

Implementation of an Educational Accountability Agenda: Integrated Governance in the Chicago Public Schools Enters its Fourth Year

by

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INTRODUCTION

In 1995, the Illinois state legislature enacted the Chicago School Reform Amendatory Act, granting the Chicago Public Schools the capacity to launch an educational accountability agenda aimed at system-wide improvements in teaching and learning. The Act reversed the trend toward the decentralization of school operations and, instead, moved towards integrating authority at the system-wide level.

Building on previous organizational, management, and budgetary accomplishments, in 1996 the district-level leadership moved to improve the system's educational performance by raising standards and improving student performance. This undertaking involves three key policy levers aimed at directing and supporting school improvement: formal sanctions, support, and professional discretion.

AGENDA IMPLEMENTATION

The district's educational agenda reflects a system-wide vision focused on improving high school performance. District policy is implemented, however, within a complex, multi-layered organization. The central administration must rely upon principals, school administrators, teachers, and students to achieve the goals and objectives of its policies. These actors respond to

district policies in ways that can support, limit, or undermine policy objectives.

Given this organizational reality, several questions arise concerning the implementation of the district's educational accountability agenda. In particular:

- How do principals and teachers respond to district pressure for improved performance?
- How do these responses compare to school and teacher reactions to policies that rely more heavily on professional discretion?
- How do principals and teachers make use of district support?
- How do principals and teachers allocate their resources in response to the various types of district initiatives?
- What effects do the responses of schools and teachers to district policies have on teachers' classroom practices?

Several initiatives that are central to the administration's efforts to improve teaching and learning in the high schools include probation and reconstitution, academic promotion, junior and senior academies, and student advisories. This *Spotlight* contains research examining these initiatives and how they are articulated at the school and classroom levels. The study draws upon interviews and direct observations

of principals, teachers, and students in particular Chicago-area schools.

PROBATION AND RECONSTITUTION

Provisions outlined in the 1995 law enhanced the power of the school district administration to identify low-performing schools and place them on probation or reconstitution. The primary objective of probation and reconstitution is to improve student achievement in reading and math as measured by standardized test scores.

Schools with less than 15% of their students scoring at national norms are placed on probation. Schools need to increase the percentage of their students scoring at national norms to 20% in order to be removed from probation. Continued low scores place schools at risk of reconstitution, under which principals and teachers can be dismissed.

Schools have responded to probation/reconstitution by mandating that teachers implement various test-preparation and skills development activities. As district pressure on schools increases, school-level mandates place increasing constraints on teachers' instructional decisions.

Teachers expressed ambivalence about allocating instructional time to test-related activities. In addition, given probation's emphasis on reading scores, English teachers feel

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the most pressure to allocate classroom time to test-related activities. This has resulted in some conflict among teachers along subject matter lines.

District Support

The district provides several types of support to schools on probation and reconstitution. These include external partners, probation managers, and operations managers. The district plans to have operation managers in all high schools, overseeing the schools' budgets and financial concerns. Operation managers are not specific to the probation policy.

Probation Managers and External Partners

Probation managers are current or former high school principals whose role is to oversee the development and implementation of the school improvement plan and monitor improvements. External partners are teams from national reform groups and local universities who are responsible for driving instructional and curricular improvements.

When surveyed, principals indicated that they made use of the external partners primarily for three responsibilities: professional development for teachers (83%), curriculum development (72%), and monitoring teachers (56%). In comparison,

principals said they consulted their probation managers in six areas: professional development (78%), the school improvement plan (72%), the budget (61%), organizational restructuring (56%), testing (56%), and leadership issues (56%).

Principals indicated that they met with the external partners much more frequently than they did their probation manager. On a whole, principals felt the external partners were very helpful. In contrast, however, teachers reported little contact with external partners and/or found them unhelpful.

Teachers' frustration with external partners appears to revolve around two issues. First, teachers reported that they resent what they see as external partners asserting authority over instructional practices. Secondly, teachers find contradictions between the districts' stated objectives for the external partners, which is whole school improvement, and the goal of probation/reconstitution, raising test scores.

Enrollment fluctuation

One unintended consequence of the district's probation and reconstitution policy may be a reallocation of teachers and students away from low-performing schools. Although enrollment declines often predate probation, the district policy may reinforce an existing trend.

As the public becomes more informed about the schools' test achievements, market-like competition between schools has emerged. Schools are responding to this market-like pressure by implementing specialty programs in order to attract higher-performing students.

