

Designs for Change



Chicago Test Score Research Shows That School-Level Initiative Brings the Largest Sustained Reading Gains

Evidence Indicates the Need for “Phase Three” of Chicago School Reform

March 2001

A new study of Chicago Iowa Reading Test results, just released by Designs for Change, indicates that low-achieving elementary schools that have made **large consistent reading score gains** over the last decade have been schools with **local initiative, leadership, teamwork, and creativity** (Table A and Table C).

Coupled with other recent research about successes and failures in the last decade of Chicago school reform, this study indicates the need for “**Phase Three**” of Chicago reform, in which “**what works**” — based on the best independently verified research and evaluation evidence — becomes the basis for the next steps in improving Chicago’s schools.

The Designs for Change research indicates that 84 schools, which were low-achieving in 1990, increased on the average from 23% at or above the national average in 1990 to 45% in 2000 (even though they were typically 82% low-income in 2000). The typical “Substantially Up School” is approaching the national average of 50%.

The Designs for Change analysis also **refutes the recent claim** by CEO Paul Vallas that “the probationary schools, the schools where we intervene and go in and **dictate**

[curriculum] models, are the ones making the most significant gains.”

The DFC study analyzed the reading achievement of the 82 elementary schools **placed on probation in fall 1996 and 1997**. As reflected in the Table B, these probation schools, in which the Central Board initiated top-down control and invested heavily in summer school, still had **nearly 80% of their students reading below** the national average in spring 2000.

The current school board **deserves credit** for attempting to improve achievement in these schools, which **did not benefit** from Phase One of reform. However, the current evidence indicates that the school board’s methods for carrying out probation did not work and **should not** serve as the basis for future improvement efforts.

Based on DFC’s research, one key priority for Phase Three should be to invest in improving the **core educational program** during the regular school day, not to expand after school and summer school programs. More broadly, there should be a **vigorous public debate** about what has worked, based on independently verified research and open access to information.

TABLE A. Low-Achieving Chicago Elementary Schools with Local Initiative, Leadership, Teamwork, and Creativity Continued to Improve Iowa Reading Test Results from 1997 to 2000

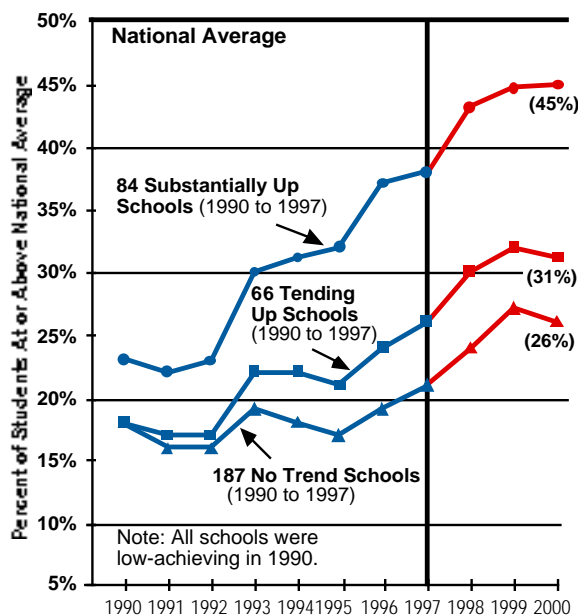
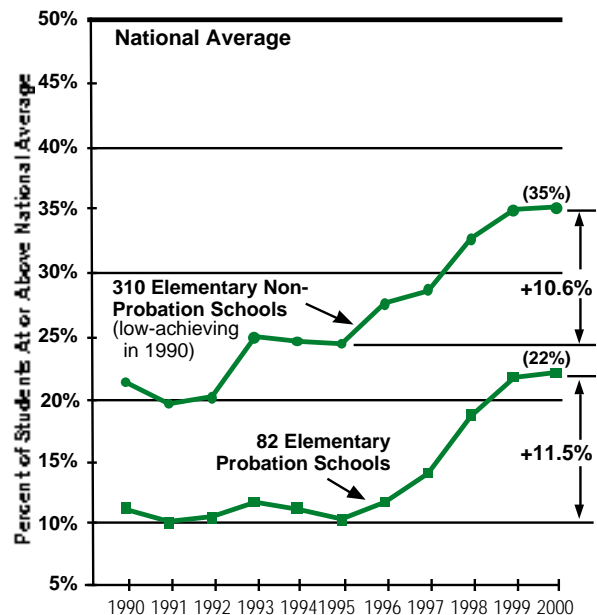


