

Designs for Change insights

February 2008 Newsletter

Each issue of
Designs for Change Insights
analyzes one important question
related to DFC's mission:
**Transforming Urban Education
on a Scale That Matters.**

Two Research Groups Conclude that Shifting Key Powers to Each Chicago School Has Dramatically Raised Achievement in a Large Number of Schools

This Research Pinpoints Distinctive Practices of Substantially Improved Schools

The most **under-reported** story about Chicago's schools is the **major impact** on student achievement created by the shift from a top-down to a **school-based** improvement strategy in 1988.

Two separate long-term research studies by Designs for Change and the Consortium on Chicago School Research have now documented major **positive impacts** of the school-based improvement framework established by the 1988 Chicago School Reform Act, in dramatically improving student achievement in a large number of Chicago elementary schools (grades pre-K to eight).

- Designs for Change (2005). ***The Big Picture***. Chicago: Designs for Change. ([download](#))
- Penny Sebring and others (2006). ***The Essential Supports for School Improvement***. Chicago: Consortium on Chicago School Research. ([download](#))

Both studies identify and analyze **Five Essential Supports for Student Learning** and related **distinctive school practices** that are characteristic of the schools that improved achievement substantially, which creates the possibility that other urban schools can learn from their experience.

As identified by Designs for Change, these Five Essential Supports for Student Learning are: (1) **School Leadership**, (2) **Family and Community Partnerships**, (3) **Social Supports for Learning**, (4) **Adults Learn and Collaborate**, and (5) **Quality Learning Activities**.

Designs for Change



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**Transforming urban
education on a scale that
matters — by linking
research and reform.**



At Earhart Options for Knowledge School (a 78% low-income and 100% African American neighborhood school on Chicago's South Side), eighth graders outscored African American eighth graders at every Evanston and Oak Park school on 2005 state tests in reading and math.

In 1988, the Illinois Legislature **radically restructured** the top-down bureaucratic Chicago school system — shifting the primary authority for educational improvement to each individual school community in Chicago.

This radical change resulted from a grassroots campaign that rewrote state education law that applies to Chicago. One Republican legislator described this effort “as the most effective grassroots legislative campaign I have ever seen.” The history of this effort is analyzed in ***Chicago School Reform, Chicago Style***, by Mary O’Connell. ([download](#))

The Chicago School Reform Act, for example, created elected parent-majority Local School Councils (LSCs) at each Chicago school, with the power to **select their school’s principal** for a four-year performance contract and then decide whether to rehire their principal or choose a different one. And principals gained the right to appoint any certified teacher to an open staff position, without regard to teacher seniority. (See “Key Changes Created by the 1988 Chicago School Reform Act” on page 6.)

Chicago’s mayor was given power over the central board of education and central administration in 1995. However, key school-level powers created by the 1988 Reform Act are **still in force** and are being actively used to improve educational quality in school communities across the city.

Chicago’s Local School Councils are about to carry out **their tenth** LSC election in April 2008.

Large Numbers of Inner City Schools Improved Substantially

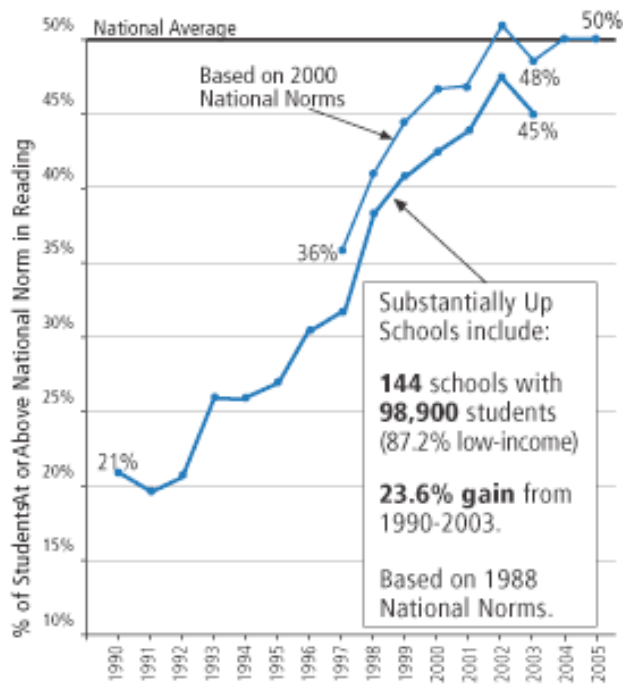
The **Designs for Change analysis** on page 3 indicates that:

- **144** Chicago public elementary schools that were low-achieving in 1990 (with only 21% of students scoring at or above the national average) made major **sustained progress** on the Iowa Reading Test from 1990 to 2005 (“Substantially Up Schools”). In 2005, they typically reached the national average of 50%.
- These 144 substantially improved schools serve as many students as the entire Baltimore school system and are **87% low-income**.



