



## **SPEECH**

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### **CTU President Karen Lewis' address before the City Club of Chicago: "On Baseball & Budgets"**

**CHICAGO** – Today, Chicago Teachers Union President Karen GJ Lewis delivered the following remarks before the City Club of Chicago:

“Good afternoon. Thanks to the City Club of Chicago for inviting me to share with you this afternoon. It is always an honor and a privilege to stand before such a distinguished group and share the Chicago Teachers Union vision for public education for our city.

“I love baseball. When I was a kid, I used to dream that one day I’d play right along-side Minnie Minoso or Sandy Koufax. I was going to be a pitcher; and my knuckleball wasn’t too bad for a second grader. On the field, I owned third base. Nobody was going to get past me. I had the knees and elbows to show it.

“When I was six-years-old my father took me next door (because we lived next to a playground) to teach me how to bat left-handed. He said he wanted me to have an advantage--whether I was playing with friends or when that day came when women were allowed in the major leagues. Daddy reminded me that perfect practice makes perfect and that if I was going to be an all-star and be immortalized in Cooperstown I had better work hard. “Talent alone, Karen, does not make one great—discipline does,” Daddy would say.

“So every day I could -- come rain, snow or shine—after homework and dinner (on weekdays) or lunch (on weekends) I’d go outside and practice my pitches with my Nellie Fox glove. Over and over I drilled into my mind how to swing and hold my bat and practice my stance, my crouch. I was going to be prepared. I was going to be drafted by the White Sox. I would hit a homerun. People would cheer and call my name as I rounded the bases and headed all the way home.

“That was my dream.

“And, my parents never discouraged me. They never told me how unattainable my fantasy or that girls couldn’t play in the majors. It didn’t matter that some of the boys in my neighborhood balked at choosing a girl to be on their team. Daddy said “don’t be afraid to step on the playing field.” He said, “show ‘em what you’ve got.” My Mother said “don’t listen to naysayers, keep your head high, Karen, and keep moving forward.” Wasn’t long before I became a secret weapon at the park—a girl who could throw a perfect slider, a pitcher who knew how to bat left-handed. I made my share of mistakes, but like my parents taught, ‘I learned from them and move on.’”

“As lifelong educators, who had great careers as Chicago public school teachers, they instilled in me a sense of purpose and told me that as long as I dared to dream—they would do their level best to provide me with the resources, tools and environment I needed to succeed. In order to succeed, they said, I first had to dare to dream. I had to dream the world I wanted to live in and then it was my responsibility to go out and create it.

“So it didn’t matter if it was baseball or being a famous surgeon or a Hollywood filmmaker or an award-winning chemistry teacher—no matter what manifestation my life would eventually take—I understood that first I had to dream, second I had to develop discipline, third I had to step on the playing field, fourth I had to ignore the naysayers and keep my head high; fifth learn from my mistakes; and sixth, and more importantly, keep moving forward

“I can’t help but think of these lessons as I enter my second-term as president of the Chicago Teachers Union. This was a job I did not want; I was supposed to retire in June, you know. Make no mistake about it—I love the classroom. But as a chemistry teacher active in my union what I desired was a union that would not only be a strong advocate for my rights as a laborer in the public school system but an organization that would be the strongest advocate for my students.

I dreamed of a union that was vocal, engaged, productive, creative and visionary. When the members of my caucus –The Caucus of the Rank and File Educators or CORE as we are known—dared to dream about challenging the leadership of our union, the best we thought we would do is win a few slots on our executive committee. In fact, we brought in a well-known labor activist from British Columbia to speak to us and even she told us that winning one or two committee seats might be the best that we could do and we should be satisfied with that and try again in three or six years.

“But there’s something to be said about dreamers and self-determination. So here we are, Jesse Sharkey, Michael Brunson, Kristine Mayle and I and the rest of our team of committed, dedicated professionals. We are reshaping the Chicago Teachers Union into a strong organization for our members and a strong advocate for our students. We had to “create our world,” “articulate our reality,” and “restructure the guts of our organization where we maximized our passion for teaching and learning and utilized our strengths of research, organizing and advocacy.

“So here we are—term two.

“As you know, this newly energized CTU is often in opposition with the status quo--those who are in power; many of whom who have never stepped foot in a classroom and inhabit editorial boards or make millions on the top levels of corporate-owned skyscrapers or promulgate in the halls of our legislative bodies. We are sometimes in opposition with those who have been inside the classroom but have forgotten the true mission of our profession and have instead opted for payouts, bonuses, and lucrative management and educational consulting contracts.

