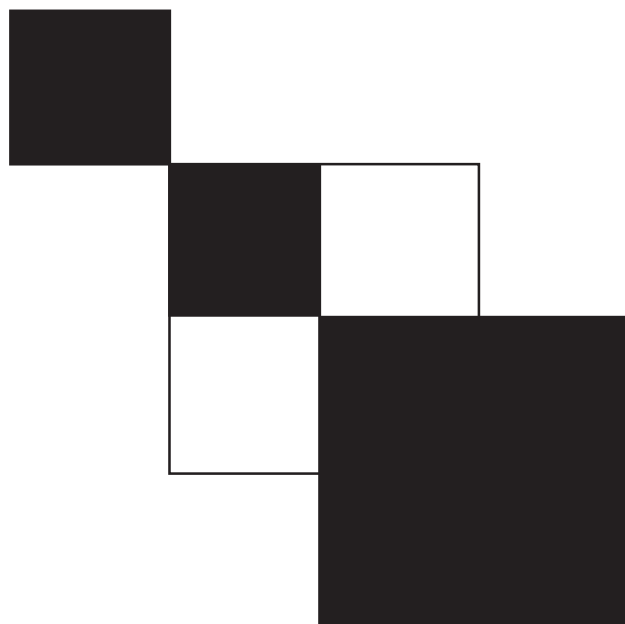
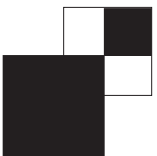

Chicago School Reform: Lessons for the Nation





Chicago School Reform: Lessons for the Nation

Endorsed by:

Designs for Change

National Center for Fair & Open Testing (FairTest)

Parents United for Responsible Education (PURE)

Written by:

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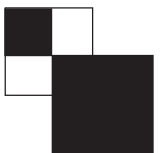
Monty Neill, FairTest

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Copies of the report are available on the web at www.pureparents.org and www.fairtest.org.

Printed copies can be obtained for \$5 from PURE, 100 S. Morgan Street, Chicago IL 60607

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Chicago School Reform: Lessons for the Nation

January 2007

Executive Summary

Public education in the U.S. faces a critical choice. We can continue to follow the path of punishment and privatization promoted by business and political interests and enshrined in No Child Left Behind (NCLB) and various Chicago Public Schools (CPS) policies and practices. Or we can expand the fairer, more effective strategies that have been evolving in the most successful schools in Chicago and elsewhere.

Unfortunately, many ineffective CPS strategies are being promoted across the nation as solutions to schools failing to make “adequate yearly progress” (AYP) under NCLB. This report takes a close look at the successes and failures of Chicago school reform – what research shows has and has not worked. The report covers Chicago school reform from the decentralization period of the early 1990s (Chapter I), to the 1995 mayoral takeover (Chapter II), and on to the most recent CPS improvement scheme, called the “Renaissance 2010” plan (Chapter III).

Among the ineffective, damaging practices carried out in Chicago are educationally counter-productive central office interventions, most rooted in the misuse of high-stakes tests, such as scripted curricula and reconstitution; grade retention based on test scores; undermining local decision making; and increased privatization. While NCLB does not require all of these, the test-focused environment created by NCLB encourages these harmful practices.

An alternative approach for sustained, continuous school improvement uses strategies shown to be successful in Chicago (Chapter IV). The recommendations listed below and described in more detail in the final chapter sum up and are based on these successful approaches. They are supported by current research in key areas such as professional development, parent involvement, and assessment. While these recommendations focus on Chicago, most have implications for NCLB, such as improved funding equity, ways to ensure schools can assist one another to improve curriculum and instruction, and focusing on strengthening school capacity to serve all children well through professional development and parent involvement.

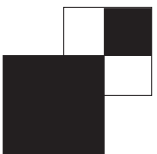
Recommendation 1: Illinois and Chicago must improve funding adequacy and equity.

- Illinois needs to provide substantially more funding, allocated especially to those districts with the most needs, including Chicago.
- Chicago’s Mayor and CPS need to establish a fair, adequate and equitable distribution of resources within Chicago Public Schools.

Recommendation 2. CPS must initiate a program of sharing best practices, including those developed in its stronger schools, among both successful schools and struggling schools.

Recommendation 3: Elected parent-majority Local School Councils (LSC) must be the default governance structure in all non-charter CPS schools.

- Hold charters accountable for parent involvement in decision-making by requiring annual reporting of parental activity in this area.



- Outsource LSC support and training to qualified groups and individuals to avoid conflict of interest between local school and central office/city hall interests and increase the quality of LSC training.

Recommendation 4. CPS must improve curriculum and instruction and foster high-quality professional development:

- Eliminate scripted curricula and move away from “teaching the test.”
- Ensure that professional development focuses on authentic, intellectually challenging and engaging curriculum and instruction.

Recommendation 5. CPS must prioritize professional development, supporting a decentralized and collaborative approach, following the guidelines of the National Staff Development Council and the U.S. Department of Education Professional Development Team.

Recommendation 6. CPS must improve parent involvement training and practices.

- Ensure that schools have access to high-quality training for parents and teachers on parents’ rights under NCLB to observe classrooms and be involved in school improvement planning and evaluation.
- Construct a standard, CPS-approved, comprehensive annual parent survey; and require schools to use it or some comparable tool to gather parent input prior to developing or modifying parent involvement and school improvement plans for the coming year.
- Require all schools to report to the public annually on progress with parent involvement.

Recommendation 7. CPS must implement high-quality assessment practices and fair and beneficial accountability policies:

- Ensure that learning high-quality assessment is part of expanded professional development, including work on using formative assessment techniques.
- Implement the assessment and accountability recommendations of the CPS-developed Commission on Improving Classroom-based Assessment and the New ERA plan, which rely more on performance-based assessments than standardized tests, while pushing Illinois to support high-quality local assessment.
- Halt the grade retention program, making retention a rarity while providing needed assistance in mastering a rich curriculum to all students who need it, regardless of their test scores.
- Implement both the letter and the spirit of the remediation, probation, and intervention provisions of the Chicago school reform law: carry out high-quality needs assessment, program planning, and program evaluation in a process which includes all school stake-holders including the LSC; provide adequate time and resources for programs to succeed.

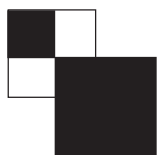
Recommendation 8. CPS must actively participate in the ESEA/NCLB reauthorization process by supporting the recommendations in the Joint Organizational Statement on No Child Left Behind (2004).

This report is endorsed by the following groups:

Designs for Change

National Center for Fair & Open Testing (FairTest)

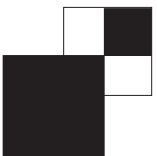
Parents United for Responsible Education (PURE)



Chicago School Reform: Lessons for the Nation

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Chicago School Reform: Lessons for the Nation

Introduction

Something amazing is happening in scores of Chicago's most challenging neighborhood public schools. Low-income, minority children are successfully learning to read, solve problems and make sense of the world. The schools are not selective, they are not magnets, their student bodies reflect the system's overall demographics. These are schools governed by parent-majority local school councils (LSCs). These councils select and work well with principals, who provide strong instructional leadership to caring and committed teachers, who themselves work collaboratively to improve their ability to teach all children well.

The real Chicago miracle is happening almost completely below the public radar.

But this great news about major improvements at regular neighborhood schools is not the "Chicago miracle" described by President Bill Clinton in his 1999 State of the Union address: "Look at Chicago, which ended social promotion and made summer school mandatory for those who don't master the basics."

This great news is not what Mayor Richard M. Daley referred to when he called Chicago "the national model for urban school reform" at a September 5, 2006, press conference highlighting a newly reconstituted school that replaced a school the district had closed for poor performance.

In fact, the real Chicago miracle is happening almost completely below the public radar. It is disregarded by local district, political and business leaders, who promote a very different analysis of and response to the challenges of struggling schools.

The nation needs to hear the truth about the successes and failures of Chicago school reform.

The truth is that an impressive number of Chicago Public Schools (CPS) have shown steadily improving academic outcomes over the past 15 years without central office intervention, large-scale student retention, teaching to the test, or being closed or privatized. In short, their students' success likely happened in spite of top-down mandates and penalties, not because of them.

Unfortunately, it's the punitive, ineffective Chicago model, not the positive, effective one, that is spreading across the nation under the influence of the federal No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB). The nation needs to hear the truth about the successes and failures of Chicago school reform – what research is showing has and hasn't worked here – because many of the unsuccessful CPS strategies are being promoted across the nation as solutions to schools failing to make "adequate yearly progress" (AYP) under NCLB.

The nation needs to hear that high-stakes use of standardized tests and punitive intervention strategies did not work in Chicago, and that holistic school improvement that is planned and implemented by collaborative local school decision makers is

Chicago's steadily improving neighborhood schools are available models for schools that haven't improved.

We will offer an alternative approach to sustained school improvement

We propose replacing the punitive, test-driven "reform" that fails to improve schools.

working. Chicago's steadily improving neighborhood schools are available models for schools that haven't improved. Their successful strategies can form the basis for alternatives to the failed approaches that continue to be promoted by Chicago business and political leaders and by those implementing NCLB.

