



CHARTING REFORM: CHICAGO TEACHERS TAKE STOCK

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SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

In 1994, as Chicago was completing its fifth year of school reform, the Consortium on Chicago School Research launched the third and fourth surveys of its Charting Reform research series. These surveys of teachers and students make it possible to take the pulse of Chicago school reform by examining changes that have occurred and the role reform has played in these changes. Major topics in the surveys encompass five essential supports for student learning: school leadership, parent involvement, professional community, a climate centered on student learning, and high quality classroom instruction. We formulated clusters of questions designed to determine the prevalence of practices in Chicago schools that prior research has shown to be effective in promoting student learning.

Charting Reform: Chicago Teachers Take Stock is the first report in a two-part series. It focuses on three of the essential supports for student learning: school leadership, parent involvement, and professional community. The information in this first report draws mainly from the Consortium's teacher survey, although some use is also made of student data. The second report, which will be released in 1996, will draw more heavily from student data to explore the learning climate for students and classroom instruction.

Teachers and students in 266 elementary and 46 high schools took part in the surveys. In all, 6,200 elementary school teachers, 2,600 high school teachers, and 39,000 6th-, 8th-, and 10th-grade students completed surveys.

The report is organized around six topics:

- Teachers' assessment of school changes since reform and the role that reform played in those changes;
- Effectiveness of school leadership, including Local School Councils (LSCs), principals, and faculty;
- Parents' involvement in students' learning and with the school;
- Professional community and work orientation among the faculty;
- Program coherence across the school; and
- The progress of reform in different elementary school communities.

SECTION I: Teachers' Overall Assessment of School Improvement

Teacher involvement is essential to successful school reform. How teachers view the changes occurring in their schools and the effects of reform provides a global assessment of the progress to date and the problems still unresolved.

Almost half of the teachers report at least some positive change in their schools; a little over one-third of the teachers register little change, and 15 percent believe things have changed for the worse. Teachers are most positive about their own teaching effectiveness, professional opportunities, and commitment. For example, over 70 percent of the

teachers say their teaching effectiveness has improved in the past three years, compared to only 5 percent who say that it has gotten worse. Fifty-seven percent say their professional growth opportunities are better than before, while only 7 percent say they are worse. Fifty-three percent of teachers say their commitment to the school has increased.

While teachers provide optimistic views of changes in their own teaching, they are not as positive about changes in student behavior and performance. By almost two to one, more teachers say that student behavior has deteriorated in the past three years (42 percent) than say that it has improved (23 percent). Similarly, only a third of the teachers see improvements in the quality of students' academic performance. The majority of teachers report no change in teacher-student, parent-teacher, and student-student relations. Although in general there are many positive reports from teachers about recent changes, the primary relations among teachers, students, and parents that support student learning have been less affected.

With respect to the impact of reform, 45 percent indicate positive impact; about 35 percent suggest no impact, and 20 percent register negative impact. In general, teachers are more optimistic about the school-community relations and the educational program than other aspects of the school. Forty-three percent of the teachers say that reform has had a positive effect on school relations with the community, compared to 10 percent who say that it has had a negative effect. Many note positive effects of school reform on professional opportunities (39 percent) and curriculum (37 percent). The areas where reform has had the least impact are student behavior and relationships between teachers and students, students and students, and parents and teachers.

One clear finding from the 1994 surveys is that high school and elemen-

tary school teachers see their experiences differently. There are many elementary schools where the typical teacher response is quite positive. In high schools, however, the average responses are lower, and very few schools are characterized by overall positive reports. These substantial differences between elementary and high schools is a major finding that runs throughout the report.

SECTION II: **School Leadership**

Chicago school reform is based on the idea that expanded engagement of local participants in the school's work will create a base of local leadership that sustains attention on fundamental school improvement. In this regard, we examined three sites of such leadership: parents and community members through the LSC, the principal, and the collective influence of the school faculty.

Local School Council

Most teachers report that their Local School Council contributes to the success of the school. Over half indicate extensive or significant contributions, with the LSC helping to address a wide range of issues. One quarter report more limited contributions, when the LSC has helped to improve the building and relations with the community, but has not addressed curriculum or student behavior. Another quarter of the teachers claim the LSC has made no contribution. Teachers are most positive about the LSC's contribution to furthering community relations (58 percent), parent involvement (58 percent), improving the school building (56 percent), and school safety (52 percent). Approximately half report that the LSC has helped to improve the curriculum, but only one-third think it has had a positive influence on student behavior.

