats for three-year-olds. In three of the last five school years, they have crowded out all non-sibling and non-neighborhood children.

An analysis by the OIG's Performance Analysis Unit determined that Mayer's boundary contains the highest average median family income by census tract of any attendance area in CPS. The median family income of Mayer's attendance area is nearly \$178,000 a year, the OIG found.

In addition, Mayer's entire attendance area is considered "Tier 4," or the most affluent of the four socio-economic tiers used during most entry-level magnet selection processes to ensure socioeconomic diversity.

The full-day Montessori pre-K that Mayer students now enjoy averages more than \$30,000 over two years in the private market, an OIG survey of nine private Montessori pre-Ks within three miles of Mayer found. That's excluding additional fees that ran as high as \$2,850 for a family's first enrollee at one private school.

Mayer's Montessori pre-K program currently costs CPS about \$700,000 a year in salaries and benefits, the OIG's Performance Analysis Unit calculated. However, taxpayers are footing that bill for some pre-K students who later leave CPS.

The OIG found that 31 percent of the three-year-olds who joined Mayer's pre-K in the fall of 2014 were no longer in CPS this school year, when they should have been in first grade. They had moved on to everything from pricey private schools and some area Catholic schools to suburban Northfield, Washington, D.C., California and even the United Kingdom, CPS student records indicated.

A PROPHETIC CONCERN

Mayer's conversion from a neighborhood school to a magnet school with a boundary occurred after CPS received a federal Magnet Schools Assistance Program (MSAP) grant to stock Mayer with a pre-K to fifth grade Montessori program and a sixth to eighth grade International Baccalaureate Middle Years Programme.

This programming was part of a CPS attempt to boost Mayer's enrollment, reduce "minority group isolation" and increase the white student body at a school that was, at the time, underutilized and nearly 90 percent minority, according to CPS's 2007 MSAP grant application.

CPS's application envisioned converting Mayer to a citywide magnet to offer these programs. But vocal area residents later convinced CPS officials to make Mayer a magnet school with an attendance boundary so they would have a better shot at Mayer's new offerings, the OIG was told. Currently, only eight of the system's 38 magnet elementary schools, including Mayer, have boundaries.

Mayer had so many openings at the time that CPS officials assumed it had more than enough room to accommodate non-neighborhood students via magnet lotteries. According to CPS's 2007 grant application, the school had room for more than 400 additional students. Its capacity was 948 but its enrollment was only 525, the CPS application stated.

However, during a March 2008 Board meeting, then-CPS Board President Rufus Williams voiced fears that after “we’ve created this wonderful school,” the largely-white Mayer neighborhood eventually would fill all seats and the school’s heavily African-American population from outside the neighborhood would no longer have access, transcripts of that meeting showed.

A draft Board Report required that an annual “demographic assessment” be done to determine if Mayer should stay a magnet school with a boundary or convert to a citywide magnet, but Williams wanted to “encapsulate” an emphasis on trying to keep some diversity at the school. He wanted to ensure that “eight, 10 years from now, the institutional memory” of his concerns had not disappeared.

As a result, CPS officials added two sentences to the 2008 [Board Report](#) specifically requiring that the CEO “or his designee shall submit” the demographic assessment with the Board Secretary by September 1 of each year and that the report should include an analysis of Mayer’s compliance with CPS’s desegregation consent decree.

Despite these public assurances, in the 10 years since, not one demographic assessment has ever been filed with the Board Secretary.

Williams has since told the OIG he would be “extremely annoyed” if he were Board President today and an annual report promised to the Board had not been conducted in a decade. He also said he believes the Board Report’s language was “purposefully obfuscatory.” Its vagueness, the OIG found, created an accountability vacuum.

DEMOGRAPHIC CHANGES

By the end of the three-year federal grant, as CPS had expected, Mayer’s diversity was more evenly distributed between black, white and Hispanic children.

But since then, as Williams predicted, Mayer’s white population continued to soar while its black population, particularly from outside Mayer’s attendance area, continued to plummet.

