

MORE PURE HISTORY by Julie Woestehoff, 2010

Chicago parents get a seat at the table

In the fall of 1987, a group of parents and teachers decided to form a united front during a 19-day school strike. Concerned that public officials were not taking proper responsibility for providing all children with a quality education, the group named itself Parents United for Responsible Education, only later noticing that the acronym was “PURE.” They held weekly public meetings during the strike. A culminating 1,000-person march on City Hall convinced Mayor Harold Washington to make sure that school doors were open the next school day.

Along with many other groups and individuals, PURE successfully fought for the Chicago School Reform Act of 1988, which established local school councils and processes for collaborative school improvement planning, budgeting, and, where needed, school remediation and intervention.

During the early years of reform, the district administration worked cooperatively with local councils and education advocates, and schools began to improve. But some city and state officials were impatient with the rate of improvement as measured by test scores, so in 1995 the state legislature re-centralized some school authority by allowing Chicago's Mayor to appoint all Board of Education members and a Chief Executive Officer. Unlike the rest of the state, the head of Chicago's schools no longer had to have education credentials.

Mayor Daley selected his City Hall budget director, Paul Vallas, for the new position. During his tenure, Vallas promoted policies and practices which have since spread across the country and even the world:

1. *High-stakes testing*, or, as Vallas called it, “ending social promotion” and “standards and accountability.” Each year the district flunked more than 10,000 students whose annual standardized test scores fell below an arbitrary cut off point. Getting the system wide test scores up every year became the administration's main focus. This led to teaching to the test, intensive test preparation, and various forms of cheating.
2. *Top-down interventions* which included mass staff firings and usurping local school council powers in “failed” probation schools.

3. Imposing a so-called business model on education, which has since been used to justify *union busting and school privatization*.

PURE challenged these policies from the beginning. We were most successful in challenging the high-stakes testing programⁱ.

Seeing that student test scores had flat-lined despite the focus on testing, and disliking the controversy attending so many of Vallas's actions, Mayor Daley replaced him with the more affable Arne Duncan in 2001. However, the bad-policy bandwagon rolled on.

Daley/Duncan's Renaissance 2010 Plan

In 2003, a prominent Chicago business coalition published a scathing reportⁱⁱ calling for one hundred new charter schools to replace the city's "failing" neighborhood schools. Initially angered by the report, Mayor Daley soon challenged Chicago's philanthropic community to get behind an aggressive new "reform" plan called Renaissance 2010. Under this plan, sixty schools would be closed for low-performance as determined by test scores, for low enrollment, or facilities problems. One hundred new schools, including charter, "turnaround," and other privately-managed schools, were to be opened by 2010. Many of the new schools would use the facilities of closed schools. Local businesses and foundations pledged at least \$50 million for the effort. In June of 2004, Duncan announced the first list of schools to be closed – 10 elementary schools and one high school.

PURE and a loose coalition of teacher, student, labor and community groups came together to develop strategies to challenge the closings. During one memorable 24 hours in August, 2004,ⁱⁱⁱ the groups staged a major protest before, during, and after the Chicago Board of Education's monthly business meeting. We started with a camp-out on the sidewalk outside of the school district's Loop headquarters. We stayed there all night so that we would be the first ones in line to sign up to testify during the public participation segment of the board meeting. Others joined us in the early hours and by 7 am there were about 40 of our coalition members in the sign-up line. Reporters from every local TV, radio, and print news outlet showed up. Buses from the schools on the closing list arrived, and parents and staff formed a picket line on the sidewalk outside district headquarters. During the Board meeting, our message – stop the school closings – completely dominated the public testimony because so many people from our group had signed up early. The hundreds of others who converged on Board headquarters were too numerous to fit into the meeting room, so they continued to picket outside and

then marched our message over to City Hall. The Board president, usually calm and affable with the public, became disconcerted and upset. However, the Board members voted unanimously to close every school on the list.

On the first day of school in September, 2004, a group of us gathered in front of one of the newly-closed schools and announced a lawsuit on behalf of homeless children filed by the legal arm of the Chicago Coalition for the Homeless. Again, media coverage of this event was strong, and overshadowed the Mayor's own opening day activities.