Principal Leadership

Teachers are very positive about their principals. The vast majority of teachers see their principals providing inclusive, facilitative leadership. One-third hold their principals in very high regard or high regard, and 45 percent indicate moderately high regard. These teachers claim their principals understand how children learn, work to involve parents, set high standards for teaching, create a sense of community in the school, and allow others to share in decision making. Only 22 percent hold their principal in low regard, although even these teachers agree that the principal encourages parental involvement and wants teachers to try new methods.

Teacher Influence

Teachers are a little less sanguine about their own influence in school governance. Over half claim that teachers in their school have extensive or moderate influence in school affairs. These teachers indicate they choose their own instructional materials and have some influence on hiring and budgetary decisions. Somewhat less than half judge teachers as having limited or minimal influence. In the latter case, this often means teachers have control over their own classroom, but they feel uncomfortable voicing their concerns and they have little or no input into broader school policies, such as the schedule, the budget, or hiring decisions. Seventy percent agree or strongly agree that their Professional Personnel Advisory Committee (PPAC)—a teacher committee established by the 1988 Chicago School Reform Act to advise the principal and LSC—takes an active role in school planning; over 60 percent agree that the PPAC advises the LSC about curriculum issues.

School Improvement Plan (SIP)

The SIP is a strategic plan that is developed each spring. Based on the needs of students, the plan provides a blueprint for improving school operations and outcomes. Over a third of the teachers give positive ratings to their SIP. These teachers helped develop the SIP; they believe the SIP will lead to improvements over the

next five years; and it has led to changes in their teaching. Forty-two percent give the SIP a mixed assessment. They are familiar with the SIP and believe that it will make the school better over the next five years, but the SIP has not yet resulted in changes in their own teaching. Twenty-one percent are negative about the SIP's impact on the school.

Local Improvement Efforts

We asked about the influence of a wide range of actors, both inside and outside the school community, on the school's improvement efforts. The current principal is given the most credit for making a positive impact in this regard. More than three-quarters of the teachers give top ratings to the current principal, followed by faculty leaders (over two-thirds), former principals, and the PPAC and other committees. About half of the teachers give favorable ratings to the LSC, the union representative, the Chicago Teachers Union, and outside projects and agencies. The lowest ratings were assigned to the central office, the subdistrict offices, and state policy. In general, the closer the individual or organization is to the school, the higher rating it receives.

Comparing High Schools and Elementary Schools on Local Governance

A recurring pattern uncovered in the survey—that a significant proportion of elementary schools seem to be improving while successes at the high school level are much less common—continues in the area of school leadership. High school teachers are less positive than elementary school teachers about their LSCs, their principal, their own influence on decision making in their school, and about implementation of their SIP. While elementary schools earn a wide range of ratings, high schools are clustered at the low end of the scales.

SECTION III: Parent Involvement

Parents play a critical role in their children's education; they are their children's first and most important teachers. Hence, survey questions were developed for both students and teachers to inquire about the role of parents in school life.

Responses from students suggest that about half the parents are at least moderately involved with their children's learning at home. These parents regularly encourage their children to work hard, praise them for doing well, check if they have done their homework, and help with homework. The other half, however, provide only limited or minimal support. These parents may occasionally encourage their children to work hard but rarely check on homework or help with it.

Similarly, teachers report that among parents of elementary school students, about half are at least moderately involved with the school. Most of these parents come to parent-teacher conferences when asked, and about half attend school events. Limited or minimal involvement characterizes the other half of the parents. Among these parents, only half attend parent-teacher conferences, and few attend school events or volunteer in the classroom.

For their part, teachers register a strong commitment to parent involvement. The overwhelming majority indicate that parents are warmly welcomed at the school and that they make considerable effort to communicate with parents.

Differences between elementary and high schools are negligible on parents' involvement with students' learning at home. However, on teacher outreach to parents, teachers' ratings of elementary schools surpass those of high schools.

Chicago's school reform aims to promote more responsiveness by schools to parents and the local community. Greater parent involvement, not only in governance but also directly in the education of their own children, is a key objective. While many teachers report improvements in this area over the past three years, these data indicate that much more still needs to be done. Greater involvement of high school students' parents is particularly important, since this is the time when students begin to drop out of school, and powerful peer influences often work against the school's mission.

