

ACADEMY FOR
LOCAL LEADERSHIP
CHICAGO

CPS School Board Field Guide

*Helping you navigate Chicago's
first elected school board*

The vote is just the beginning

HISTORIC ELECTION

For the first time, residents will vote for every member of the Chicago Board of Education. This is the result of decades of organizing.

The Board is responsible for overseeing Chicago Public Schools (CPS), serving more than 316,000 students across 600 schools.¹

Elections alone do not produce a quality school system, however. Communities also need to know what a good school board actually does, and stay involved after the election is over.

WHAT THIS GUIDE IS

This Field Guide shares how the Board works, what good governance looks like, research tied to CPS student success so residents know what to hold the Board accountable to, and how to stay engaged year-round to ensure lasting change. It comes from the Academy for Local Leadership Chicago (ALL Chicago), a nonpartisan group working to make sure Chicago's new school Board puts students first.

This is for anyone invested in Chicago's students. If that's you, and especially if you're a parent or caregiver, welcome. Research is clear that when families understand how the system works and stay engaged, students have stronger experiences and better outcomes. **This is your starting point.**

316,000

STUDENTS

21

ELECTED SCHOOL
BOARD SEATS

600+

SCHOOLS

FIND YOUR DISTRICT'S
BOARD MEMBER



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Residents didn't just win a vote. They won a seat at the table. Now the work is learning how to use it, in partnership with the Board, for Chicago's students.

BRIDGET LEE

FOUNDING EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR,
ACADEMY FOR LOCAL LEADERSHIP

The role of the CPS Board of Education

WHAT THE BOARD DOES

The Board doesn't run the school system day to day. That's the superintendent's job. The Board's job is to:

- set ambitious goals for young people,
- fund those priorities in the budget, and
- hold the superintendent accountable for delivering on them.

Those priorities come from board members listening to their communities and creating a shared vision for Chicago's students.

Two of the Board's most powerful levers are the budget and its relationship with the superintendent. It hires, evaluates, and when necessary, removes the superintendent. Per the law, the Board must also pass a balanced budget every year. When board members try to manage schools instead of governing, accountability for student learning breaks down.



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Instead of focusing solely on policy from a distance, I now see the value in bridging the gap between the classroom and leadership spaces—bringing real experiences, cultural awareness, and urgency into conversations that impact education. My voice, my perspective, and my presence are tools for change, and that advocacy is just as critical as governance in shaping the future of our schools.

ARI DANZY
COMMUNITY MEMBER

The Governance Compass

THE FRAMEWORK

The Academy for Local Leadership created the Governance Compass to answer a simple question: what does a school board that puts students first actually do?