In this report, we explore the history of Chicago school reform, from sound beginnings in the decentralization period of the early 1990s, to harmful top-down, test-driven policies, and on through CPS's latest problematic improvement scheme, called the "Renaissance 2010" plan. We will show the connection between the ineffective and damaging practices carried out here and those promoted by NCLB as it now exists.

We will offer an alternative approach to sustained school improvement that uses strategies that have been successful in Chicago and avoids ineffective, destructive practices. In the final section, we offer a set of recommendations to change CPS policy and practice. Many of these recommendations are relevant to the reauthorization of NCLB scheduled for 2007. Some of these strategies can be carried out with current resources, but additional and fairly distributed resources are essential if Chicago and the nation are to have schools that do not leave needy children further behind.

In short, we propose replacing the punitive, test-driven "reform" that fails to improve schools with effective ways to improve our schools and provide every child with a high-quality education.

I. Chicago school reform: Sound beginnings, positive results

A powerful, inclusive school reform movement swept through Chicago in the late 1980's. Dissatisfaction with poor district leadership exploded into anger during a 19-day teachers' strike that delayed the opening of the 1987 school year into the month of October. Eventually, more than 1,000 parents, teachers, and community members marched on city hall, leading Mayor Harold Washington to intervene and settle the strike.

Reformers brought the fight to the Illinois legislature, which passed a landmark bill in 1988 creating elected, empowered parent-majority local school councils (LSCs) at each CPS school (Phase I reform). Many LSCs became effective change agents, particularly through their ability to replace poor-performing principals and direct the spending of poverty funds for new programs. Principals gained new authority as well, such as the ability to select teachers and other staff, and to have keys to their school buildings. School improvement planning was redesigned to address the full range of components effective schools need, but also to reflect each school's particular strengths and challenges.

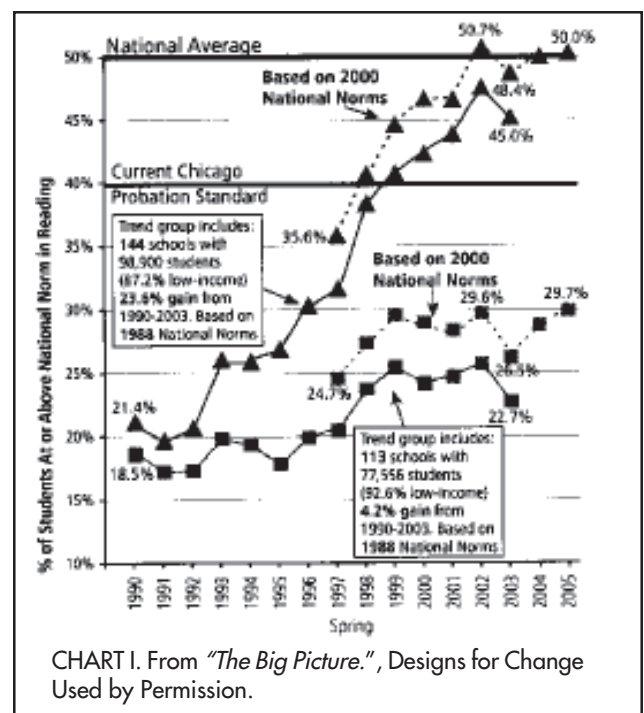
A. Comprehensive approach to improvement: The five essential supports

Fifteen years of research on the effects of this wave of school reform show remarkably positive results. The clearest presentation of this good news can be found in *The Big Picture*, a 2005 study from Designs for Change (DFC).¹ This report shows how 144 previously low-performing CPS elementary schools serving nearly 100,000 students, or about one-third of all CPS elementary students, began to make significant and sustained gains under LSC-powered school reform. Using scores on the annual Iowa Tests of Basic Skills (ITBS) and Illinois State tests, the report compares the improvements since 1990 of these 144 "substantially up" schools with 113 "no trend" schools, which started at nearly the same test score level but have been subject to various central office interventions. The contrast between the robust progress of the "substantially up" schools and the near-flatline of the 113 "no trend" schools is stark (see Chart 1).

The Big Picture argues that five "essential supports" – effective leadership, school environment and culture, family and community partnerships, staff development and collaboration, and quality learning activities in the instructional program – are common to the 144 schools. These factors work in interaction with the "complex human systems" of schools.

"The most consistent feature of these improved schools is that all adults work together as a team to improve education, including teachers, parents, Local School Council members, principal and community agencies." (*Big Picture*, p.ii).

The most consistent feature of these improved schools is that all adults work together as a team.



The population of the 144 Chicago “up” schools had larger percentages of students in poverty than the school systems of cities such as Baltimore and Cleveland.

Two of the “substantially up” schools are highlighted as case studies in the DFC report. The instructional practices of both schools focus on interactive teaching and learning rather than test prep and drill. At Earhart Elementary, whose student population is 100% African-American and 70% low-income, the curriculum is focused on inquiry. “Principal Walsh works with the staff to focus Earhart’s school improvement plan on helping students master state learning standards, as opposed to teaching to the test” (p. 43). At Carson Elementary, whose students are 95% Latino, 37% limited English proficient, and 97% low-income, “Teachers teach phonics, word fluency, and other reading skills through explicit active lessons. Teachers send home a daily stream of books for children to read and other literacy related homework. Parents are expected to help their children learn at home and are taught how to help them. While Carson staff place an emphasis on the mechanics of reading, every reading activity emphasizes that understanding the meaning of what you read is what reading is all about” (p. 44).

The Five Essential Supports for Student Learning

- ✓ Effective School Leadership
- ✓ Quality Learning Activities
- ✓ Adult Collaboration and Learning
- ✓ Social Supports for Students
- ✓ Family and Community Partnerships

Designs for Change, 2005

The population of the 144 Chicago “up” schools had larger percentages of students in poverty than the school systems of cities such as Baltimore and Cleveland. Many of these “up” schools are overwhelmingly African-American or Latino, a common situation in the segregated city of Chicago (for data on CPS, see appendix). The experiences of these schools – which achieved substantial test score gains while serving mostly low-income children, with little narrow teaching to the test – demonstrate some powerful lessons on school reform.

Similar conclusions are drawn in a 2006 report from the Consortium on Chicago School Research, *The Essential*

Supports for School Improvement.² Defining a set of supports nearly identical to those named in *The Big Picture*, the Consortium found that “schools strong in most of the essential supports were at least ten times more likely than schools weak in most of the supports to show substantial progress in both reading and mathematics. These schools were also very unlikely to stagnate. In contrast, not a single school that was weak in most of the supports showed substantial improvements in mathematics (p. 2).”

B. Local school councils: Site-based accountability and improvement

LSCs provided Chicago communities with local accountability tools that had never existed before. CPS schools were nearly inaccessible to the community in the years just prior to passage of the 1988 school reform act; school phone numbers were unlisted and parents would have to call the subdistrict office to get a message to their child’s school. One subdistrict superintendent was known for opening his monthly public meeting by warning that he did not want to hear anything bad about any of “his” schools. One new LSC was shocked to find a rowboat behind a locked door on a building walk-through to look for available classroom space; the room was quickly transformed into a music classroom.

LSCs provided Chicago communities with local accountability tools that had never existed before.

Empowered Participation,³ a 2004 book by Archon Fung, a professor at Harvard's Kennedy School of Government, looks at Chicago's LSCs as effective civic involvement models. Fung reports that LSCs build direct communication and oversight between local officials and the communities they serve, help build social capital to reverse the trend of civic deterioration, and most importantly, have a positive impact on student achievement.

Fung provides evidence that LSCs may have an especially positive impact in low-income communities whose residents have few other opportunities to have a voice in issues that directly affect them. For example, voter turnout in LSC elections in low-income communities is proportionately larger than turnout in regular municipal elections. And Fung found that the improvement effect of LSCs in low-income communities was stronger than that in middle class schools.

In addition, undocumented immigrants can run as candidates and vote in the LSC election. This has had an enormous impact on the civic involvement and development of thousands of people otherwise barred from participation in municipal elections, and has led to many positive effects on their children's educational prospects.

Overall, LSCs have provided an effective structure for strengthening schools across the five essential supports. The Galileo LSC provides an example.

A Model LSC: Galileo Academy LSC

Sharing our Successes,⁴ a 2002 report of LSC best practices by the Successful Schools Project collected from applications to an LSC award program, highlighted a number of excellent LSCs, including the Galileo Math and Science Academy LSC.

One example of the LSC's successful practice includes meaningful teacher input into all major budget decisions. An advisory body of teachers solicits teacher input and then approaches the LSC budget committee with a request. The budget committee reviews requests in light of the school's vision and principles. This process ensures that teachers have a voice and visibility in the budget process, and the LSC receives more informed and well-considered proposals. The Galileo LSC also insisted on having and maintaining a staffed grant writer position to ensure adequate resources for the school's academic programs.

The LSC uses a model for principal evaluation that focuses on educational practice and is based on the five essential supports plus two additional standards. Using this format and approach has allowed the LSC to use principal evaluation to assess themselves along with the principal, and as a tool for school improvement rather than a hoop for the principal to jump through. It allows the LSC to set several school goals as a focus for the principal.

What's an LSC?

