Chicago School Reform: Myths, Realities, and New Visions

Prepared by CReATE (Chicagoland Researchers and Advocates for Transformative Education)
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Public education in a democratic society is based on the principle that every child is of equal and incalculable value. This guiding principle requires the fullest development of every member of our nation. Effective public schools are necessary to enable every member of our nation to reach his or her fullest potential. Schools in a democracy aim to prepare the next generation to be knowledgeable and informed citizens and residents; to be critical thinkers and creative problem solvers; to be prepared to contribute positively to communities, workplaces, and societies that are characterized by diversity and inequities; and to be healthy, happy, and prepared to support the well-being of others with compassion and courage. The children and youth of Chicago deserve no less…but how is this preparation to be accomplished?

In the midst of campaigns and debates for the Chicago mayoral election in 2011, we heard many proclamations and promises about what it means to improve public schools. At that time we asked, ***how does each candidate's proposals for change compare to what we know so far from research about the real problems and solutions?*** We then presented the findings of the most reputable educational research on school reform. In this 2015 updated version of *Chicago School Reform,* we revisit the *"myths, realities, and new visions"* that we identified and proposed for education policy in Chicago four years ago. We do so in light of new research as well as ongoing community opposition to policies carried out by the school board and backed by the Mayor Emanuel and substantial business interests including the Commercial Club of Chicago. As we approach another mayoral election, it is again time to ask what we want from our elected public officials and appointed school leaders.

Below CReATE outlines a democratic, equitable, and research-backed vision that provides the Chicago school community a set of policy alternatives to the myths that too often are simply claimed without supporting evidence to be real solutions to Chicago's education challenges. The research we share supports and affirms many of the key criticisms, popular goals, and workable alternatives to the current CPS policies that are continuing to be challenged by local parent, community, and teacher organizations.

Following each topic is a list of educational researchers from across Chicagoland who can be contacted for elaboration. For general information contact: createchicago@gmail.com.

VISION: Provide Bold Leadership that Addresses Difficult Systemic Problems and Avoids Scapegoating Educators.

MYTH: The main problem with education is the lazy or incompetent teacher, who is protected by corrupt unions and supervised by out-of-control local school councils. Therefore, the key to reform is a system of rewards and punishments (such as performance pay), increased state/national surveillance of teachers through corporate management, and the dismantling of teachers' rights to organize unions and bargain collectively around benefits, school policies, and instructional practices.

REALITY: Consistently underperforming schools are unevenly but predictably distributed in Chicago's public p-12 education. School success maps strongly line-up with traditional markers of privilege (by race, income, class, immigrant status, etc.) and school failure maps predictably along lines of poverty.[1] Hardworking, knowledgeable and skilled teachers are not enough to adequately meet these challenges. ***Inequities in education would still exist because of a range of larger, systemic problems that hinder effective teaching and learning,*** both inside and outside of school.[2] Furthermore, good learning conditions cannot exist without good teaching conditions, which exclude merit pay.[3] The most successful public schools have teachers' unions and effective local school councils that are responsive to their constituencies and that operate with democratic decision-making processes.[4]

MYTH: In this financial crisis, there is no additional funding available for education, but even if there were, increased funding does not improve education. Chicago's public schools already enjoy equitable funding, and if a community wants to raise more funds, it has that option.

REALITY: ***Financial and other resources can drastically change education quality***.[5] Wealthier communities can invest much more into their schools by way of strong local property values, private donations, voluntary fundraising, and the ability of some elected officials to advocate more effectively for additional resources. Consequently, public schools across the city operate on vastly different budgets. In Illinois, the

funding system is deemed "regressive" in a national study, because the state does not provide the additional resources required to provide an equal educational opportunity in settings of concentrated student poverty.[6] The typical gap between Chicago and suburbs of $5,000 per student per year results in a gap of 30 times that per classroom (of 30 students in a CPS class), or $150,000 per class per year—enough to pay another teacher and split the class size in half.[7] Budgets reflect priorities, and education does not fare well against prisons, for example. At a time when allocations for public education are shrinking, states are building new prisons and expanding detention centers. Across the nation, additional state spending on prisons was six times the increase of spending on higher education. In Illinois, the cost of incarcerating one adult is about 4.5 times the cost of educating one child. Research suggests that one more year of high school would significantly reduce crime and incarceration rates, and that increasing the male high-school graduation rate by 1% would save $1.4 billion nationwide.[8]

Research Supported Action Goals:

- Develop and implement policies that address historic educational inequities that arise from poverty, segregation, discrimination, and social isolation.