TABLE B. Iowa Reading Test Results of Low-Achieving Probation and Non-Probation Elementary Schools



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Evidence Indicates the Need for “Phase Three” of Chicago School Reform

A new study of Chicago Iowa Reading Test results, just released by Designs for Change, indicates that low-achieving elementary schools that have made large consistent reading score gains over the last decade are those schools with local initiative, leadership, teamwork, and creativity (see attached Tables A and C).

Coupled with other recent research about successes and failures in the last decade of Chicago school reform, this study indicates the need for “Phase Three” of Chicago reform, in which “what works” — based on the best independently verified research and evaluation evidence — becomes the basis for the next steps in improving Chicago’s schools.

DFC’s research also shows that probation schools where the Central Board “dictates curriculum” have not proven an effective model for bringing about major sustained gains in reading scores. No one would argue that these failing schools should just be left alone. The current school board deserves credit for attempting to improve these schools, which did not benefit from Phase One of school reform. However, the evidence indicates the current school board’s methods for carrying out probation have not worked and should not serve as the basis for future improvement efforts.

Learn from Schools that Have Made Consistent Reading Gains

In 1997, Designs for Change released a study that identified a group of 84 low-income elementary schools that were low-achieving in 1990, but made substantial consistent gains on the Iowa Reading Test through 1997. From 1990 to 1997, these schools increased, on the average, from 23% of students at or above the national average in 1990 to 38% by 1997. (Designs for Change, *What Makes These Schools Stand Out* — see Table A).

The study just released indicates that almost all of these low-income schools have continued to improve achievement significantly between 1997 and 2000, and have now nearly reached the national average of 50%.

In spring 2000, these schools had 45% of their students reading at or above the national average — even though they served 82% low-income students in 2000 (see Table A).

In 1990, not one of these 84 schools had Iowa Reading achievement scores above the national average. By 2000, 29 of the 84 schools exceeded the national average.

Further, teacher and student survey data collected by the Consortium on Chicago School Research have enabled DFC to identify distinctive practices of these substantially improved schools.

DFC compared these “Substantially Up Schools” with other low-achieving schools that failed to improve Iowa Reading scores significantly from 1990 to 1997 (controlling for differences in the student composition of schools). Substantially Up Schools carried out a distinctive set of practices (as summarized in Table C) that reflect “**Five Essential Supports for Student Learning**”:

■ **School Leadership.** Substantially Up Schools had significantly more effective Local School Councils (as rated by teachers), principals who were instructional leaders and closely supervised the change process, and teachers who were more involved in decision making.

■ **Family-Community Partnerships.** Substantially Up Schools reported significantly more outreach to families.

■ **School Environment/Culture.** Students in Substantially Up Schools reported higher levels of personal safety, and teachers reported a much stronger commitment to their particular school.

■ **Staff Development and Collaboration.** Teachers in Substantially Up Schools felt that their school encouraged teacher innovation and reported significantly higher levels of teacher collaboration, collective responsibility, shared norms, and trust.

■ **Instructional Program.** Teachers in Substantially Up Schools reported a significantly higher staff priority on student learning.

One pervasive feature of the Substantially Up Schools across all Five Essential Supports was the high level of cooperative effort among all the adults in the school community to improve educational quality. **Cooperative Adult Effort** was vastly higher in the Substantially Up Schools than in elementary schools that were placed on probation in 1996. Therefore, low-achieving schools need intervention and support that rebuilds the school as a human organization.