Our protests never let up. A new coalition formed in Chicago in late 2008 to fight the school closings. Called the Grassroots Education Movement, GEM is made up of about 12 groups including PURE and the Caucus of Rank and File Educators (CORE), a teacher caucus in the Chicago Teachers Union. We developed a strategy built on the initial success of the August 2004 protest. Although we haven't camped out again (yet!), we have had a consistent, significant presence at each monthly Board of Education meeting. We bring a unified message and keep the heat turned up. There is a significant built-in audience – reporters regularly attend these Board meetings (and their numbers have increased since GEM began to appear regularly). Parents and others who attend the Board meetings for other reasons hear about our issues, as do the passers-by who work, shop, and sight-see in the Loop while we picket and hold press conferences in and around the building. Every meeting is recorded by Board and broadcast several times during the month on public access cable, which brings our message to more people across the city.

Little by little we turned Renaissance 2010 into a political liability, a “failed brand.”^{iv} Our organized opposition helped get 12 schools off the closure list after a new CEO took over from newly-appointed Education Secretary Duncan in January 2009. Thanks in part to their high-profile activism in this area, CORE took over leadership of the Chicago Teachers Union in July of 2010.

PURE: Arne Duncan “Dodges” the truth

Since PURE's first days, we have used many kinds of communication to get information across to parents and the public. We strongly believe that knowledge is power. We also know the other side of that coin very well – that too many parents don't know what their rights are or understand what kind of education their children need and deserve. This lack of knowledge makes it extremely difficult for parents to advocate effectively for their children, their school, or their community.

Whether the vehicle is a mailed newsletter, a cable-tv show, or an internet blog, we try to get critical information across to parents in a brief, user-friendly way. We call our one-page template a PURE Fact Sheet or Tip Sheet. Typically, a PURE Tip Sheet makes recommendations about how to do something (prepare for a parent-teacher conference, run a local school council meeting, volunteer at the school, observe in a classroom) while a Fact Sheet may explain an issue, list parents' rights, summarize a new education law, or debunk claims of school district officials. When Paul Vallas became CEO, we cranked up our production of Fact Sheets in a major way in order to counteract the disinformation the district was increasingly putting out. We found that the clear, succinct format helped parents understand and articulate the issues better, and that the media liked them, too.

Arne Duncan brought the rhetoric of disinformation to a “new level,” to borrow one of his favorite phrases. This was especially the case when he was praising Renaissance 2010 schools. He claimed that the new schools were “dramatically better” than traditional neighborhood schools, and that they were “more accountable” because they could be closed after five years. PURE has challenged these claims with lots of Fact Sheets, among other strategies.

When President Obama announced his appointment of Arne Duncan as Education Secretary in Chicago, he spoke from Dodge Renaissance Academy, the first Renaissance 2010 “turnaround” school. The former Dodge Elementary School was closed in 2002, remained closed for a year and then was reopened as Dodge Renaissance Academy in 2004. Test scores at the school increased markedly; in 2006, Dodge logged the city's largest overall state test score increase. School officials claimed that the school had nearly doubled the achievement growth of the students who had been at Dodge before it closed.

PURE decided to look a little closer at this seeming miracle. We asked about the data that school officials were using to make these remarkable claims, and, somewhat surprisingly, the district public relations department simply e-mailed us the memo from the in-house research department on which the claims were based. The data claims were accurate as far as we could tell, but we saw that a key piece of information had not been reported – only 20 of the 336 students who were enrolled at Dodge the year it was closed returned to the school. The following year, there were only 12 original students left. So, almost all of the Dodge Renaissance School student body was new; the district's comparison could not hold water. PURE did all we could to get this new information out.

Given criticisms by PURE and others that Renaissance 2010 turnarounds seemed to be more

about changing the student body than the quality of education, the district changed its plan. They would no longer close the school for a year, but instead turn it around during the summer and reopen in the fall, supposedly with the same students.

The first of these new-style turnarounds was Sherman Elementary, which opened in the fall of 2007 as the Sherman School of Excellence. From the day Sherman/Excellence opened, Arne Duncan claimed it was a “dramatic” success, and by January 2008, he was planning to model several new turnaround schools on Sherman. At the same time, he proposed closing several more schools for “low performance.”

A closer look at Sherman called Duncan's enthusiasm into question. Attendance actually went down and was lower than it had been the previous three years. Was this the “Dodge” phenomenon? As state test scores came out, we also saw that Sherman's overall school test scores were actually lower than those of some of the “failing” schools Duncan said he was “morally obligated” to close. By the end of the year, PURE put together a fact sheet^v showing that, during its first turnaround year, Sherman had a 20 percent drop in enrollment, a 10 percent drop in the number of low-income children, a 17% increase in the mobility rate, a lower parent involvement rate and lower science test scores.