The new CTU is an organization of believers. We believe in publicly-funded public education and we believe that we can have a system in Chicago that is equal to or exceeds school districts in Finland or Japan. We believe this. Why--because we understand the meaning of the word priority.

## **NOTHING VISIONARY ABOUT CLOSING SCHOOLS**

“Instead of having the distinction of having one of the best school districts in the nation (or world) Chicago now has the distinction of having closed the most public schools in a single year in U.S. history. *Priorities.*

“Instead of talking about the innovations in learning and the teaching profession, people are talking about how art, music, physical education and creative uses of technology are stripped from the core curriculum in Chicago and replaced by rote learning rituals; online programing and attacks on educators and other public school employees.

“Instead of working with parents and community, Chicago has the distinction of blaming parents and caregivers accusing them of academic neglect; depriving students of resources; vilifying their communities as places devoid of love, support and culture; labeling their teachers as failures; and stereotyping their school communities as dismal failures (despite the rise in graduation rates and test scores).

“With fewer students, fewer employees and fewer buildings—CPS continues to maintain that its fiscal deficit is mounting. Their cuts save little and do little to improve the quality of education for our students. **Priorities.**

“There is nothing innovative, bold or visionary about closing schools, firing teachers, paraprofessionals and clinicians and attacking the pensions of our retirees. There is nothing innovative, or smart, about cramming 45 kids in a single classroom—and then declaring their schools are “underutilized” or that any teacher who criticizes the status quo is unqualified and should lose their job. There is nothing innovative about that.

“There is nothing visionary about rehashing a five-year plan that was rehashed five years before that by five different CEOs. There’s nothing visionary about that—especially when most of the administrators who will be tasked with carrying out said plan usually don’t last for five consecutive years.

“Bold thinking says “**No schools will close!**” We will not balance our budget on the backs of children. Bold thinking says we will exhaust every avenue; identify every available opportunity to keep our public schools well-resourced, appropriately staffed and open. Bold thinking creates strong school communities not weakens them.

“Bold leadership declares an end to corporate subsidies and loopholes. It calls for progressive taxation. In Illinois, while the poor and working-class pay an effective tax rate of more than 10 percent, the top 5 percent are systematically advantaged by the tax code, paying a mere 4.1 percent to 6.5 percent effective tax rate. If the tax rates for the top 5 percent wage-earners in Chicago were equalized, at least another \$160 million in revenue would be made available for children’s education.

A Center on Budget and Policy Priorities (CBPP) [report](#) revealed that total [K-12](#) education cuts for fiscal 2012 were about [\\$12.7](#) billion. *Pay Up Now* just completed a [review](#) of 2011-12 tax data from the [SEC](#) filings of 155 of the largest U.S. corporations. The results show that the total cost of K-12 educational cutbacks in recent years is approximately equal to the amount of state taxes left unpaid by these companies. For 2011 and 2012, the 155 companies paid just [1.8 percent](#) of their total income in state taxes, and 3.6 percent of their declared U.S. income. The [average](#) required rate for the 50 states is 6.56 percent. - (Paul Buchheit, Nation of Change)

“So, given the deficit claims, CTU has been investigating how to generate new revenue for our school district. What are some other potential revenue streams?

## **TIFS**

“Tax Increment Financing: We’ve been talking about this for a really long time. The portion that CPS gets back from TIFs has been designated for capital construction, not to support the direct instruction of our students. The distribution of these funds has also been grossly inequitable, providing a quarter of all TIF funds to elite selective enrollment schools even though they are only 1 percent of CPS. Less than half of the TIF funds went to neighborhood schools.

“Of the \$2.45 billion in TIF dollars spent from 2004 through 2008, the Loop, near North Side, Near South Side and Near West Side communities received \$1.56 billion, or 63 percent. More than half of the 171 TIF projects finalized between 2000 and 2010 were located near the Loop. Since 2000, nearly \$100 million of TIF funds have been given to corporations to move their corporate offices to the Loop or keep them in the city.

## **TOXIC SWAPS**

“Last month, as the Board was preparing to close our schools, the Chicago Teachers Union elevated its protests against Bank of America (BOA). Bank of America is profiting from and hurting Chicagoans of all classes: by participating in predatory lending that led to the foreclosure crisis, by illegally speeding through the foreclosure process and taking possession of homes that were faithfully making mortgage payments, and by using unethically high interest rates on the debt swaps for CPS' capital improvement projects.

