



# CHARTING REFORM: CHICAGO TEACHERS TAKE STOCK

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## ***SUMMARY OF FINDINGS***

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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***

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**T**eacher 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**

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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**

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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.