Study Refutes the Claim That Probation Schools Are Models for Improving Reading Scores

The Designs for Change analysis also refutes the recent claim by CEO Paul Vallas that “the probationary schools, the schools where we intervene and go in and dictate [curriculum] models, are the ones making the most significant gains.” The Chicago Board has cited this claim as the basis for its latest plans to intervene in Chicago’s 200 lowest-achieving schools.

The DFC study analyzed the reading achievement of the 82 elementary schools placed on probation in fall 1996 and 1997. As reflected in the Table B, the results show that:

- These probation schools, in which the central office instituted top-down control and invested heavily in summer school, still had 78% of their students reading below the national average in spring 2000.

- Probation schools gained about the same as other low-achieving elementary schools that were not placed on probation between 1995 and 1999 (about 11%).

No one would argue that these failing schools should just be left alone. The current school board deserves credit for attempting to improve these schools, which did not benefit from Phase One of school reform. However, the evidence indicates that the current school board’s methods for carrying out probation have not worked and should not serve as the basis for future improvement efforts.

Thinking “Outside the Box” about How to Improve Reading Achievement

Based on these research findings, Designs for Change makes the following recommendations about central board action to significantly improve reading achievement in low-achieving schools:

- The Chicago Board should encourage independent research and evaluation about the school system’s educational programs, should release information requested by researchers and the public, and should foster intensive public debate about key policy decisions. The school system should then invest in “what works” — based on the best available evidence.

- The overriding priority should be on investing to improve the core educational program of reading, writing, math, science, and social studies during the regular school day, not on expanding a “Christmas tree” of after school and summer school programs. Low-achieving schools need assistance in adopting the effective practices identified through research about those low-income Chicago schools that have already substantially boosted scores.

- The best source of expertise to help low-achieving schools will come from principals, teachers, and Local School Council members at schools that have successfully boosted achievement over the last decade.

- The DFC research shows that energetic Local School Councils and principals have been a key resource for school improvement, and the Illinois General Assembly has recently underscored their importance. The Chicago Board should support, rather than harass, LSCs and principals who work actively to improve their schools.

- Ineffective schools need skilled help in building leadership and teamwork, not just a mandate to pick a curriculum from a menu of choices and bureaucratic monitoring and paperwork to prove they are carrying the curriculum out.

- Teachers need coherent sustained staff development that includes long-term workshop experiences, time to plan and share with colleagues, and follow-up coaching in the classroom. They do not need the “three-day summer boot camps” recently recommended by a top school system official.

- There is a growing crisis in the city because many teaching positions are unfilled or have uncertified teachers in them, especially in inner city schools. These schools can’t improve if they don’t have qualified staff.

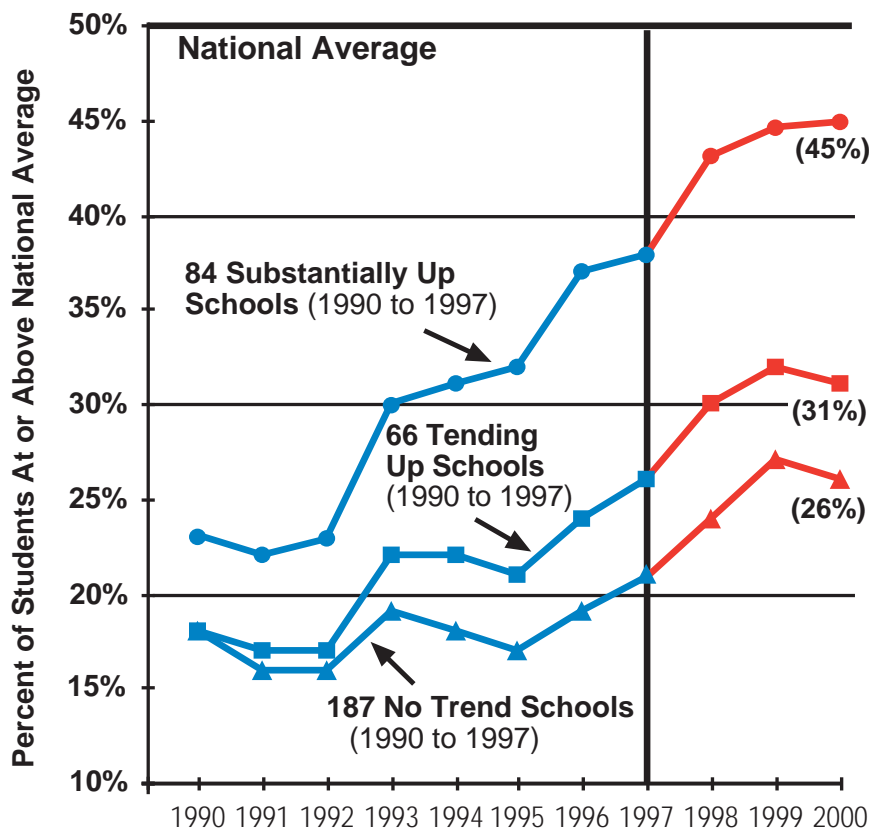
- Students with learning problems should typically be taught in the regular education program, not segregated into separate classes and schools with other students with problems — which has been the strategy most frequently used by the current school system leadership.

