

file Chicago

Public Schools

Innovation Comes to Chicago Public Schools

By JULIA VITULLO-MARTIN

Educating poor public school children seems an intractable problem in most big U.S. cities. But the Chicago public school system—once among the worst in the country—has set itself on a promising path.

Combining hands-on management from City Hall, back-to-basics teaching methods and tough disciplinary policies, Chicago has had three years of rising test scores in every category and every grade level. Truancy is down. And parents are responding. Following 13 years of decline, enrollment has climbed 30,000 to 427,000 over the past three years.

Mayor Richard M. Daley is central to Chicago's success. In 1995 the Illinois Legislature gave him sweeping managerial control over the schools, their unions and their \$3 billion-plus budget. In no other big city does the mayor have so much authority over education.

Some of Mr. Daley's aides and many of his enemies thought the schools were so hopeless he was bound to fail. But he seized on the opportunity to make radical changes. First, he took management of the schools away from professional educators and gave it to trusted aides from City Hall. Former chief of staff Gery Chico became president of the board and former budget director Paul Vallas chief executive officer. Responsibility begins and ends with the mayor, says Mr. Vallas—and every city agency knows it. "We don't have problems with cops working in schools, or getting drug houses [near schools] closed, or having rapid-response teams assigned," he says. "Nor do we have a board circumventing the CEO."

Second, even as Mayor Daley made peace with the teachers union, he dismissed the 17 unions in charge of school repairs. He authorized the central board and individual schools to contract with private firms.

Third, he balanced the budget, eliminating a \$1.3 billion deficit, and cut 13% of the central administrative staff without laying off a single classroom teacher.

But as Mr. Vallas has said repeatedly, balancing the budget is easy; improving things in the classroom is the real challenge. The triumvirate stress high standards and discipline.

Chicago has become the only big-city

school system to end "social promotion," the practice of sending students to the next grade whether or not they are performing at grade level. Mr. Vallas says that when the Daley team took over in 1995, they found that 9,700 of 1994's 27,000 high school graduates were reading at the sixth-grade level or below. Starting with eighth-grade students in 1996, the system required that students score above a cutoff on the Iowa Test of Basic Skills to be promoted. Those who scored low had to go to summer school; those who still didn't pass had to repeat the grade. In 1997 the third and the sixth grades likewise became "promotional gates."

To help close the academic deficit, Chicago has expanded after-school and summer-school programs. The schools are open and working into the evening year-round. Some 40% of the students attend the extended school-day program called Lighthouse, which offers evening academic and recreational programs as well as dinner. About 40% attend summer school. "A 185-day year is just not enough," says Mr. Vallas.

Is it working? Of the 7,756 eighth-graders held back in June 1998, 61% were promoted after summer school, and another 10% made it after an additional semester of help. And removing failing students has a beneficial effect on the classroom. "We've seen important changes in the culture of low-performing high schools, particularly among freshmen and sophomores," says Alfred G. Hess, director of the Center for Urban School Policy at Northwestern University. "Because the kids who did not make it through the gates are not present, you don't have anyone saying it's dumb to work hard and get good grades."

Under the new regime, Chicago schools also have far less tolerance for misbehavior. A student can be expelled to an alternative school for bringing a weapon to school or for being absent for more than 20 days. A student can also be expelled for commit-

ting a crime even while not at school. "If you're dangerous on Saturday, you'll be dangerous on Monday," says Mr. Vallas.

Administrators and teachers are also held accountable. No administrator except the inspector general has a contract guaranteeing employment. Principals no longer have tenure; Mr. Vallas removed 36 principals last year and estimates that he will remove another five or six this year. Although teachers have tenure and some state job protections, any good principal can move an ineffective teacher out of the system within a year, says Mr. Vallas. The system used to get rid of two or three bad teachers a year, he says; this year, it will dismiss 50 to 60.

Unlike most public-school heads, Mr. Vallas isn't afraid of private educational institutions. "We don't limit ourselves to just one way," he says. "On any given day we pay tuition for 2,000 pupils enrolled at corporate training academies, colleges and private institutes. We buy honor space in 13 universities, including the University of Chicago and Northwestern, for our best students." And unlike many superintendents, Mr. Vallas supports charter schools. Under state legislation, Chicago is allowed 15 charter schools. It has 14 in operation; Mr. Vallas closed one for poor performance.

Mr. Vallas, who went to a parochial school in a working-class neighborhood, has urged the Archdiocese of Chicago, whose own schools suffer from declining enrollment, to apply for a charter. "They can propose as many schools—we'll call them campuses—as they like under one charter," he says. "Our city is slowly losing the people and their knowledge and abilities as they close their schools. We'd rather not have the city lose that kind of resource."

Because the schools had been so bad, rising test scores do not mean Chicago students are now where they should be. Just 35% of elementary school students and 29% of high school students test at or above the national average in reading. Despite many successes and innovations, the struggle has just begun.

Ms. Vitullo-Martin edited "Breaking Away: The Future of Cities" (Twentieth Century Fund Press, 1996).



Richard M. Daley