- Prioritize education budgeting and invest in public p-12 schools by, for example, reallocating more revenues from Tax Incremental Financing (TIF) districts that mostly support commercial development.

- Distribute funding and other resources equitably, by implementing broader tax redistribution including directing statewide taxpayer dollars to high-poverty districts that need state funding support[9] and by fully funding the Illinois Education Funding Advisory Board's minimum per-pupil funding level.

- Resist scapegoating unionized teachers and local school councils and, instead, support democratic processes such as teachers organizing and parents serving on governing bodies for their children's schools.

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VISION: Develop and Implement Education Policy and Reform Initiatives that are Primarily Community-, Learner- and Research-driven, Not Consumer- and Market-driven.

MYTH: School turnarounds, consolidations, and closures, including 49 closed schools in 2013 (a total of 150 schools since 2001), have benefited Chicago Public Schools by giving "failing" schools a new start through several programs, the most notable being Renaissance 2010.
REALITY: *First conceived by the Commercial Club of Chicago, Chicago's school reform policy—"Renaissance 2010"—was not based on sound research and analysis*, but on market principles of privatization, competition, and commercialization. CPS has even adopted a market structure in which "CEOs" are preferred over educators for the top leadership position, and Boards are appointed by the mayor, not elected by the people. Since the implementation of Renaissance 2010 and other school closure measures districtwide, high-school student achievement has not risen, and most of the lowest-performing high schools saw scores drop. Moreover, the process for identifying "failing schools" was neither consistent nor research-based. The process disproportionately affected low-income African American and Latino students by closing schools in

disadvantaged minority neighborhoods, while leaving untouched those schools in more affluent areas with comparable performance and enrollments.[10] Two research studies from 2012 showed high schools remaining the same or even declining, and 'turnaround' elementary schools underperforming their democratically led peers.[11] Additionally, since the first turnaround policies and school closures in the 1990s, there has been a significant loss of experienced African American teachers (from 40% of CPS teachers to 20% in 2012) and an increase in less experienced, white, and provisionally certified teachers. Most unfairly, students from closed schools end up in lower-performing schools, and 40% of closed Chicago schools have been converted into privately run charter schools. Adding to these consequences, CPS schools that were "turned around" through closure options have experienced increases in tensions and violence inside and outside of school, and special needs students in significant numbers are not provided the support and resources they need, which are prescribed by federal and state laws.[12]

MYTH: Because competition leads to improvement, school "choice" options are necessary, and because the private sector can do better than public schools, consumer-based "choice" options must involve privatization of education.
REALITY: Philanthropies, dominated by a handful of foundations that advance initiatives of choice, competition, deregulation, accountability tied to standardized test scores, and the dismantling of teacher unions, altogether spend almost $4 billion annually, with an increasing proportion going toward policy advocacy at the national level.[13] In some cases, poorer neighborhoods in Chicago saw reductions in funding even while enrollments rose, and there is evidence that choice exacerbates racial segregation and reduces opportunities for greater educational equity. School-choice, voucher, and restrictive-enrollment programs *have not proven to be more effective* in increasing district overall student achievement. Furthermore, there is clear evidence that choice programs exacerbate racial segregation.[14] Overall, the private sector has not proven more effective at improving schools, despite a rapid increase in expenditures for outsourcing services and products including school management, curriculum, and assessments. The majority of charter schools are seriously underfunded, spending $400 to $1400 less per pupil on instruction than neighborhood schools**.** [15]

MYTH: Charter schools are more effective than neighborhood schools based on standardized test scores, and their freedom from bureaucratic red tape makes them more efficient.
REALITY: Although standardized test scores are not necessarily the measure of a good education, *37% of charter schools actually do worse and 46% achieve the same on test-based measures as neighborhood schools*, with only 17% of charter schools performing better.[16] Charter schools spend less on instruction in part by having higher administrative costs, including for-profit management service.[17] They are exempted from Illinois state laws that require a voting majority of Local School Councils to be parents, and, in Chicago, fewer than 5% of charter-school board members are parents.[18] Charter schools are not all required to enroll students with special needs, including English language learners and students with disabilities, and are incentivized to push out and keep out lower-scoring students. Chicago elementary schools serve substantially more students with cost-intensive special needs than Chicago charter schools. While some parents and families may perceive that select specialty or charter schools provide viable pathways for some young people, the success of a small selection of these schools has not improved the overall school system.[19]