Local School Councils (LSCs) are **elected bodies** at nearly every CPS elementary, middle and high school

LSC members include:

- the school Principal
- 6 parents
- 2 teachers
- 2 community residents
and in a high school...
- 1 student

The LSC's main responsibilities are:

- approving the School Improvement Plan
- approving the school's budget
- evaluating the principal
- hiring the principal

LSCs have provided an effective structure for strengthening schools across the five essential supports.

II. The Vallas era: Test-driven policies produce poor results

CPS became an intensely test-driven system, with punitive policies for children and schools.

After the first five years of LSC-driven reform, some civic leaders felt that achievement gains were not dramatic enough. The state legislature identified the central office as the problem and a mayoral takeover as the solution. In 1995, Mayor Richard M. Daley gained the power to appoint a five-member school board, the board president, and the top district administrator, who would no longer be required to have educational credentials. CPS was also allowed to create 15 charter schools and exempt certain small schools from having elected LSCs (Phase II reform).

Daley used this new power to appoint his politically savvy budget director, Paul Vallas, as the chief executive officer of CPS. Vallas had no background in education. However, he had a knack for being decisive, making news and speaking in sound bites.

Under Vallas's leadership, the system's budget was stabilized and balanced every year, ending the perennial problem of late school openings. A massive capital program was carried out to address long-neglected infrastructure needs and to build new schools. After-school and summer school programs were expanded.

CPS also became an intensely test-driven system. Vallas instituted a series of punitive policies for children and schools tied to student scores on the Iowa Test of Basic Skills (ITBS) at the elementary level and the companion high school tests, the Tests of Achievement and Proficiency (TAP), both annually administered norm-referenced basic skills standardized tests.

A. Student retention

Vallas first used single ITBS test scores for high-stakes purposes in 1996 with a new student promotion policy that required students to score at or above a set ITBS grade equivalent score in order to be promoted to the next grade. Vallas dubbed this policy "ending social promotion," a reference to moving students on to the next grade without the necessary skills.

The decision to put so much weight on standardized test scores as the measure of success was based in part on a lack of trust in teachers and teacher grades. Rather than find out if and why teachers might be passing children along who were not ready – and provide support to change such practices and actually help students progress – the new promotion policy took teachers out of the evaluation loop altogether. A student's report card grades were not considered in the promotion decision.

Vallas called the policy "the Hammer," and thousands of children took the hit.

Vallas called the policy "the Hammer," and thousands of children took the hit – the onus for failure was placed directly on them. The media began to refer to the numbers of students who "flunked" the ITBS by missing the cut-off score, despite the fact that the Iowa is not a pass-fail test nor does it match the learning standards on which classroom instruction is supposed to be based.

The first year, 7,000 eighth graders were required to go to summer school. Two thousand of them “flunked” summer school – that is, they retook the Iowa test but still did not meet the “passing” cut-off score – and were held back in eighth grade.

By 1997, when the program was expanded to include students in third and sixth grades, 12,000 children were held back. Eighth graders who were considered too old to stay in the elementary schools but who had not scored high enough on the ITBS to graduate and go on to high school were sent to stand-alone “Transition Centers.” Enrollment at these centers in 1998 was 98.5% African-American and Latino.

Some high-performing students were labeled as failures based on one bad test day.

Not surprisingly, the policy resulted in some high-performing students being labeled as failures based on one bad test day. One example was an African-American eighth grader who was a straight-A student, had perfect attendance, was selected to receive the school’s first “President’s Scholar” award, had already been accepted into a selective-enrollment International Baccalaureate (IB) program, and scored well above the required Iowa test reading score the prior year when he took the test without any stakes attached. But the pressure on this one test caused him to have a panic attack during the test. He had to be helped from the room and did not complete the test. He took a make-up test the next week. When his test results came back later in May, he had scored one-tenth of a point below the graduation cut-off. He was told he could not attend the eighth-grade luncheon or the traditional pinning ceremony with his parents. He would not receive the Presidential Award, and he could not participate in the graduation ceremony. He was also removed from enrollment in the IB program since he had not graduated and would have to attend remedial summer school, making it impossible for him to attend the required summer IB prep program.

A local advocacy group, Parents United for Responsible Education (PURE), highlighted the student’s story in a press conference. The resulting negative publicity embarrassed CPS into allowing the student to retake the test, and this time he scored high enough to graduate. But most students were not allowed this second chance, and the policy remained in effect.

The pressure on this one test caused him to have a panic attack.

Parents grew more and more concerned about the retention policy, did some research, and learned that the ITBS’ publishers, Riverside Publishing, specifically stated in the ITBS manual that single test scores should never be used to make important decisions about students or schools, and that the tests were not designed for such use.⁵

An alliance of groups also developed the *New ERA Plan*, an outline for a high-quality evaluation and assessment system which used multiple measures and involved the whole school community.⁶ (Highlights of the *New ERA Plan* can be found in the Recommendations section of this paper.)

In 1999, PURE filed a discrimination complaint against the CPS promotion policy with the Office for Civil Rights of the U.S. Department of Education. The resolution of that complaint forced CPS to consider other measures such as grades, state test scores and parent input in making retention decisions, but CPS continues to retain an average of 10,000 students per year.

False choice: Retention v. social promotion

Vallas sold this massive retention program as a no-nonsense, zero-tolerance solution to the failures of social promotion. He claimed he was “holding students accountable.” The policy was applauded and supported by every major local media outlet and championed by Mayor Daley and national figures such as President Clinton. Anyone who challenged the policy was accused of supporting social promotion, as though those were the only two possible choices: “Daley was asked if the board would flunk third, sixth, eighth, and ninth graders two consecutive times. ‘You better believe it,’ he replied. ‘We’ll do that. You want to promote them? You go promote them.’”⁷

A student who is held back learns far less the next year than does a comparable student who is promoted.

Yet there was no attempt to analyze why some students were not meeting the cut-off scores – no effort to look at the quality of instruction, the appropriateness of the assessment, or the adequacy of resources. In fact, the policy was perhaps most successful in diverting scrutiny away from those issues altogether.

Retention has not worked

The retention policy might have been defensible if retention worked. It does not. Research on retention provides one of the strongest bodies of evidence in education, and it clearly shows that retention is harmful.

A student who is held back learns far less the next year than does a comparable student who is promoted. True, the promoted student most likely stays near the bottom of his or her class, while a retained student, doing the same thing again, does better the second time. But in terms of measured learning gains, the promoted student ends the next year having learned much more – a half a year’s worth of learning – than the retained student.⁸

Further, any initial gains seen in the year a student is first retained soon disappear. That is, a student who repeats grade two is likely to be doing OK in comparison with her or his new classmates; but two or more years later, s/he most likely will be far behind, once again at the bottom of the class.

Chicago schools which retained the most students “reflected virtually no gain from 1999 to 2005.”

In addition, substantial research has found that grade retention produces harmful emotional and psychological consequences and greatly increases the likelihood the students will drop out of school. So retention hurts academically, psychologically and socially. This is true for both younger and older students.⁹

Some have claimed that the fear of retention causes other students to work harder. But Hong and Raudenbush’s detailed study using national data on young children concluded that retention does not produce improved outcomes for other students in the school. In *The Big Picture*, Designs for Change reports that Chicago schools which retained the most students “reflected virtually no gain from 1999 to 2005. Achievement stagnated at a low level (28.2% at or above the national average by spring 2005, based on 2000 national norms)” (p. 57). Gains were greater for schools with less retention.

The Consortium on Chicago School Research (CCSR) conducted a six-year study of CPS's student retention program.¹⁰ Their findings mirrored national studies: "Did retaining these low-achieving students help? The answer to this question is definitely no" (*The Effects of Retention*, p. 10).

Even President Clinton had second thoughts. Almost immediately after praising Chicago in his 1999 State of the Union address, the backpedaling began: "President Clinton may have praised Chicago's crusade against social promotion last week, but that doesn't necessarily mean he endorses holding back struggling kids, White House officials say. Even though Clinton cited Chicago, where more than 8,400 students are repeating a grade this year – some for the third time – he was 'not necessarily saying to retain kids,' said Gerald Tirozzi, assistant U.S. education secretary. Tirozzi tried to clarify that Clinton's State of the Union remarks did not mean that he favors retaining children, but that they should be given additional help."¹¹

A year later, after the first comprehensive report on retention by CCSR was published, Clinton was offering federal help: "In mid-April, President Bill Clinton expressed concern over the latest findings on student retention in Chicago and offered to provide some federal help. Addressing a convention of education reporters in Atlanta, Clinton was asked if, in light of these findings, he still believed that Chicago's promotion policy should be a model for the country. He hesitated and appeared at first to be troubled by the question. 'My answer to your question is, I don't know,' he said, 'so I'll start with that.'"¹²

In 2006, CPS did not use Iowa test scores to retain students. However, the Illinois State Board of Education agreed to embed a different nationally normed test, the Stanford 10, in the state accountability tests. The new test is shorter (only 30 minutes each for reading and math compared with 55 minutes for reading and two hours for math on the prior test) which some researchers believe are "too brief to allow for reliable judgments about kids."¹³

B. School interventions

The problem of persistently failing schools is a critical one for CPS. The 1988 School Reform Law included provisions for the CPS superintendent to assist failing schools through gradually more serious interventions. The law required a district analysis of the school's problems, creation of a corrective action plan designed specifically to address those problems, a budget to support the plan, and ongoing reviews of school progress under the plan.¹⁴ Just prior to the 1995 mayoral takeover of the system, CPS district officials started that analysis and planning process.

