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## **CPS OIG Uncovers Widespread Admissions Irregularities in K-8 Options for Knowledge Program**

Chicago — Thousands of K-8 students were improperly admitted to CPS schools outside their own neighborhoods last school year, according to a Significant Activity Report released today by CPS Inspector General Nicholas Schuler.

The report detailed the findings and recommendations of the IG's new Performance Analysis Unit following its review of the 2016-17 elementary-grade Options for Knowledge admissions process.

The OIG found a widespread pattern of inconsistent and improper K-8 admissions practices that undermines the "equal access" goal of the Options program.

Schools directly admitted K-8 students who should have been routed through the Options program. Some students were slipped ahead of applicants on official waitlists. Others were handpicked by principals after waitlists were exhausted.

These irregularities, combined with three policy loopholes identified by the OIG, leave the system vulnerable to fraud and undue influence.

Neighborhood schools that are supposed to lottery-off empty, or "open-enrollment," seats to students outside their attendance boundaries through the Options program were the biggest rule-breakers, the OIG found. However, almost every kind of CPS elementary school imaginable improperly admitted students last school year.

The CPS Office of Access and Enrollment, which manages the Options for Knowledge program, assisted the OIG with its review by conducting the largest OAE Options compliance audit in at least a decade — and perhaps ever — at the OIG's request. An OIG analysis of that audit found that:

- Of 421 schools audited, 93 percent held at least one audit failure, usually because an admission improperly bypassed OAE. Almost two thirds of schools had at least 10 audit failures. This constitutes a pervasive problem.

- Of more than 18,200 elementary-grade admissions audited, nearly 6,900 failed the audit. That's nearly two of every five.
- Audit failures were most prevalent in neighborhood schools, where 52 percent of out-of-boundary admissions failed the audit. Magnet schools had an eight percent failure rate. Only one K-8 selective-enrollment admission failed the audit, perhaps because such seats are closely monitored. In total, 90 percent of audit failures were in neighborhood schools.

OIG interviews with principals of 30 audited schools that held more than 500 combined audit failures revealed that many didn't know all the admissions rules, which are scattered across several locations. Others knew the rules and broke them. In some cases, audit failures may have been caused by documentation errors.

For decades the popular Options for Knowledge program has offered students a wide range of educational alternatives. In general, all students seeking admission to traditional (non-charter, non-contract) CPS schools other than their neighborhood ones are supposed to apply through the Options process managed by OAE.

For magnet and open-enrollment seats, OAE lotteries determine admissions. Once the waitlists from these lotteries are exhausted, schools that still have openings are supposed to accept students on a "first come, first-served" basis by contacting parents directly and sending OAE a paper application form for its approval.

At no point are schools allowed to "skip Jimmy to pick Jill," as one former OAE official put it. Non-selective schools cannot use "academic criteria, interviewing or screening of any kind," according to the Options Guide. CPS elementary school principals do not enjoy principal discretion — or the ability to handpick students.

However, nearly half (14 of 30) of the principals interviewed functioned as if they had principal discretion.

Several principals weeded out applicants, based on a variety of factors, including attendance concerns. One principal said would-be students from outside his attendance boundary must meet a certain "burden of proof" so it was helpful if they brought in report cards. Another principal asked children for their "credentials," including report cards and test scores. Yet another will "investigate" potential students because sometimes they are "running from something."

Some principals clearly played favorites. Many schools bypassed OAE to give preference to the children of CPS employees, the siblings of existing students or lottery winners, and out-of-boundary pre-kindergarten students improperly given kindergarten seats without going through OAE.

One principal improperly admitted her four children, her niece and nephew (the children of a staff member), a teacher's child and a custodian's two children, even though all nine students lived out-of-boundary. At the time, the school had been removed from the Options program due to potential overcrowding, meaning it was barred from accepting outsider students.

More than 980 children who attended schools other than their neighborhood ones for pre-K were improperly advanced to kindergarten. Kindergarten was the entry-level grade in these schools, so outsider pre-K kids had to apply to it through OAE.

At some neighborhood schools, open-enrollment kindergarten seats are highly coveted. (See **Appendix B** for data on applications per Options seat.) For example, at eight neighborhood schools with some of the most competitive open-enrollment kindergartens, 69 students were improperly admitted via, in effect, side-door procedures that bypassed OAE. Meanwhile, more than 1,700 other students who applied through OAE lotteries were left sitting on waitlists.

At one such school, which ran a tuition-based pre-K program, the principal described an unwritten agreement with former CEO Barbara Byrd-Bennett that supposedly allowed the school to admit out-of-boundary tuition-paying pre-K kids to its kindergarten. Board authorization is required for such a variance from Board policy. As a former OAE official explained: "You don't want to let people buy their way into a good elementary school."

Some principals defended their vetting practices, saying students who are not automatically entitled to attend their schools should face greater scrutiny. However, admissions practices varied greatly. Such widespread inconsistencies undermine the Options program's credibility with parents.

"These are the public's schools. All CPS parents deserve a level playing field. The OIG review found that too many of last year's elementary admissions fell short of that standard," IG Nicholas Schuler said.

CPS is in the process of converting its Options admissions process into an online "GoCPS" application system that will address one weak spot identified by the OIG. However, GoCPS will not block schools from improperly enrolling students. The OIG believes improper admissions may well continue under GoCPS unless training is conducted and other changes are made.

As a result, the OIG issued 10 recommendations as part of its review. In response, CPS is crafting a corrective action plan.

A copy of the Significant Activity Report is attached and can be found online at the OIG's website: [cpsoig.org](http://cpsoig.org).

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