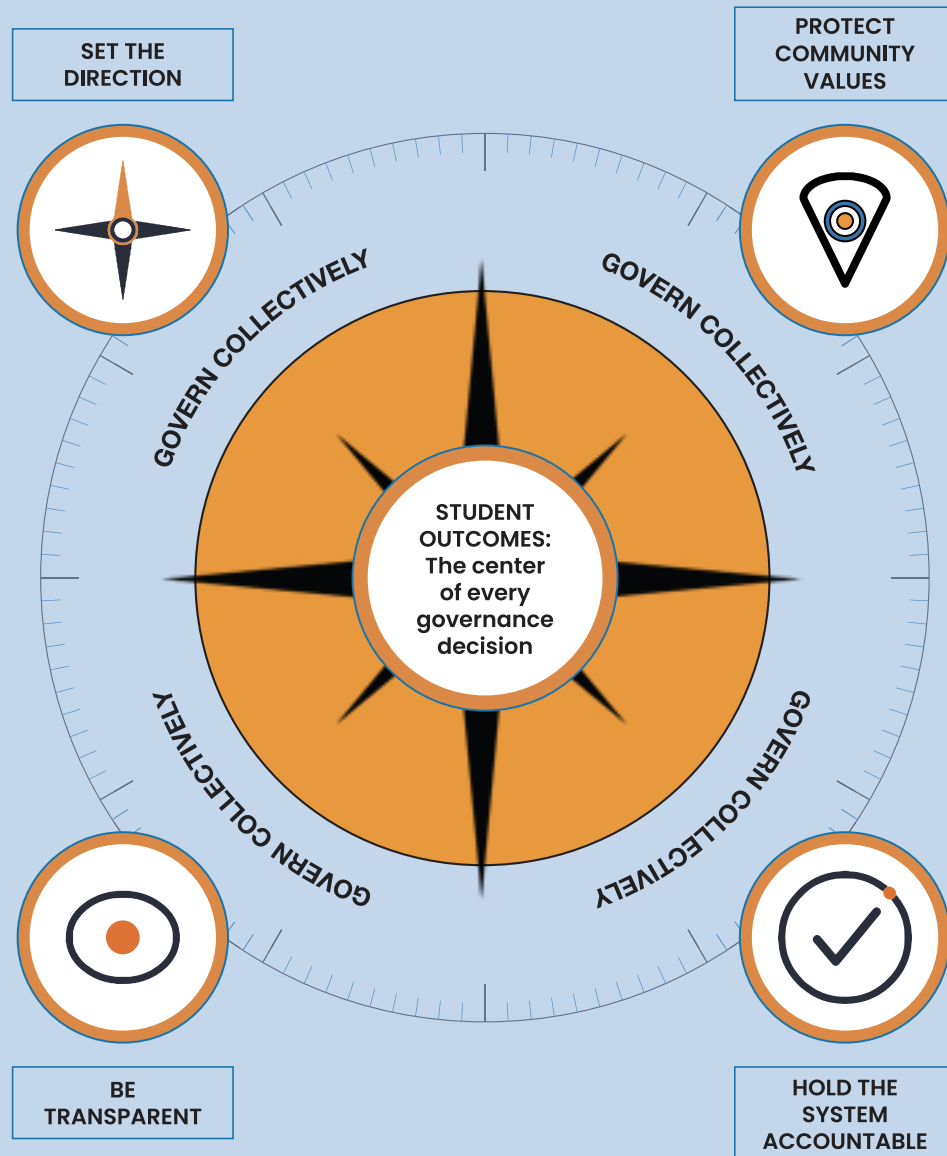
The framework builds on the CPS Equity Framework² and national research on effective school board governance, and was developed through community roundtables, conversations with young people, aspiring and current board members, and district leaders across Chicago.

It was built for Chicago, with Chicagoans.

The Compass doesn't tell the Board which decisions to make. It offers a framework for making them well.

CENTERED ON STUDENT OUTCOMES

The Compass' orientations are centered on student outcomes. Every orientation answers the same underlying question: **is this serving students?**



An effective board centers on students

01 SETS THE DIRECTION

This comes first because everything else depends on it. The board decides what success looks like for students, with the community, not for them.

- Set 1-3 clear goals, shaped by what the community says matters most, with extra focus on students furthest from opportunity
- Stay focused on a few goals instead of spreading thin, even when there is pressure to add more
- Connect every decision, like the budget, superintendent's evaluation, and policy agenda, back to these goals
- Support the district's plan and initiatives, but let the board's own goals lead the way

02 PROTECTS COMMUNITY VALUES

The community decides what matters most for students. The board's job is to uphold that, especially under pressure.

- Systematically collect the vision and values of community members, and turn those values into non-negotiables
- When politics or outside pressure push back, the board doesn't trade away what the community said mattered most
- Listen first to the people most affected by the decision before the board acts, even if they are harder to reach
- Communities don't always agree on what matters most. A good board names that tension and builds a shared vision with transparent trade-offs.

03 HOLDS THE SYSTEM ACCOUNTABLE

The board's two most powerful levers are the budget and its oversight of the superintendent, both of which exist to ensure better student experiences and outcomes.

- Set superintendent goals that are the same as the board's own goals, then evaluate progress against them
- Require the budget to reflect the board's stated goals. The budget shows what the board actually prioritizes.
- Trust staff recommendations backed by evidence. The board's job is to evaluate and decide, not to redo the staff's work.

04 IS TRANSPARENT

A good board shares decisions and data in plain language, so the community can see how its input shaped outcomes for students.

