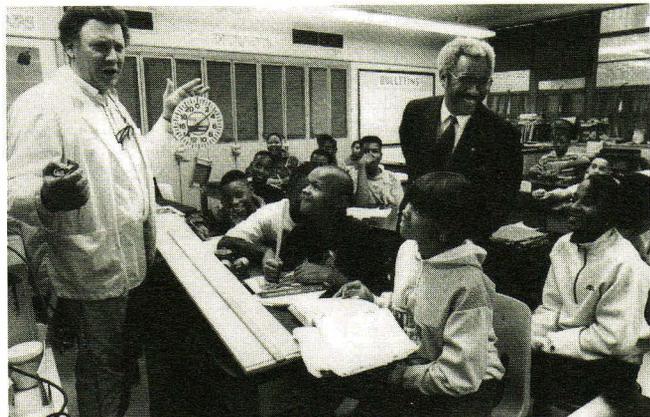


# School Leadership and the Bottom Line in Chicago



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**R**esearch on Chicago school reform conducted between 1990 and 1996 shows that local control facilitated significant improvements in student achievement in a large proportion of elementary schools. It is also clear that under Chicago's decentralization, the quality of the principal's leadership is a critical factor in determining whether a school moves forward to improve learning opportunities for students.

Evidence comes from studies carried out by the Consortium on Chicago School Research, including surveys of teachers, principals, local leaders, and students, and in-depth case studies of dozens of schools.<sup>1</sup> We have now linked these data to longitudinal analyses of standardized test scores that produce an estimate of the value added to student learning by each elementary school and whether this has been improving.<sup>2</sup> At this point, we are in a position to share what we have learned about successful principal leadership aimed at improving academic achievement.

During the 1990s, Chicago witnessed gradual but consistent improvement in student test scores. In 1990, about a quarter of the students in grades three through eight reached national norms in reading and mathematics. By 1999, this proportion had grown to 35 percent in reading and 43 percent in math. One third

of the elementary schools (most include eighth grade) raised the percentage of students reaching national norms by at least 15 percent. Almost half the schools showed an increase of between 5 percent and 14 percent.<sup>3</sup> While far too many students still fail to reach national norms, this steady upward trend is encouraging.

This same period saw the establishment of local control under the framework of the 1988 Chicago School Reform Act. The law created parent-dominated Local School Councils (LSCs) for each school and gave them the power to hire and fire their principal. Principals gained greater autonomy in selecting their staff, and they received new resources relative to the number of low-income students their school served. Eventually, elementary schools received an average of \$500,000 a year which could be used to finance improvements.<sup>4</sup>

In 1995, the state legislature handed the mayor control of the school system, giving him the right to name a five-member school board and the chief executive officer of the system. With the extensive news coverage of the mayor's new team, most outsiders failed to realize, however, that the 1995 reform left local control intact: Local School Councils were not affected, and neither were their formal authority and resources.<sup>5</sup>

# Key Elements of Principal Leadership in Productive Schools

The underlying assumption behind the Chicago reform is that local actors, if given adequate authority and resources, will be able to effectively solve local problems. Key in this regard is how the 1988 reform law dramatically reshaped the sanctions and incentives for principals. Instead of reporting to their central administration superiors, principals became locally accountable. They work under four-year performance contracts subject to LSC review. Most importantly, when they successfully introduce improvements, local leaders recognize and appreciate their efforts.

In productive schools, principals share a common leadership style and substantive focus. The figure on page 3 depicts characteristics of principals' leadership style and the strategies and specific initiatives they employ to empower parents, communities, and the professional staff to serve students more effectively. A central theme emerging from our research is that principals of improving Chicago elementary schools skillfully use a combination of both support and pressure to enable and vitalize the efforts of adults who work directly with children.

## Leadership Style

**Inclusive, facilitative orientation.** These are principals who can articulate a "vision-in-outline" for the school and invite teachers and parents to further elaborate and shape this vision. They look for opportunities to bring parents, teachers, and other staff into leadership positions, because they know that change requires the commitment, talent, and energy of many.<sup>6</sup>

**Institutional focus on student learning.** Principals in productive schools set high standards for teaching, understand how children learn, and encourage teachers to take risks and try new methods of teaching. Regular visits to classrooms demonstrate their conviction and give them a pulse on instruction.