Rather than continue that process, the Vallas administration applied the same high-stakes single test standard to identify schools for the various levels of intervention. Beginning in 1996, CPS targeted schools at which fewer than 15% of the students scored at or above national norms on the Iowa or TAP tests. These schools were placed on remediation. If they did not score higher within one year, they were moved to the probation list.

President Bill Clinton expressed concern over the latest findings on student retention in Chicago

The 1988 School Reform Law included provisions for the CPS superintendent to assist failing schools through gradually more serious interventions.

School communities reported that the legally required hearings on school probation status seemed more like kangaroo courts with predetermined outcomes than meaningful opportunities to evaluate a school. Under probation, the school's LSC was sidelined in favor of central office control. A probation manager was assigned, and the school's discretionary funds were directed toward programs chosen by the probation manager.

If a school did not improve fast enough under probation, CPS used the "reconstitution" level, which allowed it to fire teachers and the principal and hold new LSC elections. In 1997, CPS reconstituted seven high schools. All staff members had to reapply for their jobs, and eventually about 100 teachers were fired. This led to enormous conflict with the teachers' union, and no more schools were reconstituted.

False choice: district intervention v. the status quo

Again, Vallas portrayed the probation and reconstitution programs as the only commonsense solution to school failure. Those who disagreed with the program as implemented or recommended more support and resources for schools and local stakeholders were labeled naysayers who yearned for the failed past days when they had the ear of the district leaders.

Independent studies of the probation initiatives were not positive.

In fact, independent studies of the probation initiatives were not positive. A 2003 report by Kara Finnegan and Jennifer O'Day, *External Support to Schools on Probation: Getting a Leg Up?*, focused on the success of external partners CPS provided to probation schools.¹⁵ It concluded that "in the lowest performing schools, current assistance efforts are simply not strong enough to overcome the deep problems in educator and organizational capacity necessary to fundamentally improve instruction" (p. 50).

Northwestern University's Center for Urban School Policy conducted a \$1.8 million study of the CPS high school restructuring plan over three years and concluded that little progress was made. Findings for schools on probation were especially disappointing. Nine external partners served the 33 high schools on some form of probation in 2000. "Between 1997 and 2000, partners increasingly focused on reading, and boosting test scores in lieu of offering general staff development and professional development tailored to teachers' needs in individual schools, the study found."¹⁶ The payoff was minimal, with seven of the nine external partners in 2000 garnering only small test score gains.

CPS gave up the 1997 attempt at reconstituting schools after a year of teachers' union protest and little academic progress, but the district came back a few years later with a new plan called "intervention." Results were not better. Reading scores dropped at three of the five intervention schools. Math scores dropped at four, with the fifth posting a gain of only a tenth of a percentage point. "Despite dismal test scores and an exodus of teachers at intervention schools last year, School Board's get-tough experiment to improve failing high schools is slated to continue next fall."¹⁷

C. Test-centered schooling

Under Vallas, CPS used the twin sticks of retention and probation to force schools into unprecedented use of scripted curricula and test preparation. Test prep books developed by the central office and delivered to schools on probation became the *de facto* school reading and mathematics curriculum. Weeks of test prep stretched into months, particularly in the third, sixth and eighth “bridge” grades when student test scores determined whether or not they were promoted. Summer school, which students who “flunked the Iowa” had to attend, became laboratories for test prep curriculum development and use.

Weeks of test prep stretched into months.

In “Complexity, Accountability, and School Improvement,” Jennifer O’Day described what test-centered schooling did in CPS: “The emphasis on negative incentives (stigma of probation, threat of reconstitution) tied to a single measure (ITBS) appears to have resulted in two tendencies that work against long-term improvement. First, attention in these schools became focused not so much on student learning per se, but on getting off or staying off of probation.... Most common was the emphasis on test preparation in the form of intensive drill and practice to raise student scores. Some schools even redesigned their curriculum not only to reflect the general skills on the ITBS but to align the proportion of time allotted in the curriculum to a given discrete skill with the proportion of test items measuring that skill.... Another common practice was to triage assistance (mostly, test preparation) to students scoring near grade-level cutoffs in the hope that, by raising these students’ scores slightly, the school could escape probation (p. 312).”¹⁸

The 1999 National Research Council report on testing concluded that “Chicago’s regular year and summer school curricula were so closely geared to the ITBS that it was impossible to distinguish real subject mastery from mastery of skills and knowledge useful for passing this particular test.”¹⁹

False choice: Basic skills v. challenging work

Once again, Vallas promoted a seemingly commonsense idea: that students have to get “the basics” before they can move on to more complex work that involves higher-order thinking.

“Attention in these schools became focused not so much on student learning per se, but on getting off or staying off of probation.”

In 1995, newly appointed Chicago School Board President Gery Chico raised alarms in schools when he called for an end to the “baloney” in favor of a back-to-basics approach: “Here would be a new, ‘basic approach to education’ and more standardized testing, he said. Both were needed because there had been ‘too much emphasis on going your own way, making the kid feel good about him or herself.’ And he derided people ‘who don’t think tests are worth very much. They’d rather worry about the whole child. Can they sing? Can they dance?’ ‘Everything they have to say resonates with the mayor’s political realities,’ says one advocate, who asked not to be identified. ‘It’s simple. You get back to basics. You don’t have to get involved in all this complicated jazz about higher-order thinking skills. And how will you know you’re successful? Test scores. And you can do it in one year.’”²⁰

Consortium studies challenged the idea that basic skills acquisition has to precede complex work.

The Iowa test was indeed a “basic skills” test that CPS claimed indicated whether students had the skills needed to go on to the next grade. The district reported the scores as grade-level equivalents, which gave this argument more weight. The test maker, Riverside, which urged districts not to use grade equivalents, eventually stopped providing them to CPS.

Consortium studies have also effectively challenged the idea that basic skills acquisition has to precede complex work. Two different studies – “Authentic Intellectual Work and Standardized Tests: Conflict or Coexistence?” and “Instruction and Achievement in Chicago Elementary Schools” – show that students at all ability levels learn more when they are challenged, as measured on basic skills and other assessments.²¹ (We will elaborate this point in our recommendations.)

Test-centered policies have not worked

Research on the 1990-2005 period of school reform in Chicago clearly demonstrates that teaching to the test has not produced greater learning, and more generally, that the CPS test-centered policies of the Vallas era did not work.

Teaching to the test has not produced greater learning.

Anthony Bryk came to this conclusion after a detailed analysis of CPS test results.²² A first glance at the test score trends seems to indicate that more improvement occurred after 1995, when the mayor took control of the schools. However, increased grade retention, exclusion of the scores of more low-scoring students, changing demographics, shifts in when the ITBS was administered, and repeated use of the same forms of the ITBS all meant that the apparent increases in scores masked the absence of real improvement. Bryk concluded that the effects of Phase I reform almost brought Chicago up to the national average in the rate of annual student growth in reading, but there were no significant improvements in Phase II, from 1995 to 2001. Test scores actually flattened out under the explosion of test preparation and pressure to raise test scores that occurred in the second, mayoral control, phase. Bryk’s report proposes that the test score increases the mayor takes credit for should most likely be attributed to decentralization: “the effect of decentralization reform, which was much maligned by system leadership during phase II, was probably the single biggest source of the much heralded system successes during the late 1990’s” (p. 261).

The effect of decentralization reform was probably the single biggest source of the much heralded system successes during the late 1990’s.

Designs for Change (DFC) also challenges the system’s persistent public relations claims of success for its major interventions of retention and probation. DFC points out that the vast majority of schools experiencing these interventions continue to perform too poorly to get off probation, including 80 of the 88 schools with the highest student retention rates and all of the 101 schools assigned reading specialists by the central office. Those schools’ test scores followed a pattern from 1990-2005 – quick rise, leveling off, and subsequent drop – that extensive research finds to be indicative of a narrow, test prep curriculum (*The Big Picture*, p. 25).

Chicago’s experience with the failure of test-driven reform is one example of what has become a well-understood phenomenon. Facing harsh consequences, schools focus narrowly on boosting test scores on the high-stakes test. Tests, however, are

intended as a sample of a whole curriculum. To teach just the tested portion leads to score inflation – the scores go up, but real learning does not. Ironically, over time the scores cease to increase at all, a plateau effect identified by *The Big Picture* as the “flat trend” schools.

In fact, the evidence shows that CPS should have stayed with the provisions of the 1988 plan. Had CPS done so, school improvement would be substantially further along than it now is. CPS continues to rank at the bottom of big urban districts on the National Assessment of Educational Progress’s (NAEP) Trial Urban District Results – for example, on 2005 NAEP tests, Chicago ranks just above Washington D.C. schools, tenth out of 11 in fourth grade math, and eighth out of 11 in fourth grade reading.²³ Given the significant improvements in the 144 schools cited by *Designs for Change*, it is highly probable that CPS interventions in schools that have not improved are responsible for holding back overall system progress.