- Make decisions publicly and connect community input visibly to board action
- Acknowledge success when it's happening, be honest when goals aren't being met, and share accessible data so residents can see which students are being served well and which are not
- Publish meeting agendas, notes, and recordings and explain major decisions after the vote

05 GOVERNS COLLECTIVELY

A good board debates openly, then stands behind its decisions together, so students aren't the ones who pay for a divided board.

- Every member gets the same information and the same accountability
- Debate openly in the boardroom. A member can dissent publicly, seek reconsideration, or work to change a decision, but should not interfere with implementing a lawful decision of the board.
- Each member answers to their district and to a shared ethical standard. The board's credibility depends on every member honoring that.

Seeing the full picture

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Students who experience our schools every day possess knowledge that no data dashboard, attendance report, or standardized test can fully capture.

If we genuinely want schools to improve, we have to begin trusting them as partners in shaping the future of public education.

OWEN
MIKVA YOUTH
LANE TECH COLLEGE PREP
CLASS OF 2025

HOW CHICAGO'S STUDENTS ARE DOING

One way you can partner with the Board to ensure students are learning is by understanding how Chicago's students are doing and what helps them succeed.

Over the past three decades, Chicago Public Schools has made real progress. **Since 2008, the high school graduation rate has climbed from 62% to 84%.** The largest gains came from students who started furthest behind, including young men of color and students with disabilities. Grades have improved, and more students are taking and passing Advanced Placement exams. College enrollment is climbing as well, though completion tells a more complicated story.³

BEYOND THE NUMBERS

Numbers only tell part of the story. Students, parents, teachers, principals, community members, and other people close to schools know important things about students that no dataset can fully capture. This section shares the best available evidence, but it's meant to add to that lived knowledge, not replace it.

GET KEY INSIGHTS

Get key research insights about schools, teaching, and learning about what helps Chicago students succeed.



Data to watch

SCHOOL CULTURE

When students feel known, supported, and challenged, they have stronger attendance, grades, and long-term outcomes, including college enrollment.⁴ Teachers and principals build these conditions by fostering trust, belonging, strong relationships, and student voice alongside rigorous academics. School culture and climate are even more closely related to whether or not students attend school now than before the pandemic.⁵

Many schools use students' feedback on the *Cultivate*⁶ and *5Essentials*⁷ surveys to spark conversations and collaboration to keep improving students' experiences and outcomes.

ACADEMIC PERFORMANCE

No single data point tells the full story. Grades, attendance, and course credits from pre-K through 12th grade are some of the strongest predictors of student success in and after high school, more so than test scores or a family's income. CPS tracks these through the Elementary On-Track and 9th Grade On-Track indicators to see if students are on pace to graduate, and to intervene when they're not. Students who are on track at the end of ninth grade are nearly four times more likely to graduate than those who aren't. On-Track data helps educators ask the right questions about who is struggling and why across gender, race, English Learner status, and more.

ATTENDANCE

Students who attend school more often get better grades and test scores. Like districts across the country, attendance across CPS is still below pre-pandemic levels. But schools serving similar students can have very different attendance rates, often tied to what students experience inside the building.

Attendance matters at every stage of a student's education, from pre-K through elementary school and high school, and it's one of the strongest predictors of student success. Low attendance is linked with lower academic skills, grades, and high school graduation. High attendance is linked with higher academic skills, grades, and high school graduation.⁸

POSTSECONDARY OUTCOMES

CPS has worked to expand pathways into college, trades, and the workforce for CPS graduates. In 2024, CPS students enrolled in college at a rate five percentage points higher than the national average (66% compared to 61%),³ despite serving a higher proportion of students from low-income households than most districts. A college degree raises lifetime earnings for students from every economic background, and the boost is largest for students from the lowest-income households.⁹

Still, while enrollment is up, the college completion rate isn't: the completion rate has been steady near 50% for years, with more students finishing college only because more are enrolling.

Gaps also persist across race and gender, English Learner status, and disability status, with some groups completing at two to three times the rate of others. The question isn't just who enrolls, but who finishes and whether every student has a real opportunity to do both. The To&Through Project gives schools and nonprofits the data and tools to track this progress and improve it.³

How are your students doing?

