

School System Leaders Propose Ineffective Strategies that Are Contradicted by Test Results and Research

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A just-completed research study about Chicago Iowa Reading Test results from 1990 to 2000 contradicts school system claims that “the schools where we go in and dictate curriculum are the schools that seem to be doing the best.” This inaccurate assertion is being used to justify more top-down control of Chicago’s schools.

In contrast, the research shows a ten-year pattern of major achievement gains for high-poverty elementary schools with more local initiative, leadership, teamwork, and creativity (based on an analysis by Designs for Change of Consortium on Chicago School Research data).

In Mayor Daley’s State of the City address, he said, “You can’t teach [other] subjects to children who can’t read....How do you stimulate, how you do a new curriculum about reading? Do you use arts, do you use music? I think we have to go outside the box.”

The response to Mayor Daley’s challenge that has come from the school system leadership is based on inaccurate claims about which Chicago schools have substantially improved their test scores and what research shows about good reading instruction.

“The studies have indicated that the schools where we go in and dictate curriculum are the schools that seem to be doing the best. This whole concept of having 600 schools doing 600 different things, the whole premise of the first school reform movement in 1987 — what we are learning is that the probationary schools, the schools where we intervene and go in and dictate models, are the ones making the most significant gains.”

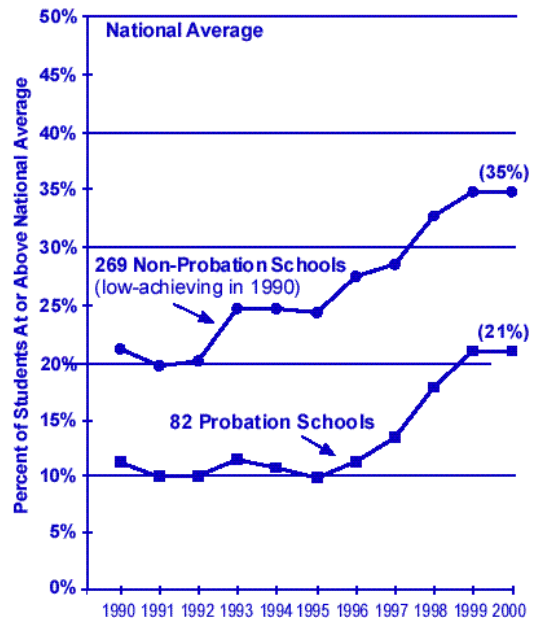
— Paul Vallas, Chief Executive Officer
 Chicago Public Schools
Chicago Tribune, February 16, 2001

Probation Schools Leave 79% of Students Below National Average in 2000

As Table 1 clearly indicates, the claim that

TABLE 1. Iowa Reading Test Results of Low-Achieving Probation and Non-Probation Elementary Schools.

- Percent of elementary students at or above the national average (Grades 3-8 combined from 1990-2000).
- 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.
- All schools shown were low-achieving in 1990, with less than 40% at or above the national average.



probation schools are making exceptional gains is inaccurate. Table 1 shows Iowa Test reading results for two groups of elementary schools that were low-achieving in 1990 (when they had 40% or less of their students reading at or above the national average). The two groups of schools are:

■ Schools that were low-achieving in 1990 and were placed on probation in either fall 1996 or fall 1997 (82 schools). These were the first two years in which large numbers of elementary schools were put on probation.

■ Schools that were low-achieving in 1990, but were not placed on probation at any point before fall 2000 (269 schools).

Contrary to Vallas' claim, elementary schools that were placed on probation in 1996 or 1997 and told what to teach still had 79% of their students reading below the national average by spring 2000.

Further, 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 (a gain of about 11% for both groups from spring 1995 to spring 2000, as reflected in Table 1). Schools where the central office has dictated the curriculum still have nearly 80% of their students reading below the national average. Thus, the probation strategy can hardly serve as the model for helping schools to teach all children to read.

