



BEN STRAUSS

Protesters gather outside Wrigley Field during a Chicago Cubs playoff game.

Illinois Schools On Uneven Playing Field

BY BEN STRAUSS

CHICAGO—WHEN THE CHICAGO CUBS hosted Game 1 of their opening round playoff series on Oct. 1, more than 40,000 fans packed Wrigley Field. Outside the ballpark, another group was also trying to make history—roughly 1,500 parents, students, teachers and activists protested for state educational reforms.

Crowded around the foot of a flatbed pick-up truck, the rally was the latest in an educational reform movement, led by State Sen. James L. Meeks, a reverend at Salem Baptist Church on Chicago's South Side.

For six years, Meeks and others have tried to increase media attention and put pressure on Illinois lawmakers to address disparities in dollars spent per child in

wealthy suburban Chicago public school districts versus dollars spent in the inner city and downstate.

“We do not want the City of Chicago to pay more attention to the Cubs and White Sox than to their kids,” Meeks said at the demonstration.

Although Illinois has the fourth highest GDP in the country—at \$741 billion—it ranks 49th in public school funding, forcing local communities to foot the bill for public education.

School districts in high property wealth communities in Illinois provide more than 80 percent of school funding through property taxes. Low-income districts hover near 45 percent, resulting in an average of \$4,186 less spent per student, ac-

ording to a recent study by the Center for Tax and Budget Accountability (CTBA), a nonprofit research and advocacy group.

In some cases, the disparities are greater.

The wealthy suburban school district of Winnetka spends close to \$17,000 per student at New Trier High School, says Meeks. A large percentage of this comes from property-tax revenue. Meanwhile, many districts in the inner city struggle to break \$10,000, and are often unable to meet basic needs.

In August, on the first day of class for the Chicago Public Schools, Meeks led 1,400 inner city students to demonstrate at New Trier High. The next day, he held a rally in downtown Chicago.

The scope of the funding quandary is expansive. Eighty-one percent of Illinois students live in low-income districts, according to the CTBA. Students of color are also disproportionately affected.

When a district cannot provide 93 percent of what the state deems a minimum funding level per child, it is referred to as “Foundation Level.” Ninety-three percent of African Americans and 66 percent of Latinos attend schools in Foundation Level districts.

What’s more, funding disparities result in less qualified teachers and lower ACT scores, the CTBA found.

In the mostly white neighborhood of Wrigleyville—where the Cubs play—the protest was a predominantly African-American affair.

Beverly Williams took a bus from the far North Side to the rally with her 6-year-old granddaughter. After raising four kids in the public schools, Williams says she sees her granddaughter’s generation also struggling.

“I talked to a teacher who said they don’t have books for every subject,” she says. “This is so important because it’s our next generation, and if we don’t help them, what kind of generation are we going to have?”

Brandon Saunders, who attends Morgan Park Academy on the South Side, says he hoped the venue would allow him to reach a new demographic.

"I believe it is a huge step because people who came to see the game walked past and I heard them say this was awesome," he says. "I think we did impact people even if we didn't touch the politicians."

Meeks' latest state Senate proposal calls for an increase in the state's income and corporate taxes to help lower property tax rates in low property wealth communities, where rates are 7.84 percent, compared to 2.12 percent in the wealthiest neighborhoods. The bill is pending.

The movement, however, continues to draw attention.

A handful of New Trier students joined the protest after hearing Meeks explain the issue in Winnetka. Senior Matt McCambridge spoke to the crowd, announcing his plans to create the Illinois Council of Students, a student-run organization that will foster dialogue between the suburbs and the city.

By the first week in October, the Cubs were swept out of the playoffs. But Meeks said he has no plans to go so quietly: "We'll protest at every public event until something is fixed." ■

Engineer Students Talking Trash

STUDENT MEMBERS OF Engineers Without Borders (EWB) at the University of Minnesota can be forgiven for talking trash these days: Their effort to turn garbage into economic opportunity for Haitians just earned them a \$25,000 advocacy award from Keen Footwear.

The student engineers are exploring a way to recycle thousands of used plastic water sachets littering the streets and beaches of Haiti, a culturally rich but materially destitute island country in the Caribbean. (Seventy-six percent of Haitians live on less than \$2 per day, and half of all Haitians suffer from malnutrition, according to the U.N. World Food Program.)

The students say they hope to use that plastic, in turn, to make composting toilets for urban families. If successful, the project could enhance sanitation, reduce pollution and, eventually, create jobs for Haitians.

"We're trying to take refuse and make it into something useful," says Nathan Knutson, a second-year master's student in mechanical engineering. He says the recycling programs used in the United States use large-scale sorting, shredding and injection-molding machines—all of which use tremendous amounts of energy. In Haiti, the students want to bring the ability to recycle to something that can be hand-operated, says Knutson.

"We've had [the general idea of recycling] forever up here in the States," he says, "but the technology threshold hasn't been reached to make recycling a reality in Haiti."

The Haiti project consists of two collaborating groups. One group is exploring low-tech ways to re-melt and re-mold the plastic; the other is perfecting a prototypical composting toilet, to be made with that re-melted plastic.

"It's a very basic, dry-composting indoor toilet system," says Lina Kelsaite-Fish, a senior civil engineering student.

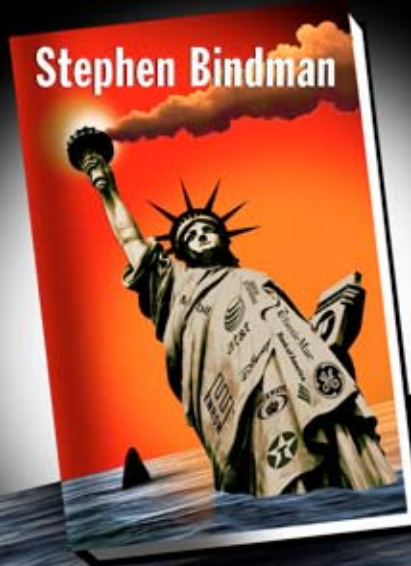
A big question remains how to transport and use the resulting compost, since

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