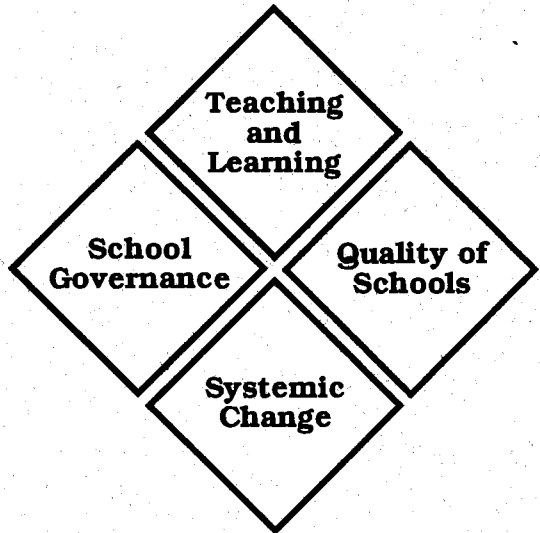

Achieving School Reform in Chicago:

What We Need To Know



A Research Agenda

Consortium on Chicago School Research

Achieving School Reform in Chicago: What We Need to Know

The Consortium on Chicago School Research is an independent federation of Chicago area organizations which have come together to undertake a range of research activities to assist school improvement in the city and assess its progress. It aims to encourage: (1) broad access to the research agenda setting process; (2) the collection and reporting of systematic information on the condition of education in the city; (3) high standards of quality in research design, data collection and analysis; and (4) wide dissemination and discussion of findings.

During its first year, the Consortium devoted considerable effort to identifying the concerns and questions which must be investigated if we are to understand the progress of school reform and school improvement in Chicago. The result is a Research Agenda which recommends a set of studies and analyses, but also proposes ways to strengthen the numerous and varied social ties between research institutions and the city's schools, so that broad communal learning occurs.

The activities suggested in the agenda can help to clarify the next steps in school improvement and shape public awareness of how school reform should be judged. Over time, the reporting and discussion of results based on this agenda will enhance the conversations about school reform and can contribute to educational improvement in the city.

Process for Developing this Agenda

This is an agenda for Chicago—built out of the concerns of Chicago school leaders and key participants, and informed by the best expertise both local and national. We asked Chicagoans about their current experiences with school reform and the issues which they thought might be on the horizon two or three years from now. These discussions focused both on how to improve individual schools and on issues affecting the whole system.

Individual interviews were conducted with key public officials in the Chicago Public Schools and in city and state government. More than one hundred individuals also participated in focus groups, including students, parents, teachers, principals, local school council members, sub-district superintendents and business leaders. Over fifty civic and community organizations were invited to submit position statements. Toward the end of this process, the Consortium convened a conference of educational researchers from around the city, bringing them together with nationally recognized experts on urban schooling to help synthesize this stakeholder commentary and add their own insights.

Fundamental Convictions

This agenda is grounded in a new vision about how information and research can help improve education. Several key ideas undergird the Consortium's work:

- ❖ **Broad community involvement is required if educational improvement is to occur.** A responsive agenda must address the issues of diverse audiences ranging from the public officials who oversee the system to the numerous individuals engaged in school reform in the city's many neighborhoods. Most broadly, it must speak to all who live or work in the city, for all citizens share a stake in Chicago's schools.
- ❖ **Good information leads to a better understanding of issues and stimulates new ideas.** Historically, research has been most useful when it identifies problems, offers concepts for understanding them, and provides specific facts to inform subsequent policy making.

- ❖ **The agenda must respond to immediate needs, but it must also anticipate questions on the horizon.** The problems of Chicago's schools did not occur overnight, nor will they be solved overnight. If we are to have more informed policy making over the long term, then we must create an infrastructure now to address current questions plus those that will arise tomorrow and beyond.
- ❖ **The agenda must focus on student outcomes.** If research is to assist in the improvement of student performance, however, it must do more than simply document what students are (or are not) learning. It must also examine the critical processes and key contexts where learning occurs.
- ❖ **The agenda is not a single big study.** Rather it calls for multiple investigations involving diverse methodologies and expertise. Addressing this agenda will require broad involvement of the city's research community if we are to have information about the many issues that lie ahead in restructuring the city's schools.
- ❖ **We must assure that the broad consultation process employed in developing this agenda continues in its execution.** Fairness in shaping the information that is collected and in gaining access to that information is essential to the enhanced democratic participation that is part of Chicago school reform.

Content of the Agenda

The agenda is organized around a set of key concerns within four major topical areas. Each concern represents an essential strand in the reweaving of a responsive urban school system. These topics and concerns are outlined in the next four pages.

School Governance

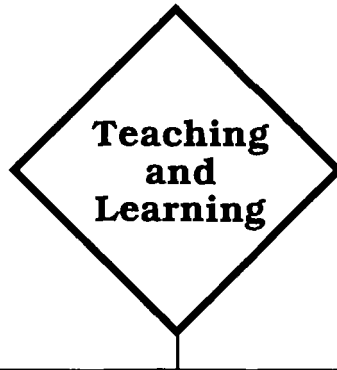
Reform grew out of disillusionment with an unresponsive system that was ineffective in dealing with persistent problems like declining student performance and teachers' strikes. It was widely argued that a fundamental change was needed to regenerate a sense of agency and commitment. The central instrument chosen to spur such reform was a change in local school governance. This area considers issues such as the implementation of the Local School Councils, their decision-making activity, and the politics of school communities.