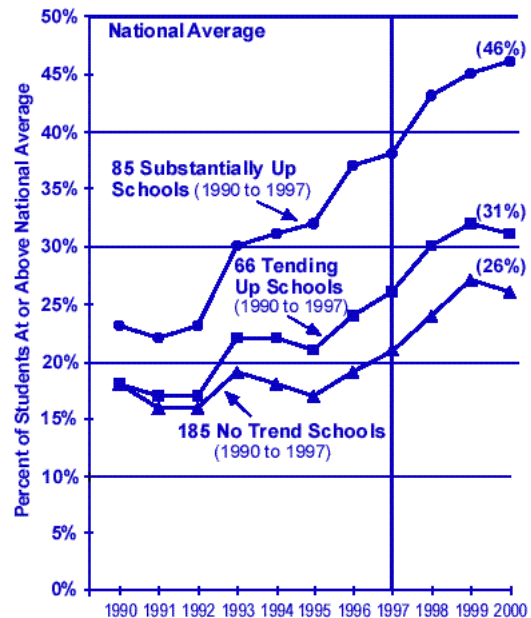
In fact, if school officials were to dictate the curriculum in the 200 elementary schools that had the lowest reading scores in spring 2000, 76 of the 82 schools that were placed on probation in 1996 and 1997 would be on this list of sanctioned schools. Thus, schools previously on probation would be subjected to the same "cure" that has already failed to bring about major gains in achievement for most of them.

Elementary Schools with Local Initiative, Teamwork, and Creativity Approach or Exceed the National Average on the Iowa Reading Test

"Substantially Up Schools"
Approach or Exceed the National Average by Spring 2000. In fall 1997, Designs for Change released a study of elementary schools that had made exemplary progress on the Iowa Reading Test from 1990 to 1997. The study also identified distinctive practices of these schools (based on teacher and student surveys carried out by the Consortium on Chicago School Research).¹

TABLE 2. Chicago Elementary Schools with Local Initiative, Teamwork, and Creativity Continue to Improve Iowa Reading Test Results.

- Percent of elementary students at or above the national average on the Iowa Reading Test (Grades 3-8 combined from 1990-2000).
- 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.
- All schools shown were low-achieving in 1990, with less than 40% at or above the national average.



The Designs for Change study analyzed three groups of elementary schools that were low-achieving in 1990 (with 40% or less of their students at or above the national average):

■ Substantially Up Schools from 1990 to 1997 (85 schools).

■ Tending Up Schools from 1990 to 1997 (66 schools).

■ No Trend Schools from 1990 to 1997 (185 schools). Most schools placed on probation in 1996 and 1997 fell into the “No Trend” category, based on their pattern of 1990 to 1997 scores.

Designs for Change has continued to track the progress of these three groups of schools through the spring 2000 Iowa testing. As Table 2 shows, the strong positive trend of reading score gains for these Substantially Up Schools has continued from spring 1997 through spring 2000. (Note that with minor differences, the same set of elementary schools that were low-achieving in 1990 are analyzed in both Table 1 and Table 2.)

Focusing on the Substantially Up Schools, Table 2 indicates that:

■ Substantially Up Schools increased from 23% to 38% at or above the national average from spring 1990 to spring 1997.

From spring 1997 to spring 2000, the Substantially Up Schools increased to 46% at or above — very close to the national average of 50%. As a result, 37 of these 85 schools were above the national average by spring 2000.

■ From 1997 to 2000, the Substantially Up Schools continued to out-gain the Tending Up Schools and No Trend Schools (see Table 2). Indeed the scores of the Tending Up Schools and No Trend Schools declined from spring 1999 to spring 2000.

Only two Substantially Up Schools were ever placed on probation. (Applying the 1997 Board policy, 19 schools in the Substantially Up group would have been placed on probation, if they had not significantly improved their 1990 reading scores.)

Substantially Up Schools Are Distinguished by Local Initiative, Leadership, Teamwork, and Creativity. DFC’s study released in 1997 focused on whether Substantially Up Schools employed a distinctive set of educational practices. Fortunately, the Consortium on Chicago School Research collected extensive data about school practices from Chicago elementary schools using teachers and student survey questionnaires gathered in spring 1994. The Consortium combined teacher or student responses to individual questions to create “indicators” of effective practices for school improvement.

As reflected in Table 3, these effective practices fall under Five Essential Supports for Student Learning:

- School Leadership.
- Family-Community Partnerships.
- School Environment/Culture.
- Staff Development and Collaboration.
- Instructional Program.

Of 26 practices organized around the Five Essential Support that were analyzed by the Consortium, 14 of them showed a statistically significant difference (at less than the .05 significance level) between Substantially Up Schools and No Trend Schools. These 14 practices provide extremely useful research-based evidence clarifying what practices can help elementary schools substantially improve their reading achievement, as summarized below.

