



JOSEPH A. MOORE

ALDERMAN, 49TH WARD
7356 NORTH GREENVIEW AVENUE
CHICAGO, ILLINOIS 60626
TELEPHONE: 773-338-5796
ward49@cityofchicago.org
www.ward49.com

Ms. Katy Hogan
Mr. Gabe Gonzalez
Network 49
P.O. Box 68361
Chicago, Illinois 60660

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Dear Katy and Gabe,

Please accept my apologies for my delay in responding to your email regarding the Chicago Math and Science Academy's (CMSA) expansion proposal and KEYS Nineveh Academy's letter of intent to open a charter elementary school in Rogers Park. As you can imagine, my plate is nearly always full and I wanted to devote the time and attention necessary to provide you with the type of thoughtful response your letter deserves. I believe this is more important than abiding by an arbitrary deadline.

As my response is fairly lengthy, I divided it into sections to make for easier reading.

The Status of the two Proposals

At the outset, allow me to set forth my understanding of the status of the two proposals. CMSA in February submitted a proposal to expand its ninth grade class by 100 seats over a four-year period. CPS staff is currently reviewing the proposal and will make a recommendation to the Chicago Board of Education by mid-April. If the staff recommends approval of the application, the Board of Education will consider that recommendation at its Wednesday, April 26, board meeting.

KEYS Nineveh Academy Charter School recently submitted a letter of intent to open a K-5 charter school in Rogers Park that will be focused on Mesopotamian studies, cultural preservation, language courses and history, while also providing refugee and health care services for those who have escaped persecution and genocide, especially from the Assyrian region. This is the first step in a long application process. CPS does not anticipate making a decision on this application until November or December.

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CHICAGO, ILLINOIS 60602
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My Approach to the Charter School Debate

Unfortunately, the discussion surrounding charter schools on both the local and national levels has devolved into a debate over a false choice--charter schools vs. public schools. Those of us who keep an open mind on charter schools are unfairly accused of being for charter schools and against traditional neighborhood public schools. I am not pro-charter and I am certainly not against neighborhood schools. Instead, I am pro-good schools. The more good schools we have in our community, in whatever form they take, and the more quality educational choices we can offer the parents and guardians of our children, the better off our community will be.

As I have stated publicly on numerous occasions, I want people to choose to live in Rogers Park because of our schools, not in spite of them. The more quality educational choices our community offers, the more likely we can keep families in Rogers Park and entice more families to move to Rogers Park.

We are well on our way to achieving that goal. As you note in your letter, Sullivan High School experienced strong academic and enrollment gains over the last several years. As you also know, our neighborhood elementary schools enjoyed similar academic gains. These advances have occurred even though two charter schools have opened in our neighborhood over the same period of time--CMSA in 2005 and UNO Rogers Park in 2012. This belies the false and defeatist narrative that quality neighborhood public schools can exist only in the absence of quality charter schools and that the only way our neighborhood schools can succeed is by depriving our families of educational choices.

Charter school opponents frequently point to studies that allegedly show charter schools do not outperform traditional neighborhood public schools academically and frequently perform below public school levels. I am certain charter school advocates have their own studies that reach the opposite conclusion. However, even assuming that charter schools as a whole do not outperform public schools as a whole, this does not mean that all charter schools are subpar. Certainly this is not the case with CMSA, which consistently is rated as one of the top schools, not only in our neighborhood, but the entire city and state.

The Chicago Math and Science Academy Expansion Proposal

As you know, the Chicago Math and Science Academy (CMSA) proposes to expand its ninth grade class by 25 students a year for the next four years, ultimately expanding its high school enrollment by 100 students. They assure me they have room in their existing building to expand without resulting in any overcrowding.

