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Appendix – WBEZ Factual Errors and Mischaracterizations

Last week, a WBEZ series provided inaccurate and misleading information about a series of fundamental CPS reforms, including the creation of objective, uniform, educationally sound guidelines and criteria for Individualized Education Programs (IEPs) in special education – as required by law.

Although general guidance was provided in the past, CPS did not have a specific and uniform approach to developing IEPs – one informed by both best educational practices and the law.

In fact, these changes were part of a larger overhaul of CPS systems and practice, the result of nearly a year of research into how to improve special education at CPS. In 2016, we released a white paper that candidly outlined these concerns, including data showing the performance of students with disabilities had remained largely flat even as general education student performance soared. The white paper laid out the specific reform steps we intended to take, which we did over the following year. As a result, CPS now has timely data to assist schools, the ability to track IEP's effectively, objective standards to ensure proper and equitable IEP development, training for special education staff, and the documentation and execution of multi-tiered supports to give every child the best chance to succeed.

CPS released the procedural guidelines in December 2016, so that staff, families, and the community could use them to inform decisions at IEP meetings. CPS published an update to its manual this summer with clear, transparent guidance and standards on critical special education services, including paraprofessional support and transportation.

As CPS mentioned multiple times during interviews, building the guidelines and manual was a collaborative process involving school principals, advocates, special education experts, attorneys, and families. Working with these groups, CPS has refined the guidelines and manual and will continue to refine them to ensure students receive the supports and services they need to succeed.

Despite its implications of dire special education funding cuts, the story admits that spending had gone up under this administration through 2016 – and failed to note that the district's overall spending for special education grew from \$753.8 million in FY11 to \$828.2 million in FY16.

Following these large increases, CPS' actual school-based special education spending did fall by 1.5 percent from FY16 to FY17 – from roughly \$605 million to \$596 million – but hardly the “significant” decrease the story describes. This actual spending closely mirrored the budgeted spending, of \$611.6 million in FY16 to \$598.3 million in FY17.



The series included a number of other troubling factual errors that led to incorrect conclusions.

- While the story claimed the district cut 350 special education teachers from March 2016 to March 2017, there were actually only 164 fewer special education teachers in classrooms (i.e. on staff) during this period. Despite that smaller one-year reduction, CPS still has 230 more special education staffers than three years ago, while serving fewer students. The series insisted on using a methodology that did not accurately reflect the actual services provided to students by special education teachers – despite being provided the accurate data and being informed about the flaws in the inaccurate methodology she used.
- Even as enrollment was declining, CPS was adding staff. In 2014, CPS had 3,654 special education teachers, 19 more than the 3,635 teachers in 2017. In special education para-professional staff positions, CPS had 3,376 staff in 2014, and 234 more positions (3,610) in 2017.
- When it comes to related services (staff positions such as speech pathologists and occupational therapists) the series said CPS had a 12 percent reduction last year. However, CPS did not significantly reduce spending on related service providers. Below are CPS’ actual expenditures on these services – a decline of less than 2 percent from FY16 to FY17.

Related Service Provider (Type)	FY16 Expenses	FY17 Expenses
Occupational Therapist	\$10.8 million	\$10.5 million
Physical Therapist	\$3.4 million	\$3.3 million
Speech Language Pathologists	\$32.4 million	\$31.2 million
Psychologists	\$22.7 million	\$22.0 million
Social Workers	\$31.0 million	\$30.9 million
Nurses	\$28.1 million	\$27.8 million

- Additionally, the series claimed that students had significantly less time with specialists, writing: “Compared with the previous year, time with specialists dropped in the 2016-2017 school year even though the number of students with special needs stayed about the same.” WBEZ did not use a file that showed the actual amount of services that students received. In terms of actual services provided, here is a chart showing the comparison in the service categories, a 3 percent total reduction, not the reduction of 12 to 29 percent that WBEZ reported.