Through the arts program at Walsh Elementary School (a “Substantially Up School”), teachers chose reading units to integrate with the arts, through collaborations with neighborhood artists.

Iowa Reading Test Scores (1990-2005) for “Substantially Up” Chicago K-8 Schools That Were Low-Achieving in 1990



Source: Designs for Change

Chicago’s Substantially Up Schools are primarily **neighborhood schools** and are spread across the city.

Chicago’s LSCs represent the **largest concentration** of elected officials of color in the United States.

The **Consortium study** concentrated on analyzing Iowa test score gains between 1990 and 1996. The Consortium study identified **118** elementary schools that moved from 22% at or above the national average on the Iowa Reading Test in 1990 to 37% by 1996.

On the Iowa Math Test, the top 118 elementary schools moved from 22% at or above the national average in 1990 to 44% in 1996 (compared with the national average for urban, suburban, and rural schools of 50%).

The Designs for Change study indicates that elementary schools that improved substantially from 1990 to 1996 typically **continued to improve** their achievement scores from 1997 to 2005.

Rachel Carson is a **98% low-income** Chicago neighborhood school serving 1,300 primarily Latino students, which carries out the Five Essential Supports for Student Learning.

Carson’s students now **meet state-wide averages** on state **reading and math** achievement tests by **eighth grade**.



Rachel Carson was transformed when an effective LSC chose an outstanding principal. See a detailed case study of Carson’s transformation. ([download](#))

Both Studies Indicate that Schools with Sustained Achievement Gains Carry Out Five Essential Supports for Student Learning

Much recent emphasis nationally has been placed on **improving instruction** as the **sole focus** for raising student achievement.

However, school communities are **complicated human systems**, in which these two studies indicate that weakness in **any one** of the Five Essential Supports for Student Learning (such as weak trust and collaboration among teachers) can **undermine** the school's ability to improve instruction and student learning. For example:

- In a school with high **teacher turnover**, teachers don't stay long enough to master the skills needed to provide quality instruction.
- If the school community does not work together to encourage high **student attendance**, many students are not in school enough to benefit from good instruction, and they are likely to drop out later on.
- If **parents** are not enlisted as partners to help their children learn, students' prospects for high achievement and graduation rates are significantly diminished.

Thus, the Consortium study concludes that:

"Our findings counter arguments that long-term school improvement can result from narrow intervention efforts, such as a specific instructional program or a new set of teachers."

In the early 1990s, Designs for Change, the Consortium on Chicago School Research, and others in Chicago focused on developing a framework for understanding the **complexities** of school communities **that must change** to improve the quality of instruction and student achievement.

Both Designs for Change and the Consortium focused on and refined **Five Essential Supports for Student Learning** (diagram on page 5). We also identified **specific practices** related to each Essential Support that distinguished (1) Chicago elementary schools that were low-achieving in 1990 that subsequently made substantial test score gains, compared with (2) schools serving similar student bodies that did not raise scores substantially.

School communities are complicated human systems, in which weakness in any one of the Five Essential Supports for Student Learning can undermine the school's ability to improve instruction and achievement.

"Our findings counter arguments that long-term school improvement can result from narrow intervention efforts, such as a specific instructional program..."

—Consortium on Chicago School Research

As these Five Essential Supports are currently defined by **Designs for Change** (based on DFC’s research about the links between school practices and Iowa Reading Test improvements, DFC’s case studies of dramatically improved schools, DFC’s direct involvement in helping schools improve, and research by the Consortium and others), these Five Essential Supports are:



- **School Leadership:** for example, principal leadership that is strong but inclusive, Local School Council leadership, and teacher leadership).
- **Family-Community Partnerships:** for example, teacher outreach to parents, parent involvement in the school, and community involvement in aiding the school program).
- **Social Supports for Learning:** for example, school discipline and safety, student self-discipline, teachers’ commitment to their school, and a culture of school-wide support for student learning.
- **Adults Collaborate and Learn:** for example, active teacher teams, mutual teacher trust, staff development that includes assistance in the classroom, and high quality education for the Local School Council.
- **Quality Learning Activities:** for example, instruction focused on helping students meet challenging learning standards, not test preparation.



An Earhart parent reads to her sons while they wait for a parent teacher conference.

