

## Research Shows that Local School Councils Improve Schools!

There is strong evidence over the years that Chicago's elected, empowered, parent-led Local School Councils (LSCs), established in 1989, have been a successful element of effective school reform.

**New research:** A 2012 report by the Chicago research and advocacy group Designs for Change found that high-poverty schools achieving the highest reading scores were governed by active Local School Councils.

[“Chicago’s Democratically-Led Elementary Schools Far Out-Perform Chicago’s ‘Turnaround Schools’ Yet Turnaround Schools Receive Lavish Extra Resources,”](#) found:

- About 33 neighborhood schools with at least 95 percent low-income students not only outscored equally poor schools cleared out of all staff and “turned around” by the Academy for Urban School Leadership, but even beat the city test score average, the study by Designs for Change indicated.
- The neighborhood schools did so without the average \$7 million per school in funds and facility improvements over five years given the typical AUSL school — and with far less teacher turnover.
- The analysis ranked 210 city neighborhood schools with at least 95 percent low-income students, based on the percent of students passing their 2011 state reading tests. It found that AUSL placed only three schools among the top 100 — Howe (53rd), Morton (84th) and Johnson (88th). AUSL’s lowest scorer was Bethune, at 199th. Two CPS-run turnaround schools — Langford and Fulton — came in 150 and 206th, respectively.
- Often, the study found, neighborhood schools outperformed equally-poor AUSL turnaround schools located only a few miles away. For example, in the South Shore neighborhood, Powell came in No. 14, while AUSL’s Bradwell was No. 194. (R. Rossi, Chicago Sun-Times, 2/22/12)

This 2012 study reinforces DFC's 2005 report, *“The Big Picture,”* which found a correlation between schools with test scores trending “substantially up” and effective LSCs. 144 previously low-performing Chicago Public Schools (CPS) elementary schools serving nearly 100,000 students, or about one-third of all district elementary students, began to make significant and sustained gains under LSC-powered school reform between 1999 and 2005 (blue line of chart). The chart's red line represents similarly low-performing schools which were on probation, a designation based on several years of low student test scores, during that same time and controlled by the district, not LSCs. The graph makes clear that district interventions were not as effective as LSC decision making in improving student outcomes.

*“Charting the Course”* and other studies by the Consortium on Chicago School Research (CCSR) have found a high level of effectiveness in LSCs.

- In 1997, CCSR found that 77% of LSCs functioned well, with only 8% experiencing “major operational problems.” Principals viewed LSC selection of principals very positively: “Their positive responses stand as a **strong endorsement** of this most important work of the councils.”
- In 2003, CCSR found that, of the **teachers** who know about LSCs, 70% said they were “**really helping to make this school better,**” up from 63% reported nine years earlier.
- CCSR noted that LSCs comprise “**an overwhelming percentage of the minority elected public officials in Illinois.**”

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“*Empowered Participation*,” a 2004 book by Archon Fung, a professor at Harvard’s Kennedy School of Government, uses LSCs as **a model of empowered deliberative participation**. Fung finds that LSCs **increase accountability** between local officials and the communities they serve, help **build social capital**, and encourage low-income, minority parents to become **more involved** in their community. Most importantly, he found that LSCs have a **positive impact on student achievement**.

An October 1997 study by Designs for Change identified schools which had improved the most in reading achievement since 1990. They identified common factors in these schools, a “distinctive set of practices” which seem to have a substantial impact on improved student achievement. These practices include:

- ▭ active and effective Local School Councils
- ▭ effective school principals who involve others in decision making
- ▭ more teacher involvement in decision making
- ▭ more teacher outreach to parents
- ▭ students who feel safe in their schools
- ▭ teacher collaboration and information sharing
- ▭ teachers who trust one another
- ▭ teachers who are encouraged to innovate
- ▭ an overriding focus on improved student achievement.

Some examples of what LSCs have done in their schools include replacing principals who were not attentive to school needs, directing discretionary funds to pay for school bands and other fine arts programs, creating computer labs, fighting for repairs, renovations, additions and new schools to relieve overcrowding, implementing parent programs to increase parent involvement, and adding gifted programs.

*What are LSCs?*

Local School Councils (LSCs) are elected bodies at nearly every Chicago Public Schools (CPS) elementary, middle and high school. The LSC has 6 parents, 2 community members who are not parents of students at the school, 2 teachers, the principal, and, in high schools, a student member. The parents and community members are elected by the parents and community residents around the school. Teachers are selected by the school staff. These members serve for a two-year term. High school student members serve for one year. By law, the LSC chairperson must be a parent representative.

The LSC's major responsibilities are to approve the school budget and annual strategic plan (called the school improvement plan), to evaluate the principal every year and to decide every four years if they want to renew the principal's contract or hire a new principal. This is the strongest site-based management system in the nation.

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