

The System Matters
Chicago Activists Win District-Wide Change

By Donald R. Moore, Ed.D.

In March 1985, the principal of Dumas Elementary School, in the **Woodlawn** neighborhood of Chicago recruited 120 parents for a breakfast to kick off a campaign to encourage children to read books on their own. Rather than being congratulated by the school district for such a successful outreach effort, she was reprimanded, because the large gathering of parents indicated to a school system bureaucrat that she had “lost control of her school.”

This story, and many others like it, were a clear example to many people concerned about improving Chicago’s schools of the limits to working for reform at the individual school level without **restructuring the ground rules for the entire school system**. A military-style school system bureaucracy issued directives that principals and teachers were ordered to carry out (right down to a scripted reading and math curriculum called “Chicago Mastery Learning” that was supposed to be “teacher-proof”). Parents were often unwelcome in schools, particularly if they asked questions. School system leaders viewed principals and teachers who worked collaboratively with parent and community groups with suspicion.

The same problems **face** school reformers across the country: inspired principals, teachers, and community leaders can only have sporadic and unsustainable impact in the face of **a system that rewards conformity and punishes creativity**. In Chicago, a legislative victory that created a different system with genuine local control and accountability has had much success, though its effects have not yet reached all the city’s schools.

Organizing for Change

Chicago’s school system was not easy to change. Even business leaders met brick walls when they tried to improve the school system. In 1981, Chicago United, a business group

concerned about social issues in the city, carried out a massive study of the schools system, and made 253 recommendations for change – on subjects ranging from audio-visual repairs to student absenteeism. Although the Chicago Board of Education agreed to carry out the recommended changes, a consultant who studied the school system for business leaders six years later concluded that none of the group’s major recommendations that focused on improving student learning had been carried out. The consultant recommended a radical decentralization of the school system, at a time when leaders of large Chicago corporations were moving more authority in their own businesses to the local store or plant.

Decentralization was also on the table in summer 1986, when a small coalition of school reform groups and educators met to consider drafting a plan to restructure the Chicago school system by amending state law. Some advocated breaking the school system into twenty subdistricts with elected school boards, following the example of New York City. However, Designs for Change, an educational research and advocacy group, argued for bringing decision making and the focus for improvement all the way down to the individual school, and the coalition swung around to support this idea.

Calling themselves Chicagoans United to Reform Education (or CURE), the group drafted and circulated a manifesto called “Needed: A New School System for Chicago” in fall 1986, which spelled out all the key elements of the Chicago School Reform Act that was passed two years later.

CURE members then began to draft and endlessly debate the specific language for their proposed law, while seeking additional groups to endorse their plan. What seemed to many observers like a useless academic exercise suddenly took on pivotal importance, when a bitter month-long school strike disrupted the opening of school in fall 1987. Spurred by the 1984 election of reform Mayor Harold Washington, active parent and community groups demanded not only an end to the school strike, but also radical change in how the school system operated. The CURE Coalition seized the moment to advocate for their plan.

After the strike was settled, Mayor Washington convened an Education Summit that included many supporters of the CURE restructuring plan, along with business leaders who also became sympathetic with the CURE plan's systematic design for shifting the focus of decision making and improvement to each Chicago school. Mayor Washington's Education Summit spawned the broader Alliance for Better Chicago Schools (or ABC'S Coalition) and brought together parent, community, and business leaders around a common reform agenda.

The coalition included Chicago grassroots activists from every racial and ethnic background and virtually every Chicago neighborhood (some were multi-issue community groups and others were parent and advocacy groups that focused solely on school reform). But the coalition also included Chicago's two most influential business organizations: Chicago United and the Civic Committee of the Commercial Club. Education historian Michael Katz observed, "Reformers in the city had created an unprecedented multiracial, cross-class coalition dedicated to school improvement through democracy."

The ABC'S Coalition blended large-scale demonstrations and lobbying in Chicago and Springfield that showed broad parent and community support with the expertise of professional lobbyists and public relations specialists.

