



CONSORTIUM ON
CHICAGO SCHOOL RESEARCH
AT THE UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO
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Interview with John Q. Easton, Executive Director
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Q: What is CCSR'S model for the role of research in shaping and supporting urban school reform?

A: We're not the ones who are going to come up with the answers, but we think we can help the practitioners and the policy makers while they're working. We do this by helping them identify the problems and understand the factors that feed into these problems. As they develop solutions, we are right behind them with the information to help figure out whether something is working or not.

Q: How is research at the Consortium different from the traditional academic model?

A: We're much more hands-on. We connect very closely with people in schools and the people making decisions about schools. While we are grounded in theory, we're much more interested in the real day-to-day workings of schools and policy makers. We're doing work that builds on itself so that there is coherence. There's also our approach to public informing. We just don't throw papers out over people's doorways or into academic journals -- we work very closely with people about what the research means and how it can be used. When we finish one study we don't jump off to another topic but we keep trying to learn more about what we are finding as we're going along.

Q: How was the Consortium created and how did it operate in the early years?

A: The Consortium started very small and during a very exciting time in Chicago during the school reform that decentralized Chicago Public Schools. It started under the leadership of a man named Tony Bryk, who was a professor at the University of Chicago. He brought together a lot of local researchers from universities, including co-founder Penny Bender Sebring, and people from different organizations to do a credible job of studying this school reform. There were a lot of small research organizations interested in studying Chicago Public Schools, but there wasn't enough real capacity to do a large-scale study the public would really understand.

Q: What is the relationship between the Consortium and Chicago Public Schools?

A: We see ourselves in a partnership with Chicago Public Schools although we insist upon having independence so that we can be objective. Working in partnership means we're studying some of the issues they think are most important -- where they need the most assistance and where they're going to be most receptive to our findings. At the same time we also want to step back and say, "Well, what do we see as some of the big issues that the school district is facing that they may not be thinking of?" So we're trying to partner with them on their priorities but at the same time bring our own perspective and experience into the mix.

Q: How did the partnership with CPS survive over these many years despite the fact that you deliver some tough news to them sometimes?

A: We've certainly had some contentious moments when people at CPS have wondered, "Is it really worth putting up with this?" when the Consortium has released negative findings and caused bad headlines. But I think there's been a feeling that in the long run it's been more positive than negative, and that the quality of the work has been high. The belief exists not only inside the school district, but also across the city with different organizations that believe that our work is valuable and that the school district should continue to partner with us even though there are going to be bumps in the road along the way.

Q: The Consortium has enjoyed a productive relationship with Arne Duncan, who spent seven years as CEO at CPS before becoming Secretary of Education. When did you first start working with Duncan on school reform issues and how did he incorporate CCSR findings into his reform strategies?

A: I got to know Arne when he was quite young, when he had just come back to Chicago and was working with Ariel (Investments) to develop the Ariel Community School. Arne reached out for data about schools that he couldn't get from the school district and our relationship has developed since then. I think Arne really valued our approach to school research, which is to really go deep into Chicago instead of just studying one topic. Arne grabbed on very quickly to some of our early high school work. We created this indicator of the freshman year success that's highly predictive of whether students will graduate from high school. He incorporated that into his high school accountability system his very first year and encouraged us to dig more deeply into it to help understand why this was such a good predictor. This has led to a lot of work that we've done on the importance of freshman year as we've learned more about how important student attendance is, how important student grades are for ultimate success in high school. Another good example is the work that we've done on postsecondary transition of high school graduates into college. Melissa Roderick at the Consortium has led this work in a really, really productive partnership with the postsecondary department of the Chicago Public Schools. The Consortium was doing the longer-term research that informed the day-to-day practices and activities of that office.

Q: How do you think Arne Duncan's long-time relationship with the Consortium will influence any national strategy around education research?

A: I can't speak for Arne, but I believe the success he had in Chicago working closely with researchers would lead him to believe that this might be a model that could be replicated. This model involves developing a deep knowledge about a school district, where you build coherence in your studies and in your findings. It could be very productive, especially in the larger urban districts across the country that continue to struggle with public education.

Q: Many urban districts and large universities are interested right now in replicating the Consortium model. Why has this been such a difficult thing to launch in a big way?

A: It was a sort of perfect storm of events that led to our success. We started off with a real specific need to study Chicago Public School reform. We had a lot of civic support from local leadership, including foundations, willing to fund our work. The school district was really involved and eager to have our assistance. So we got the right combination of events at the right time, and we've been able to sustain it over time by continuing to develop relationships with both of those groups.

Q: What do you consider to be CCSR'S "greatest hits" -- which research studies made the biggest splash locally?

A: In our early years, we came out with a study about local control that got a lot of attention. It said one-third of the elementary schools in Chicago really embraced school reform and were freed from the shackles of the bureaucracy and were really moving forward, one third was in the middle, they had potential but hadn't really caught on, and then there was a third at the bottom that we called "left behind by school reform" schools. This made our name and captured the public's imagination and allowed us to secure funding.

About 10 years ago the Consortium was studying the Annenberg Challenge in Chicago Public Schools. We did a strand of work on what we called "authentic intellectual work in classrooms" and we demonstrated through some very rigorous research procedures that the kind of academic demands that were placed on students really influenced how well they did. So, the students whose teachers gave them more demanding assignments produced higher quality work and improved standardized test scores, so this was really kind of big news and it showed that placing high intellectual demands on kids pays off -- not just for high-performing kids, but even low performing students improved drastically when teachers demanded a lot of them.

In the last couple of years we have had several studies that followed students into college and showed college graduation rates and what kinds of preparation it took in the high schools for kids to enter college prepared and likely to graduate. We've also made a big impact for work Elaine Allensworth and I have done around the importance of freshman year and what matters for students being on track and graduating from Chicago public high schools.

Q: Has CCSR influenced the discussion on national reform and changed the way other urban school districts are thinking about research?

A: The work around the freshman year has really spread like wildfire across the country. Most districts kind of understood that freshman year was a make-or-break-it year, but we showed how you can actually measure that and intervene during the freshman year with students who are showing lack of engagement, poor academic work --that there will be a payoff in improved graduation rates. We have worked with about a dozen large school districts across the country on improving their information systems and their interventions. We've also worked with several large public school districts around setting up a system to follow students into college so that you can see what sort of high school experiences matter for college preparation and success.