Compelling Consortium Evidence Documents the Impact of the Essential Supports on Student Achievement

The Consortium’s study identified **five very similar Essential Supports**, spelled out the key research-based elements of each Essential Support, and identified striking relationships between a school’s strengths in the Essential Supports and improved student achievement in both reading and math.

- Schools strong in most of the Essential Supports were **ten times** more likely to make **substantial test score gains** than schools weak in most Essential Supports.
- A weakness in **any one** of the Five Essential Supports **significantly reduces** the likelihood of substantially improved achievement.
- While classroom instruction has the most direct impact on student achievement, the other four Essential Supports **create the foundation** that makes quality instruction possible.
- Effective **principal leadership** is the catalyst for strengthening the Essential Supports and improving student achievement.

Why This Matters

The fact that **two separate research studies** identified very **similar practices** in elementary schools with substantially improved student achievement has important implications for improving urban schools in Chicago and across the nation:

- Substantially improved Chicago public schools can become **learning sites** to help each other and to teach other Chicago schools how to carry out the Five Essential Supports for Student Learning more effectively.
- Other big city school systems can be successfully restructured based on Chicago’s experience. Designs for Change will soon clarify these lessons for other big cities in **Transforming Urban Education on a Scale That Matters: Lessons from Chicago School Reform (1985 to 2005)**.

“Schools strong in most supports were ten times more likely than schools weak in most supports to show substantial gains in both reading and mathematics.”

—Consortium on Chicago School Research

Chicago’s Substantially Up elementary schools serve as many students as the entire Baltimore school system.



- Successes from Chicago school reform can be incorporated into rewriting the federal **No Child Left Behind Act** (which will occur after the next presidential election).
- The critical importance of selecting and supporting good principals underscores the significance of **assisting LSC members** in Chicago in carrying out high quality principal evaluation and selection.
- Chicago's effective school-based improvement framework needs continued participation from **LSC candidates** who must sign up by **March 12** at their school to run for seats on their LSCs in the April 2008 LSC election.

What Designs for Change Does to Improve Large Numbers of Schools: A Priority on Helping Local School Councils Evaluate and Select Principals

Designs for Change builds its Chicago reform efforts on research about urban school improvement.

Both the Designs for Change and Consortium studies clearly indicate that the catalyst for turning around a failing urban school is to select and assist an **outstanding principal**. Further, both studies identify an **effective Local School Council** as one key characteristic of a substantially improved school.

Thus, DFC helps Chicago's Local School Councils carefully **evaluate** their principal when their principal's four-year contract ends. If a principal is not rehired or retires, DFC then helps the LSC carry out a systematic process for deciding what critical improvements are needed at their school and helps them **carefully select** the best possible **principal**.

DFC helps Local School Council members with principal evaluation and selection through four-hour introductory courses and follow-up assistance at individual schools.

In the 2006-2007 school year, **DFC aided 820** LSC members from **140** schools.



A Designs for Change staff member discusses the qualities of an effective principal with a Local School Council member.

Key Changes Created by the 1988 Chicago School Reform Act

Chicago's elected **Local School Councils** are **unique** in big cities. However, Chicago's LSCs are **similar to the elected school boards** in the 900 school districts in the rest of Illinois.

- **Local School Councils** (LSCs) are established at each school, which include six elected parents, two elected community members, two elected teachers, an elected student (in high schools), and the principal.
- LSCs have the responsibility to **choose their school's principal** for a four-year contract and to either **renew** that contract after four years or **select** a new principal.
- Life-time principal **tenure is abolished**.
- LSCs have the responsibility to help develop, approve, and monitor a **school improvement plan**.
- LSCs have the responsibility to help develop, approve, and monitor a **school-based budget**.
- After a phase-in, the average elementary school received **\$500,000 annually in new discretionary funds** to be used by the LSC to improve their school.
- Principals have the responsibility to identify the specifics of their **school's curriculum**.



Earhart's Local School Council members discuss how they can incorporate an African American museum into their school in 1977.

In 1988, the Illinois School Reform Act dramatically restructured the Chicago school system — shifting the primary authority for educational improvement to each Chicago school community.

Historian Michael Katz called Chicago School Reform the “most significant restructuring of the governance of a big city school system in the last hundred years.”

- Principals have the right to **appoint any certified teacher** to an open teaching position, without regard to teacher seniority.
- **Teacher** members of the LSC have the responsibility to **help choose their school's principal**.
- An elected Professional Personnel Leadership Council has the right to **advise the principal and LSC** about school improvement, budget, and curriculum.
- The Central Board **does not have top-down** supervisory control over the LSCs or principal.