And on July 2, 1988, 150 Chicago school reform activists **cheered** wildly in the Illinois State Senate gallery as the Illinois Senate cast the decisive vote to ratify the Chicago School Reform Act – a hundred-page state law that fundamentally restructured the Chicago Public Schools. One Democratic legislator, who was seriously ill, was brought from Chicago to Springfield in an ambulance to ensure a Senate victory.

The Reformers' Prescription

The Reform Act put strong faith in the abilities of parents and educators at each school to improve the quality of their children's education by shifting key decisions to the school

level. The Reform Act was aimed at creating a framework for the Chicago school system in which innovation would be supported and rewarded, rather than punished; it fundamentally restructured the school system's rigid top-down bureaucracy. Katz subsequently called the Reform Act "the most complete restructuring of an urban school system in the twentieth century."

The Reform Act made some major changes:

- Created elected Local School Councils (LSCs) at each Chicago school, with the authority to (1) hire and fire their principal, (2) develop and approve a binding plan to set priorities for the school's improvement, and (3) decide how school funds were spent. These parent-majority LSCs include six elected parents, two elected community residents, two elected teachers, and the school's principal.
- Abolished life-time principal tenure and made principals accountable to their LSCs under four-year performance contracts.
- Ended teachers' rights to use their seniority to occupy new or vacant teaching positions. This allowed each principal the opportunity to shape a school staff who supported the school's vision for improvement.
- Gave each school a sizable new amount of new discretionary funds (which now averages nearly \$500,000 per school each year) for the LSC and school staff to spend in support of their improvement priorities.

Making the reform plan part of state law was a key strategic move; anyone who wanted to change the design for Chicago school reform would have to win the legislature's support. And the reform law created nearly 6,000 new elected public officials in Chicago (the LSC members) that the ABC's Coalition expected to organize as a potent political force to defend the Reform Act from any legislative attacks.

Survival and Successes

Twelve years later, an important part of the Chicago school reform story is about survival and success. The basic school-level decision making framework established in 1988 is still in place. About 6,000 elected parents, community residents, and teachers now serve on Chicago's Local School Councils. The Consortium on Chicago School Research at the University of Chicago **published** a detailed study of Local School Councils citywide in **1997, which** concluded that 50-60 percent are "highly functioning," about 30 percent are "performing well but need support," and 10-15 percent have serious problems, ranging from inactivity to sustained conflict. The average LSC meets at least once a month, has a quorum 90 percent of the time, and has at least two active committees.

The transformation of Washington Irving Elementary School (an 87 percent low-income neighborhood school on Chicago's West Side) shows what Chicago reform at its best has made possible. When the reform law passed, Irving was one of Chicago's lowest-achieving schools. Currently, the average Irving eighth grader is performing at the national average in reading on standardized tests and far above the national average in math. The school is packed with computers and well-stocked classroom libraries purchased with the school's discretionary funds. Students read books everywhere, sometimes as they walk down the hall. Irving students use computers primarily for writing and for research projects, not for drill.

When Madeleine Maraldi became Irving's principal (shortly before the Reform Act was passed), she challenged her staff to stop talking about the problems that Irving's students brought to the school and to focus instead on what the school staff could do to unlock the students' learning potential. While many teachers were offended at first, Maraldi gradually won teachers over with in-depth hands-on learning experiences that showed teachers how to teach differently. She also involved teachers in designing grade-by-grade educational strategies as part of a long-term effort to build teacher teams and leadership.

Irving's first Local School Council, which was elected soon after Maraldi arrived, made the decision to keep her as principal, impressed by her creativity and commitment, as

well as by her willingness to debate her ideas for change with the Local School Council. When Maraldi advanced a recommendation for change, such as the practice of keeping each class with the same teacher for two years, the Irving LSC analyzed and debated the change thoroughly. The LSC has also been insistent that Irving should employ a Parent Coordinator with its discretionary funds, and a major school commitment has been to hold **regular** workshops in which parents participate in many of the same learning experiences that their children do, and learn how they can help their children learn at home.

The Irving LSC has typically been about evenly split between Latino and African American members – reflective of the school’s student population. They have deep respect for the principal, whose four-year contract they have subsequently renewed two more times.

Recently when Maraldi announced her retirement as principal, the LSC reviewed resumes from 20 applicants, interviewed three in-depth, and chose a new principal whom they feel confident will continue the school’s successful educational thrust.