D. Test-score driven inequity

A less discussed concept behind mayoral-driven reform is that “the schools aren’t so bad, we just have the wrong kids in them.” The mayor has made it clear that his number one priority on the education and all other fronts is to attract and hold more middle class families in the city. But instead of fixing every school so that every child in every community receives a high-quality education, the city has increased access to top-quality schools for students from middle-class communities and with the highest test scores.

For example, CPS built the \$45 million Northside College Prep High School in 1999 in a predominantly white, middle class community that had no urgent need for a new school. Northside is a selective enrollment high school. Students cannot even apply to this school without meeting a certain test score cut point. (CPS uses annual state reading and math test scores.) A norm-referenced standardized test is then given to approved applicants and those scores used for further winnowing.

By 2002, CPS had built a second state-of-the-art selective enrollment high school on the wealthier north side, Walter Payton College Prep. CPS also closed the highly successful Jones Commercial high school, which prepared predominantly African-American juniors and seniors for top-line administrative and managerial jobs with downtown corporations. The school was located in the gentrifying South Loop and was reopened in 2002 as a third selective-enrollment college prep high school. Now called Jones College Prep, the school is undergoing a multimillion-dollar renovation, including expansion onto newly acquired property.

This effort has not, in fact, increased the number of middle class families using CPS. In fact, the overall poverty rate and demographics of the system have remained fairly stable over the past ten years. Instead, the effect of offering more high-quality schooling to the already advantaged was to increase the creaming of high-scoring students away from neighborhood high schools, ensuring that nearly every regular high school ended up on the probation list.

The evidence shows that CPS should have stayed with the provisions of the 1988 plan.

CPS continues to rank at the bottom of big urban districts on the National Assessment of Educational Progress’s (NAEP)

Creaming high-scoring students away from neighborhood high schools ensured that nearly every regular high school ended up on the probation list.

Large and overcrowded schools, many of which are mostly Latino, are likely to be shortchanged.

At the same time as CPS was providing state-of-the-art college-track schools for the white, middle class north side, it also opened the first military academy high school on the predominantly African-American south side. Since then, several other high schools in low-income neighborhoods have been converted to military academies over the objections of their local school councils. LSCs in these schools are disbanded and replaced with a management run by retired military officers.

In an effort to appear even-handed, the Vallas administration promised to open college preparatory high schools in each of the three CPS regions south of the loop to balance the attractive new schools available in the three northside regions. Martin Luther King, Jr. College Prep opened in 2003 in a closed, low-performing neighborhood high school in the Mid-South area. The school has struggled from the beginning with inadequate resources and unfulfilled CPS promises. It was recently ranked by CPS as seventh out of seven college prep schools.²⁴

Robbing the poor?

The system's middle-class schools also seem to have an unfair share of school dollars. A February 2005 analysis by *Catalyst* magazine of budget allocations to schools within CPS found that, "From the perspective of student-based budgeting, schools with the fewest poor students and schools with selective enrollments have padded budgets. At the other end of the funding scale, large and overcrowded schools, many of which are mostly Latino, are likely to be short-changed."²⁵

Catalyst found that schools with the fewest poor students are likely to get more funding than the district average: "federal and state poverty funds are not giving schools with more poor students a clear financial advantage — a violation of federal law.... (S)elective enrollment and magnet schools are also likely to get more funding. Almost half of the schools with more students from middle-income families are either selective or magnet schools, compared to only 10 percent in the schools with higher concentrations of poverty. Selective and magnet schools typically offer a suite of special classes that tend to attract a diverse — and often wealthier — set of students. This relatively small group of schools also gets nearly a third of the \$60 million for desegregation programs that was analyzed by *Catalyst*."

III. Renaissance 2010: NCLB Chicago Style

Despite the failure of the test-based policies initiated by the Vallas administration, CPS has expanded all of them under the leadership of Arne Duncan, who became CEO in 2001. Duncan has earned praise for being more collaborative and thoughtful than Vallas – leading some to refer to his tenure as Phase III of reform – but Mayor Daley continues to dominate CPS policymaking.

The district tends to use multiple measures as “multiple barriers” to promotion.

While the settlement of PURE’s discrimination complaint forced CPS to consider other measures such as grades, state test scores, and parent input in making retention decisions, the district tends to use those measures as “multiple barriers” to promotion, rather than as various sources of information to be considered together to produce a more accurate look at a student’s overall performance.

CPS has expanded its school intervention program. As with student retention, school probation status is now based on a variety of measures, but the test score cut-off has been raised from 15% to 40% (perhaps to tie it to state NCLB “standards”). Now more than half of all CPS schools are on the probation list. Instead of receiving extra resources from the central office, probation schools are required to use most of their own discretionary funds to purchase specific services from the central and area offices, including programs with no track record of success.

Most recently, Duncan and the mayor have been promoting Renaissance 2010, the most aggressive intervention so far. Renaissance 2010 envisions 100 new schools created by 2010 from a projected 60 closed “failed” CPS schools. The new schools are either charter schools, privately run contract schools, military schools, or closed and restructured district-run schools.

A. Civic Committee promotes closing and privatization

Early in 2004, the Civic Committee of the Commercial Club of Chicago published a report, *Left Behind*, which called for 100 new charter schools and paved the way for Mayor Daley’s Renaissance 2010 program.²⁶

Now more than half of all CPS schools are on the probation list.

This report details some key problems in the Chicago Public Schools – and some notable successes – and then makes recommendations for privatizing large parts of the system (specifically, opening 100 new charter schools) without ever providing any connection between the problems and the “solution.” It also offers no evidence that the “solution” is likely to work.

The report makes a strong effort to show how terrible the CPS schools are. It looks at aggregate standardized test scores in 2002, which are quite low on average in CPS, especially in “high poverty” schools (80% of students eligible for free or reduced lunch). It points out that there had been little improvement in ISAT scores over the previous four years. However, unlike the 2005 Designs for Change report, *The Big Picture*, the Civic Committee did not separate out schools that had seen gains from schools that had not.

While the rhetoric of the report blames teachers for the system's failures, the report's own data do not.

While the results indicate that the Daley reforms have not worked, the report hastens to assure readers – without backing up the assertion – that “this failure is not attributable to the current CEO or the system or to its board.” It provides data showing Chicago has far more uncertified teachers than suburban schools, and it claims that CPS has too few “excellent teachers” and lacks an effective system of teacher evaluation.

While the rhetoric of the report blames teachers for the system’s failures, the report’s own data do not. In fact, the report shows that CPS teachers outperform their suburban counterparts in teaching low-income and minority students. Yet the Civic Committee does not call for “choice” for those underserved suburban students.

In reading, for example, Latinos in CPS, whether low-income or not, score higher on the annual state assessments than do Latinos in the suburbs. African-Americans in Chicago do about as well as African-Americans in the suburbs. Chicago eighth graders in high-poverty schools score higher in reading than do students in suburban high-poverty elementary schools (there were no high-poverty high schools in the suburbs). And considering all students, while the percent of students meeting reading standards declined from grade 3 to grade 11 in the suburbs, it did not decline in Chicago – though the percentage meeting standards at grade 11 was only 36% in Chicago in 2002 compared with 63% in the suburbs. (In math, Chicago did less well by comparison.)

CPS teachers outperform their suburban counterparts in teaching low-income and minority students.

In other words, the report’s own data show that CPS teachers, despite having larger class sizes, having less pay, and lacking proper certification in some cases, did as well or better getting low-income and minority-group students to pass the state reading exams than schools in the suburbs.

The report’s main message is that the real problem is the system “lacks competitive pressures... it responds more to politics and pressures from the school unions than to community or parental demands for quality.” (p. 3.) The Committee’s supposed solution, competition, is unsupported in the report by any evidence that more “competition” from charter schools would lead to educational improvement. In fact, national evidence shows that charter school students are not scoring higher, on average, than students in regular public schools.²⁷

The Committee's supposed solution, competition, is unsupported in the report by any evidence.

False choice: Choice v. leaving students to languish in failing schools

Apparently the lack of evidence in *Left Behind* did not matter to city leaders. Despite some initial irritation with the Committee’s report, Mayor Daley and CPS have jumped to implement the recommendations by rolling out Renaissance 2010.

Duncan has promised this program will provide “dramatically better schools” in every community. His message now is that he won’t wait any longer for the lowest-performing schools to improve – he will move to shut them down and replace them.

Anyone who questions the wisdom of this approach or brings up negative research about charters and privatized schools or the loss of LSC-style local democracy is again criticized using a false dichotomy: if you are against Renaissance 2010, you are “against change” and in favor of the status quo of failure.

B. Key concerns about Renaissance 2010

Parents and community members began to be concerned about the Renaissance 2010 Plan in an earlier, more targeted version of the program called the Mid-South Plan. This plan proposed to close 20 out of 25 schools in a 3-square-mile area of the city where several public housing high-rises had recently been torn down and where CPS had already closed a handful of schools. The Mid-South Plan called for two-thirds of the closed schools to reopen as charter or privately run schools.

