



## New Chicago High School Graduation Policy Gets Mixed Reviews

Jamaal Abdul-Alim

June 13, 2017

In a radical policy change being referred to as everything from “forward thinking” to “remarkably silly,” high school seniors in Chicago, starting with the class of 2020, will not be able to graduate unless they present “evidence of a postsecondary plan.”

The policy — formally known as “Learn.Plan.Succeed” — was [announced](#) by Chicago Mayor Rahm Emanuel in early April and quietly [approved](#) by the Chicago Board of Education in late May.

Under the initiative, allowable evidence of a postsecondary plan can include things such as a college acceptance letter, a military enlistment letter, proof of employment or a job offer. It can also include acceptance into an apprenticeship program, a job program or a “gap year” program. Waivers may be allowed for students with “extenuating circumstances.”

Emanuel is [slated](#) to discuss the new policy and other education initiatives at the National Press Club next week.

The new graduation requirement — considered the first of its kind in the nation — comes at a time when Illinois finds itself in the midst of a longtime state budget impasse and massive debt, [plummeting](#) regional public university enrollment, and at a time when Chicago’s public school system itself had to [borrow \\$389 million](#) just to stay open to finish the 2016-2017 school year.

It also comes at a time when concerns are being raised anew about [concentrated joblessness](#) among Chicago’s Black and Latino youth, who also comprise the vast majority of Chicago’s public school students.

The new graduation requirement is drawing mixed reviews among youth and education policy experts, some of whom are raising questions about its workability and practicality given Chicago’s joblessness and Illinois’ budget woes.

The policy drew a wait-and-see response from an organization that represents those who work in college advising.

David Hawkins, executive director for educational content and policy at the Arlington, Va.-based National Association for College Admission Counseling, said while the Chicago plan appears to be the first of its kind in terms of scope and specifics, that schools, school districts and states

have already been incorporating college access measures into their high school requirements for several years.

“From requiring students to take admission tests, like SAT and ACT, to developing [individual learning plans](#) to submitting an application for college, there have been many variations on this theme,” Hawkins said. “What is not yet clear is whether these initiatives have consistently led to better outcomes in both college access and success.

“So it is difficult to say whether this proposal will succeed,” Hawkins said of the recently-adopted Chicago plan.

Hawkins also expressed concerns about the impact that policy might have on the admissions side for higher education, particularly in light of Illinois’ ongoing fiscal problems.

“In theory, admission officers at two- and four-year colleges could see an influx of applications, which is generally good for the institutions’ recruitment efforts,” Hawkins said. “Given Illinois’ recent higher education budget woes, I believe admission offices would be somewhat concerned about whether there would be resources to accommodate students who seek to enroll.”

Hawkins also raised concerns about “unscrupulous institutions, particularly in the for-profit sector” that might see the new graduation requirement as an opportunity to cash in on students’ need to have an acceptance letter in hand in order to graduate. That view was shared by others.

“It creates a need and sense of urgency that didn’t exist before,” said Antoinette Flores, senior policy analyst on the higher education team at the Center for American Progress, a Democratic leaning policy and research organization in Washington, D.C.

“Some students may find themselves nearing graduation without a ‘plan,’” Flores said. “An admission letter on a short timeline is one that for-profit colleges can easily provide with rolling admissions and paid recruiters designed to make enrollment quick and easy.”

Flores added, “Community colleges do not have the same kind of resources, particularly in the current fiscal environment. An unknown college that makes enrollment easy and sells a dream can seem more appealing if a student doesn’t know all of the details.”

Whether that happens for Chicago Public Schools or its students remains to be seen. CPS students are guaranteed admission to City Colleges of Chicago, the city’s community college system.

Kisha Bird, director of youth policy at the D.C.-based Center for Law and Social Policy, Inc., raised questions about whether Chicago even has enough jobs to offer young people in order to adopt a policy that requires them to submit proof of employment or a job offer if they do not plan to go to college, enlist in the military or to pursue any of the other allowable options.

“While it’s a lofty goal to say they need a job offer, we already know the truncated labor market is not friendly to teens and young adults, especially young adults of color,” Bird said, citing a 2017 [report](#) that found employment conditions in Chicago were worse than in Illinois and the nation for 16- to 19- and 20- to 24-year-olds.

