

Should Chicago Have an Elected Representative School Board?

A Look at the Evidence

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FEBRUARY 2011

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In December 2010, the Chicago Teachers Union-Community Board proposed a shift from a mayor-appointed school board to an elected board representative of and directly accountable to Chicago Public Schools' constituencies. This report, authored independently of the Community Board, summarizes research on the effectiveness of mayor-appointed school boards and the record of Chicago's mayor-appointed board. The report was written to provide information to elected officials, educators, parents, and members of the general public concerned about improvement of education in Chicago and the proposal to shift to an elected representative school board.

This report addresses the question: Should Chicago Have an Elected, Representative School Board? To address this question we explored several sub-questions:

- What does research say about the track record of mayor-controlled school systems?
- Has mayoral control improved education for Chicago public school students?
- Have the appointed board's policies increased educational equity?
- Are there examples where elected boards have been responsive and accountable to educators and communities?

To answer these questions, we reviewed research on school governance nationally. To review the record of Chicago's mayor-appointed board we examined CPS and Illinois State Board of Education data, reports of research pertinent to the Chicago experience, Chicago's performance on the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), and qualitative studies of the effects of CPS policies on teaching, students, and communities. We also gathered information on elected school boards in four major cities drawing on media reports, published research, school district websites, and conversations with local actors.

Key findings are:

- 1. There is no conclusive evidence that mayoral control and mayor-appointed boards are more effective at governing schools or raising student achievement.**
- 2. The Board's policies of top-down accountability based on standardized tests, and its simultaneous expansion of selective-enrollment schools, expanded a two-tier education system in Chicago.** Based on their scores on a single test, thousands of primarily African American and Latino students were subjected to probation, retention, scripted instruction, test drills, and basic-skills education. This was not supported by education research, did not result in real improvement, and reinforced a lower tier of educational opportunities for these students. At the same time, the Board also expanded a top tier of world-class, selective-enrollment schools that serve just 10 percent of high school students and are roughly three times more white and more affluent than CPS high schools overall.
- 3. Under the mayor-appointed Board, CPS has made little progress in academic achievement and other measures of educational improvement, and on nearly every measure there are persistent, and in some cases, widening gaps between white students and African American and Latino students.** Chicago's scores on the NAEP have increased very modestly in ways that cannot be distinguished from increases in other urban districts, and Chicago continues to significantly lag behind other large cities. There are persistent and significant racial disparities at the At-Or-Above-Proficient and Advanced levels in math and reading on the NAEP, and scores for African American students at these levels are abysmal. Graduation and dropout rates have

improved slightly but graduation rates are still very low and dropout rates still very high, and the gap between the rates for whites and for African Americans and Latinos has widened.

- 4. The Board's policy of closing neighborhood schools and opening charter schools (Renaissance 2010) has generally not improved education for the students affected. In some cases, it has made things worse.** Most displaced elementary school students transferred from one low-performing school to another with virtually no effect on student achievement. Eight of ten students displaced by school closings transferred to schools that ranked in the bottom half of the system on standardized tests. In the affected communities, the policy has increased student mobility and travel distances, led to spikes in violence, and increased neighborhood instability. School closings are also associated with patterns of gentrification, raising troubling questions about the relationship of Board policies and real estate interests and about the prioritization of affluent students who make up a small percentage of CPS families.
- 5. Although data on charter schools, nationally and locally, are mixed, there is no evidence that, overall, CPS' charter schools are significantly better than its traditional public schools.** The largest study conducted to date in the U.S. found that students in charter schools are not doing as well as students in regular public schools: 17% of charter schools perform significantly better, 37% significantly worse, and 46% show no significant difference. Chicago charter school outcomes are mixed, overall showing roughly comparable performance to neighborhood schools. On average, Chicago charter high schools served fewer English language learners and low-income and special education students, and on average, Chicago charter schools replaced more than half of their staff between 2008 and 2010.
- 6. Chicago's mayor-appointed board is comprised of elite decision makers who are neither representative of the student population of CPS nor directly accountable to the public. Board structures and processes severely limit public input in decisions.** The Board is composed primarily of corporate executives, while the district is 92 percent students of color and 86 percent low-income students whose communities have no role in school district decisions. This is problematic because perspectives and knowledge of parents, educators, and students are essential to

good educational decision-making. It is evident that community members feel that the Board is unresponsive to their input and concerns. Parents have felt it necessary to take extreme measures to be heard, including candlelight vigils, marches, campouts in front of Board headquarters, a hunger strike, and a recent 43-day occupation of a school field house to get a long-needed school library. Case studies in this report illustrate that elected school boards can create conditions for democratic public participation.

The evidence we collected for this report does not support the “Chicago miracle.” There is compelling evidence that, for over 15 years, the Board’s policies have failed to improve the education of the majority of Chicago public school students, especially African American and Latino and low-income students. Some students’ entire K-12 education has been dominated by high-stakes testing, the fear of retention, a basic-level education, and school closings and their resulting instability. There is an urgent need to shift course. Although responsive and directly accountable governance structures are not sufficient by themselves to improve schools, they are an important condition.

Recommendations:

- **Chicago should transition to an elected representative school board (ERSB).**
- **The ERSB’s operations should be transparent and publicly accountable.**
- **The ERSB should establish structures and practices that strengthen democratic public participation in district initiatives and decisions.**
- **The ERSB should draw on sound educational research and educator, student, and community knowledge to develop and evaluate policy.**
- **Achieving equity in educational opportunities and outcomes should be integral to all ERSB decisions**