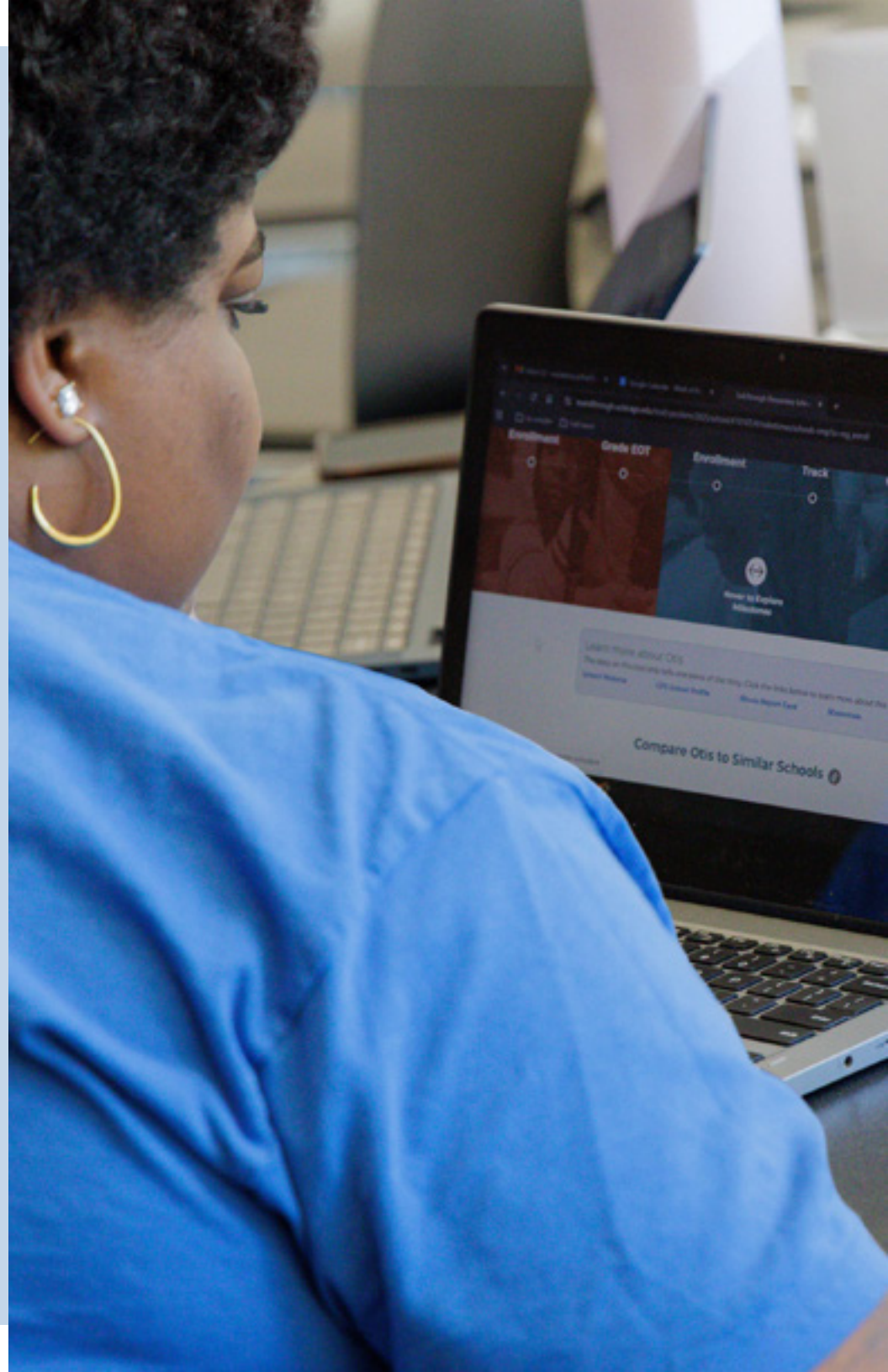
START BY LOOKING AT THE DATA

The To&Through Project's Milestones Tool¹⁰ allows Chicagoans to explore outcomes for students living in each of the 20 elected school board districts. It tells you where students in your district go to high school, how many graduate on time, how many enroll in college, and how many complete a degree.