Changing schools multiple times can set children's academic progress back as much as a year.

School and community advocates were very concerned about the impact of these proposed changes on their community and on hundreds of neighborhood children who had already been transferred once or twice in previous area school closings. Citing University of Chicago research warning that changing schools multiple times can set children's academic progress back as much as a year,²⁸ the community successfully mounted a strong challenge to the Mid-South Plan, which led to its being almost entirely shelved.

However, in June 2004 Mayor Daley announced the Renaissance 2010 Plan, which resembled the Mid-South Plan except that the 60 planned school closures were more spread out geographically and the target list of schools was now a well-guarded secret.

Community protest against Renaissance 2010 has made it perhaps the most controversial of the mayor's ideas since he ordered up a fleet of backhoes for a midnight excavation of the runways at Meigs Field.

- In August 2004, about 20 activists camped out overnight at school board headquarters to be the first in line to testify against Renaissance 2010. More than 30 LSC members, parents, students, teachers, and community activists took over the entire public participation segment of the Board meeting with powerful arguments against the plan.
- On the first day of school in September 2004, the Chicago Coalition for the Homeless filed a legal challenge against Renaissance 2010, claiming that school closings deprived some homeless children of their “right of return” to their school of origin. Two years later, this case has yet to be resolved, in part because CPS has failed to live up to an agreement to track and provide academic support services to the homeless children who have been displaced by Renaissance 2010.
- Thirty-seven out of 50 Chicago city aldermen have signed on to support a moratorium on school closings until CPS meets a number of criteria such as reporting to City Council on the progress of all children displaced under Renaissance 2010.

Community protest against Renaissance 2010 has made it very controversial.

- The Illinois House of Representatives passed a bill requiring local referenda on school closings in cases where public testimony at closure hearings weighs heavily against such closure.

Shaky claims of success

Thirty-seven out of 50 Chicago city aldermen have signed on to support a moratorium on school closings.

CPS claims that Renaissance 2010 is already providing superior options for Chicago families. However, these claims are based on internal CPS reports, not independent research. The most recent CPS report on its charter schools claimed that they were outperforming “nearby schools” where CPS claims the students would likely have gone, even though a large percentage of CPS students generally do not attend their neighborhood schools. The CPS charter report also does not adjust for demographic factors, although the charters serve fewer low-income, limited English proficient and disabled students.

CPS made similar claims about one of the first Renaissance 2010 schools, the Dodge Renaissance School housed in the closed Dodge Elementary school, stating that students from the “old” Dodge progressed at a far faster rate at “Dodge Renaissance.” However, the data in the report showed little difference in outcomes.²⁹ An additional disturbing fact is that only 12 of the 336 original Dodge students were still at the school two years later.³⁰

Despite CPS claims of success, only 12 of the 336 original Dodge students were still at the school two years later.

The public was also learning about some of the extra resources going to Renaissance schools that are not generally available to regular neighborhood schools. For example, another early Renaissance School, the Williams Multiplex, contained an early learning center with 15 children to a class and at least two adults in each room. A recent *Chicago Sun-Times* story on a new Renaissance 2010 charter run by the University of Chicago reported that class size in one room was halved in order to address some of the significant discipline challenges that were playing out in front of the reporter.³¹ At the “new” Sherman school, where CPS replaced all the adult staff but left the children in place, new teachers are paid a \$10,000 bonus.

Added burdens for neighborhood schools

Violence soared at five of the nine high schools that accepted most of the students transferred out of the high schools closed under Renaissance 2010.

Meanwhile, stories have begun to emerge from neighborhood schools about the pressures being placed on them when they take in hundreds of “student nomads” from nearby closed schools. On the first day of school in September 2004, at Schiller School, which received most of the 400 students from the nearby closed Sojourner Truth school, visitors reported seeing piles of desks blocking the hallways while students in classrooms had no place to sit. Students’ records often never made it to the receiving school.

In high schools where gang problems exist, delicate balances keeping the peace are often disrupted by large influxes of students from closed schools. A May 8, 2006, article in the *Chicago Tribune* reported that violence had soared at five of the nine high schools that accepted most of the students transferred out of the high schools closed under Renaissance 2010.³² An interim principal at the already overcrowded Gage Park High School was fired by CPS right before school opened in 2006 for

refusing to accept an additional 350 students, thereby raising some class sizes to 40 and violating teachers' union agreements.

Parents looking for accountability

Parents have found that the rosy picture painted by CPS and others of charter and other novelty schools does not always match the reality. While many parents are satisfied with their choice and believe they have done the best thing for their child, others have had their children pushed or forced out because they did not "fit in," because the parent could not afford school fees, or the school would not or could not provide special education, bilingual or other services. The new charter school that replaced the historic DuSable High School – located in Englewood, one of Chicago's poorest neighborhoods – charges students \$100 for each suspension. This policy will most likely quickly drive away "undesirable" students. Parents are also discouraged by the lack of accountability of the new school structures. When they have a problem with the administration of a charter or other novelty school, there's generally nowhere to turn for redress.³³

A charter charging students \$100 for each suspension will most likely quickly drive away "undesirable" students.

In place of a local school council, Renaissance 2010 schools have a transitional advisory council (TAC), which develops the school proposal and operates throughout each school's formation and startup. TACs are appointed by CPS from people who apply from all over the city and the greater metropolitan Chicago area. Rather than having a parent majority like an LSC, TACs rarely have more than two or three parents, and they are usually outnumbered by businessmen, foundation representatives and others.

The CPS Renaissance 2010 policy states that all new school proposals must include a plan for a permanent governance board with parent and community representation. The policy specifically states that this board may be a "traditional" LSC. However, to date no new school created under Renaissance 2010 has a traditional LSC. In fact, there is little contact between any new school governing board and the general public.

No new school created under Renaissance 2010 has a traditional LSC.

In sum, CPS appears to be releasing partial and misleading evidence about the new Renaissance 2010 schools, as well as giving substantial extra assistance to make it appear that these schools are unqualified successes, and to perhaps ask implicitly why "regular" schools cannot do the same, though they cannot control the composition of their student bodies and have less money. This is not to argue that charter schools are inherently bad schools. Indeed, we have talked with parents who are happy with the small class sizes, closer attention and less focus on drilling to the tests to be found in some regular community schools. However, charters should not be used to attack LSCs or unions, or to promote misleading comparisons with community schools.

IV. Recommendations: What to do instead of Renaissance 2010 or NCLB? Lessons for Chicago and the nation.

The past 15 years of school reform in Chicago provide a cautionary tale for the nation as the consequences of the federal No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) begin to take hold. Chicago has experienced first-hand the negative effects of many of NCLB's dominant strategies: overemphasis on standardized tests, punitive labeling and ineffective top-down interventions. It has also experienced the positive effects of local decision making, adult collaboration and a holistic approach to school improvement.

Charters should not be used to attack LSCs or unions, or to promote misleading comparisons with community schools.

In light of these negative and positive experiences, we offer the following recommendations for genuine reform in Chicago, based on what has worked in CPS schools. They are alternatives to the strategies that failed in Chicago and are about to be repeated across the country under the auspices of NCLB. Chicago and the nation can strengthen programs that are working well and use what works to support and develop schools and educators in need of help. To do so will require a change in direction away from closing schools, privatizing, undermining LSCs and unions, narrowing the curriculum, and using retention and other forms of threats and sanctions as prime motivators.

In presenting our ideas for improving schools, we note research and current CPS practice that support our ideas. Indeed, it is important that there are some significantly positive central office practices: CPS can use them as well as the valuable lessons from the successful school practices identified by Designs for Change and others to craft a new phase of Chicago school reform that builds primarily on the experiences and lessons of Phase I.

A. Resource equity

Recommendation 1: Illinois and Chicago must improve funding adequacy and equity.

- Illinois must provide substantially more funding, allocated especially to those districts with the most needs, including Chicago. This effort is essential. The groups that have constantly criticized the system and offered various privatization schemes as the “solution” should add their considerable weight to the push for statewide funding adequacy and equity – as well as back away from their ill-considered promotion of privatization.
- Chicago's Mayor and CPS must establish a fair and adequate distribution of resources within Chicago Public Schools. CPS must halt its practice of using federal and state Title I money to replace local funds and obey the laws that require those funds to be used as a supplement. It must put in place a transparent budget and capital improvement process that provides the public the information needed to monitor equitable and efficient use of funds.

We propose alternatives to the strategies that failed in Chicago and are about to be repeated across the country under the auspices of NCLB.

B. Decentralization

In addition to the research cited in the previous chapters of this report, there is other evidence that local site management and attention to sound educational principles are more effective strategies for positive change than politically popular get-tough reforms espoused by Chicago leaders and NCLB. *Breaking Through: Transforming Urban School Districts* by John Simmons³⁴ links the improvements in Chicago to decentralization, replacement of ineffective principals by LSCs, teamwork and a focus on instruction.

Since decentralization has produced more educational benefits than re-centralization, CPS needs to reorganize how it will support decentralization. No doubt proponents of privatization and expanded charters will paint these strategies as forms of decentralization – but if so, they are forms of decentralization without meaningful public accountability and which evidence shows largely are not helpful.