■ **School Leadership.** As reflected in Table 3, Substantially Up Schools had more effective Local School Councils (as

TABLE 3. What Makes Schools with Substantially Improved Reading Achievement Stand Out?

Elementary schools that had low reading achievement in 1990, but then showed a substantial pattern of improvement, were rated significantly higher by the students and staff on each of the Indicators of their practices described below.

✓✓ = less than .05 level (statistically significant) ✓ = less than .10 level (merits further study)

1. School Leadership

✓✓ **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.

✓✓ **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.

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

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

2. Parent-Community Partnerships

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

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

3. School Environment/Culture

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

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

4. Staff Development and Collaboration

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

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

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

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

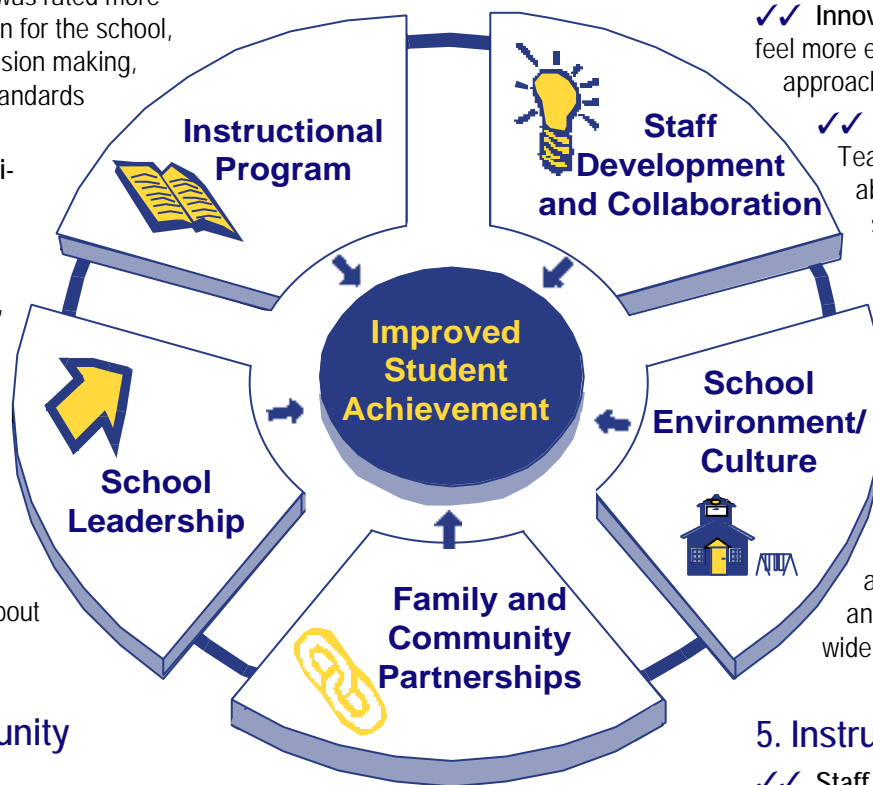
✓✓ **Teacher-Teacher Trust.** Teachers feel more trust with fellow teachers.

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

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

5. Instructional Program

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



rated by teachers), principals who were instructional leaders and closely supervised the change process, and teachers who were more involved in decision making. This set of statistically significant findings provides strong support for one of the major ideas behind the 1988 Chicago School Reform Act: in schools where strong democratic participation and leadership develops among Local School Councils, principals, and teachers, student achievement is more likely to improve substantially.

The Substantially Up Schools that showed the greatest Iowa reading achievement gains from 1990 to 2000 are taking their own initiative, not awaiting top-down directives from the central administration.

■ **Family-Community Partnerships.** Substantially Up Schools reported significantly more teacher outreach to communicate with and involve parents.

■ **School/Environment/Culture.** A safe inviting school culture focused on learning has been consistently identified as a key feature of high-achieving urban schools. Students in Substantially Up schools reported significantly higher levels of personal safety.

The second school culture indicator that was highly significant was teacher commitment to the school. Teachers in Substantially Up Schools expressed a high level of commitment to their particular school, strongly agreeing with such statements as “I wouldn’t want to work in any other school.” In contrast, journalists’ reports about schools on probation show low commitment to the school among teachers, and indicate that many seek transfers to other schools.²

■ **Staff Development and Collaboration.** Substantially Up Schools were significantly different from No Trend Schools on six indicators of Staff Development and Collaboration.

