November 30, 2011

Parent or Guardian of a Student at
Wendell Smith Elementary School
744 E. 103rd St.
Chicago, Illinois 60628

Re: Proposed Reconstitution of Wendell Smith Elementary School

Dear Parent or Guardian:

As Chief Executive Officer of the Chicago Public Schools (CPS), nothing is more important to me than making sure your child is getting access to a high quality education. My team is dedicated to ensuring that every child in every community can be successful in the classroom and graduate ready for college and career – which is why I am writing to you today.

There are too many schools in Chicago failing our children. Across the District, only 7.9% of 11th graders last year tested ready for college, while achievement gaps for African American and Latino students remain in the high double-digits. As adults, we all have a responsibility to make sure that we are putting the academic needs of our children before all else. To do so requires some very difficult but necessary choices to boost the academic achievement of our kids.

For too long, Wendell Smith Elementary School (Smith) has been one of the schools not meeting the needs of its students. Over the last several years, Smith has been a chronically underperforming school that has not made the progress necessary to take it off of probation. This is why we are proposing today, after a lengthy and thoughtful process, to reconstitute Smith. In other words, we will make Smith a “turnaround” school, which will provide students with the opportunity to access a high quality education and get on a path to success in the classroom.

What is a turnaround? Turnarounds change under-performing CPS schools by completely overhauling them, without moving students, and create an entirely new culture of success. The turnaround process brings highly qualified staff that are specially trained to work in low-performing schools to help meet the specific needs of those schools’ children. Turnarounds have a laser focus on driving student learning and improving academic achievement immediately.

The results of these turnaround schools in Chicago have been remarkable – for example, the percent of students at turnaround schools that met standards last year improved twice as fast as the CPS district-wide average. We want to provide your child with access to the same opportunities to boost their chance of academic success, which they will receive next school year should we implement this turnaround at Smith.

At this school and schools across the district, we are making significant investments in the coming year to boost student achievement:

- Providing a longer school day with additional instructional for teachers and students;
- Implementation of a new, more rigorous curriculum will better prepare your child for college by using Common Core State Standards in their school day;
Expanding access to quality preschool programs that put students on the path to academic success from day one of their education.

Below you will find more information about this proposal and why we are considering Smith for a turnaround in order to give your child access to a better educational environment where he or she can thrive and succeed.

Our Proposal

We are proposing that Smith, located at 744 E. 103rd St., be turned around at the end of the current school year per ILCS, 105 5/34-8.3(d)(4). Smith has received the lowest performance level (Level 3) on the CPS Performance Policy (Board Report 10-0728-PO4) for five years and has failed to make adequate progress to address the deficiencies that have placed it on probation. In other words, CPS is proposing to turnaround Smith based on the school’s chronic low academic performance and the need to provide higher quality educational options for students in the community.

If the Board approves the turnaround of Smith, I will recommend that the CPS Office of School Improvement (OSI) manage the school. OSI is a nationally recognized pioneer in turning around chronically under-performing schools. Through effective and innovative school reform strategies, OSI has demonstrated success in accelerating elementary student academic growth at a rate beyond that of the CPS average. These results are evident both in ISAT score increases and in the district’s “value added” measure of achievement improvement.

Details For Current Students

The turnaround of Smith will have no effect on the enrollment of any current students at Smith or any students eligible to enroll as of the 2012-2013 school year. All current Smith students will remain enrolled in the school after it is turned around. If you have any questions concerning this proposal, please call the CPS Quality Schools Hotline at 773-553-5020.

Details For School Personnel and Local School Council Members

If the Board approves this proposal, all current administrators, faculty and staff members assigned to Smith will be displaced at the end of the 2011-12 school year in accordance with Board policies and any applicable contracts and collective bargaining agreements. If you have any questions or concerns regarding how the proposed turnaround affects the employment status of administrators, faculty or staff, please contact Employee Services at (773) 553-1142 or employeeservices@cps.k12.il.us.

Public Comment On The Proposal

I invite you to share your feedback on this proposal at the public hearing scheduled for Thursday, February 2, 2012, at 125 S. Clark St, 5th Floor Board Chambers, from 8:00-10:00 p.m. You may also provide alternate proposals or other written suggestions at that time. If you wish to comment at the public hearing, you must sign up between 7:00 pm and 9:00 pm on the day of the hearing at 125 S. Clark St. in the lobby. You will have two minutes to speak, unless the hearing officer or meeting organizer provides an extension. The hearing will conclude at the stated end time or following the comments of the last person who has signed up to speak, whichever occurs first.

After the public hearing, I will review a written report from the hearing officer. At that time, I may recommend that the Board consider and take action on the proposed turnaround of Smith at its meeting on February 22, 2012.
I can assure you that we will not turnaround any school without careful consideration for what is best for our students, and that my team and I will work to make any transition as smooth as possible. If you have questions or concerns, please call the CPS Quality Schools Hotline at 773-553-5020.

Sincerely,

Jean-Claude Brizard

CC: David Vitale, Board President  
    Noemi Donoso, Chief Education Officer