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For Immediate Release

144 Chicago Inner City Elementary Schools Serving Nearly 100,000 Students Show 15 Years of Substantial and Sustained Achievement Gains

Their Strategies for Success Provide Valuable Lessons for Struggling City Schools

Note: The full report described here and the complete list of substantially improved Chicago public elementary schools is available at the web site of Designs for Change: www.designsforchange.org.

Chicago (September 21, 2005)—A major research project analyzing elementary school achievement over the past 15 years in Chicago identifies 144 public inner city elementary schools—all of them low-achieving in 1990—that have shown substantial and sustained improvement in reading test scores through grade 8, with the typical school’s performance reaching national averages.

Further, research indicates the distinctive practices that account for the success of these “Substantially Up Schools,” making it possible for other schools to learn from their practices.

The 144 schools serve nearly 100,000 students, a number equal to the entire school system enrollment in such cities as Baltimore. The successful Chicago public schools are distributed throughout the city, including many in the city’s poorest neighborhoods. Overall, 87% of the students attending these successful inner city public elementary schools are from low-income families.

At Carson Elementary School on Chicago’s Southwest Side, for example, student achievement has risen from 12% exceeding national averages on the Iowa Reading test in 1992 to 58% in spring 2005. And Carson’s 97% low-income and mostly Latino student body of 1,275 students had the highest attendance rate of any school in Chicago two years ago.

Like Carson, the successful schools are almost entirely neighborhood schools that must accept any student who asks to be admitted. These successful schools also have elected parent-majority Local School Councils that select their principals, and unionized staff.

Research carried out by Chicago-based Designs for Change has tracked the progress—or lack of it—in Chicago public elementary schools during a reform process that began in 1988, when the state legislature shifted major authority from the central school administration to each individual Chicago school. The 1988 Chicago School Reform Act established an elected Local School Council at schools like Carson, with the power to hire its principal on a four-year contract and make decisions about school improvement priorities and budget. The Reform Act also gave principals and teachers additional authority unique in big cities.

In 1990, only about 20% of the almost 100,000 students in the 144 elementary schools identified in the Designs for Change study could read at or above the national average, based on Iowa Reading Test results. Today that number has risen, in an almost unbroken progression, to an average of 50%—the national average for a cross-section of urban, suburban, and rural schools. The number of students in these schools reading at or above the national average has more than doubled.

At Earhart Options for Knowledge School on Chicago’s South Side, for example, the percentage of students scoring at or above the national average on the Iowa Reading Test has risen from 33% in 1990 to 75% in spring 2005. Thus, Earhart is far above the national average of 50%. With a 100% African-American and 77% low-income student body, Earhart has eliminated the “achievement gap” between African-American and white students — a goal that Earhart’s Local School Council set in the early 1990s.

While the Designs for Change research focused primarily on reading, citywide mathematics gains in Substantially Up Schools have exceeded the improvements in reading.

Further, the upward trend shown in the Iowa scores of Chicago’s Substantially Up Schools is also reflected in major improvements on the state’s ISAT Reading Tests in grades 3, 5, and 8, which are one key basis for deciding which schools will be labeled as “needing improvement” under the federal No Child Left Behind law.

“The fact that 144 public elementary schools have shown this remarkable success is a cause for celebration for the Chicago teachers, Local School Councils, parents, and principals that have turned these schools around,” said Donald Moore, executive director of Designs for Change and director of the research effort. “These results mean that Chicago has a successful network of elementary (K-8) schools that is the size of the Baltimore school system.”

“Now the challenge is to help these improved schools share lessons with each other to continue to improve and to help bring this success to the Chicago schools that continue to lag behind. This study and other research about successful inner city schools documents the principles for success. The lessons learned by Chicago schools that have made consistent substantial gains are a major resource available to other schools that want to improve, both in Chicago and nationally.”

The Designs for Change research focuses on the public elementary schools that were the lowest-achieving in 1990. “The most consistent feature of these improved schools is that all adults work together as a team to improve education, including the teachers, parents, Local School Council, principal, and community agencies,” said Moore. The study indicates that effective and long-lasting improvements occurred when these elementary schools took swift advantage of major authority granted by the legislature in the 1988 reform legislation, and kept building on their success. “These effective Local School Councils hired a principal who was a strong leader, but who also welcomed broad participation,” Moore added.

The details of improvement strategies vary from school to school, but Designs for Change and other research groups have identified “Five Essential Supports for Student Learning” found consistently in successful schools like Carson and Earhart. The Five Essential Supports are: Effective

School Leadership, Social Supports for Student Learning (School Culture), Family and Community Partnerships, Adult Collaboration and Development, and Quality Learning Activities. Research has identified distinctive practices associated with each of these Five Supports that have been documented in successful urban elementary schools in Chicago and other major cities (see **Attachment 1: “Five Essential Supports for Student Learning”**).

“The challenge now is to work with the schools that need to improve to help them carry out the Five Essential Supports for Learning that we know from research will bring substantial and sustained improvement,” said Moore.