Decentralization means strengthened LSCs, allowing principals to work collaboratively with teachers to improve instruction, and fewer unhelpful mandates from the central office. It should also mean enabling more successful schools (as judged by more than just test scores) to assist schools that need assistance. Careful work must go into designing such supports – it would not help to weaken one school by moving its principal or requiring her or him to spend too much time with another site, for example. Nonetheless, we believe a careful development of collaborative improvement across schools is possible and should be a priority in CPS.

Recommendation 2: CPS must initiate a program of sharing best practices, including those developed in its stronger schools, among both successful schools and struggling schools.

Recommendation 3: Elected parent-majority local school councils must be the default governance structure in all non-charter schools.

- CPS must hold charters accountable for parent involvement in decision-making by requiring annual reporting of parental activity in this area.
- CPS must outsource LSC support and training to qualified groups and individuals to avoid conflict of interest between local school and central office/city hall interests and increase the quality of LSC training.

C. Improved instructional quality

By now, most policy analysts have concluded that the heart of school improvement is improved instruction. This has been confirmed by research in Chicago.

Anthony Bryk³⁵ cited longitudinal research in Chicago by Fred Newmann, who

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There are some significantly positive central office practices.

Decentralization should mean enabling more successful schools to assist schools that need assistance.

There can be sustained gains at schools serving large percentages of low-income children of color.

“found very large differences in learning gains between the 100 classrooms they studied that had the most intellectually demanding instruction as compared with the 100 classrooms with the least challenging instruction. Even though both kinds of classrooms exist in the same schools, students in classes where authentic intellectual work was assigned could easily learn 50% more over the course of a year than their schoolmates across the hall.” Newmann and his colleagues examined teacher assignments and student work samples, discovering that cognitively rich teaching did exist across the system, including for low-income and minority-group students – but there was far too little of it.³⁶ Chicago should support and expand this higher-quality instruction, as described concisely in *A Guide to Authentic Instruction and Assessment*, rather than continue to promote scripted curricula and teaching to mostly multiple-choice tests that fail to engage or challenge most students.³⁷

Bryk also cites another local study by the Center of Urban School Policy at Northwestern University,³⁸ which compared ten very disadvantaged, predominantly African-American elementary schools and found that in the most successful schools, “teachers taught to greater (intellectual) depth than their counterparts in schools with little or no test score gain. A strategy of teaching directly to the test was less effective in boosting achievement levels than teaching for depth and understanding.”

Gains did not come through teaching to the test or drill-and-kill, one-size-fits-all programs.

This is similar to what Newmann, *et al.*, found: The more teachers used interactive instruction instead of just talking at the students, the better the results. Of the five “essential supports” cited in *The Big Picture*, the least developed was “Instructional Program,” suggesting more research should be done to determine which instructional approaches work best with which students for attaining high-quality results.

Real improvements are based on serious, inclusive school evaluation and program planning. Attention is paid to connecting staff development with instructional needs, and introducing more interesting, culturally relevant curricula. These findings suggest that system-wide efforts to strengthen curriculum and instruction could be valuable. However, such efforts must not take the form of one-size-fits-all programs handed out from the central office. Rather, teachers at each school must be involved in collaborative action, including the use of centrally organized resources, to ensure each teacher provides high-quality instruction.

Teaching directly to the test was less effective in boosting achievement levels than teaching for depth and understanding.

It is good news that there can be sustained gains at schools serving large percentages of low-income children of color. *The Big Picture* provides evidence that these gains did not come through teaching to the test. Several schools are profiled, and their approach is not the drill-and-kill, one-size-fits-all programs increasingly found in urban schools serving poor kids, as documented by Jonathan Kozols recent book, *The Shame of the Nation*.³⁹ In addition, the 144 “up” schools saw far greater gains on the overall ISAT than did the “no trend” schools, schools on probation, schools with high grade retention, and schools with literacy coaches. This suggests the “up” schools have been more likely to teach a wider curriculum to address state standards in reading, math, writing, social studies and science.

The good news does deserve qualification. Many people in Chicago say there is far too much teaching to the test in even the better schools, with too little attention to

higher order critical thinking. Newmann’s findings reinforce this conclusion. Attention to class size, more professional development and time for teachers to work together, along with far better assessment and accountability procedures are needed across the board, not only in low-scoring schools. But the approach toward improvement found in the “up” schools, which is rooted in Phase I reforms, is far more likely to be a step toward providing all children a cognitively rich curriculum than are the approaches in the probation schools, which are more focused on short-term test score gains.

Many people in Chicago say there is far too much teaching to the test in even the better schools.

One area for system-wide improvement should be the implementation of high-quality “formative” assessment, which has been found to have a strong positive impact on learning outcomes.⁴⁰ Formative assessment, or “assessment for learning,” is used to provide feedback to students to help them do better. As such, it requires skilled teachers who know their students well. Formative assessment, at its best, also includes students using self-assessment techniques.

Schools that have not been able to serve their students well need change. The question is what kind of change. As *The Big Picture* concludes: “School-initiated efforts to improve achievement resulted in *major gains* in high-poverty schools, while the three expensive Central Board programs analyzed in this study *either had little impact or were harmful to students*” (emphasis in original, p. 66).

Recommendation 4: CPS must improve curriculum and instruction and foster high-quality professional development.

- CPS must eliminate scripted curricula and move away from “teaching the test.”
- CPS must ensure that professional development focuses on authentic, intellectually challenging and engaging curriculum and instruction.

The approach toward improvement found in the “up” schools is far more likely to provide all children a cognitively rich curriculum.

D. High-quality professional development

Research has shown that those who most significantly influence the achievement of students are teachers.⁴¹ Therefore, one key to raising student achievement is to ensure that students are taught by high-quality teachers.

Good professional development is key.

Good professional development, “professional context” as Judith Langer⁴² calls it, is key to helping teachers develop the knowledge and leadership necessary for their teaching to positively impact their students’ achievement. As *The Big Picture* reports, the high-quality, sustained professional development systems developed by the 144 successful Chicago inner-city elementary schools contribute to the schools’ success. These systems, which differ from school to school, work for the schools, are independent of top-down, central office training efforts, and contribute to the 15 years of substantial and continued achievement by these schools.

The successful Chicago elementary schools “organize the adults into learning communities whose goals are aligned with those of the school and district” (Standard 1 of *Standards for Staff Development*).⁴³ They do so according to the individual

needs of each school, its students, and its teachers, administrators and LSC members. Collaboration among all these interested parties and along with the families and the community form the basis for an overall system to improve student achievement (Standards 9 and 12).

The successful Chicago elementary schools organize the adults into learning communities.

This successful model of professional development also meets the principles set down in 1994 by the U.S. Department of Education Professional Development Team in *Building bridges: The mission and principles of professional development*.⁴⁴ According to this document, high-quality professional development: (1) focuses on teachers as central to student learning; (2) focuses on individual, collegial and organizational improvement; (3) respects and nurtures the intellectual and leadership capacity of individuals within the school community; (4) reflects best available research and practice in teaching, learning and leadership; (5) enables teachers to develop further expertise in subject content, teaching strategies and technology; (6) promotes continuous inquiry and improvement; (7) involves collaborative planning; (8) requires substantial time and other resources; (9) is driven by a coherent long-term plan; and (10) is assessed by its impact on teacher effectiveness and student learning.

Professional development is not a quick fix. It takes time, money and commitment. Coupled with adequate school funding, properly supported decentralization, parental involvement, high-value assessment and rational accountability, it is the solid route to sustained improvement. Chicago has failed to support sustained, high-quality professional development. Instead of schemes like Renaissance 2010, CPS should make professional development a central component of its work with schools and educators.

Professional development takes time, money and commitment.

Recommendation 5: CPS must prioritize professional development, supporting a decentralized and collaborative approach, following the guidelines of the National Staff Development Council and the U.S. Department of Education Professional Development Team.

E. Effective parent participation

In addition to strong LSCs, other forms of parent involvement must be strengthened. All schools receiving NCLB funds are required to have a parent advisory council (PAC). The PACs exist to provide parents/legal guardians, teachers/staff, and concerned community individuals with opportunities to participate in the planning, design, implementation and evaluation of the Title I Program, to increase the involvement of parents at the school, and to strengthen the ability of parents to support their children's academic progress at home. The PAC serves as an advisory group to the principal, and in Chicago to the LSC, by providing input on amendments and future Title I programs and by developing a parent involvement policy, which includes the school-parent compact.

In addition to strong LSCs, other forms of parent involvement must be strengthened.

In a new report, *Effective Parent-School Partnerships*, Parents United for Responsible Education shared the results of a survey of 4,320 parents in 92 Chicago schools.⁴⁵ Some key findings:

- Parent satisfaction was most strongly connected to school support for home learning activities and opportunities to volunteer and contribute to school decision making.
- Student achievement was higher in schools with higher levels of parent volunteering and decision-making opportunities and where more parents work with their children at home.
- There are missed opportunities, ways parents might be more involved if they had the chance.
- Parents have an easier time getting through the school house door than the classroom door.
- Overall, school efforts to involve parents focus on the easiest but least effective activities such as newsletters and large-scale parent conferences rather than more effective interactive, personal activities.

