

BATTLE LINES DRAWN AS CHICAGO SCHOOLS JUST DAYS AWAY FROM THE SHOWDOWN



The looming strike between the district and the Chicago teachers is leading to hugely concerned local communities, who are innocent bystanders trapped in a battle, that is largely labeled political and fear they could be trampled under the feet of the battling giants. Elfega Cazares, an immigrant parent is not concerned about who wins in this fight between the Chicago Teachers Union and Chicago Public Schools; she says all she knows is that her children will definitely be the losers. "It is very important that we stay in school so we can be prepared to be someone in life," she said in Spanish. Her hopes could be belied and students could find themselves out of the classroom a week from now. To showcase her union's strength, its President Karen Lewis said more than 26,000 teachers and support staff are unbending in their intent to strike. School officials and worried parents got into hurried consultation about how to keep the 400,000 students safe and occupied outside their classrooms. There are many neighborhoods in the area that are full of gangs and violence is a frequent occurrence. District officials assuaged worried parents that they would chaperone students during the morning in 145 schools, where half-a-day classes are scheduled to be held. Moreover, they have also invited bids from community organizations to provide "positive activities" that will keep the kids indoors for the rest of the time. The strike, which means cessation of work, would also mean that College applications will have to be deferred; sports for more than 11,000 athletes would have to be suspended and upwards of 20,000 juniors may have to miss out on practice tests for ACT exams. Some working parents expressed concern about who would look after their children in their absence. They are also worried that they will miss out on an education that could help them get out of the drudgery of low-paying jobs that they had to undergo. These immigrants say that they crossed the border, so that their children could get an education for their future, something that they could not get. Mayor Rahm Emanuel has a lot hinged on last minute negotiations and although some issues, it seems, have been resolved, bargaining and pretentiousness over several other issues has continued. The mayor will soon find himself in the national spotlight, as he is scheduled to address the Democratic national convention, just days before the proposed commencement of the strike. On Labor Day the unions exhibited their collective strength when they packed a downtown plaza with thousands of sloganeering supporters. Speaking to the crowd, Lewis said the Mayor was a "liar and a bully." Perez elementary Principal Vicky Kleros said that ninety-five percent of the 430 preschool-through-eighth-grade students at Perez elementary qualify for free or reduced-price lunches. They could be denied this benefit if the walkout takes place. However, she said that when the schools continued to function for half a day, between 8:30 a.m. to 12:30 p.m., the children would still get their breakfast and lunch, thanks to the \$25 million contingency money that the school district has in place, if the strike takes place. If there is a strike, Kleros said the school would be open from 8:30 a.m. to 12:30 p.m. every school day so children still could eat breakfast and lunch and participate in activities. After that, library and park district buildings will be open — all part of a \$25 million school district strike contingency plan. Something has to give. Who will blink first? There is just too much at stake and time is a commodity they do not have – the showdown is just round the corner.