Teachers in Substantially Up Schools felt that they worked in an atmosphere where innovation and initiative were encouraged.

They also reported high levels of teacher collaboration, collective responsibility, shared norms, and trust.

■ **Instructional Program.** The Consortium had only analyzed a few indicators of the quality of schools’ instructional programs when the DFC study was completed. One indicator that the Consortium had analyzed that distinguished the Substantially Up Schools was staff priority on student learning; Substantially Up Schools placed a strong emphasis on improved student learning as the consistent touchstone for decisions and actions.

A Common Thread of Cooperative Adult Effort. After the Consortium compiled its analysis of indicators falling under the Five Essential Supports, it became evident that one common thread among the practices that distinguished the Substantially Up Schools was the high level of cooperative effort among all of the adults involved in the “school community.” Cooperative Adult Effort combined such indicators as LSC contribution, teacher outreach to parents, and teacher-principal trust.

Compared with elementary schools placed on probation in fall 1996, three-quarters of the Substantially Up Schools ranked higher on cooperative adult effort than all but the highest-ranking elementary schools on probation.

The severe deficits of schools on probation in their cooperative adult effort indicates that these schools have dysfunctional working relationships among adults that need to be rebuilt to improve student achievement. Heavy-handed external demands for accountability typically do little to create effective adult cooperation and often make it even worse, with teachers who stay at

the school retreating into a shell, while others seek to leave.

Recent Consortium Studies Further Underscore Need for Teacher Creativity to Boost Reading Achievement

It is widely believed that the best way to improve achievement for students who have significant reading difficulties is to require them to memorize and recite facts, and to participate in repeated drill and practice exercises. This type of instruction is often entirely scripted by the teacher or the textbook.

A just-released study by the Consortium on Chicago School Research compared the heavy use of this teacher-dominated drill with the use of “interactive instruction.”³ Teachers using interactive instruction usually “coach, listen, and guide students; pose questions that ask for explanations and which may have multiple answers; assess how students arrived at answers; and provide choices in what students study.”⁴

While good instruction includes elements of both methods, the Consortium found that when teachers placed strong emphasis on interactive instruction, their students posted substantially higher Iowa Reading scores than students in classrooms where drill, review, and practice dominated.⁵ The researchers concluded that “over the eight years of elementary schooling, the total impact could amount to more than a half year less learning in schools where didactic instruction is heavily employed.”⁶

The Consortium also concluded that “a diverse array of students benefit from participation in a classroom with high quality intellectual assignments. Both students with high and low prior achievement levels learn more over the

course of an academic year than comparable students in classrooms with low-quality assignments.”⁷

However, the current school system leadership has strongly emphasized drill in preparation for the Iowa Test (through such materials as *Test Best on the ITBS*).⁸ Further, the curriculum options that they propose to mandate for low-achieving schools (like “direct instruction” and the district’s own “structured curriculum”) place an overriding emphasis on teacher-directed drill.

Local and National Research Supports a “Balanced” Reading Instruction Strategy

For decades, two camps of educators have warred over how to teach children to read. One camp focuses almost exclusively on teaching phonics, while the other camp emphasizes that children learn to read through the direct experience of reading books and will pick up phonics as they read.

Several major research reviews have recently concluded that a “balanced approach” that takes elements from both methods works best. Effective reading programs explicitly teach phonics, vocabulary and spelling. They also create literacy-rich environments for students, with multiple opportunities to read books, to be read to, to write, and to analyze and apply what they read.⁹ A recent portrayal of a Chicago inner elementary school (Dixon Elementary School) shows how such a balanced approach has led to high student achievement.¹⁰

Designs for Change also observed this balanced approach to reading instruction when it conducted case studies of seven Substantially Up Schools in Chicago.¹¹

Once again, the Board’s proposal to use centrally-mandated scripted strategies that emphasize rote learning in low-achieving schools is directly at odds with research-

based recommendations for helping children with reading difficulties.

