

Chicago School Reform: Lessons for the Nation

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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 stakeholders 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 and individuals:

Designs for Change
 National Center for Fair & Open Testing (FairTest)
 Parents United for Responsible Education (PURE)