Technical note: DFC has previously pointed out why gains on the Iowa Tests after spring 1997 must be viewed with great caution. DFC decided to release this analysis because major policy decisions are now being made based on Iowa results. DFC will soon release other evidence, not dependent on the Iowa Tests, concerning the reading improvement of the Substantially Up Schools.

For more information: see DFC’s website <www.designsforchange.org> or call Bernard Lacour or Matthew Hanson at 312/236-7252.

TABLE A. Low-Achieving Chicago Elementary Schools with Local Initiative, Leadership, Teamwork, and Creativity Continue to Improve Iowa Reading Test Results from 1997 to 2000

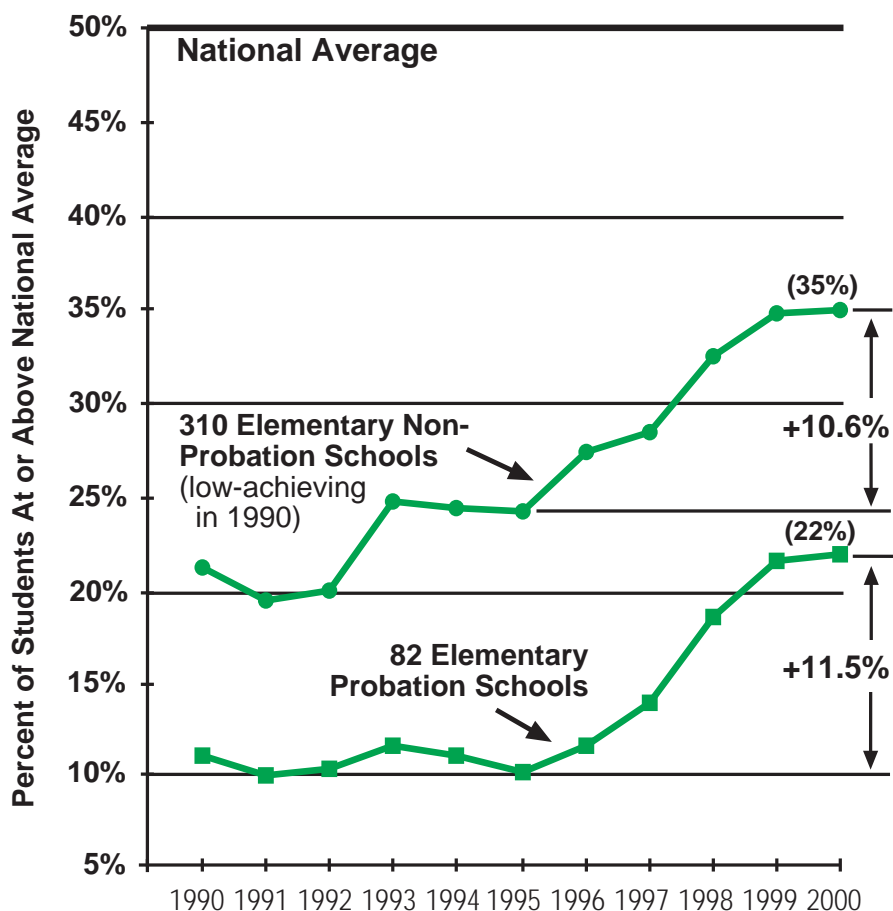
- n 84 low-income Chicago elementary schools, which were low-achieving in 1990, showed a substantial trend of improved reading achievement from 1990 to 1997, as documented by a previous Designs for Change study (reflected by blue trend lines).
- n Most of these schools continued to make substantial achievement gains from 1997 to 2000, and persisted in outpacing other elementary schools that were low-achieving in 1990 (reflected by red trend lines).
- n These Substantially Up Schools moved from 23% at or above the national average in 1990 to 45% in 2000 — very near the national average of 50%.
- n In 1990, not one of these elementary schools had Iowa Reading Test scores above the national average. By 2000, 29 of the 84 schools exceeded the national average.
- n Based on student and teacher survey data, Substantially Up Schools employed a distinctive set of practices, including more local initiative, leadership, teamwork, and creativity (see Table C).