CPS rates CMSA as a Level 1+ school, the highest ranking a school can achieve and independent agencies rank CMSA as the second best charter school in the City of Chicago and the third best charter school in the State of Illinois. These findings are echoed by *U.S. News and World Report's Best High Schools*, which last year gave CMSA a silver ranking. CMSA's ACT composite scores have risen consistently over the years and now equal the state average of 20.8 and exceed the CPS average by 2.4 points.

One hundred percent of CMSA graduates last year were accepted into college, including the University of Chicago and Northwestern University. And once in college, a clear majority of CMSA graduates actually obtain a post-secondary degree. According to a CPS report, CMSA graduates enjoy the highest college retention rate in the City.

CMSA is able to achieve this with a student body that hardly can be considered "privileged." It is safe to say the vast majority of CMSA graduates are the first in their family to go to college. Ninety-four percent of CMSA students qualify for free or reduced lunch and 97% are from families of color. Approximately 11.4% of CMSA students are in special education, which closely mirrors the district-wide average of 12.2%.

In short, CMSA offers families in our neighborhood, especially low-income families of color, a quality educational option. Because of their economic circumstances, these families do not enjoy the range of educational choices for their children that those of us who are more economically privileged enjoy.

As you know, CMSA is not a selective enrollment school. The school takes anyone who applies, up to CPS' prescribed limit. And here's the rub. CMSA informs me that they turn down over 200 applications each year, even though their facility could accommodate more students, simply because of CPS' enrollment cap.

I am well aware of the political pressure to oppose charter schools, especially on the City's north side. The charter school opponents are much better organized and single-issue oriented than those who support making good charters an educational option. The low income parents and guardians whose children are the primary beneficiaries of charter schools are not well organized and scattered throughout our community and city. The more politically expedient course for me would be to simply give in to political pressure.

However, I simply cannot in good conscience oppose a high-quality school from expanding its offerings in my neighborhood, especially when so many families wish to enroll their children in that school and especially when the arguments against the school expansion--that it will hurt other schools--flies in the face of objective evidence to the contrary. To me, supporting the expansion of a good school with the academic rigor and track record of CMSA is a no-brainer. It's good for our families. It's good for our children. And it's good for our entire community.

Unless I'm missing something, the sole argument against CMSA's expansion appears to be that it will siphon off students from Sullivan. I find this argument ironic. Those who oppose CMSA's expansion rightly extoll the virtues of Sullivan, yet they imply that if Sullivan families and students were given a choice of schools, they inevitably would choose to go elsewhere. This argument sells Sullivan short and assumes that families and students currently attending Sullivan see it as the school of last resort.

Moreover, this argument also is not supported by the objective facts. According to CPS statistics and census data, 1,832 high school-aged CPS students live within Sullivan's boundaries. Of those students, 1,433 (78%) opted this year to attend a CPS school other than Sullivan. Of those who opted to attend another CPS school, approximately two-thirds (941 or 66%) enrolled in

another neighborhood school or a selective enrollment school. Only 34% (492) chose a charter school. Of those students who chose a charter, a little over one-half (274 or 56%) attend CMSA.

In other words, **only 15%** of the high school students who live within the Sullivan attendance boundaries attend CMSA. When 49th Ward CPS high school opt out of Sullivan, they are *much more likely* to attend another district school or charter school, than CMSA. (These statistical ratios, by the way, are very similar to Rogers Park's elementary schools).

There is no indication that the 200 students who were refused admission this year to CMSA because they were not picked in the lottery are any different than any other high school student in Rogers Park. Based on the ratios above, the overwhelming number of those students chose to attend another district school or charter rather than Sullivan. It therefore stands to reason that if 100 more students are allowed to enroll in CMSA over the next few years, it will come much more at the expense of other district schools and charters rather than Sullivan. The impact on Sullivan will be minimal at best and certainly does not justify depriving 100 predominantly low income families their choice in schools.

These statistics also call into question the applicability of the recent advisory referendum that Network 49 advocated, as the predominant argument in support of a "yes" vote was based on the false premise that Rogers Park charter schools siphon off large numbers of students from Rogers Park neighborhood schools.