“The so-called "under-utilization" of Chicago Public Schools can easily be tied to excessive home foreclosures in certain neighborhoods - most notably: Austin, Englewood, North Lawndale, Roseland, South Chicago, West Englewood, West Pullman, and Woodlawn. These communities have been devastated by years of community disinvestment at the behest of city officials and most of these communities also have seen the most charter proliferation. The families have been driven out by the foreclosure crisis and more and more of the public schools are being shut down every year. Families lose their homes, teachers lose their jobs, children lose a trusted community institution. It's as if there is a concerted effort to make sure that these are not walkable, thriving, healthy communities.

“We are currently hearing about the reduction in library, art, music and special education programming because of school-based budget cuts. For every million dollars that Bank of America has earned from toxic swaps in the last 5 years, there are over 10 library, art, music or world language programs that will be eliminated. If the banks had not crashed our economy, the district would have nearly \$180 million more to invest in our classrooms, an amount that would restore all of the cuts to the better school day throughout the city.

“Renegotiating out of a bad deal sends the signal that CPS is looking out for its taxpayers and the schools. The district has paid out hundreds of millions on these bad swap deals since 2008, and are on track to pay hundreds of millions more unless they renegotiate the terms of these agreements.

## **FAIR TAXATION**

“In Illinois, while the poor and working-class pay an effective tax rate of 12 percent or more, the top 5 percent are systematically advantaged by the tax code.

“At the city level, a combined city-income and commuter progressive-tax between just 0.5 percent and 1.5 percent can generate close to a \$1 billion for the city, with half going to CPS. Imagine if CPS had \$600 million more in revenue in addition to nearly \$300 million a year from TIFs and Swaps? We would be having an entirely different conversation of improving early childhood programs, wrap around services, adult education, anti-violence initiatives, expansion of nurses, counselors and school social workers, etc.

“How does the state give \$98 million to UNO yet our schools are losing millions of dollars because of corporate loopholes? This makes no sense at all.

## **FINANCIAL TRANSACTION TAX**

“There is a Financial Transaction Tax bill gasping for air somewhere in Springfield. We need to take a closer look at what this legislation will do for our schools. Dr. William Barclay, an economist and researcher says between 2009 and 2012 the total revenue that could have been raised by an FTT of \$1/contract paid by both buyer and seller for all contracts traded on the Chicago derivative markets (except options on individual stocks) ranged from \$6.3 - \$7.4 billion. Dr. Barclay says the total revenue that could have been raised by an FTT of \$1/contract on agriculture (AG) contracts and \$2/contract on NON-AG contracts ranged from \$10.6 - \$13.1 billion.

“Now: CEO Barbara Byrd-Bennett has asked the CTU to offer revenue solutions to the district’s budget crisis. This is a start. Now the only question remains, when will CEO Bennett and Mayor Emanuel join with CTU to lobby for these important reforms? Our children cannot wait, our schools deserve our advocacy.

## **THE ROAD TO EFFECTIVE COLLABORATION**

“The CTU wants to work with our leaders in City Hall, Springfield and at the Board to solve these sorts of problems. We can’t work together on these issues because they keep creating new problems. There is nothing radical about me other than I want each and every student in Chicago to get the best education we have to offer--an equal education.

“Last year we issued *The Schools Chicago’s Students Deserve*, our comprehensive plan for strengthening our schools. We are pleased to see that CPS has taken some of our recommendations (pre-school, kindergarten and restoring art, music and physical education), but we encourage the Board to act with deliberate speed to rid the district of this vast levels of inequality.

“We desire collaboration. We want the respect of our profession and our expertise. We want to be partners in making Chicago’s school district one of the strongest in the nation. Look at Montgomery County, Maryland, as an example. There the School Superintendent, the Board of Education, the unions representing principals, teachers and support staff, as well as the PTA work together to develop the district’s budget and education plan—and a way to implement it. Parents, employees and the administration working together: that is how you build trust. You don’t build it in CPS silos. You don’t build it by ignoring parent, community and teacher voice.

“As long as the status quo of elites continues to impress upon our district these horrible policies that may work well in corporate environments but are not good for children, the Chicago Teachers Union will be portrayed as oppositionists. Members of the status quo—the people who are running the schools and advising the mayor on how to best run our district -- know what good education looks like because they have secured it for their own children in well-resourced public and private institutions.

“In a city with over 600 public schools there are 600 different theories on how to offer students a high-quality, well-resourced education. What a student receives differs from campus to campus. And every year CPS moves the bar on what excellence looks like.