Over the last decade, Mayer’s racial composition has changed from 16 percent white to 71 percent white, and from 52 percent black to eight percent black. In addition, its enrollment has risen substantially, from 497 to 760. It is no longer underutilized.

Based on socioeconomic tiers used by CPS after a judge dissolved the CPS desegregation consent decree, Mayer also has lost socio-economic diversity even though the goal of the [current magnet admissions policy](#) is to promote both socioeconomic diversity and, “to the extent permitted by law,” the racial diversity achieved under the desegregation consent decree.

The earliest available tier data indicates that since the 2011-12 school year, the percent of 3-year-olds attending Mayer from Tier 4 — the most affluent of four socioeconomic tiers — has risen from 74 percent to 98 percent this school year.

Mayer's current eighth grade is the last pre-magnet class in the school. After it graduates, Mayer's socioeconomic and racial diversity will almost certainly continue to move in exactly the opposite direction from that promoted in the CPS magnet policy, even though Mayer holds the title of "magnet" school and receives extra funds for doing so. This large decrease in diversity is what the annual demographic assessment was intended to keep in check.

OUTSIDER ADMISSION CHANCES

Currently, under a [Mayer Board Report](#) updated in 2010, CPS awards all Mayer entry-level Montessori seats for three-year-olds to siblings and neighborhood students in Mayer's attendance area first. Only if additional seats remain does CPS select non-neighborhood three-year-olds from socioeconomic-tier waiting lists.

This school year, siblings and neighborhood students filled all 64 slots for Mayer three-year-olds so the 686 non-attendance area Mayer applicants on socioeconomic-tier waitlists were out of luck.

In fact, in the last five school years, only four three-year-olds have been admitted to Mayer from socioeconomic-tier waitlists.

Such applicants would have faced a much more even playing field if they had applied to Drummond or Suder, two citywide magnets with pre-K Montessori programs that select their three-year-olds from citywide waiting lists that include socioeconomic tiers. Like Mayer, those two schools became magnets after winning a MSAP grant.

RECOMMENDATIONS AND CPS'S RESPONSE

As a result of its performance review, the OIG made three recommendations to CPS on April 17, as listed below. CPS's May 18 written response is summarized below:

- OIG Recommendation 1: As soon as possible, CPS should halt funding of the free two-year Montessori pre-K program at Oscar Mayer that uses an admissions process skewed to favor the children in Mayer's attendance area — the most affluent in CPS.

CPS Response: CPS said it would conduct a 10-year demographic assessment of Mayer by August 1 and, "upon the completion of the assessment, a determination will be made regarding the continued funding of the pre-K program." Any enrollment changes would not begin until the 2019-20 school year. In addition, a demographic assessment will be filed annually beginning September 1.

- OIG Recommendation 2: CPS, the School Board and the Mayer community should consider other options, including converting Mayer to a *citywide* pre-K to 8 magnet, as the 2008 Board Report envisioned. Another option would be to follow the format of Clissold Elementary, which offers K-5 Montessori and an IB Middle Years Programme in grades 6 to 8 but no Montessori pre-K.

Clissold is a neighborhood school with Montessori and IB “magnet cluster” programs.

CPS Response: CPS has said that if its 10-year demographic assessment shows a need to consider changes to Mayer’s boundaries, a “community engagement plan” will be developed by September 1 to “consider all viable options.” Any such plan would be implemented from September 2018 through January 2019. Any proposed recommendations that emerged from this process would be considered by the School Board at its February 2019 meeting.

- OIG Recommendation 3: The CEO should work with the Board Secretary to create a joint process that will record “designees” charged with producing information for the Board and will track the production of such information.

CPS Response: CPS has agreed to collaborate with the Board Secretary in developing a process for recording “designees” going forward and for tracking their required reports to the Board.

A copy of the OIG’s Significant Activity Report is attached, along with a transcript of relevant portions of the March 2008 Board meeting. All can be found online at the OIG’s website: cpsoig.org.

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