- ❖ New roles and norms for exercising local authority in schools
- ❖ Elements of effectively functioning Local School Councils
- ❖ Balancing authority and responsibility between local schools and the central administration
- ❖ Changing role of principals with new responsibilities and increased demands
- ❖ Effective participation of parents and communities in school affairs
- ❖ Local politics as they contribute to school improvement or impede change

Teaching and Learning

Governance reform was intended to renew human effort, foster social cooperation around the school, and open up new possibilities for improvement. This area focuses on the ultimate standpoint for judging reform—does it make a difference in teaching and student learning? It considers outcomes for students and the key educational processes that can advance them.



- ❖ Analysis of student performance, attitudes, and aspirations
- ❖ Curriculum offerings, opportunities to learn, and students' educational experiences
- ❖ Schools' responses to student diversity
- ❖ Instructional reform and the professional development of teachers
- ❖ School readiness and early childhood services
- ❖ Transition to the work place and to higher education

Quality of schools

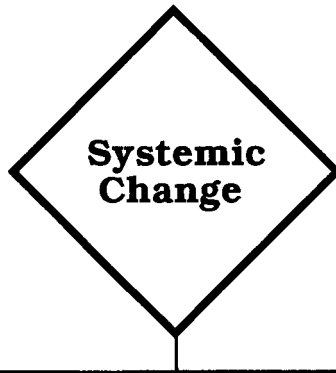
If we are to enhance teaching and student learning, we must attend to the organizational conditions that encourage students and teachers to commit effort to their work. The quality of the human interactions that occur within schools is a central concern. This topic area maps out key aspects of the character of schools as work places for students and teachers and as institutions who are responsive to their local communities.



- ❖ Clarity of mission, a press toward academic work, and a caring, safe environment
- ❖ Recruiting qualified teachers and improving classroom practice
- ❖ Working conditions for students and teachers that promote respect and personal engagement
- ❖ A cooperative ethic with teacher participation in school management
- ❖ Strengthening ties between schools and community institutions
- ❖ Enhancing parent involvement in their children's education

Systemic change

Even in a decentralized school system, critical functions still occur at the system level that can either facilitate or constrain local action. This topic area considers the structural and cultural change required at the system level if school reform is to be institutionalized. Also, some key questions about school reform can only be addressed at this level, such as “Are educational opportunities becoming more equitably distributed across the city?”.



- ❖ Important central functions—providing information, stimulating innovation, and intervening in failing schools
- ❖ New norms and working relationships for the Central Service Center and subdistrict staff
- ❖ Constraints on the system from federal and state regulations and collective bargaining agreements
- ❖ Strengthening the system's capacity to analyze operations and evaluate programs
- ❖ Cumulative effects of local action on education equity across the system

Advancing the Agenda

To advance this work, the Consortium will establish a study group for each of the major topical areas. These panels will stimulate research in their area, synthesize ongoing work, continue to refine issues through the stakeholder process, and promote continuing discussion around the city. Through these panels, the Consortium will directly address some of the activities implied by this agenda. This includes the development of an indicator system to assess progress in each of the four major areas, regular reporting on the condition of education in Chicago, and related support activities, such as data archiving and public use surveys. In other cases, the Consortium's primary function is to assist individuals and groups to undertake relevant studies and to promote broad dissemination and discussion of the results.

Universities have an opportunity to provide concrete service to the community by encouraging individual faculty to take part in the implementation of the Research Agenda and facilitate their participation on Consortium panels. To be sure, the research and academic community has something to contribute, but also much to learn.

Similarly, researchers in advocacy groups and community organizations have played a significant role in shaping this agenda. As the Consortium moves forward, these groups can help to encourage broader consideration of results as well as suggest new questions that emerge and merit scrutiny. These are important functions in a society that values democratic control of its educational institutions.

Advancing the Agenda cont.

There is a special role for those researchers whose professional affiliations are with state and local government. It is hard to envision the work set out in this agenda proceeding very far without the cooperation and genuine interest of state and local officials. In return, the agenda and collaborative work enjoined around it can directly assist them in their particular role of advising key policy makers. More generally, full scrutiny and fair reporting are fundamental to maintaining communal trust in our public institutions. The Consortium provides a vehicle for officials to execute this responsibility.

Finally, the foundation community plays a strategic role in advancing the Research Agenda by providing independent sources of support. We encourage even small foundations who do not normally fund research to identify an area in the agenda of particular concern to them and to support work on this topic. In order to assure a full, balanced and independent scrutiny of the reform process, it is vital that multiple organizations and sources of support be engaged around these research activities.

Background and Mission of the Consortium

The Consortium is deliberately multi-partisan. Its membership includes faculty from area universities, research staff from the Chicago Public Schools, researchers in advocacy groups, representatives of the Illinois State Board of Education and the North Central Regional Educational Laboratory, as well as other interested individuals and organizations.

Researchers from many different settings who are interested in schooling and its improvement can come together under the umbrella of the Consortium. This activity should expand over time to build an analytic capacity focused on the improvement of education in Chicago. Similarly, the Consortium aims to facilitate new working relationships among those who produce and use research. Specifically, it seeks to create occasions for sustained dialogue between researchers and policy shapers both at the city level and in local school communities.

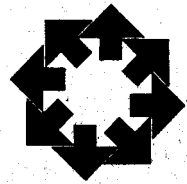
Research is viewed, not just as a technical operation of gathering data and publishing reports, but as a form of community education. The Consortium does not argue a particular policy position. Rather, it believes that good policy results from a genuine competition of ideas informed by the best evidence that can be obtained. It works to produce such evidence and to assure that the competition of ideas remains fair and vital.

The Consortium will remain a small organization with a few core professional staff. Its major activities are undertaken as cooperative efforts among local institutions and individuals. It is deliberately structured to encourage the voluntaristic and collaborative spirit that has marked its activities to date.

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