ACADEMIC PROMOTION

In the spring of 1996, the district declared that it would end social promotion and announced a new academic promotion policy. The policy ties student promotion from the third, sixth, eighth, and ninth grade to both course credit and standardized test scores. According to the policy, these students could be retained a grade if they failed to score at the district benchmark on nationally-normed tests, the Iowa Test of Basic Skills (ITBS) or the Test of Achievement and Proficiency (TAP) for ninth graders. The district set the benchmark at approximately one grade level below the national norm.

Students who fail to post adequate scores on these tests must attend a Summer Bridge remediation program. In addition, the policy requires third, sixth, and eighth graders to receive passing grades in reading and mathematics and have no more than twenty unexcused absences. Ninth graders must earn at least five course credits their fresh-

Districtwide Improvement Strategies				
<i>Types of Policy Leverage</i>	<i>Probation/ Reconstitution</i>	<i>Academic Promotion</i>	<i>Academies</i>	<i>Student Advisories</i>
Pressure	Threat of Restaffing	Grade Retention	Certificate of Initial Mastery, CASE	Required Participation
Support	External Partners, Probation Managers	Summer Bridge, Developmental math & reading	Funds for Common Teacher Planning Time, Textbooks, & Science Labs	Teacher Compensation, Curriculum
Professional Discretion	Principal Selection of External Partners	Promotion Waivers; Hiring Teachers in Summer Bridge	Choice of Organizational Model	Choice of Organizational Model

man year and have no more than twenty unexcused absences.

Summer Bridge Program

The Summer Bridge Program for low-scoring students is a central component of the district's accountability agenda and promotion policy. The board provides Bridge teachers with "structured" lesson plans that identify lesson objectives and materials, the order of activities, how the teachers should present the material, and the instructional format teachers should use. At the end of the seven-week program, students take the ITBS or TAP again. If they meet or exceed the district benchmark, they are promoted to the next grade. If they fail, they are retained.

Confusion surrounds the degree of success of the program. One point of confusion centers on how to distinguish students who were required to attend the program for low test scores from those required to attend the program due to excessive absences. Another issue of concern is distinguishing students promoted because they posted acceptable test scores at the end of the program from those students promoted because they received waivers.

Teachers expressed general satisfaction with the quality of the curricular materials. However, they complained that the pace was unrealistic. Teachers felt that they needed to slow the pace in order to address students' learning needs.

JUNIOR AND SENIOR ACADEMIES

The Junior/Senior Academy initiative provides the organizational framework for changes in the high school curriculum and students' progression through and graduation from high school. Students in the Junior Academy enroll in courses focused on a common core curriculum. Students must earn course credit in the core subject areas and pass the Chicago Academic Standards Exam (CASE) to be promoted to the Senior Academy where they can enroll in focused career and academic programs.

According to the district's High School Redesign Plan, the mission of the Junior Academy is to establish a sound foundation in the core curricular subject areas while providing a smaller, more personalized environment. The primary goals of the Junior Academy are to reduce the number of course failures, improve attendance patterns, and maintain support networks for academic and social needs.

Schools have accommodated to the district's Academy initiative to a high degree. A full 98% of principals surveyed report that their schools had Junior Academies in the 1997-98 school year. In those 40 schools, all ninth graders are enrolled in the Academy, while 35, or 88%, of the Academies enroll all tenth graders. Survey responses also indicate a high degree of compliance with the stated objectives. Eighty percent of the principals surveyed report that a primary focus of the Academy is to improve academics, 56% report that counseling is a central focus, and 54% report that improving attendance is a primary goal.

The survey also indicates that principals attribute improvement in student attendance and discipline to the Academies. Seventy-eight percent of the principals reported that they saw an improvement in student attendance since the implementation of the Academy. Seventy-one percent of the principals attributed improvements in testing to the Academy and sixty-three percent reported improvement in discipline. In contrast to these high percentages, 51% of the principals surveyed believe that student grades have improved because of the Academy, while 41% of respondents believe that passing grades have improved.

Curriculum Standardization

District curriculum standards are aligned with state goals and provide broad objectives for each subject area. During the 1997-98 school year, the district created and disseminated Programs of Studies aligned with the standards for ninth and tenth grade core subject area courses.

The district has begun to implement district-wide final exams, or Chicago Academic Standards Exams (CASE), aligned with the state standards. The district piloted CASE in ninth and tenth grade algebra, English, and science courses in June 1998. Central office officials report that 75.8% of ninth graders passed the English CASE, 42.7% passed the history exams, 35.5% passed the biology test and 25% passed the algebra exam. The district plans to implement CASE at the tenth, eleventh, and twelfth grades by the 2001-2002 school year.