Board's Proposals Will Further Segregate and Stigmatize Students with Learning Problems

The Chicago Board has a pattern of separating students with learning problems into separate schools and classrooms that are viewed negatively by their fellow students. One costly example of this approach is the Board's policy of flunking tens of thousands of students, based on their Iowa test scores. After studying the Board's grade retention program for three years, the principal evaluator of this program, Professor Melissa Roderick stated, "The effect of retention on these kids seems to be very decimating... This is a disaster, to be quite honest... And it's just [the] beginning of a disaster because now we're seeing all of these first- and second-graders being retained." Contrary to what many teachers and parents think, Roderick says, "No research says that early-grade retention is good for kids."¹² (emphasis added)

In Chicago, eighth grade students who fail to meet the minimum test score either repeat eighth grade or are sent to separate "Academic Preparation Centers" that focus almost exclusively on drilling students for the Iowa Test. Yet only 38% of these eighth graders were able to achieve the minimum test score after an extra year of school and two summer school experiences.¹³ Further, within two years of being retained, nearly one-third of these students dropped out of school.

There is now compelling evidence that the Board's retention program is an expensive failure and that these dollars should be invested in (1) preventing low achievement in the first place, and (2) promoting low-achieving students but providing them with intensive help, rather than retaining them.¹⁴

Yet the Board is considering "an extensive pullout program" and separate schools-within-schools for students with serious academic difficulties. They are, once again, ready to place students with learning problems in segregated settings.

Centrally-Directed Curriculum Violates Chicago School Reform Law

While the Chicago Board has a legal right to determine the curriculum in schools that are on probation, reconstitution, or intervention, the state law applying to all other Chicago public schools states that "the principal, with the assistance of the Professional Personnel Advisory Committee, shall develop the specific methods and contents of the school's curriculum, within the Board's system-wide system standards and objectives and the requirements of the school improvement plan."¹⁵

The Board's proposal to mandate the curriculum of 200 schools violates the rights of any affected school that is not on probation, reconstitution, or intervention.

"Thinking Out of the Box" about How to Improve Reading Achievement in Chicago

By 1995, it had become apparent that a substantial portion of Chicago schools would only improve with outside assistance and intervention. The Central Board deserves credit for undertaking its initial efforts to improve schools where educational quality and student achievement were unacceptable. No one can argue that schools with a multi-year record of failure should simply be left alone.

Since 1995, however, a great deal of research evidence has been gathered about

the key practices of effective high-achieving Chicago elementary schools and the strategies needed to put these practices in place.

The updated analysis of the “Substantially Up Schools” presented in this report, along with recent research about effective instruction by the Consortium on Chicago School Research and other national research on effective reading instruction, provide a clear picture of how a large number of low-achieving schools in Chicago have moved toward becoming excellent effective schools. For example, these school have:

- Developed effective collaborative leadership among the Local School Council, principal, and teachers.
- Reached out to involve families.
- Established a safe environment for students that encourages learning.
- Convinced teachers that they will be rewarded for being creative.
- Recruited a talented committed teaching staff.
- Built teamwork and trust among teachers, other school staff, the LSC, and parents, who work cooperatively to improve learning.
- Made student learning the school’s top priority and its touchstone for its decision.
- Emphasized interactive teaching that encourages students to think and not just memorize.
- Created a balanced reading program that both teaches phonics and provides a “culture of literacy,” in which students have multiple opportunities to read and write.

Scores of schools have now shown that they can carry out these effective practices in Chicago and that one indication of their

success is higher scores on standardized tests.

Research also makes clear that schools that are achieving at unacceptable levels are not carrying out these effective practices, while schools in their neighborhoods serving very similar students are excelling.

The key question that must be addressed, then, is how we can rebuild the human organization of the failing schools, so that they carry out the practices of Chicago’s successful schools that effectively educate low-income students.

The Chicago Board has started down entirely the wrong road in asserting that the key to improving these schools is “go in and dictate curriculum,” based on the inaccurate assertion that the probationary schools “are the ones making the most significant gains.”

Here are a few key principles for dramatically increasing the number of successful Chicago schools:

- The overriding priority when investing dollars should be to improve the core education program that is carried out during the regular school day. Many Chicago schools lack staff who are viewed as essential in typical suburban schools. This priority should take precedence over expanding after school and summer school programs.
- Parents and educators across the city have complained increasingly that many teaching positions are unfilled or are filled by uncertified staff. According to a study by the Illinois State Board of Education, 1,308 of 2,637 unfilled teaching positions in Illinois were in the Chicago Public Schools from December 1, 1999 to September 1, 2000 (i.e., 50% of all unfilled teaching positions in Illinois).¹⁶ A critical obligation of the Central Board is to recruit sufficient qualified teachers to staff the regular school program.

