

Perestroika in Chicago's Schools

By creating Local School Councils, Chicago has introduced a vehicle for fundamental reform of the public schools, but, as in Eastern Europe, the real work lies ahead, after the "walls" have come down.

The most far-reaching restructuring of a big-city school system ever attempted got under way in October 1989, when more than 310,000 Chicagoans turned out to elect representatives to newly formed Local School Councils. The local councils are the centerpiece of reform legislation signed by Illinois Governor James Thompson in December 1988. The intent of the law is clear: power is to shift from a Byzantine central office to each local school site, and a command-style system is to be replaced by a democratic, radically decentralized one. The new model is to be a series of concentric circles with the school at the center, and circles of service, information, and resources available as needed. Under any circumstances, this kind of shift would be difficult and complex. In the Chicago context, the upheaval was sure to be dramatic and intense.

In a sense, school reform is Chicago's *perestroika*. As in Europe, an authoritarian, survivalist bureaucracy has collapsed, almost of its own weight, and a radical democracy is proposed



As Local School Council members, Maria Avila (left) and Maria Arevalo are helping to shape the future of Spry Elementary School.

as the solution to years of paralysis and backwardness. People who are ill-equipped—in temperament as well as experience—to run their own affairs are thus thrust into positions of authority. As an insulated central office loses its authority, there is a certain blood-letting, some bringing down to human size of those who had once

been powerful; but it is tentative, almost token. The overall experience is characterized by intense hope and the glow of optimism. And as in Europe, the euphoria of bringing down walls guarantees nothing. What lies ahead is unclear; it depends on what people decide to do next.

School Crisis

Chicago's schools have been on the boundary of collapse for years. Indicators of that crisis abound:

- Nearly 50 percent of students who enter Chicago high schools drop out or fail to graduate with their classes. Of those who do graduate on time, only about one-third can read at grade level.

- Reading scores in almost half of Chicago's schools are in the lowest 1 percent of the nation.

- About 35,000 students (or 11 percent) are absent on any given day. Almost half of those absent students are considered chronically truant.

The list goes on. The causes of school crisis in Chicago are the same conditions found in most large urban

Photograph by John Booz

districts. First is the inequitable distribution of educational resources. For example, more than half of the poorest children and 80 percent of the bilingual children in Illinois attend Chicago schools; and yet Chicago operates on substantially less money per child than surrounding districts. This is in part the result of a funding system based on property taxes. But Chicago is disadvantaged in relation to other resources as well. The city's students attend school in overcrowded and aging physical plants; they contend with an inadequate transportation system; they cannot enter school buildings after school hours; and they have more limited access to libraries, parks, and other public facilities than do students in neighboring districts. On every measure, Chicago children need more, and yet they have less.

A second cause of crisis is the stubborn will of a range of self-interested

bureaucracies to work against any common purpose. For example, as in most big systems, Chicago schools require a firefighter in every building. There are five high-pressure boilers left in the entire system, and yet no school can be open without a firefighter on site. The expense of this kind of contractual agreement would be comic if it weren't tragic. Big school systems are less a single monolith than a collection of warring factions, with many programs entrenched as a result of court orders or federal and state laws. The central curriculum office, for example, contains 125 people. If only 1 administrative position were closed, the funds could double the supply budget at 12 schools or provide a

5-teacher team at 20 schools with 2 hours of planning every week for a year.

A third cause of failure is a rigid, unresponsive classroom culture. We have experienced enormous and fundamental changes in our society, but most schools today look exactly as schools looked 50 or 100 years ago.

the test of reality as well. Schools, frankly, have not responded to the dazzling array of needs and potentials that youngsters bring to school today. Too many schools are organized with a mythical child in mind, someone like Beaver from "Leave it to Beaver." When the children who arrive at the schoolhouse door don't look or act any-

thing like Beaver, don't have his wry sense of humor or his experiences and skills, they are too often deemed unteachable by inflexible and narrow schools.

At the time, no one in Chicago denied the need for reform. The fact that the schools were in crisis was broadly experienced and widely understood. It was in this context of stagnation and unresponsiveness that the Chicago Teachers Union led a walk-out in September 1987. It was the ninth teachers'



Photograph by John Booz

Lawyer Kyle Henderson and corporate officer Betty Forbes (standing), reform volunteers, watch as teacher and Local School Council member Mildred Arroyo-Wanyung of Spry Elementary School translates protocol for principal selection into Spanish for fellow LCV members.