The district increased the high school graduation requirements in math from two to three years, and in science from one to three years. The district also eliminated pre-Algebra courses and mandated that low-scoring students enroll in developmental math classes concurrent with their enrollment in Algebra. Students who post low reading scores enroll in developmental reading courses, further reducing course options. The district also split the physical education requirement into two years of physical education and two years of career education. Finally, the district added two years of foreign language study to the required courses and a community service requirement.

Effect on Teachers

While district efforts to standardize curriculum play a crucial role in the implementation of the Academies and district High School Redesign Plan, they represent just one constraint on curricular decisions made by teachers. Schools and teachers must deal with state goals and assessments as well as subject matter standards promoted by professional associations. These factors compete with the district emphasis on the TAP and the CASE.

According to a survey of teachers, subject matter departments are a significant influence in the coordination and standardization of the curriculum. This suggests that subject matter departments may play a key role in

determining how teachers implement curricular initiatives. Additionally, the IGAP and TAP tests are major factors in curricular standardization. However, while the tests promoted standardization, they did so only in superficial ways. Teachers reported implementing test preparation activities but referred to these activities as a "suspension" of the regular curriculum or "taking time out" of the curriculum.

STUDENT ADVISORIES

In 1997-98, the district initiated the Student Advisory Program as part of its high school restructuring plan. The district expected the schools to implement an advisory period in students' schedules. The initiative called for each student to be assigned a teacher/advisor who would play a supportive role by acting as a liaison between parents and the school, keeping track of advisees' progress, and guiding students during the school year. The district also expected teachers to implement a curriculum of study skills, life skills, and career education. To facilitate the curriculum, the district distributed two books of recommended activities centered on career and vocational goals, academic goals, and social goals and concerns.

In contrast to the Academy initiative, the advisory program met with considerable teacher resistance. Conflict arose over teacher compensation in the spring of 1997, when the board first introduced the program. The union viewed the advisory as an additional preparation but the board refused to provide extra compensation. The conflict remained unresolved throughout the 1997-98 school year. This resulted in tensions between teachers and principals and varying commitment to the program.

In addition to the conflict over compensation, interviews with teachers suggest that they felt uncomfortable with the expansion of their role inherent in the advisory goals. Teachers preferred to develop informal relationships with their students and most often report that they used advisory as a study hall,

providing students academic tutoring and test preparation activities.

There was also frustration centered on the lack of incentives and sanctions for students associated with the program. Teachers reported that students did not receive credit for attending the advisories and that there were no penalties for absences.

The central office responded to the teachers' resistance to the program in two ways. First, during the 1998-99 school year, the board paid teachers to hold advisories once a week for 30 minutes, over the course of 20 weeks. Second, the central office placed more emphasis on the academics and downplayed the counseling aspect of the program. The new curriculum focuses more on study skills, how to organize time, and career concerns.

CONCLUSION

This research focused on how public high schools in Chicago have implemented key components of the district's educational accountability agenda and how this implementation has affected classroom teaching. Because the focus was on the implementation of the district's agenda as it exists and operates at the district, school, and classroom levels, the reform efforts have not been questioned in substantive terms. One implication of taking these reforms for granted is to leave an impression that the successes and failures of these efforts can be attributed mainly or solely to their implementation rather than to the nature of the reforms themselves or to a combination of both.

It is clear that several issues need further consideration. First, if the district intends for its accountability agenda to foster instructional improvements, both the quality of the standards it establishes and how they affect teachers' curriculum and instructional decisions needs to be assessed. Though district standards are typically viewed as a "top-down" policy aimed at directing instruction, curricular standards are highly influenced by current teaching practices. At issue is what practices

do the district's curricular standards and assessments reinforce, foster, and sustain, and how do these practices affect student learning?

Secondly, linkages between the elementary and high schools remain crucial to improvements in both. Strategies designed to reform high schools target problems generated, in large part, by the poor performance of students leaving the elementary schools. To date, the district has addressed this issue primarily through its academic promotion policy. This policy attempts to ensure that high schools receive students prepared for high school-level work. However, it is difficult to assess how effective this policy has been in that regard. District curricular standards and assessments play a role in this, as well, as they outline the curriculum students should receive as they progress through the system. These efforts may hold potential. Yet, the demographic and enrollment shifts cannot be addressed through these means. The extent to which the district can coordinate issues of supply and demands of students and of teachers merits further investigation.

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