Almost all Chicago schools have improved their tested achievement scores over the past decade, some by a little and some by a lot. Research by Designs for Change indicates that those low-income Chicago elementary schools that have shown sustained multi-year improvements in reading (like Irving) have more effective Local School Councils (as rated by their teachers), principals who focus on instructional improvement, teachers with high levels of teamwork, morale, and creativity, and strong outreach to parents. One of the strongest predictors of improved test scores is something that wasn’t possible before the Reform Act: a high level of collaboration among all the adults who have a stake in the children’s success – including parents, teachers, the principal, the Local School Council, and local organizations. Put in political science terms, these successful Chicago schools have developed high levels of “social capital.”

Not There Yet

The Reform Act has not, however, been a silver bullet. About 30 percent of elementary schools and the majority of high schools have not improved significantly since the Reform Act was passed, and the original law did not spell out a successful process for intervening in schools that were not making progress on their own initiative. This lack of progress in some schools, coupled with yearly financial crises at the beginning of each school year, led the Illinois legislature to amend the Reform Act in 1995.

Chicago's Mayor was given strong authority to appoint the school system's Central Board, direct the central administration, use funds more flexibly, and intervene in non-performing schools. Yet none of the **school-level decision making** authority of Local School Councils and principals was significantly changed. Chicago remains the most decentralized big city school system in the nation.

The 1995 amendments have been a mixed bag. The Mayor's aggressive leadership team has brought financial stability and substantial new school construction and repair over the last six years. The Mayor's team has also pressed a test-based accountability system that determines whether or not students will be promoted to the next grade, and whether low-performing schools will be placed on several varieties of probation. Probation brings a loss of school autonomy, coupled with top-down directives and on-site monitoring.

While everyone agrees that these failing schools and students are the school systems number one problem, initial research about the impact of Chicago's massive student flunking initiative and the Central Board's heavy-handed intervention in failing schools indicates that these changes have not substantially improved student achievement for the schools and students performing the worst. What these new top-down pressures have done is encouraged a fixation in many low-achieving schools on drilling students for the specific standardized test that is given in Chicago (the Iowa Test of Basic Skills).

Chicago is still looking for the right next step. Recently, Chicago's teachers have thrown out union leaders who deferred to the Mayor's school system leadership team, and replaced long-time union leaders with activists who are demanding less emphasis on

prepping students for tests and more teacher voice in improving instruction. The Mayor has also replaced the abrasive Chief Executive Officer and Board President who headed his initial leadership team with individuals who pledge to work more collaboratively with teachers and Local School Councils.

The challenge is how to nurture the ingredients of success (ingredients that are so evident at schools like Washington Irving) – in failing schools that did not improve on their own from 1988 to 1995, but also resisted the heavy-handed accountability campaign of the past six years. One proposal is to enlist schools like Washington Irving, which have already been turned around, by giving them extra resources to help those schools down the block that haven't changed.

Lessons

Although it still has far to go, Chicago's **progress** in creating an educational system structured to support school-by-school improvement on a widespread **basis has much to teach other urban school reformers.**

First, rewriting the basic state laws that define how urban school systems function is powerful and necessary for systemic reform. Most states have special sections of state law that apply only to their state's largest school districts. Without changing these basic ground rules, excellent urban schools will remain exceptions.

Second, the sizable number of Chicago schools that have improved radically embody a common set of principles, **which focus around building** cooperation among all the adults who are important in a child's life.

And finally, the Chicago reform experience demonstrates that parent and community leaders in a wide diversity of urban neighborhoods will devote sustained effort to collaborate with educators in improving their children's schools, if real authority is shifted to the school level.

Long-term urban education reform campaigns that begin by changing the state laws that determine the way big city school systems operate show great promise for catalyzing improvements in hundreds of schools, not just a few.

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Resources

Catalyst Magazine. A monthly magazine with award-winning journalistic analysis of Chicago school reform since 1990. Back issues are available on-line. <www.catalyst-chicago.org>

Consortium on Chicago School Research. Extensive research studies analyzing Chicago school reform since 1990, many of which can be down-loaded on-line.

<www.consortium-chicago.org>