And in spite of all we now know about how people grow and learn, classrooms are still little lecture halls with teachers dispensing bits and pieces of wisdom called curriculum. Children learn best in an environment that nurtures and challenges a range of interests, where they are active in making choices, and where they are engaged in matters of real importance to them. Children learn when they are safe and respected. All the heavy machinery of schooling—the lockstep conformity and ironclad rules—run counter to the requirements of learning communities.

Finally, not only have the content and organization failed to evolve with a changing world, but knowledge of and respect for students have failed

strike in 18 years.

School Reform

Lasting a record 19 school days, the teachers' strike became the catalyst that forged a workable coalition of parents, community groups, and business leaders. The presence of this reform coalition soon guaranteed that, regardless of any agreement between the board and the union, there would be no return to business as usual. It became the vehicle for people to express their anger and frustration with the full range of school problems. Over the next several months, this coalition hammered out a reform package and a successful legislative strategy.

The Chicago School Reform Act created Local School Councils at 542 attendance centers. Each council consists of 6 parents, 2 teachers, 2 community representatives, and the principal. Members are elected by constituent groups: parents vote for parent representatives, teachers for teacher representatives, and so on. This method of representation was designed so that local schools can be run by local people, and as a safeguard against corruption or a takeover by self-interested groups.

Local School Councils have real power. First, each council hires the principal for its school and negotiates a four-year performance contract. This provision brings an end to principal tenure and a system of city exams that dramatically limited candidates for leadership positions. Second, councils draft school improvement plans consistent with federal and state regulation but free of city wide curriculum mandates. And finally, councils control school budgets and decide how to spend funds consistent with their visions of change.

The reform legislation is, of course, only a step toward real school improvement. Any law is imperfect, just as any court order is inadequate. The real work of school improvement is long-term and complex, and no single step can turn around years of failure. Still, today in Chicago there is hope, and a release of energies is powering the beginnings of change.

Next Steps

The initiative to restructure Chicago schools came from below; thus, the course of reform has a rough and improvisational look. And there are vast problems to encounter and overcome as reform moves into its second year.

To begin with, everyone in Chicago uses the language of reform, but there is still a long path to travel if power and resources are really to shift from the center to the base. Local initiatives are still routinely frustrated, and the

central office still regularly issues commands. For example, last spring, after several councils had developed upgraded school security plans, using neighborhood resources and citizens, the central office announced a new security arrangement between the schools and the city police. The superintendent directed local schools to dis-

ferent. And yet, if they don't try something dramatically different, there is little chance they can create dramatically different schools. And if the schools do not break with their tradition of failure, then failure will remain their constant companion.

Finally, the most serious obstacle to reform is the failure of the reformers

to capture the imaginations and energies of teachers. Under reform, teachers have significantly expanded their power; yet the parent-led local councils suggest *parent control*, a term that has, to teachers' ears at

A Radical Experiment in School Reform

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continue their programs and refused to allow funds to be used for them. Councils were enraged at another instance of business as usual.

Further, the people who have the power to propose and implement dramatic change will not necessarily do so. This is the *perestroika* problem: If one has lived in Rumania a long time, one is out of practice in exercising freedom. In Chicago, as Local School Councils draft improvement plans, they often fall back on the taken-for-granted and the commonplace; they propose things like higher test scores, less truancy, and so on. This lack of imagination, this paucity of visions, frustrates the council members' ability to propose something dramatically dif-

ferent. At least, a punitive ring to it. The failure to build an authentic partnership between parents and teachers could undo much of what has been positive to date.

As in Europe, the outcome of upheaval in Chicago is far from certain. The conditions for fundamental change exist. But whether or not positive change for children, families, and teachers is the result depends on decisions made and initiatives enacted. The fact that 6,000 citizens are convening regularly and focusing their energies on the schools is a positive thing. It is now necessary for that energy to bring about dramatic change in specific schools.

This unprecedented reform is based on a sense that the solution to the problems in a democracy is more democracy, that the people with the problems are also the people with the solutions, and that experience in changing things will bring wisdom to the next steps. Our options are open, lighthouses of hope and possibility are beginning to be put in place, long-term change can proceed from a base of support. Can we do it? □

William Ayers is Assistant Professor, University of Illinois at Chicago, College of Education, Box 4348, Chicago, IL 60680. From September 1989 to June 1990, he served as an assistant to the deputy mayor for education in Chicago.

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