“Some schools have I pads and well-equipped science labs and others have no toilet paper or working computers. Why do the most disadvantaged children get the least? Why is it in a city with rising levels of

homicides and violence that our students do not receive the appropriate social and emotional supports? What does this say about our district? What does this say about our priorities?

### **MORE TOP DOWN CHAOS**

“What we have is more top-down chaos. We have principals who are under a “one strike” policy—if they make one mistake they can lose their jobs. This creates a climate of fear. And this culture of instability trickles down to the classroom. Instead of speaking out against these horrible school reform experiments being imposed on them by the district—year after year—they quickly and haphazardly attempt to implement them. And when one doesn’t work they move on to the next, and then the next and then the next.

“This past Friday the Board abruptly announced it would lay off over 850 employees; nearly 500 of them teachers—as a result of school closings and turnarounds. They even want to get rid of nearly 150 bus aides—after promising the public those children who have to travel long distances to their new welcoming school will have bus service. I guess the buses will have to drive themselves. We fear this is the tip of the iceberg. With CPS’s “billion dollar deficit” myth—an unverified statement—they can and will eliminate more teaching positions and other jobs. And who will be impacted the most—teachers of color; tenured teachers; and older, more highly educated employees. Where will this impact be felt the most—in predominately African American communities?

### **POVERTY, RACISM & INEQUALITY IN OUR DISTRICT**

“And, when are we going to address the elephant in the room? When will there be an honest conversation about the poverty, racism and inequality that hinders the delivery of a quality education product in our school system? When will we address the fact that rich, white people, think they know what’s in the best interest of children of African Americans and Latinos—no matter what the parent’s income or education level. And, when did all of these venture capitalists become so interested in the lives of minority students in the first place? There is something about these folks who love the kids but hate the parents. There’s something about these folks who use little black and brown children as stage props at one press conference while announcing they want to fire, layoff or lock up their parents at another press conference.

“I know no one likes to talk about race, especially since so many people believe we are living in post-racial America—even though Chicago remains the most segregated city in the United States. There is nothing wrong about dreaming that everyone is equal; that all playing fields are even; and that all anyone needs to succeed is equal opportunity to get ahead—but we have to work on this together to make this happen.

“Whether they want to be bus drivers or bankers—it is our job to give our students the best, high-quality (and equitable) education available. This is our responsibility. Our obligation. It is our job to encourage the dreamers. To give them a stable and supportive environment and the tools and discipline they need to succeed.

“Langston Hughes said “...for if dreams die, life is a broken-winged bird that cannot fly.” Let’s give our students wings—not clip them.

### **IN CLOSING**

“Every student in Chicago Public schools deserves to have the same quality education as the children of the wealthy—I believe this. This is what I am working on. This isn’t a dream for a utopian (perfect) world. This is what we can and should have for our city and our students now. Continuing CPS policies

and budgetary priorities that disinvest in neighborhood schools have failed to serve most students and need to be discontinued.

“In conclusion, let me say I told you in the beginning that I love baseball. But in 1969 I fell out of love with the sport after the Cubs lost to the raggedly Mets. I couldn’t believe it. I was done. And up until 2009 I wanted nothing more to do with the sport that as a little kid I once vowed to make history as the first female pitcher in the major leagues. I turned my sights to tennis and every now and then a good ole’ boxing match.

“Now I’m a huge White Sox fan. Going to the games now is bringing back all of those feel good memories I had with my Father—and I’m glad to be in love with the great American past time again. But you know, my jilted love affair with the Cubs got me to thinking. *There’s always a way back in with baseball.* Despite all of the crushed dreams of many Cub fans year after year they continue to fill up the stadium. No World Series win--but the fans still show up. Despite the curse of the goat the fans show up. They cheer. They love the players. They root for the home team.

“When the Cubs lose a game they don’t call for Wrigley Field to close down. They don’t want the entire team dismantled. Despite empty seats, the stadium isn’t accused of being underutilized. The owners don’t kill the franchise. They don’t bastardize the team. They don’t demoralize the coach who then demoralizes the players. The owners don’t blame the fans for every missed ball or strike. They honor the players’ contracts. No one questions their salaries or tries to steal their pensions and rarely does the public attack their union. They invest in the stadium—they want to make it better, and better and even outstanding.

“Year after year—despite individual player performance, despite game losses and near wins—the fans show continue to show up. We keep cheering for our Cubbies. We know they are winners. We dream. We believe.

“Do the same for our children. Cheer them on. Invest in them. Love them. Support their parents. Support their teachers. Support their schools. Let’s work together. Let’s win, Chicago. Let’s win.”

**-END-**