Use it to ask better questions, not to draw easy conclusions. No single board member can change these numbers alone. Still, every member is responsible for knowing them and making sure all students have access to the experiences and opportunities they need to succeed.

Parents, teachers, principals, community members, and other people close to schools know important things about students that no dataset can fully capture.

This resource shares the best available evidence, but it's meant to add to that lived knowledge, not replace it.



Is a candidate ready to govern?

ASKING STRONG QUESTIONS

The best candidate questions don't have yes/no answers. They require candidates to show their reasoning and connect their positions to student outcomes and experiences.

EXAMPLES OF STRONG QUESTIONS

- Board members represent different districts, but govern as one body. How would you build working relationships with other board members, and what would you do if the board was divided on a decision that affects students?
- Students are the people most affected by board decisions and often the least consulted. How would you make sure young people have a real voice in the board's work, not just a seat at the table after decisions are already made?
- How would you evaluate whether the superintendent is doing their job, and what would lead you to act?
- What would you look for in a CPS budget to know whether it reflects the board's stated goals?
- In your district, outcomes differ significantly across community areas and student groups. What does that data tell you, and what would you do about it?

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If I could ask a school board candidate one question, I would ask, 'How are you going to make sure students' voices are actually included when important decisions are being made, instead of asking us after everything has already been decided or not asking us at all?'

It doesn't sit right when decisions are already made before students have a chance to share their opinions. It feels like we're being left out, even though these decisions affect our future. I want Chicago schools to make sure students have a real voice in the decisions that impact us.

LIZ

MIKVA YOUTH

CHICAGO BULLS COLLEGE PREP CLASS OF 2025

Staying engaged

THIS GUIDE IS JUST THE BEGINNING

Elected school boards are only as strong as the communities behind them. The vote matters, but so does every school board meeting attended, every question asked of a candidate, and every decision held up against what students actually need.

Here are some ways to stay in the mix. **Chicago's students are counting on us to get it right.**

GO VOTE

All 21 CPS Board seats will be on the ballot in November 2026, with terms starting in January 2027.

cpsboe.org/about ↗

CONTACT YOUR DISTRICT'S MEMBERS

Find your district's board member, attend office hours, and ask where they stand on the issues that matter.

cpsboe.org/about/bios ↗

JOIN BOARD MEETINGS

Attending in person is the most direct way to see governance in action and make your voice heard through public comment.

cpsboe.org/meetings ↗

JOIN YOUR LOCAL SCHOOL COUNCIL

LSCs are elected bodies at every CPS school with real authority over school budgets and principal hiring. Show up to LSC meetings, or run for a seat.

cps.edu/about/local-school-councils ↗

STAY CURRENT ON STUDENT OUTCOMES

CPS School Profiles break down information by each school, including academic progress, school climate, and community engagement to offer a fuller picture of each school's strengths and areas for improvement.

cps.edu/schools/profiles ↗

JOIN YOUR COMMUNITY ACTION COUNCIL

CACs bring together community members to build a strategic plan for educational success in their area and shape academic initiatives.

cps.edu/services-and-supports/parent-engagement/community-action-councils-cacs ↗

BRING YOUNG PEOPLE TO THE TABLE

Mikva Challenge offers programming that develops young people's civic voice in decisions that affect them.

mikvachallenge.org ↗

APPLY TO ALL CHICAGO

Go deeper on governance with programs built for residents who want to engage the board directly and meaningfully.

localleadership.org/join ↗

Resources & end notes

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

Every resource from this guide, and a few more, is compiled. Check it out.

localleadership.org/resources ➔



SOURCES

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ACADEMY FOR
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CHICAGO

About ALL Chicago

ALL Chicago is a nonpartisan organization building the civic infrastructure for effective school board governance in Chicago. Through the Fellowship, we prepare civic leaders for school board service. Through the Governance Compass, we give communities and board members a shared framework for what good governance looks like. Through Community Empowerment, we build the capacity of parents and residents to engage their elected board with confidence.

These three lines of work connect: governance that is prepared, principled, and accountable to the community creates the conditions for every Chicago student to succeed.

Thank you to our collaborators:

***Mikva
Challenge***



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