The Designs for Change findings:

- Lend strength to the 1988 decision of the Illinois General Assembly to shift a significant amount of the initiative for school improvement to the school level, including principal hiring, school improvement planning, and control of funds.
- Support the decision announced by the Chicago Public Schools earlier this summer to remove many central administration restrictions from 85 high performing schools and indicate that this program should be expanded.

The study recommends that:

- Interested schools that have shown exemplary improvement should be given additional resources to learn from each other and to become learning sites to help other schools, through workshops and consultation by their successful teachers, principals, Local School Council members, and parents.
- Successful kindergarten to eighth grade schools should be given the option to expand one grade per year to become kindergarten through twelfth grade schools.
- Central office initiatives to improve schools that the research study shows have not worked should be discontinued or radically changed, with the savings reinvested in proven research-based initiatives.

During the past 15 years, a wide range of central administration interventions have been attempted in an effort to raise Chicago test scores. When the Illinois legislature was dissatisfied with the pace of test score improvement in 1995, Chicago’s Mayor was given increased authority to intervene in low achieving schools in an effort to improve student performance.

Ten years later, the Designs for Change research (along with other research studies) indicate that three expensive central administration initiatives to improve Chicago’s schools (school probation, large-scale grade retention, and assigning Reading Specialists to low-achieving schools) have not significantly raised achievement levels over a period of years. For example:

- Among the elementary schools originally placed on probation in 1996 or 1997, only 6 of the 68 schools still open reached the current Chicago probation standard of 40% on the Iowa Reading Test in spring 2005.
- Among the 101 elementary schools that had the highest grade retention rates in grades 3, 6, and 8 combined in summer 1997, only 8 of the 88 schools still open reached the Chicago probation standard of 40% on the Iowa Reading Test in spring 2005.
- Among the 114 low-achieving elementary schools that were assigned Reading Specialists in 2001, none of the 101 schools still open exceeded the Chicago probation standard of 40% on the Iowa Reading Test in spring 2005.

“Despite a lack of demonstrated impact, both the probation initiative and Reading Specialist initiative have been dramatically expanded by the Central Board,” said Moore. “These ineffective central office programs are costing over \$200 million per year, money that should be reinvested in strategies that have been shown to work.”

“Our research has identified a huge network of successful schools in Chicago that are educating our city’s most vulnerable students. Along with other researchers, we have identified the critical strategies that lead to success. These same strategies will work in other inner city schools that are currently failing,” said Moore.

Titled “**The Big Picture: School-Based Reforms, Centrally-Initiated Reforms, and Elementary School Achievement in Chicago (1990-2005)**,” the report is available on the Designs for Change web site at www.designsforchange.org.

The report’s preparation was supported by grants from The Spencer Foundation, The Joyce Foundation, and The Ford Foundation. The study’s contents do not necessarily reflect the views of these funders.

Designs for Change is a 28-year-old educational research and reform organization, headquartered in Chicago. DFC is particularly focused on improving the quality of urban education for the most vulnerable students, including, students of color, low-income students, English language learners, and students with disabilities.

APPENDIX 1

Five Essential Supports for Student Learning

The Five Essential Supports for Student Learning are based on research in Chicago, as well as national and international research, focused on analyzing successful kindergarten through grade eight urban public schools that serve a substantial percentage of low-income students, and where students consistently achieve substantially better than schools serving similar student bodies:

Essential Support 1. School Leadership Focused on Success For All Students

Essential Support 2. Social Supports for Learning (School Culture)

Essential Support 3. Family and Community Partnerships Support Learning

Essential Support 4. Adults Collaborate and Learn

Essential Support 5. Quality Learning Activities (with a Special Focus on Literacy)

A common thread runs through all Five Essential Supports: “Adult Teamwork to Improve Student Learning and Development.”

Essential Support 1. School Leadership Focused on Success For All Students

The Local School Council (LSC) is a significant source of leadership in the school, with its most critical decision being to take great care in hiring an excellent principal. The Local School Council remains actively involved in developing and maintaining a school vision, school improvement and budget planning, and in carefully evaluating the principal’s performance and making a well-informed decision about principal contract renewal. The LSC strongly supports parent involvement, and creates and maintains relationships with community agencies that aid the school. Many LSC members and parents volunteer in the school.

The principal displays strong but facilitative leadership in helping develop and carry out a vision for school improvement. The principal consistently creates opportunities for broad participation of staff, parents, students, and the community in decision making, school improvement, and improving student academic performance.

The principal carefully monitors all aspects of activity in the school to ensure appropriate implementation, while encouraging broad buy-in to the school’s objectives and practices. The principal carefully selects and supports staff who have the necessary expertise and commitments to implement the school’s vision. Thus, teacher turnover is low, and teachers remain to develop skills and experience that enable them to significantly increase their contributions over time.