**Efficient management.** "Things get done" in these schools. Teachers have the books they need when classes start. Principals secure academic and social support services for students in need, so that classroom disruptions are minimized.

**Support and pressure used to catalyze initiatives, enable others.** While principals may press teachers to adopt a new approach to teaching reading, they make time available for teachers to learn new content and strategies, receive coaching, and obtain necessary materials.<sup>7</sup>

## Principals' Strategies

**Quick hits.** Stirring rhetoric quickly appears hollow if not accompanied by complementary action. Thus, principals often begin by attacking and solving quickly some highly visible problems. At one school, for example, the initial focus was on alleviating overcrowding by finding some supplemental space in the community for extra classrooms. Such early initiatives provide concrete signs of change and develop a collective sense of agency.<sup>8</sup>

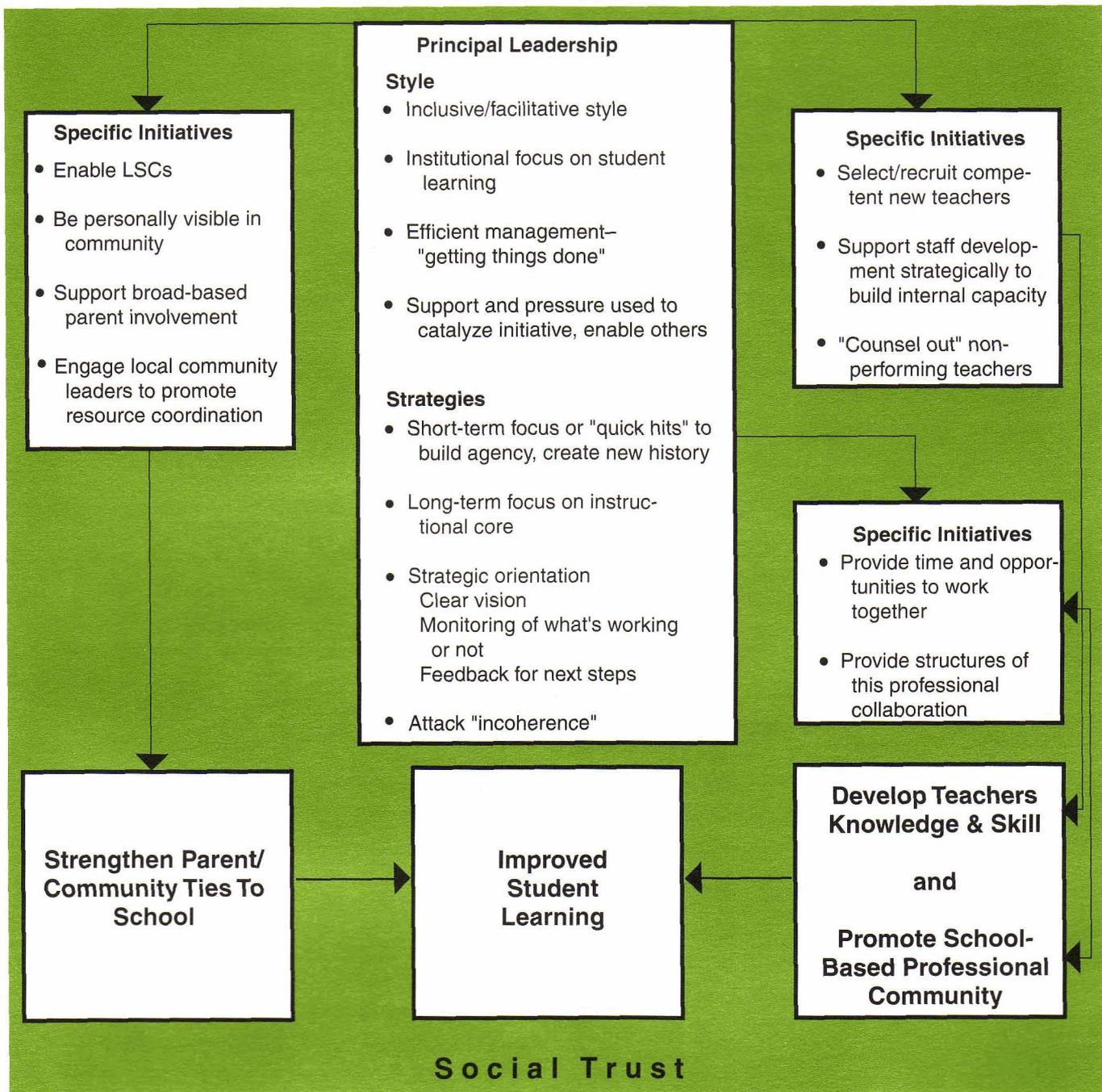
**Long-term focus on instructional core.** Principals know that their schools need to make major improvements in student achievement, and that attaining this will require profound changes in teachers' work. Thus, they concentrate on strengthening the quality of the faculty through recruitment of talented new teachers, targeted staff development for all teachers, and organizational changes to promote best practices. Also they pay constant attention to the myriad of day-to-day decisions about the schedule, assemblies, parents' meetings, etc., in order to maximize instructional time and resources for learning.