(1) Percent of elementary students at or above the national average on the Iowa Reading Test (Grades 3-8 combined from spring 1990 to spring 2000). (2) Year to year reading achievement for schools that were Substantially Up from 1990 to 1997, that were Tending Up from 1990 to 1997, and that showed No Trend from 1990 to 1997. (3) All schools shown were low achieving in 1990, with 40% or fewer students at or above the national average. (4) Five schools that were included in the 1990-1997 analysis were eliminated from the 1990-2000 analysis. See full report: Donald R. Moore and Matthew Hanson (2001, March). Chicago Test Score Research Shows That School-Level Initiative, Not Top-Down Control, Brings Sustained Reading Gains. Chicago: Designs for Change.

TABLE B. Iowa Reading Test Results of Low-Achieving Probation and Non-Probation Elementary Schools

- n Elementary schools that were placed on probation in 1996 or 1997 and told what to teach still had 78% of their students reading below the national average by spring 2000.
- n Reading score gains from spring 1995 to spring 2000 were about the same for low-achieving schools, whether or not they had been placed on probation (gains of 10.6% and 11.5%, respectively, for the two groups from spring 1995 to spring 2000).
- n Elementary probation schools where the central office has dictated the curriculum and invested heavily in summer school still had nearly 80% of their students reading below the national average in spring 2000. Thus, the probation strategy can hardly serve as the model for helping low-achieving schools to teach all children to read.



(1) Percent of elementary students at or above the national average (Grades 3-8 combined from spring 1990 to spring 2000). (2) Year to year reading achievement for schools that were placed on probation in either fall 1996 or fall 1997, compared with low-achieving schools that were not placed on probation in either of these two years. (3) All schools shown were low-achieving in 1990 (or the first year they opened), with 40% or fewer students at or above the national average. (4) DFC carried out analyses of low-achieving non-probation schools using two different criteria; both analyses yielded nearly identical results. See full report: Donald R. Moore and Matthew Hanson (2001, March). Chicago Test Score Research Shows That School-Level Initiative, Not Top-Down Control, Brings Sustained Reading Gains. Chicago: Designs for Change.

TABLE C. What Makes Schools with Substantially Improved Reading Achievement Stand Out?

n Elementary schools that had low reading achievement in 1990, but then showed a substantial pattern of improvement, (“Substantially Up Schools”) were rated significantly higher (significant at the .05 level) than “No Trend Schools” by students and staff on each of the Indicators of their practices described below.

n Less than .05 level (statistically significant) = 3
 Less than .10 level (merits further study) = 3

n Based on survey data collected by the Consortium on Chicago School Research in spring 1994.

1. School Leadership

3 **Local School Council Contribution.** Teachers rated the LSC more highly in having contributed to improving various aspects of the school’s educational program and environment.