“In terms of postsecondary education, it’s not enough that they get an acceptance letter,” Bird said. “We already know that when it comes to students of color, even though they get accepted, they have many challenges,” she said, listing such barriers as food, books, health care and other things that financial aid does not cover.

“The question really is what do you want to see CPS public school students doing and how do you get them there?” Bird said. “And a plan in and of itself is not sufficient.”

Emanuel’s office acknowledged a request for comment from *Diverse* Tuesday but did not provide one before publication.

The college enrollment rate for Chicago Public School students for the Class of 2015 was 57.9 percent, according to [data](#) provided by CPS. That figure is fairly consistent with other school districts that have a high number of minority students and high levels of poverty, as does Chicago Public Schools, where 46.5 and 37.7 percent of the student population is Hispanic and Black, respectively, and over 80 percent are considered economically disadvantaged, according to [CPS demographic data](#).

For instance, according to the National Student Clearinghouse, a Herndon, Va.-based organization that tracks educational outcomes, students from higher income schools are more likely to enroll in college immediately after high school than students from lower income schools — 69 versus 54 percent, respectively.

Similarly, students from high schools with fewer minorities were more likely to enroll immediately than those from high schools with higher minority populations, the clearinghouse states, citing a statistic of 68 versus 57 percent, respectively.

CPS’s goal is to increase its college enrollment rate to 60 percent for the graduating class of 2019, according to a CPS spokesperson.

Mayor Emanuel’s new graduation requirement calls for \$1 million in funding from the philanthropic and business communities to provide eight additional “college and career coaches” for CPS students.

Flores, of the Center for American Progress, said donations are “not an acceptable replacement for dedicated and sustainable local or state funding with a serious commitment to making sure students have the resources necessary to make this proposal work.”

Dr. Danette G. Howard, senior vice president and chief strategy officer at the Indianapolis-based Lumina Foundation, which focuses on increasing the percentage of Americans who have post-secondary credentials or degrees with labor market value, called Chicago’s policy “forward-thinking” because it takes into account that a high school education is “is not going to allow students to really have thriving lives once they graduate.”

Support for that view can be found in a University of Illinois at Chicago [report](#) — released earlier this week and titled “The High Costs for Out of School and Jobless Youth in Chicago and Cook County.” The report found that “more educated individuals earn more and are less likely to be unemployed.” For instance, those without a high school diploma or only a high school

diploma had unemployment rates of 7.4 and 5.2 percent, respectively, whereas those with some college or a degree had unemployment rates of 4.4 percent or less, the report found.

“I think the school system is thinking about how to equip students for the greatest opportunity for success,” Howard said.

Others — particularly from conservative and libertarian circles — were more skeptical about government-prescribed options for post-secondary success.

“Looking to students to sensibly plan their best course after high school is remarkably silly,” said George Leef, director of research for the Raleigh, North Carolina-based John William Pope Center for Higher Education Policy.

“Students will mostly just say whatever they think will sound good — or have others write it for them — and afterwards do exactly what they would have anyway,” Leef said. “This is just political grandstanding.”

However, the Chicago policy does not envisage simply letting students say what they plan to do, but rather requires them to present evidence of such.

But that’s still problematic, according to Dr. Neal McCluskey, director of the Center for Educational Freedom at the Cato Institute, a libertarian think tank in D.C.

“Not only does this seem more aspirational than reality-based — lots of people who want jobs have trouble finding them — but it seems like an extension of compulsory education beyond elementary and secondary,” McCluskey said. “It is a de facto post-K-12 mandate, with the government essentially dictating to adults that they must either be in school or working.

“I doubt that that’s the intent, but it is the result, and it is a very concerning extension of government control over people’s lives.”

Howard, of Lumina Foundation, said: “While you can’t compel young adults to do anything, I think giving them these various options gives these young people a much greater chance for success.”

“If there’s nothing in place, it’s much more likely that many students will have no plan at all, that many students will graduate without thinking about going to a postsecondary institution or what they need to be successful in postsecondary education,” Howard said.