**Strategic orientation.** Principals use the School Improvement Plan mandated under the 1988 reform to bring together parents, community members, and teachers around a comprehensive, coherent plan for school development. The Plan lays out annual goals and specific strategies for improvements in each of five areas: school leadership, parent involvement, professional development and collaboration, student-centered learning climate, and classroom instruction. It also details a monitoring process and benchmarks by which progress will be measured.

**Attack incoherence.** A strategic orientation helps a school resist incoherence in the planning and implementation of new programs. In improving schools, teachers are more likely to say that, once a program has begun, there is follow-up to make sure it is working, and that you can see real continuity from one program

# Elements and Key Substantive Foci of Principal Leadership

## Productive Chicago Elementary Schools



to another. This is particularly important in making sure that plans to address new learning standards and/or strengthen teaching strategies actually wind up in the classroom.

In our earlier research, we dubbed schools with high levels of incoherence "Christmas tree schools." These were well-known showcases because of the variety of

programs they boasted. Frequently, however, these programs were uncoordinated and perhaps even philosophically inconsistent. The new, special programs were like dazzling ornaments hung on a tree at Christmas, but the basic school operations remained unattended.<sup>9</sup>

## Key Substantive Foci

We found that principals of productive schools exploited opportunities provided under the 1988 reform to push forward on two big issues: promoting stronger social ties between school staff and the community, and creating a viable professional community among the school staff.

### Strengthen Parent/Community Ties to School

Evidence from our studies shows that productive schools have active LSCs and committed parents. In these schools, LSC members regularly carry out their mandated duties—approve the School Improvement Plan and the budget, advise on personnel, and evaluate the principal. In addition, LSC members reach out to parents to encourage their participation in school events, and they play a significant role in obtaining assistance and cooperation from other agencies in the neighborhood, such as the park district, police department, and organizations like the YMCA.<sup>10</sup>

Case studies reveal that expanded participation by the local community provides strong social support for fundamental change in the school. Processes and structures that encourage interactions among parents, community members, and local professionals crystallize shared concerns and mobilize action.

Principals play a key role in enabling their LSCs. Like good chief executives, they make sure their councils are well informed and prepared for the decisions they need to make—for example, understanding the budget. They also seek ideas and input from their councils for the School Improvement Plan.<sup>11</sup>

Principals are personally visible in the community. In our case-study schools, their actions ranged from helping to close down a drug house, to giving talks in the community to stem negative perceptions about the school, to stopping a neighborhood liquor store from marketing products to students.<sup>12</sup>

Another common initiative is to promote broad-based parent involvement, similar to that outlined in Joyce Epstein's framework.<sup>13</sup> This encompasses supporting parents in their parental role, such as offering parent training classes. It also means teaching parents ways to monitor homework and reinforce learning at home, involving them as advisors and decision makers, and recruiting them as volunteers.