Duncan went ahead with his new turnaround schools modeled on Sherman, and he continues to tout Sherman to this day as Secretary of Education. States are required to include school turnaround plans in their proposals for receiving federal education funds.

Arne Duncan takes the policies of Vallas, Daley, and Renaissance 2010 nationwide

Over the years, PURE has developed contacts with parent, community, and education advocacy groups across the nation. An issue that relates closely to Renaissance 2010 is that of mayoral control of the schools, and we've been asked to speak about Mayor Daley's real track record here in Chicago to groups in Los Angeles, Washington, D. C., New York City, Milwaukee, and elsewhere.

By the time Arne Duncan began his pre-nomination media tour, PURE was well-prepared to weigh in on the wisdom of taking Daley/Duncan's school reform style nation wide. We sent a list of pertinent questions about Duncan's record^{vi} to the Congressional committee questioning the Education Secretary nominee. After Duncan gave a speech at the National Press Club in June of 2009, touting Sherman and Dodge, PURE responded with a detailed refutation of his comments.^{vii} A few days later, Education

Week published an essay by Arne which repeated several of these whoppers.^{viii} Three weeks later they published PURE's letter challenging his statements about Sherman.^{ix}

By August, 2009, the Chicago Tribune, long a cheerleader for Duncan's strategies, published a page-one story proclaiming that Mayor Daley's (and Arne Duncan's) high school reform didn't work. Challenges to Duncan's Race to the Top program, which requires states to adopt more of his R2010-style programs, grew more widespread and louder. But it wasn't until December, 2009, that a national newspaper began to question Duncan's track record in Chicago: the Washington Post printed "Arne Duncan's legacy as schools chief questioned."^x Not too surprisingly, PURE was the only Chicago-based group that went on the record criticizing Duncan's tenure.

Skepticism about Arne Duncan's ideas has finally hit the mainstream media, but how effective the truth will be in diverting the dangerous direction of current federal education policies remains to be seen.

What next for PURE?

Over the past few years, PURE has experienced a severe drop-off of funding. We believe that this is directly related to our opposition to Renaissance 2010, which had the backing of nearly all of the local foundations. In addition, Mayor Daley has made numerous (so far unsuccessful) efforts to get rid of local school councils, and foundations are reluctant to support groups that advocate for them. We've been told that our strategies are passe, and that we need to come up with new ways to organize parents and new issues to tackle.

We disagree.

In reality, even formerly progressive foundations (such as the one where President Obama was a board member) have chosen to fund what we call astroturf parent groups that organize around "educating" parents about how terrible their schools are so that they will be more interested in moving their children to charter and other novelty schools.

It's been made clear to us that the business community (of which the foundation community is a part) is out to break the teachers' union and privatize urban schools, turning them over to a certain group of education missionaries who are taking on urban school systems in a 21st century version of the "white man's burden." These people may mean well, but in their quest to remake the schools in a new image, they deny history, cultural diversity, research, and, above all, the emotional, intellectual,

physical, and educational needs of children.

The antidote is more organizing, more parent voice, more teacher empowerment, more youth representation, more community action, and more truth-telling. PURE intends to be around to make sure that happens.

End notes follow next page

- i PURE has written a book about this campaign, "Chicago Parents Fair Testing Campaign" which is available at
- ii http://www.civiccommittee.org/initiatives/education/LEFT_BEHIND.pdf
- iii http://www.rethinkingschools.org/archive/19_04/pare194.shtml
- iv See http://pureparents.org/index.php?blog/show/R2010_brand_joining_Edsel_and_the_New_Coke_in_the_graveyard_of_failed_products
- v <http://pureparents.org/data/files/Shermancharts12-08.pdf>
- vi http://pureparents.org/index.php?blog/show/Questions_for_Nominee_Duncan
- vii http://pureparents.org/index.php?blog/show/Duncan_tells_some_whoppers_to_National_Press_Club

viii http://pureparents.org/index.php?blog/show/More_whoppers_in_Arnes_Ed_Week_essay

ix http://pureparents.org/index.php?blog/show/PURE_letter_in_Ed_Week

- x <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2009/12/28/AR2009122802368.html?sub=AR>