■ Ineffective school communities need skilled help in clarifying their school’s vision; building effective working relationships among adults, including teachers, administrators, Local School Councils, parents, and community; and creating a coherent instructional program. This help goes far beyond requiring them to pick a curriculum from a menu of choices.

■ The most effective way to address students’ learning problems is to invest in preventing them in the first place, primarily through a high quality regular education program. Assistance for students who develop learning problems should be provided primarily as part of the regular education program and as part of meaningful learning activities, as opposed to being provided in separate stigmatizing settings with a focus on repetition and drill.

■ Teachers need coherent staff development opportunities consistent with research about the qualities of effective professional education, which include long-term workshop experiences, time to plan and share with colleagues, and follow-up help in the classroom.

■ The best source of expertise to help failing schools will come from principals, teachers, and Local School Council members from schools that have successfully boosted achievement over the last decade. They should be given the resources to enable them to help other schools.

A Technical Note

This analysis is part of a larger study currently being completed by Designs for Change. DFC has previously pointed out reasons why gains on the Iowa Tests must be viewed with great skepticism, especially after spring 1997.¹⁷ Gains in Chicago on the Iowa Tests should be viewed skeptically because of (1) high stakes attached to the test, (2) the extensive test preparation being carried

out for the test, and (3) the fact that the identical versions of the test were used repeatedly after spring 1997.

DFC decided to release this analysis because (1) major policy decisions are now being made based on the school-wide percentages of students scoring at or above the national average in Chicago, and (2) public perceptions about the patterns in these data are generally inaccurate.

DFC has analyzed other evidence, not dependent on the Iowa Reading Test, concerning the validity of reading score improvement by the group of schools classified as “Substantially Up Schools” in this report. These additional data will be released as part of a larger report in approximately one month.

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Note: Although data from the Consortium on Chicago School Research were analyzed in this study, the analyses and conclusions are entirely the responsibility of Designs for Change, and no endorsement of the report’s findings and interpretations by the Consortium as an organization, its Steering Committee, or the Steering Committee’s member organizations should be assumed.

¹ Designs for Change (1998, April). *What makes these schools stand out: Chicago elementary schools with a seven-year trend of improved reading achievement*. Chicago: Author.

² Jody Temkin (2000, December). Collins High: Faculty, staff, students “desperately” seek leadership. *Catalyst* XII(4): 14-18.

³ Julia B. Smith, Valerie, E. Lee, and Fred M. Newmann (2001, January). *Instruction and achievement in Chicago elementary schools*. Chicago: Consortium on Chicago School Research.

⁴ Ibid., p. 7.

⁵ Ibid., pp. 20-21.

⁶ Ibid., p.. 21.

⁷ Fred M. Newmann, Anthony S Bryk, and Jenny K. Nagaoka (2001, January). *Authentic intellectual work and standardized tests: Conflict or coexistence?* Chicago: Consortium on Chicago School Research, p. 23.

⁸ Steck Vaughn Company (1998), *Test Best on the ITBS*. Austin: Author.

⁹ Catherine E. Snow, et al., eds. (1998). *Preventing reading difficulties in young children*. National Research Council. Washington, DC: National Academy Press.

¹⁰ Stephanie Banchemo (2001, February 11). Grade school creates “culture of literacy.” *Chicago Tribune*, pp. 1, 16.

¹¹ Designs for Change (1998, April), p. 78.

¹² Lawrence Hardy (2000, September). The trouble with standards. *American School Board Journal* 187(9): 31.

¹³ Melissa Roderick, et al. (2000, September). *Update: Ending social promotion*. Chicago: Consortium on Chicago School Research.

¹⁴ Donald R. Moore (2000, April), *Chicago’s grade retention program fails to help retained students: Better alternatives exist to Chicago’s costly mistake*. Chicago: Designs for Change.

¹⁵ Illinois School Code, Section 34-8.1

¹⁶ Illinois State Board of Education Research Division (2000, December). *Educator supply and demand*. Springfield, IL: Author, p. 29.

¹⁷ Donald R. Moore (2000, September). New data about Chicago’s grade retention program provides further proof that neither retention nor social promotion works. Chicago: Designs for Change.