Finally, principals of productive schools engage other local community leaders to promote resource coordination. One hospital, for example, sends physicians to a nearby elementary school to provide immunizations before school starts. This small but efficient measure prevents many children from missing the first few days and weeks of their school career.

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### Develop Teachers' Knowledge and Skill and Promote School-Based Professional Community

In improving Chicago schools, there are regular opportunities for reflective dialogue among teachers about practice, pedagogy, and stu-

dent learning. Teachers open their classroom doors and share their work with peers. Rather than just following rules and regulations, teachers are motivated by a growing sense of shared beliefs and practices focused on student learning.<sup>14</sup> These are the conditions that encourage teachers to deepen their knowledge and understanding of subject matter and improve their practice.

**Specific initiatives to develop teachers' knowledge and skill.** To build internal capacity, principals make a major commitment to individual professional development. They create time for this to occur and allocate school discretionary resources to support it. Building this human resource capacity usually involves entering into relationships with outside agencies, such as a university, non-profit organization, or the federal regional educational laboratory, to obtain training and consultation. Moreover, successful professional development is sustained, of high quality, delivered at the school building level, and clearly tied to the School

Improvement Plan priorities. Interestingly, low-achieving schools also offer frequent opportunities for staff development, but these tend to be more idiosyncratic and disconnected from any specific improvements that the school is trying to implement.<sup>15</sup>

Principals also carefully recruit competent new teachers who will contribute to the emerging vision of the school. Discretionary monies that accompanied local control have been instrumental in hiring additional teachers. Similarly, they work to “counsel out” non-performing teachers.

**Specific initiatives to promote school-based professional community.** Principals of productive schools recognize that if teachers do not play an active part in the reform process and do not feel ownership for the changes that result, it is unlikely that these changes will culminate in meaningful improvements for students. Thus in productive schools, teachers are likely to have significant say in school policy, particularly in areas like choosing instructional materials and determining the content of in-service programs.<sup>16</sup>

A major challenge for principals is to make time and other resources available for teachers to work and learn together. Teachers meet before and after school, on weekends, and at longer retreats. Principals use their discretionary money to pay teachers for at least part of the time they devote. Principals also work with faculty leaders to create structures and procedures for carrying out the work of change. These may take the form of design committees; leadership teams involving parents, teachers, counselors, and others; grade-level committees; or leaders of schools-within-schools.

## **Social Trust: The Foundation for School Development**

Yet formal structures provide only the skeleton for a productive school. How people behave, interact, learn, and work together is what breathes life into the school.

A common characteristic of improving schools is cooperative work relations among all adults. To achieve this requires a strong base of social trust among teachers, between teachers and parents, between teachers and the principal, and between teachers and students. In improving schools, where trust and cooperative adult efforts are strong, students also report that they feel safe, sense that teachers care about them, and experience greater academic challenge.<sup>17</sup> In contrast, in schools with flat or declining test scores, teachers are more likely to state they do not trust one another, and both teachers and students report less satisfaction with their experiences.

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Case studies and survey analyses reveal how principals work to promote social trust. These principals are accessible; teachers and parents feel that principals “really listen” and that they have opportunities to influence important affairs. These principals demonstrate integrity; they articulate specific values, and their

daily behavior reinforces this. Teachers can depend on them to provide the basic resources teachers need to be successful. Finally, they take a personal interest in the well-being of others, sometimes reaching beyond their formal role to do so.<sup>18</sup>

## **Perspectives**

These days many Chicagoans have turned their attention to the vast array of initiatives launched by the current CEO of the school system. Freed by the 1995 law from some of the budgetary and union constraints, the CEO has been rebuilding and repairing schools, offering pre-school, summer school, and after-school programs, and supporting new training and professional development programs for principals. He has also put schools on probation, reconstituted others, and ended social promotion.

Yet, LSCs continue to choose their principals, and principals continue to act with considerable freedom

and resources. In elementary schools, accompanying this decentralization has been a broad-based increase in student achievement.