Student achievement was higher in schools with higher levels of parent volunteering and decision-making opportunities.

Recommendation 6: CPS must improve parent involvement training and practices.

- Invest in high-quality materials and workshops for schools to use to assist parents with home learning activities. Provide support for expanded school volunteer programs, including information about best practices, volunteer training and incentives (from local businesses, etc.). Ensure that high school parent involvement resources at the school and central office levels are equal to those provided for preschool-grade 8. This could include parent workshops on helping students build good study habits, college readiness and how to access scholarships.
- Ensure that schools have access to high-quality training for parents and teachers on parents’ rights under NCLB to observe classrooms and be involved in school improvement planning and evaluation.
- Construct a standard, CPS-approved, comprehensive annual parent survey, and require schools to use it or some comparable tool to gather parent input prior to developing or modifying parent involvement and school improvement plans for the coming year.
- Require all schools to report to the public annually on progress with parent involvement, such as data generated by a parent survey and level of parent activity, and to include this information on the school web site.

Assessment can play a powerful, positive role in school improvement.

F. Improved assessment, evaluation, and accountability

Assessment can play a powerful, positive role in school improvement – or it can undermine good quality and inhibit needed changes by forcing too much attention to learning that is easily measured by standardized tests. High-quality assessment data, combined with other information, enables serious evaluation of a school by its staff, the LSC and the central office.

As noted above, formative assessment is one key component that deserves systematic support, primarily through professional development and in-school collaboration. Formative assessment, however, does not mean using the computerized, multiple-choice mini-tests (benchmark tests) that Chicago and many other districts

have implemented and that reinforce a low-level curriculum geared toward passing the state test.

Dozens of groups signed on to the New ERA Plan, a set of principles for accountability and assessment.

Teachers need to use a wider array of assessment tools to promote better teaching and gather evidence on how well students have learned. CPS itself convened the Commission on Improving Classroom-based Assessment (2003).⁴⁶ The project brought together high-ranking CPS officials with civic leaders and outside experts to create a structure for using classroom-based assessment in CPS. However, the city has never acted on the recommendations and did not even officially release the report. Implementing the recommendations in this report would enable Chicago to take a significant step toward high-quality assessment practices.

There have been concerted efforts in Chicago to improve assessment and accountability. Dozens of groups signed on to the *New ERA Plan*, a set of principles for accountability and assessment developed by Chicago reform and community organizations, with assistance from FairTest, in 2001.⁴⁷ The *New ERA Plan* emphasizes school improvement, the central role of teachers, parents and students in student assessment, democratic participation in school evaluation, high-quality public information and responsible assessment practices.

Accountability is first gathering evidence from multiple sources to use for improvement.

High-quality assessment information, most of which will have to come from classrooms and the work of teachers and students, can be combined with other data about schools to evaluate how well a school is doing and what needs to be done next to ensure continued improvement. This additional data can include such things as grade promotion, attendance and graduation rates; school climate surveys (e.g., on student, worker and parent satisfaction); data on the availability of fully certified teachers, books and libraries, electronic equipment and laboratories; the condition of the buildings; class size; instructional practices; and the quality of professional development. The point of evaluation is to provide useful feedback on the most important topics so that the responsible people – educators, students, parents – can make informed and beneficial decisions.

CPS must call a halt to the misuse of assessments.

Accountability, then, is first gathering evidence from multiple sources to use for improvement, reporting that evidence and the conclusions (evaluation) to the public, then using the resulting agreements to make improvements.⁴⁸ This process involves planning, and such planning should be collaborative among all key parties. This means that many teachers will have involvement in planning as a part of their job description.

It may be that additional interventions are sometimes needed in schools that are not doing well, and such interventions may be drastic, including replacing ineffective staff or reorganizing the school. However, such steps should be a last resort, taken only after serious efforts to mobilize the school staff and community to overcome problems. Interventions should be tailored to the specific needs identified through careful evaluation. CPS central office also needs to recognize that previous efforts such as probation and reconstitution have not succeeded, and the efforts to turn responsibility over to privatized providers is proving to produce mixed results at best. Meanwhile, CPS must call a halt to the misuse of assessments. The ISAT should not be used as it currently is, as the main factor in determining grade promotion.

Grade retention itself should be largely eliminated, except in rare cases. Instead, extra help geared toward success in a rich curriculum, not just gaining a few points on a standardized test, must be provided to all students identified, using multiple sources of evidence, as needing additional help.

In addition, CPS should resist as completely as possible the No Child Left Behind mandate to act on schools solely on the basis of test scores. Rather, a comprehensive improvement effort using all the components identified here should be undertaken. When a school does not do well enough and sanctions are imposed under NCLB, the law allows “any other major restructuring...” to be used.⁴⁹ Chicago must use its comprehensive improvement effort as that option, though the improvement effort should not be limited to schools labeled “in need of improvement” under NCLB.

The official CPS 2006 school improvement planning process harkens directly back to the pre-Vallas Phase I process, which required CPS and the schools to pay attention to the full range of components effective schools need, but also reflected and built upon each school’s special strengths and challenges. Any interventions should be implemented as envisioned by the 1988 school reform law, in a deliberative, inclusive and careful manner.

Recommendation 7: CPS must implement high-quality assessment practices and fair and beneficial accountability policies.

- CPS must ensure that learning high-quality assessment is part of expanded professional development, including work on using formative assessment techniques.
- CPS must implement the assessment and accountability recommendations of the CPD-developed Commission on Improving Classroom-based Assessment and the *New ERA Plan*, which rely more on performance-based assessments than standardized tests, while pushing Illinois to support high-quality local assessment.
- CPS must halt the grade retention program, making retention a rarity while providing needed assistance in mastering a rich curriculum to all students who need it, regardless of their test scores.
- CPS must implement both the letter and the spirit of the remediation, probation and intervention provisions of the Chicago school reform law: carry out high-quality needs assessment, program planning, and program evaluation in a process that includes all school stakeholders including the LSC; provide adequate time and resources for programs to succeed. In all cases, use NCLB’s allowed option of selecting “any other major restructuring...” to improve schools deemed “in need of improvement” under NCLB.

Recommendation 8: CPS must actively participate in the ESEA/NCLB reauthorization process by supporting the recommendations in the Joint Organizational Statement on No Child Left Behind (2004).⁵⁰

CPS should resist as completely as possible the No Child Left Behind mandate to act on schools solely on the basis of test scores.

CPS must carry out high-quality needs assessment, program planning, and program evaluation in a process that includes all school stakeholders.

A final challenge

Public education in the U.S. faces a critical and very real choice.

In her 2004 book *High Stakes Education*,⁵¹ Pauline Lipman acknowledges the “good sense” of CPS’s test-driven policies: “the policies make sense because finally school leaders are taking decisive action against a status quo that has failed to educate the majority of students.” CPS leaders have been able to tap into the deep anger and frustration with the public schools and “succeeded in framing their agenda as the only choice against the ‘failed policies of the past.’” (p. 39). Yet their policies resulted in a “pervasive culture of individual blame” primarily directed at schools and individuals in low-income communities of color (p.46). And we know that these policies did not work.

Public education in the U.S. faces a critical and very real choice. We can continue to follow the unintelligent design of business and political interests, or we can demand the right to practice the fairer, more effective strategies that have been evolving quietly over the years in the most successful schools in Chicago and elsewhere. It’s up to us.

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Appendix: Chicago Public Schools Data

Elementary Schools (481) 409 traditional elementary schools 39 magnet schools 16 middle schools 8 gifted centers 9 special schools	Student Enrollment 19,471 Pre-School 1,734 Pre-School special education 29,502 kindergarten 261,143 elementary (1-8) 109,982 secondary
High Schools (115) 37 general/technical 12 vocational/career schools 12 magnet schools 8 math & science academy 4 military academy 21 small schools 9 achievement academy 3 alternative school 9 special ed schools	Student Racial Breakdown 48.6% African-American 37.6% Latino 8.1% White 3.2% Asian/Pacific Islander 2.4% Multi-Racial 0.1% Native American
Charter Schools (27) 31 Elementary campuses 16 High School campuses	Additional Student Information 85.6% of students from low-income families 19.9% of Illinois public school students attend CPS 13.7% are limited-English-proficient 94.0% attendance rate for elementary schools 86.0% attendance rate for high schools 92.1% citywide attendance rate
Local School Councils (each consists of) 6 parent representatives 2 community representatives 2 teachers 1 principal 1 student representative (High School only)	Pupil/Teacher Information 20.2 pupils per teacher in elementary schools 16.9 pupils per teacher in high school \$61,178 average teacher salary \$104,605 average administrator salary
Total Positions 39,205 (public schools) 47 (non-public schools) 3,583 (citywide) 1,582 (central/regional)	Overall Racial Breakdowns (All Staff) 43.8% African-American 35.7% White 17.4% Latino 2.6% Asian/Pacific Islander 0.5% Native American
588 Principals 54.1% African-American 31.3% White 13.4% Latino 1.0% Asian/Pacific Islander 0.2% Native American	24,664 Teachers 35.8% African-American 47.3% White 13.2% Latino 3.1% Asian/Pacific Islander 0.6% Native American