Type of Service	Minutes Provided FY16	Minutes Provided FY17	Percent Change
Physical Therapy	728,985	693,075	-4.9%
Nursing	8,036,086	8,313,255	+3.4%
OT	3,743,715	3,816,090	+1.9%
Psychology	492,555	369,795	-24.9%
Social Work	10,407,525	9,842,850	-5.4%
Speech/Language	16,190,715	15,287,850	-5.6%
Total	39,599,581	38,322,915	-3.2%

- WBEZ either misunderstood or ignored CPS explanations of data pertinent to analyzing potential overidentification of male children of color. As we discussed with WBEZ, we see a dramatic overrepresentation of Latino and African American boys in the more restrictive educational environments (LRE2 and LRE3) – even though they’re identified at similar rates in special education as a whole. This means that African American and Latino boys are pulled out of the general education classroom more often. Scholarly research confirms that overidentification of minorities has the effect of segregating students from their classmates, and can have detrimental effects. For both Latinos and African American males, this overrepresentation could be a result of implicit racial bias, not a disability that requires special education services.
- Overidentification also has the obvious and unacceptable effect of denying students the “least restrictive environment” – a standard set by both best educational practice and federal and state law.
- In some cases, additional language or math tutoring, or social and emotional supports, could be more appropriate for students who are struggling, haven’t yet learned English sufficiently, or who have behavioral challenges. This support can be provided in the general education classroom. Improperly removing students from classrooms to receive special education services could have the perverse effect of treating the wrong problem, providing the wrong support, and preventing students from receiving instruction from the general education teacher.
- The story suggests that white boys are overrepresented in special education, claiming they make up 5 percent of CPS’ overall student body and 15 percent of the district’s special education student population. This is false. In reality, 15 percent of white male students have IEPs – in other words, 15 percent is the number of white males with IEPs divided by the total number of white males in the district. Overall, white students were 9.9 percent of the district’s overall enrollment in FY16 and 8 percent of the special education population.



- On summer school, the piece alleged that “the number of special-needs children who got an extended school year...dropped by 56 percent last year” without pointing out that more students actually attended summer school than the previous year.

Number of Students	ESY 2016	ESY 2017
Total Students Eligible	7,085	3,192
Students Attending During Week 2	908	1,075

CPS was also surprised to see a special education advocate quoted that those with learning disabilities cannot perform well on tests. For most students, special education is supposed to provide the understanding and the tools to overcome specific learning differences, and to use that information to achieve learning proficiency similar to their non-disabled peers. To prove that proficiency, these students may require additional time on tests, or the ability to access physical tools (such as a calculator when the class is working on problem solving, not the underlying math). But for the majority of such students, there are no actual limits on their academic abilities and they can demonstrate that in testing.

In fact, the district has implemented a best practices system called MTSS – Multi-Tiered System of Supports – to ensure that all students are receiving the right supports for their needs. MTSS is not a way to classify students for specialized services, but begins with high quality instruction and universal screening of all students and includes multiple tiers of instruction and support services. In MTSS, struggling learners are provided interventions at increasing levels of intensity to ensure they “catch up” and/or stay on par with their peers. Some of the most common academic supports used in MTSS include small group instruction or individual tutoring for academic needs. The most common behavioral supports include peace circles, behavior contracts, developing anger coping skills, individual counseling, or peer juries for behavioral challenges.

- Tier 1 of MTSS is the well balanced delivery of core instruction aligned to Common Core State Standards that is differentiated to appeal to all learning styles. All students access Tier 1, which also includes high quality standards-based instruction, curriculum and assessment including differentiated supports.
- In addition to Tier 1 (which all students receive), some students may need a layer of Tier 2 supports. Tier 2 instructional supports are provided to some targeted students who need additional layers of instruction in specific areas based on data driven identification. Tier 3 supports are for very few students who (in addition to Tier 1 and 2) need highly individualized supports that are also layered and increase in intensity and duration.

WBEZ attempts to disparage these supports and the requirements that the supports be documented for each child. The concept of these interventions is embedded in federal special education law, but the series neglects to say so. These intervention supports also ensure that students receive the help they need immediately, even before a special education referral.



Documentation and data are fundamental to this approach. If you don't document interventions, you can't ensure that services are being provided or hold staff accountable. To transform academic outcomes, the district needs actionable data to hold schools accountable for the success of their students.