

Charting Reform: Chicago Teachers Take Stock

**A Report Sponsored by the
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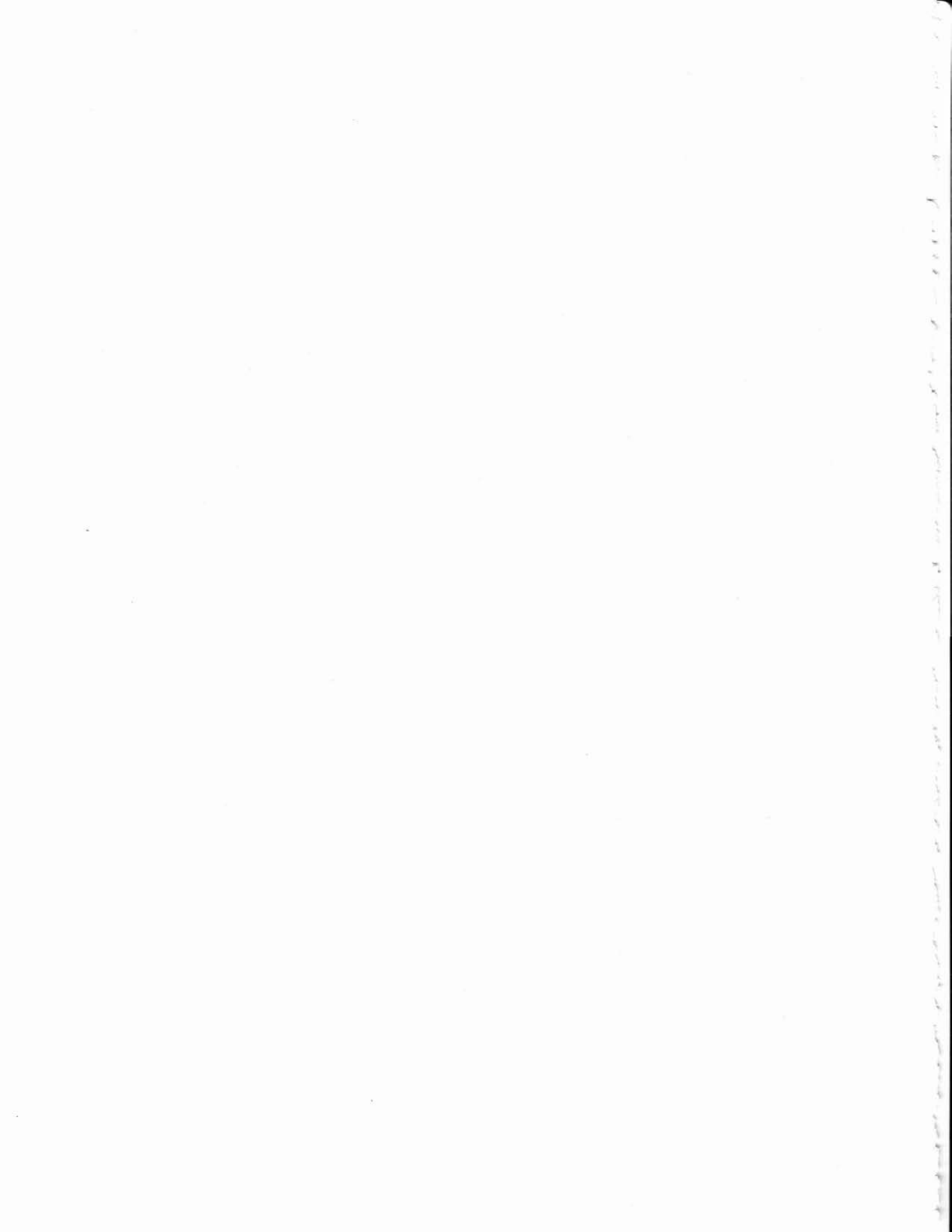
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Background

In 1994, as Chicago completed the fifth year of school reform under the Chicago School Reform Act, the Consortium launched its third and fourth surveys in the *Charting Reform* series. These surveys of teachers and students make it possible to “take the pulse” of Chicago school reform, to gauge what changes have occurred, and to see how reform has affected them. Major topics in the surveys include: school governance, parent involvement, professional community, a climate centered on student learning, and classroom instruction. Teachers and students in 266 elementary and 46 high schools took part in the surveys. In all, 39,000 students completed surveys, along with 6,200 elementary school teachers and 2,600 high school teachers.¹

In the early winter of 1995, the Consortium provided individually tailored reports to all schools that participated in the study.² These reports were designed to help schools assess their strengths and weaknesses and the effectiveness of improvement efforts under way. Schools were encouraged to use these data to complete a self-analysis according to *Path-*

ways to Achievement: The Three-Tiered Process, Self-Analysis Guide, which was produced by the Chicago Public Schools (CPS).