SECTION IV: ***Professional Community and Orientation***

National educational reform efforts call for more challenging academic standards for all students. To attain this will require profound changes in teaching. Teachers need greater knowledge of subject matter, the mental processes occurring in the mind of the learner, and the background and experiences that students bring to this. It will also require fundamental change in the nature of the school as a workplace for teachers. If schools are to be more effective, active learning environments for students, they must also have this character for teachers.

Five features work together to create a professional community for teachers.

- Regular opportunities for reflective dialogue engage teachers in conversation about practice, pedagogy, and student learning.
- Deprivatization of practice occurs when teachers open their classroom doors and share their work with peers. Through their observations and follow-up discussions, joint problem solving becomes the norm.

- Peer collaboration emerges from reflective dialogue and deprivatization of practice. Through shared work, teachers learn from each other and continue to develop the skills, knowledge, and ideas necessary for continuous school improvement.
- Shared beliefs and values direct the work of teachers, rather than rules and regulations.
- A focus on student learning governs adult behavior and promotes strong commitments to student welfare and improved instruction.

On four out of five elements of professional community, nearly forty to fifty percent of the teachers report moderate or high levels of the practice in their schools. This includes reflective dialogue, deprivatization, peer collaboration, and focus on student learning. Regarding shared beliefs and values, three-quarters of the teachers report good to unanimous agreement. These results are, to some extent, optimistic in that aspects of professional community appear to be emerging widely across the city. Nevertheless, this leaves half or more of the teachers with only limited or minimal supports for the complex and time consuming task of changing their instructional practices. Moreover, the positive effects of a professional community are unlikely to be realized in an individual school unless these practices are normative, i.e., most of the teachers engage them most of the time.

Professional Development

Teachers need access to new ideas if significant school improvement is to occur. Almost half of the teachers report having participated in professional development activities within their school at least five times during the year. Participation in externally organized activities—by agencies such as the teachers' union, the Chicago Public School central offices, and local universities—is less widespread. Forty percent of the teachers report that they do not participate in these external activities at all.

Professional Orientation

A key consequence of developing schools as professional communities is a stronger professional orientation among teachers. This can be seen in a heightened tendency toward innovation, a strong commitment to the school, and a sense of collective responsibility for student learning. Three-quarters of the teachers report a moderate to strong tendency toward innovation, i.e., in their schools teachers are encouraged to stretch and grow, and many are eager to try new ideas. Over half register positive or very positive commitment to the school. These teachers look forward to working each day and would recommend the school to parents seeking a place for their child. Another third of the teachers offer a more mixed assessment. While they claim loyalty to the school, they may prefer to teach somewhere else and would not necessarily recommend it to others.

Over a third of the teachers indicate a fairly strong to strong sense of collective responsibility among most of their faculty. They believe it is their responsibility to help all children learn, and they work together to do what is best for students. Another 40 percent indicate that such a strong orientation characterizes only about half of their faculty. About a quarter of the teachers offer even weaker reports. They indicate that only a minority of the teachers are really engaged.

Comparing High Schools and Elementary Schools on Professional Community and Orientation

The differences between elementary and high schools are quite broad. Teachers in most high schools offer very negative reports about their colleagues, their work conditions, and professional orientation. With peer influences particularly strong and negative during students' high school development phase, adults need a special solidarity if they are to create engaging learning environ-

ments for students. However, many high school teachers appear alienated from their colleagues and only weakly tied to the school and its improvement.

SECTION V: Program Coherence

Since earlier Consortium research suggests that many schools offer an array of special programs but little continuity across them, we took a closer look at this phenomenon.

Almost half of the elementary school teachers report moderate to strong levels of program coherence. These teachers tend to agree that they monitor new programs to make sure they are working and that there is continuity across programs. They disagree with statements that there are too many programs to track and many programs coming and going. Forty percent of the teachers' responses suggest that they see moderate incoherence in new programs. These teachers say that they do not see much follow up with new programs or real continuity across programs. About 15 percent rate their schools as very incoherent.

Analysis indicates that four major factors influence the degree of program coherence in a school. Program coherence tends to be high where:

- The school improvement planning process broadly engages local actors and sustains local attention on improvement.
- Strong norms, with a focus on student learning, help schools sort out good programs from those that simply look good.
- Principals advance coherence by supporting broad engagement of the faculty and by taking direct managerial action, such as monitoring of classroom instruction.

- Schools are small rather than large, thereby making coherence easier to achieve.