The principal (and/or school leaders acting with the principal’s strong support) provide active educational leadership in the classroom and are committed to educational development for all staff and for other key school community leaders.

Active teachers and other staff leaders shape and carry out the school's improvement priorities. This staff leadership carries out strategies focused on strengthening the school's instructional programs and professional development, and assessing of the school's strengths and weaknesses. A focus on achieving high levels of student literacy (competence in reading and writing) for all students is key to school improvement efforts.

Staff collaborate through active grade-level and school-wide teacher teams to carry out shared goals. School staff and other leaders develop an instructional framework that is used consistently across classrooms and grades.

The school community develops an improvement plan focused on comprehensive restructuring to improve educational quality and student achievement and coordinates this improvement plan with the school budgeting process. The school community regularly evaluates the progress of its improvement efforts, establishes benchmarks for performance, and refines its plans based on these evaluations. The key leaders of the school community master and employ skills and methods for coordinating a long-term restructuring process. They mentor other members of the school community who master these skills.

Essential Support 2. Social Supports for Learning (School Culture)

The school community consistently creates and maintains a school environment (culture of the school) that effectively supports high student attendance, a safe atmosphere conducive to learning, and the engagement of all students in challenging educational activities. Students move beyond externally-imposed discipline to learn self-discipline. The school's physical environment, educational materials, and technology are carefully assembled and maintained to support learning.

Teachers and other staff convey through words and actions that every student can learn. The school community understands that all students (including low-achieving students, special education students and English language learners) gain from involvement with assignments that require them to go beyond memorization of facts to participate in challenging educational activities. Staff emphasize students' social and emotional development, as well as their academic development.

The school values cultural diversity and respect for the students' cultures, which is an important emphasis of the school's educational program.

Essential Support 3. Family and Community Partnerships Support Learning

Families and community agencies are important partners in planning and carrying out the educational program. They collaborate with the school to support children's learning, inside and outside of the school. Families are assisted in helping their children learn at home. Families are systematically encouraged to visit the school, feel welcomed and respected there, and actively participate in school-wide activities (such as student performances) and in their children's classrooms. Family education is an important part of the school's improvement effort.

Community agencies aid individual students and families and provide education and support for school staff.

Essential Support 4.

Adults Collaborate and Learn

Principal leadership and shared teacher beliefs facilitate a high level of collaboration, trust, and peer support among teachers and other staff. Teachers and other staff often work in teams, with time created for regular opportunities for them to meet and work together. Staff are encouraged to innovate and take risks.

On an ongoing basis, all staff participate in educational development programs that actively engage them in mastering research-based skills and knowledge that are focused on the school's educational improvement priorities. These activities help staff to integrate new knowledge into their regular teaching practices and encourage staff to coach and support each other.

The members of the school community develop effective partnerships with sources of external assistance (for example, universities, and nonprofit assistance organizations). They also participate in networks with peers in other school communities to share ideas. At the same time, the school's key strategies for educational improvement continue to depend upon (1) a core group of leaders within the school community who remain active over an extended period of time and (2) mutual trust and collaboration among school community members.

Other key stakeholders in the school community besides staff (including the Local School Council and other parent and community leaders) collaborate with the staff to assess current practices, to plan for improvement, and to foster a shared sense of responsibility to the school and its students. The Local School Council and other parent and community leaders active in the school participate in educational development programs and assistance that help them carry out their school improvement responsibilities effectively and to understand the school's educational strategies.

Essential Support 5.

Quality Learning Activities (with a Special Focus on Literacy)

The school staff, with the involvement of the school community, develop an educational vision and related educational practices that focus on achieving rigorous learning standards for all students. The overall instructional program employs such effective instructional practices as developing a coherent instructional design across grades, appropriate pacing of instruction, making maximum use of available learning time for challenging educational activities, and frequent assessment of student progress. Further, the school places a priority on fostering students' social and emotional development, as well as their academic growth. These learning opportunities are available to all students, including special education students and English language learners.

In reading, the educational program focuses on the overriding goal of fostering reading comprehension. This goal is pursued through carrying out research-based instructional activities, such as explicit instruction in word analysis and comprehension, the development of reading fluency, strong support for independent reading, and regular opportunities to write. The school also emphasizes the development of speaking and listening skills. Regular learning activities outside school (including homework) target reading and language development.

A Common Thread:

Adult Teamwork to Improve Student Learning and Development

A common thread runs through the implementation of the Five Essential Supports for Learning in grade kindergarten to eight urban public schools that serve a substantial percentage of low-income students and that consistently achieve substantially better than schools serving similar student bodies. Adult members of the school community (including the Local School Council, parents, teachers, other school staff, community agencies, and volunteers) achieve a high degree of “Adult Teamwork” to improve student learning and development.

All adults (including teachers, the principal, Local school Council, parents, and community agencies) demonstrate high levels of mutual trust and unselfish assistance to each other. They exhibit a high level of skill in accomplishing tasks by working as groups. They exhibit what social scientists have called a high level of “social capital.”