MYTH: Centralized, top-down reorganization of struggling schools, including closing low-performing schools and firing large numbers of teachers, is the best path to renewing public education.
REALITY: The common CPS practice of closing low-performing schools and other Race to the Top (RttT) impositions on schools have little support in educational research.[20] Alternative approaches that maintain democratic control, respect teacher unions, and work collaboratively with the larger community offer greater promise for improving student learning. A long list of Chicago schools that have shown significant improvement share these common features in addition to having strong, responsive school leadership, positive school wide relational trust, ongoing focused professional learning, and the systematic development and revision of curriculum.[21]

MYTH: Mayor-appointed school boards are better able to advance effective school reform.
REALITY: 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. Compared to Chicago, cities with elected boards have been more effective in responding to the challenges of large urban school systems.[22] Larry Cuban, a nationally respected education historian, says simply, "there is no connection at all [of mayoral control] with academic achievement." Even the Civic Committee of the Commercial Club of Chicago, a key sponsor of mayoral control and the regime of high-stakes test accountability, concluded that "large increases in some test scores being reported actually distorted the real picture. …The reality is that most of Chicago's students are still left far behind. Real student performance appears to have gone up a little in Chicago elementary schools during the past few years and even those gains then dissipate in high school."[23]

Parents of students and the larger community have grown increasingly critical of Chicago's mayor-appointed Board. In 2012 advisory referendum, 87% of voters in 327 precincts selected for this vote supported an elected board.[24]

Research Supported Action Goals:

- Draw on the expertise of educators and researchers, not primarily the business and philanthropy sectors, to develop policies and reforms.

- Suspend the school-turnaround and closure process, then develop and apply standards for school restructuring that are research-based, consistent, fair, and transparent.

- Enforce policies for public accountability, and require all schools that are supported by public funds to constitute Local School Councils with a voting majority of parents.

- Provide district leaders who are knowledgeable about education and urban contexts and skillful in collaborative and democratic decision-making processes, continue in the future with a credentialed superintendent for CPS, and transition from mayoral control to a democratically elected school board that is accountable to the public.

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VISION: Improve Teaching and Learning Effectiveness by Developing Standards, Curricula, and Assessments that are Student-centered, Holistic, Culturally Responsive, and Authentic, NOT Narrowly Skills- and Sorting-based.

MYTH: A standardized curriculum organized around the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) with an emphasis on heavily prescribed instruction, a significantly more challenging curriculum, and newly developed high-stakes tests in literacy and mathematics will significantly raise student achievement in Chicago and around the nation.
REALITY: The nation's 10-year experience under No Child Left Behind (NCLB) did little to increase student achievement. Harsh federal, state and local district sanctions, like teacher dismissals, school closings and other turnaround strategies, are set to continue the pressure on high-needs schools to narrow their curricula in order to prepare for the new generation of high-stakes tests under the Common Core State Standards. The CCSS are a major component of the federal and corporate reform agenda to eliminate teacher unions, sponsor privatization of public schools, and aggressively expand charter schools. New standards become one additional policy mandate that threatens the survival of democratically run public schools and aggravates the educational divide across the nation.[25]

MYTH: A national curriculum will equalize schools across the U.S.
REALITY: CCSS, like NCLB, does not propose a common foundation of resources for public education; therefore, schools remain largely class and race segregated with wide inequalities in resources. School funding inequities, along with measures of student poverty, correlate directly with disparities in student learning outcomes. International comparisons of school resource equity rank the U.S. near the bottom while having the highest childhood poverty rate among industrialized nations.[26] In contrast to what the proponents of the CCSS claim, the presence or absence of strong, demanding national standards has no relationship with significantly improving student success or equity.[27] For English language learners (ELLs), who are among the students in the lowest two quartiles on the National Assessment of Educational Progress, increased demands for text and task complexity within the CCSS have particular negative consequences.[28]

MYTH: New national testing tied to the Common Core will strengthen student learning and achievement.

REALITY: Extensive testing of new national assessments has revealed a dramatic increase in the number of students unable to demonstrate proficiency in math and literacy. Schools and students who struggled the most to meet NCLB accountability measures are even less likely to be well served by curricula designed with little knowledge of the unique needs of schools and communities. The development of Common Core and the tests tied to these national standards omitted English language learners who are at most risk of failing.[29] In following a failed course for school improvement, CCSS continue to pressure low-performing schools to gut valuable programs and devote limited resources to test preparation. One subject being cut is art, particularly for students in low-income communities of color, even though arts education contributes significantly to creative problem-solving skills and to social and emotional learning, which are essential for academic success.[30] In addition, early childhood education experts have also strongly criticized the CCSS as inappropriate and contradictory to the development needs of young children. [31]

