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October 23, 2017

Dear Special Education Stakeholder,

As we move forward with reforming how we deliver special education services, our core principle is to do what's best for the individual student. This means delivering the supports they need in the most timely manner, and creating an equitable system that treats similarly situated students similarly.

We know that overall, students at CPS are making remarkable academic gains, whether it's in record-breaking math and reading attainment in elementary school, record-breaking freshmen-on-track rates, more students graduating from high school, and more students enrolling in college and finishing college.

However, a rising tide has not lifted all boats, as academic performance for special education students has remained stubbornly flat. We thought it was important to find out why, and change it, so that all students can live up to their potential.

Over the past two years, many dedicated experts have worked hard to change our special education system. Lifelong educator and recent schools chief Denise Little led a year-long taskforce, with the support of special education experts, advocates, legal counsel, organizational experts and educators. In fact, after CPS launched new guidelines in December 2016, we adjusted requirements based on feedback, especially from principals and teachers. These changes simplified the documentation process and made it faster and easier. We want to make sure we get this right, which is why we will continue to listen and refine elements going forward.

However, setting standards and documenting outcomes is critical to future success. When we dug into the reasons for the disparity between special education and general education outcomes, we saw a stark difference between how general education teachers and principals were documenting strategies, using data, and matching them against outcomes versus how little data was available to the district or educators on how special education services were being provided and their results, or lack thereof.

More than a year ago, we released a [white paper](#) reviewing these issues and are moving forward based on its three major findings:

- *Uniform Guidelines*
 - There were no specific, uniform, and objective guidelines for building Individualized Education Programs (IEPs), the most important and foundational piece of special education.
 - IEPs are unique to every student, but students with similar needs should receive similar services to meet their needs.
 - More importantly, IEPs need to be informed by best practices and the law – otherwise, equity is unlikely.

- CPS worked to establish guidelines and procedures that have been published and shared with every school and are available to every family for review. We will continue to work with advocates, educators and families to improve them as needed.
- *Early Interventions*
 - We also learned that students weren't consistently receiving early interventions that are critical to quickly meeting their needs. These immediate supports also will provide critical information about students and their learning profiles. For example, if a teacher has a second grade student whose first language is Spanish and who is struggling to read, is that because he has a learning disability or because he needs help learning English? The same is true for behavioral issues. If you can equip a child with coping skills rather than pulling them out of the classroom, that's a much better outcome for the student.
 - As a holistic approach, CPS has adopted the Multi-Tiered System of Supports (MTSS) framework for all students – not just diverse learners – to improve core curricular instruction, intervention, and services. The MTSS provides a framework for delivering high quality, differentiated instruction and targeted support for students' academic, social-emotional, and health and wellness needs in all school and classroom settings. In the past year, the Office of Diverse Learners Supports and Services has systematically worked to put in place the training, data systems and intervention monitoring for effective MTSS in its areas of practice, ensuring consistency across both general education and special education.
 - Understanding whether the student has a learning disability or simply needs more time mastering phonics triggers a different set of steps from the teacher. The MTSS Framework provides the systems and structures for the teacher to respond appropriately to the students learning needs.
- *Racial over-representations*
 - Some of CPS' findings are that boys of color are overrepresented in the most restrictive categories of special education. That means they can be pulled from classrooms and inappropriately segregated from their general education peers. Moreover, this risks providing the wrong supports for the wrong problem. Both MTSS and uniform guidelines will guard against this outcome.

For the sake of our students, it is important to get special education right. Unfortunately, a recent series on WBEZ was rife with errors and mischaracterized the district's delivery of special education services and the framework for our approach.

The district finalized its guidelines and manual in the summer of 2017, to be ready for the current school year. With the new systems and data finally in place, we believe CPS can begin the step-by-step process of lifting academic outcomes -- and life chances -- for students with disabilities, just as CPS has already done for students in general education. We want to assure families that ending this inequity is at the core of why we launched these fundamental reforms.

A more detailed appendix of factual errors and misleading conclusions in the WBEZ report is attached.

Sincerely,



Forrest Claypool
Chief Executive Officer
Chicago Public Schools