



(Bloomberg)

Opinion : What Chicago Owes its Students

By Bridget Lee | Academy For Local Leadership

We often hear that the school system does not work. Let's be honest: It works for families who can test into the right school, buy into the right attendance boundary, or pay privately for what their child is missing. It even works for adults like me, whose careers are built around improving it.

Who it does not work for gets discussed far less. We tend to call these young people "marginalized." The Governance Compass, my organization's framework for school board governance, uses a more precise term: students furthest from opportunity.

Not on the margins. At the center.

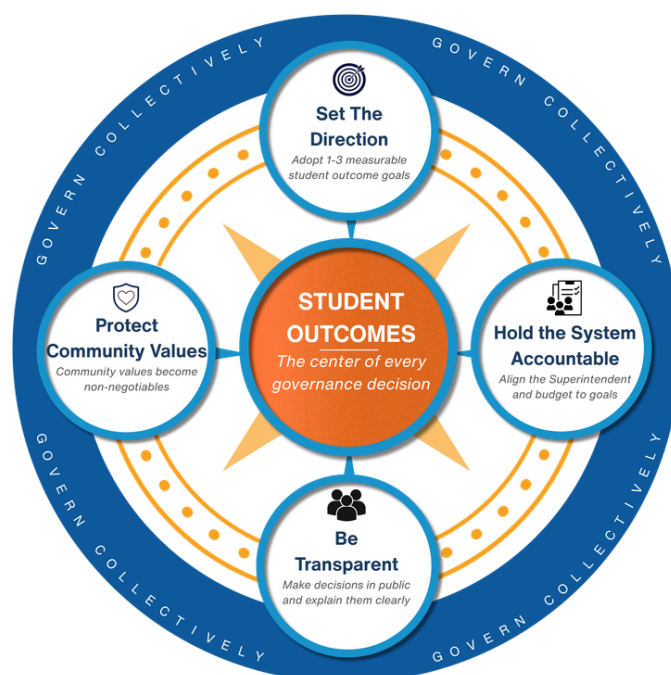
My father went to prison. I became a first-generation college graduate. Both facts shape how I think about what schools owe kids furthest from opportunity: for some, school is not one opportunity among many. It may be the institution standing between them and a life limited before they have had the chance to choose it.

Those are the students my organization placed at the center of the Governance Compass. A compass does not tell you where to go, only whether you are headed toward the destination you named.

"Student-centered" risks becoming what "equity" became: a phrase everyone uses and no one is required to define. We mean students whose families cannot privately replace a lost teacher, transfer schools, or call someone with influence when the system fails them, those with the least margin for adult error.

In November, Chicagoans will elect every school board member for the first time, a real democratic achievement, though representation is only the beginning of good governance. Elections decide who gets a seat; governance decides what they do once they arrive.

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The Compass asks whether board members are exercising authority responsibly across five commitments: setting a clear direction for student outcomes; protecting community values; holding the system accountable; making decisions transparently; and governing collectively rather than as 21 separate officials.

Those commitments matter most when decisions are hard. A board should not be a rubber stamp, and a decision is not student-centered simply because someone says it is for children. Leaders must explain the evidence, who benefits, and what they will do if they are wrong.

Good intentions do not protect children from bad governance, and neither does technical expertise alone. In 2013, Chicago closed dozens of schools through decisions defended with data, but made without real power for the families who would live with them.

That history is a warning, not a script. A board that governs well does a few things consistently: It sets a small number of clear goals and connects major decisions to them; treats community values as essential, especially under political or financial pressure; uses the budget and the superintendent relationship to hold the system accountable; explains decisions in language families understand; and governs as one body, even when members disagree.

Chicago has a rare opportunity to build a board that does all of that in practice, not just in principle, especially for the students furthest from opportunity. That is what the Governance Compass is for.