MYTH: High-stakes testing for students and schools is an effective way to measure learning and to hold students, educators, and schools accountable.
REALITY: High-stakes tests may effectively measure a small set of student knowledge and skills, but they do not measure higher-order thinking skills and a broad set of knowledge, and, consequently, *offer a very narrow picture of what students have learned and how well teachers have taught.* Grade retention that results from narrow measures of academic preparedness can increase student risk for problems in school, including dropping out, and, even when the student is promoted, the use of such assessments to sort students creates tracks within grade levels that reflect racial, ethnic, and social-class differences and that function to direct entire categories of students toward low-wage jobs or incarceration.[32] When such narrow and biased assessments are then tied to teacher evaluation and compensation, the result is a system that rewards narrow and biased teaching.[33] Parents around the country have recognized these limitations and organized to opt their children out of high-stakes testing when possible. Even the CPS administration, reflecting teacher and parent concerns, in October 2014 called for a major delay in adding any new assessments tied to CCSS.

MYTH: Tying teacher evaluations to improvement in standardized test scores (value added) will improve teaching and student learning.
REALITY: Value-added measures for teacher evaluation, a central component of Race to the Top (RttT) and CCSS that requires standardized testing results to count for as much as 50% of teacher ratings, have no foundation in research. Studies on the use of student test scores to measure teacher effectiveness provide no evidence that such approaches are fair, reliable or accurate. Research shows that high-rated and low-rated teachers show radical swings in ratings from year to year, with teachers rated as strong one year falling dramatically the next year and lower-rated teachers rising to an excellent rating over the same period. In short, *attributing student gains or losses to a specific teacher is unsupported in education research*.[34] At best only about 7% to 10% of overall variation in student achievement can be attributed to a student's individual teacher. Much more significant are a child's socio-economic background, the collective make-up of a school and classroom, school resources, the curricula, and other factors.[35]

MYTH: Good teachers are primarily those who know what they are teaching and need not have learned how to teach or be able to connect to the community.
REALITY: Chicago Public Schools has reserved teaching vacancies for graduates of fast-track alternative certification programs, despite the fact that such graduates overwhelmingly report that they are ill-prepared for the reality of schools, and *have not shown to be more effective at raising student achievement.* Programs like Teach For America recruit bright college graduates, but offer little pre-service preparation, and then see their participants leave the profession after an average of three years.[36] In contrast, teachers with community knowledge and connections are more likely to raise student achievement, as well as to participate in long-term efforts at school-community partnerships and teacher professionalization, including collaborative improvement of working conditions and mentoring.[37]

Research Supported Action Goals

- Support teachers and school administrators in developing broad, rich curriculum that centers on diverse, flexible, and rigorous standards and that is targeted to their students' unique and varied strengths and needs.

- Create more complex and accurate assessments and use them not to penalize students or teachers, but to identify what additional resources or services are needed, such as with multi-layered performance-based assessments that are used formatively.

- Invest in high-quality and long-term teacher preparation.

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VISION: Ensure the Support, Dignity, and Human and Civil Rights of Every Student.

MYTH: Students are as likely to find the necessary support for school success in large schools and classrooms as in small ones.

REALITY: Next to parental income level, school size is the key factor in school success. Defined as under 500 students at the elementary level and between 1000 and 2,500 at the secondary level, *small schools do better on every measure*: graduation rates, attendance, grades, and test scores. Small schools have less violence, drug abuse, and suicide. Smaller schools and classrooms make it more likely for every child to be well-known by a teacher, for teachers to collaborate in supporting students, and for parents and families to participate. Not surprisingly, in the nation's wealthiest private schools, class size is typically limited to 15 in elementary schools and 25 in high schools.[38]

MYTH: Safer and more effective schools result from tougher punishment or militarized discipline.

REALITY: *There is no evidence that harsh punishment leads to safer schools.* However, research confirms that schools punish certain gender, racial, and sexual-identity groups more often and more severely than others. From as early as preschool, boys are expelled almost five times as often as girls; for all grade levels, African American students are suspended or expelled at rates several times higher than any other group; and youth who are not heterosexual experience school sanctions up to three times more often than heterosexual youth.[39] Similarly, there is no evidence that military programs increase academic success, and yet, *Chicago has the most militarized public-school system in the nation.* The military high schools, JROTC and the Cadet program enroll a disproportionately high percentage of students of color, reflecting a broader strategy to recruit African American and Latino males from low-income areas for first-responder positions in U.S. wars abroad. Military programs are reducing coursework in academic content (replacing them with JROTC courses, for example), and graduates of such programs do not always receive promised financial benefits. The majority of the cost of running the programs (over $9 million) is covered by Chicago taxpayers, not the Department of Defense.[40]

MYTH: Public education is already supportive and effective for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, questioning (LGBTQ), and gender non-conforming youth.