SECTION VI:

The Progress of Reform in Different Elementary School Communities

This section examines the characteristics of elementary schools that distinguish schools that are moving ahead from those experiencing difficulty. Several patterns emerge from our analyses of schools with productive adult activity focused on school improvement.

- Small schools (fewer than 350 students) have consistently more positive reports on most measures of school leadership, parent involvement, and professional community.
- Although positive reports are found within schools of every racial and ethnic composition, some differences have emerged. Integrated schools (over 30 percent white student enrollment) have the most positive reports. These are followed by predominately Hispanic schools. Teachers in predominately African-American schools and mixed minority schools are somewhat more likely to give negative reports, especially with regard to parental involvement and professional orientation.
- The highest-rated schools serve a slightly more advantaged population. However, the differences between high-rated and low-rated schools are not large with respect to the percentage of low-income families served.
- Schools with stable student populations receive somewhat more positive reports.

- The collective effect of these three factors—racial/ethnic composition, income level, and student mobility—introduce some geographic patterns. In general, the highest-rated schools are broadly distributed around the city. Thus, positive experiences with reform are quite equitably distributed. The clumping of low-rated schools on the West side, South central, and Northeast sides follows the basic racial composition pattern mentioned above. Even so, it is important to note that there are numerous occasions where a low-rated school sits almost next door to a high-rated school. Clearly, schools can share the same community demographics, yet teachers inside them report that reform is proceeding in very different ways.

Possible Explanations: Racial Tensions and Social Trust

In searching for explanations that help distinguish high-rated elementary schools from low-rated schools, we considered whether “racial and ethnic differences among staff members created tensions in their school.” Reports of such tensions are not widespread, but they are pervasive in some schools. In over 60 percent of the schools, less than a quarter of the teachers agree or strongly agree with this statement; but in 10 percent of the schools, more than half of the teachers claim that this is true. Such tensions appear to have very deleterious effects on the schools. In such places, teachers offer much poorer effectiveness ratings for local school governance, SIP implementation, parent involvement, and the level of professional community and orientation. In fact, the presence of racial tensions has a far greater impact on improvement efforts than the combined influence of all of the other school and student background characteristics discussed above.

Racial/ethnic tensions in some schools are a manifestation of a larger school problem: a lack of trust among teachers and between teachers and parents. The survey results show, for example, that 40 percent of the teachers disagree or strongly disagree

that teachers in their school trust each other. Similarly, while over 80 percent indicate considerable respect for their students' parents, less than half report that most of their colleagues experience parental support in return.

The results investigating the impact of the level of social trust on the overall school ratings were startling. Social trust turned out to be the key factor in explaining the differences between high- and low-rated schools. Positive social relations within the faculty and with the parents provide the foundation from which cooperative efforts to improve student learning can emerge.

In comparing results from earlier surveys, this survey found a high degree of consistency. Schools with positive reports in 1991/1992 generally received high ratings in 1994. This pattern of stability is especially encouraging in light of the substantial turnover among principals and teachers in the past few years as a result of systemwide early retirement initiatives.

CONCLUSIONS

The uneven track record of reform suggests that many schools need more external support and assistance in order to deepen the reform process. As we stated in our previous report, the school system needs to find ways to give more assistance to support school development. Without such external help, many of these schools may never become productive learning environments.

The study calls for the following factors to improve school operations and advance student learning. First, are the immediate and most direct instruments of student learning: the nature of classroom instruction, the appropriateness of materials, and the organization of professional activity to promote more effective teaching. Much more attention is needed to strengthen the technical core of schooling—how teachers interact with students around subject matter—if

higher and more sophisticated levels of student learning are to occur.

Second, as schools try to do this, they must work to strengthen the general social relations within the school. Raising student achievement will require significant effort and collaboration from the adults in the school community. But this will not happen in an environment that is marred by distrust among the faculty and between teachers and parents. Only through building a strong social foundation in the school community will organizational change go forward.

Principals fared very well in the survey responses. Most teachers hold their principals in high regard for their leadership and for their managerial skills—and see them as the most important local actor in advancing school improvement. Given the central role principals play in stimulating local change, the school system needs to attend to their concerns. Many of the issues they raised in the Consortium's 1992 survey still remain unaddressed.

As we have found in previous studies, reform is progressing better in small schools. However, small size is not a panacea; some small schools are just as bad as any large school. Smaller size is an important facilitative factor, however, when adults are predisposed to advance improvement efforts. From a system perspective, encouraging the development of small schools is one important element of a larger array of strategies designed to help create conditions that foster improvement.

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