In retrospect, the 1988 reform was ambitious in setting up the basic structure of local control, but was thin in providing the necessary supports for schools to be effective, self-guided local institutions. By 1994, however, the central office began to formulate and enact plans for assistance and external accountability, and these became more formalized in 1995. It seems clear that a systemwide infrastructure was needed for assisting schools with their development and for intervening in failing schools. If designed to enhance local professional capacity, both efforts could strengthen schools' initiatives and broaden the improvement of student performance.<sup>19</sup>

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## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> The Consortium on Chicago School Research is an independent federation of Chicago area organizations that since 1990 has been conducting research designed to advance school improvement in Chicago's public schools and to assess the progress of school reform.

<sup>2</sup> Anthony S. Bryk, Yeow Meng Thum, John Q. Easton, and Stuart Luppescu, *Assessing School Productivity Using Student Achievement: The Chicago Public Elementary Schools* (Chicago: University of Chicago, Consortium on Chicago School Research, 1998).

<sup>3</sup> Department of Research, Analysis and Assessment, Office of Accountability, Chicago Public Schools, *Iowa Tests of Basic Skills Reading and Math, 1990-1999*. Unpublished report (Chicago: Author, June 1999).

<sup>4</sup> Anthony S. Bryk, Penny B. Sebring, David Kerbow, Sharon Rollow, and John Q. Easton, *Charting Chicago School Reform: Democratic Localism as a Lever for Change* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1998).

<sup>5</sup> Illinois Public Act 89-0015, 1995. Subsequent legislation, however, required LSCs to use Board criteria in evaluating their principals and provided for arbitration when LSCs' recommendations for contract renewal differed from those of the CEO. (Illinois Senate Bill 652, Section 34-2.3, May 1999.)

<sup>6</sup> Penny B. Sebring, Anthony S. Bryk, John Q. Easton, Winifred Lopez, Stuart Luppescu, Yeow Meng Thum, and BetsAnn Smith, *Charting Reform: Chicago Teachers Take Stock* (Chicago: University of Chicago, Consortium on Chicago School Research, 1995).

<sup>7</sup> See Matthew B. Miles, "Unraveling the Mystery of Institutionalization," *Educational Leadership*, November 1983, pp. 14-19.

<sup>8</sup> Bryk, et al., *Charting Chicago School Reform*, Chapter 6.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, Chapter 3.

<sup>10</sup> Susan Ryan, Anthony S. Bryk, Gudelia Lopez, Kim P. Williams, Kathleen Hall, and Stuart Luppescu, *Charting Reform: LSCs—Local Leadership at Work* (Chicago: University of Chicago, Consortium on Chicago School Research, 1997).

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 23-24.

<sup>12</sup> Bryk, et al., *Charting Chicago School Reform*, Chapter 6.

<sup>13</sup> Joyce Epstein, "School/Family/Community Partnerships," *Phi Delta Kappan*, May 1995, pp. 701-712.

<sup>14</sup> Sharon D. Kruse, Karen S. Louis, and Anthony S. Bryk, "Analyzing School-based Professional Community." In Karen S. Louis and Sharon D. Kruse, eds., *Professionalism and Community: Perspectives on Reforming Urban Schools* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin, 1995, pp. 23-42).

<sup>15</sup> Penny B. Sebring, Anthony S. Bryk, Melissa Roderick, Eric Camburn, Stuart Luppescu, BetsAnn Smith, Yeow Meng Thum, and Joseph Kahne. *Charting Reform in Chicago: The Students Speak* (Chicago: University of Chicago, Consortium on Chicago School Research, 1996). Anthony S. Bryk, Eric Camburn, and Karen Seashore Lewis (1999). Professional Community in Chicago Elementary Schools: Facilitating Factors and Organizational Consequences. *Educational Administration Quarterly*, 35, 751-781.

<sup>16</sup> Sebring, et al., *Charting Reform: Chicago Teachers Take Stock* p. 17.

<sup>17</sup> Sebring, et al., *Charting Reform in Chicago: The Students Speak*.

<sup>18</sup> Anthony S. Bryk and Barbara Schneider, *Relational Trust: A Core Resource for School Improvement*. Manuscript in preparation for American Sociological Association's Rose series. An earlier version appeared as a technical paper published by the Consortium on Chicago School Research, University of Chicago, 1996.

<sup>19</sup> Bryk et al., *Charting Chicago School Reform*, Chapter 7.

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