Though advisory referenda inform my decision making, I do not consider them controlling. Non-binding referenda are like scientific opinion polls. They provide a snapshot of public sentiment at the time they are conducted and their results often are determined more by the wording of the measure than a thoughtful and deliberative discussion in which all the facts are aired. I suspect that if another referendum asked voters if they would support opening additional seats for a school rated as one of the best in the state where nearly all its graduates go on to college, it would receive a similar, if not greater, percentage "yes" vote.

As the elected leader in this ward, I have a responsibility to give thoughtful consideration to the views of my constituents, but my ultimate responsibility is to lead. I am obligated to weigh all the arguments pro and con and make policy decisions that I believe to be in the best interests of the entire community, even if some of those decisions are not universally popular.

To me, this comes down to a matter of simple justice. Low and moderate income families should enjoy the same kind of educational options that those of us who are more economically privileged enjoy.

Accordingly, I have informed the Board of Education that I support CMSA's application to expand. Of course, ultimately it is the Board of Education's call. The Board and CPS staff are in a far better position than I to determine whether the school can expand its enrollment without diminishing the quality of its educational offerings and harming nearby schools. I will support their decision regardless of its outcome.

The KEYS Nineveh Academy Letter of Intent

Though I am well aware of CMSA quality and track record, I know little about the company that runs the proposed KEYS Nineveh Academy and I know very little about their plans other than what they shared with me in a brief courtesy meeting at my office and what I read in *DNAinfo*.

As a result, I'm going to do something that is becoming far too rare in today's political climate. I am withholding judgment until I get all the facts.

That said, I have some initial concerns based on quotes in the *DNAinfo* article attributed to the school's representatives.

Though I deeply appreciate and understand the Assyrian community's desire to "preserve [the Assyrian] language and culture which is facing extinction," our public schools should be open and welcoming to all. I would not want in our neighborhood a charter *public* school whose enrollment is technically open to all, but in reality serves a distinct religious and cultural population. It certainly is not in the interest of our diverse community to divide our public schools into separate ethnic enclaves. At a minimum, I would insist on guarantees that the school would enroll a diverse student body from a broad cross-section of languages and cultures.

On the other hand, I am not insensitive to the substantial challenges facing our refugee families. Most have experienced unspeakable horrors and faced unfathomable challenges that we could only begin to imagine. Your assurances to the contrary, I'm not so sure our local neighborhood schools are as well-equipped as they should be to deal with the unique social, emotional and language needs of these refugees. Most refugees need trauma-informed instruction throughout the day and wrap-around services, including psychological services at a moment's notice. A school run by members of their own community arguably would be in a better position to provide those services in a timely and more comprehensive manner.

It is not enough to speak in generalities about our love for immigrants and refugees. If a qualified organization proposes to provide these needed services to our vulnerable refugee children, we should not reject it out of hand simply because it happens to be a charter school.

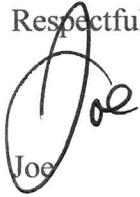
Perhaps KEYS Nineveh Academy could serve as a transition program for recent refugees instead of a traditional K-5 school, and possibly collaborate with the Immigration Center concept that CPS is piloting at Sullivan. Once these refugee children have been stabilized, they could then be transitioned to a more traditional public school. It is a thought worth pursuing as CPS considers KEYS Nineveh's application.

Conclusion

I sincerely appreciate your views and passionate commitment to our local public schools. Though we may disagree on this particular issue, I hope we can continue to work together on the many other school-related issues on which we share common ground. We are fortunate to have many good schools in Rogers Park and have people, such as yourselves, who are passionate about education.

If you wish, I am happy to meet with you to continue our dialogue.

Respectfully,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to be the name 'Joe'. The signature is stylized with a large, looping initial 'J' and a smaller 'oe' following it. The word 'Joe' is printed in a small, plain font directly beneath the handwritten signature.