The responses to these two new surveys, along with the results from the two previous Consortium surveys, yield rich and comprehensive information on the progress of reform efforts in the Chicago Public Schools. Extant case studies and anecdotal accounts suggest that there is great diversity in how schools are responding to reform, but it is only through broad-based analysis that we can better understand this variability. Just how great are the differences from one school to another and to what extent are they linked to other factors in the schools and their communities?

This is the first report in a two-part series. Here we focus on three of the essential supports for student learning in *Pathways to Achievement*: school leadership, parental involvement, and professional community and development. The second report will probe two additional supports for learning: the nature of schools’ learning climate and instructional programs. The information in this first report draws mainly from

teachers, although some use is also made of student data. We reverse this process in the second report which primarily examines students’ experiences.

Teachers are central actors in school reform. Thus, we focus here on teachers’ attitudes, beliefs, and behavior. We have tried to bring fidelity to their perspectives about their work, their school community, and the progress of reform. Successful improvement efforts are highly unlikely unless teachers seriously engage the reform. Any effort to promote improvement, whether at the system or individual school level, must be grounded in an understanding of how teachers perceive their circumstances. We hope that this report provides a deeper perspective on the issues embedded here, and we are pleased to be able to give voice to the teachers’ perspective.

On balance, teachers’ views on some matters deviate from those offered by students in our next report. Both of these, in turn, differ some from those of “outside researchers” looking in at school activities. (For this reason, this report includes two short case studies from this “researcher

perspective” and several more appear in the second report.) By comparing across these various perspectives, we develop a more comprehensive understanding of Chicago’s reform.

Beyond these two reports, a third report detailing trends in student achievement over the last nine years will be released later this fall by the Chicago Panel on School Policy and the Center for

School Improvement. During the next year, the Consortium will also share results of its three-year study of the effects of reform on classroom instruction. Based on extensive interviews and over 1,000 hours of classroom observations, this study will examine changes in curriculum and instruction in the context of decentralization. We are also currently attempting our first survey of Lo-

cal School Council (LSC) members and hope to report on this sometime next year. All these studies will add greatly to our collective understanding of school reform and school improvement.

What is Reform?

By devolving authority to local schools, the 1988 Chicago School Reform Act sought to weaken central power of the school

About the Surveys . . .

Work on these surveys began in the fall of 1993 as “work groups” were assembled to identify the key concepts that should be included and procedures for data collection. These groups involved researchers from local universities, independent organizations, and the school system. As is customary in all Consortium projects, the survey development and planning were greatly influenced by a diverse group of stakeholders. Teacher and student advisory committees played a major role in creating and conducting these surveys. Elementary and high school teachers and students discussed and reviewed materials and procedures during survey development. Teachers and students also pilot-tested many new survey questions and provided us with feedback on the content of the surveys. After the data collection was complete, teachers and students helped review basic findings to sharpen our interpretations.

In addition to the teacher and student advisory groups, we held numerous formal and informal discussions across the city with important local constituencies. We sought ideas and reactions from a broad base of civic and political leadership through our Constituent Advisory Board. We also drew on assistance from many national experts who critically reviewed technical aspects of the surveys. The work groups collected numerous surveys from other school districts, from nationally funded research projects, and from school improvement efforts. These many sources helped us shape surveys that provide a fair and accurate picture of how teachers and students perceive their school experiences and how Chicago’s unique reform is progressing.

The surveys were administered in May and June of 1994 to sixth-, eighth-, and tenth-grade students and to elementary and high school teachers. A Spanish language version was available for students. Students completed surveys during a class. Teachers completed surveys during teacher meetings or on their own.

The basic statistic presented in the report is “percentage of teachers” who responded to a survey item in a specific way. The percentage that we use for this purpose is based on the probability sample of 80 elementary and 31 high schools. When we compare different types of schools or ascertain the relative importance of various factors on responses, we make use of all the available data from the total of 266 elementary and 46 participating high schools.