3 **Principal as Instructional Leader.** The principal was rated more highly as setting a vision for the school, involving people in decision making, and insisting on high standards for staff performance.

3 **Principal Supervision.** Principals were more likely to closely supervise the change process — for example, through a regular presence in classrooms.

3 **Teacher Influence on Decision Making.** Teachers reported more influence on decisions about instruction and about school-wide issues.

2. Parent-Community Partnerships

3 **Teacher Outreach to Parents.** Teachers reach out more to communicate with and involve parents.

3 **Teacher-Parent Trust.** Teachers report a higher level of trust among teachers and parents.

3. School Environment/Culture

3 **Student Safety.** Students report that they are safer in and around school.

3 **Teacher Commitment to School.** Teachers have a stronger personal commitment to this particular school.

4. Staff Development and Collaboration

3 **Teacher Collaboration.** Teachers work together more collaboratively.

3 **Teacher Collective Responsibility.** Teachers express a stronger collective responsibility for the school’s improvement.

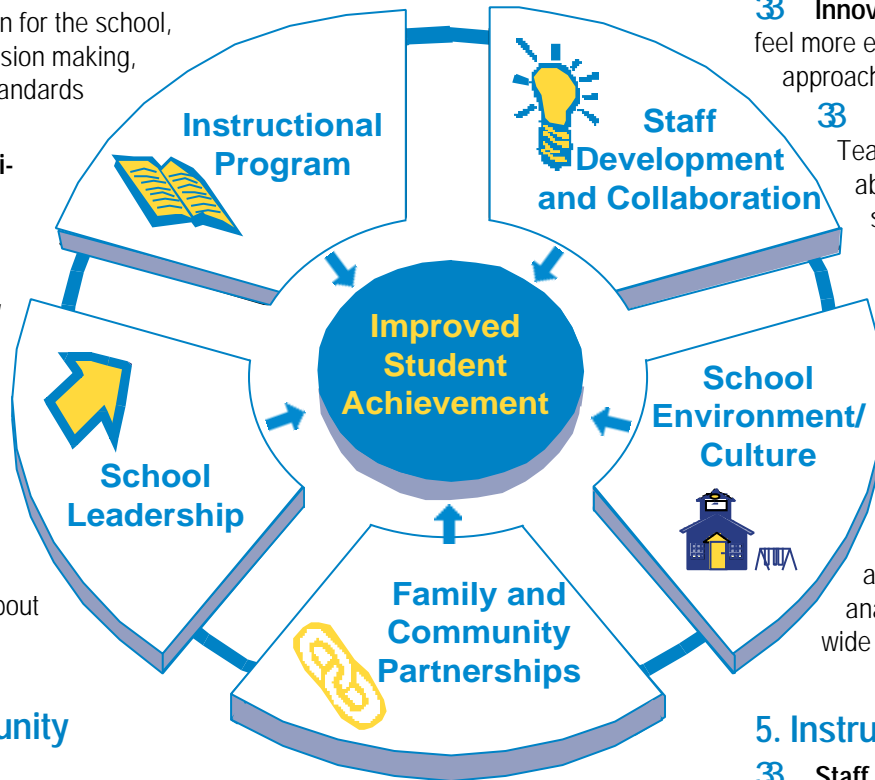
3 **Innovation Encouraged.** Teachers feel more encouraged to try out new approaches.

3 **Shared Teacher Norms.** Teachers express more agreement about what is expected of students in terms of academics and behavior.

3 **Teacher-Teacher Trust.** Teachers feel more trust with fellow teachers.

3 **Teacher-Principal Trust.** Teachers trust the principal more.

3 **Reflective Dialogue Among Teachers.** Teachers are more likely to discuss and analyze their teaching and school-wide improvement.



5. Instructional Program

3 **Staff Priority on Student Learning.** Teachers report that the school places a stronger emphasis on improved student learning as the overriding school priority.

Source: Donald R. Moore (October, 1997). What Makes These Schools Stand Out: Chicago Elementary Schools with a Seven-Year Trend of Improved Reading Achievement. Chicago: Designs for Change.