REALITY: Despite state laws and district policies that prohibit discrimination and address bullying based on sexual orientation and gender identity, *many LGBTQ and gender non-conforming youth are experiencing verbal and physical discrimination and harassment,* are not able to identify adult supporters, and are not learning accurate information about gender, sex, and sexual orientation; further, teacher-preparation programs in Illinois are not adequately preparing teachers to address such bias based on sexual orientation and gender identity.[41]

MYTH: Public education is already supportive and effective for English language learners and students who are undocumented immigrants.

REALITY: Despite evidence that *developmental bilingual education is correlated with the strongest outcomes for academic achievement in English for English language learners*, schools continue to operate as if such students will learn English faster through immersion in an English-only school experience.[42] Despite

the U.S. Supreme Court ruling that ***states may not discriminate against students enrolling in K-12 public schools on the basis of their legal status***, clear guidelines do not exist for higher education. While Illinois passed the 2011 DREAM Act, creating a private scholarship fund to support higher education for undocumented youth, access remains limited as undocumented students are not eligible for federal or state financial aid. Conservative estimates put the number of undocumented children at 1.7 million, with 65,000 graduating from high school having lived in the United States for five years or longer, and between 7,000-13,000 enrolling in colleges.[43]

Research Supported Action Goals

- Limit the number of students in every school and every classroom to the levels that research has determined to be optimal.

- Provide successful restorative- and transformational-justice programs instead of tougher punishment policies and practices.

- Halt the establishment and expansion of all military programs, phase out JROTC programs, and invest instead in programs that research has shown to be effective in fostering academic success, discipline, leadership, and college pathways.

- Improve both pre-service and in-service preparation for all school personnel about diversity and equity regarding sexual orientation and gender identity and expression, and provide adequate resources to support students, operate programs, and monitor compliance.

- Provide high-quality developmental bilingual education programs.

- In the absence of federal legalization or pathways such as the DREAM Act, create other avenues for accessible higher education.

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A WAY FORWARD: GUIDANCE FOR CHICAGO'S NEW MAYOR

What would a public school system that cherishes each student as invaluable look like? A school that nurtures each student would embrace her strengths, her family, her community, her creativity, and her potential. A system that takes responsibility for each student would work to achieve equitable resources and equitable outcomes. Such a system would significantly increase support for each student who is at risk of being failed by our society and schools. Each student failed would be seen as a crisis of incalculable loss caused by a systemic failure to properly engage and support. A school system that honors each student would celebrate and increase diversity in all realms. Each student would feel cared for and unique; increasing her love of learning would be the guide for personalized curricular decisions. Book learning would be in the service of greater projects and explorations. Field trips, art,

experiments, and projects would be the norm. Schools would be a meeting hub to launch meaningful activities in which academic content is learned along the way. Meaningful, contextualized learning would guide curricular and budgetary decisions. Bureaucracy would be bent to follow student needs. Education would act in the real world, and thus the value of the learning and action would be palpable for each student. Students would be honored for their ability to think new things, to see advantages and disadvantages, to work together, to build a better society.

Teachers would be treated as professionals; they would use their knowledge and authority to create educational experiences that work for each student. Teaching itself would be seen as a higher calling, one by which society remakes itself. The best and highest paid teachers would be sent to those students who are most at risk, for not even one student can be lost! Teaching would be a lifelong profession. Experience would be valued and passed on. Work conditions would be set to maximize long-term retention and learning. The many aspects of diversity of students and society would be mirrored by the diversity of the teachers.

Schools would not be seen as the salvation of society. Schools cannot do it alone. Schools are representatives of the societies in which they operate. Students, teachers, parents, and communities have common interests and should be collaborative partners in creating a society that values each and all. The assets of each school and community would be highlighted and enhanced. A school would dislodge notions that money, power, and knowledge are conflated and somehow related to a person's worth. Students would see that everyone is invaluable, and that therefore they are also invaluable. Schools would be a place for the practice of citizenship, hubs of democracy and action, rather than holding tanks where one is prepared to be a consumer, to be merely college and career ready. School, as a representation of society to the student, would show each student that he or she is needed, and needed in earnest!

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