The mission of Catalyst Chicago is to improve the education of all children through authoritative journalism and leadership of a constructive dialogue among students, parents, educators, community leaders and policymakers.

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DATA GUIDE
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- Student demographics
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- NAEP reading and math scores
- High school, college graduation rates

NEW ONLINE
An updated timeline of Chicago schools going back to the 1800s and updated citywide data with state report card information. Go to catalyst-chicago.org.

COVER ILLUSTRATION BY DENNIS NISHI

Cover art from the first issue of Catalyst, published in February 1990. [Illustration by Mary Flock]

Looking back
Catalyst founder Linda Lenz began covering Chicago schools in 1978 as a reporter for the Chicago Sun-Times. She left in 1989 to create this issues-oriented publication. Here she puts key developments in perspective. PAGE 3

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I’m often asked — by friends, television hosts, people I’ve just met — whether Chicago’s public schools have gotten any better after decades of reform. I know they’d like a simple yes or no, but I find neither satisfying.

Rather, it’s been more like yes and no, or two steps forward, one step back.

Take, for example, the five-year high school graduation rate. Between 2000 and 2015, it improved 23 percentage points, to 70 percent — an impressive accomplishment. However, African-American males continue to lag far behind.

Further, the University of Chicago Consortium on Chicago School Research reports that almost a third of graduates leave school with a grade-point average of less than 2.0, which means they are unlikely to have the skills needed for success in either college or the work force.

As is often the case, the one step back reflects racial and economic inequality. And the two steps forward leave a lot of territory to cover.

If you take a look at the actions the school district has taken to improve outcomes for kids, you also will see some progress. For example, years ago CPS policy moved away from out-of-school suspensions — a punishment that deprives students of instruction — toward restorative justice, which revolves around dialog between offenders and victims. In a similar vein, it also has made social and emotional learning, which can promote cognitive learning, a priority.

Yet schools have not received the training or support to put these policies into effect, which actually can have a negative effect on schools as staff spend time on goals that may be unattainable under the circumstances.

The larger problem, of course, is the dark cloud of insufficient and/or mis-placed resources hanging over the district’s head.

In the past 25 years, there have been dozens of failures of good intentions and sometimes even good policies to move schools, especially the most disadvantaged, forward. And it is those often wonky but important issues that occupy much of Catalyst’s thoughts and time, as we strive to show what is working, what is not working and why.

Where Catalyst came from

My idea for Catalyst Chicago began with the Chicago School Reform Act of 1988, which cracked open and breathed new life into a calcified school district. The key feature was revolutionary: creating elected local school councils—six parents, two community members and two teachers — that would have the power to select their schools’ principals, a make-or-break decision for schools regardless of who does the choosing.

That structure created a need, I thought, for an independent source of in-depth information on education issues so that council members and others newly involved in the system could knowledgeably participate in this grand experiment in local control.

For the previous decade, I had been the education reporter for the Chicago Sun-Times, and I knew that the news media would not have the time, space — we were still a print world — or inclination to dig deep into school-improvement issues on a regular basis.

Creating an editorial plan was easy, but I didn’t know how to put it into motion, so I consulted a savvy news source, Anne Hallett, who was then executive director of the Wieboldt Foundation. Anne said: “Go talk to the Community Renewal Society,” which at that time had been publishing The Chicago Reporter, an investigative newsletter focused on race and poverty, for 17 years.

At CRS I reunited with Roy Larson, the Reporter’s editor and publisher, who had been the religion editor at the Sun-
Times and my pod-mate. Roy melded my idea with CRS’S idea for a newsletter for parents, and together we went in search of funding. As it turned out, the MacArthur and Joyce foundations had been looking for a way to track implementation of the Reform Act, and The Chicago Community Trust was interested in assisting parents.

So in February 1990, the first issue of Catalyst rolled off the presses. Reviewing our early issues — and they are all online — I am struck by how little the major issues have changed. In our first few years, we reported on principal selection, testing, school choice, the shortage of bilingual teachers, funding equity and overcrowding in Hispanic communities.

The roots of reform

When Chicagoans talk about the arc of school reform these days, they typically point to 1995 as the beginning. That is when the Legislature put the mayor, then Richard M. Daley, firmly in charge of the school system.

But significant action to improve schools actually predates even the 1988 Reform Act. It began with the late Mayor Harold Washington, who in the early 1980s pulled together school officials, business leaders and reform advocates for closed-door meetings on how CPS could graduate students who were better prepared for college and employment. Faced with a rebellious City Council, there was little more Washington could do.

Then, in 1987, teachers went on strike for a record 19 days, giving Washington the imperative and opportunity to go public and set a big vision. His first move after the strike was to call a citywide conference to gather ideas about school reform. Hundreds of Chicagoans showed up for a rally and discussions.

Though the event was largely symbolic, the symbolism was telling: An African-America mayor was making clear that he expected major changes in a school system that for the first time had African-Americans as superintendent, school board president and teachers union president.

Washington went on to create the first-ever assembly of leaders from every sector of the city, from the CEOs of Amoco and Harris Bank to West Side parent activists. They held their plenary sessions in City Council chambers. Washington died before his Education Summit got under way and eventually gave rise to the 1988 Reform Act.

Early research by the Consortium on the newly decentralized school system found that about a third of the schools adopted practices that likely would produce achievement gains, another third adopted good but uncoordinated practices, and a third merely treaded water.

But it was mostly continuing labor unrest and the failure of test scores to rise immediately, as some had unrealistically expected, that led to the 1995 restructuring. The key change was a return to unfettered mayoral control. The 1988 law had created a grass-roots nominating committee that repeatedly gave Mayor Daley candidates he didn’t want. The 1995 law dismantled the body.

(There is a widespread misconception that the school board was elected before the mayor regained full control in 1995. So listen up: CHICAGO HAS NEVER...
ER HAD AN ELECTED SCHOOL BOARD. Indeed, Chicago mayors have been appointing school board members since 1872. Check out our online timeline for other interesting dates.)

The 1995 law also severely curtailed union bargaining rights, foreshadowing a legislative priority of our current governor, and freed up enough money so that Mayor Daley’s hand-picked school leaders could overcome red ink in the school district budget, sign a first-ever four-year teacher contract and launch popular new programs. But Springfield supplied no new money.

If these sound like Republican reforms, it’s because they are. At the time, Republicans controlled the Senate, House and governor’s office. But Democrats didn’t put up much of a fuss either.

The funding package included a divergence of taxes meant for pensions, one of the first such actions in a long series that handed us today’s financial crisis.

Mayoral control returns

The return of total mayoral control first brought us Paul Vallas, the mayor’s hard-charging budget chief, as Chicago Public Schools CEO and Gery Chico, the mayor’s chief of staff, as School Board president. Together, they set an agenda that continues to guide—or haunt, depending on your politics and perspective—CPS policies.

Accountability was their watchword. But their implementation was ill-informed. Vallas put 109 low-scoring schools on probation, a number impossible to handle well, and set test-score requirements for student promotion even though numerous studies had shown that holding kids back does them no good. CPS is now considering abandoning student retention entirely.

Vallas also welcomed charter schools, while most public school officials opposed them, and Chico was a champion for selective-enrollment high schools, which were aimed at keeping the middle class in the city.

Vallas eventually wore out his welcome at City Hall and was replaced in 2001 by Arne Duncan, then a mid-level CPS administrator who had caught the attention of a top Daley advisor.

Duncan has said, correctly in my view, that the best decision he ever made at CPS was to hire Barbara Eason-Watkins as chief education officer. Eason-Watkins was an ace principal in a South Side school, and as chief education officer she brought new attention to the bottom-line issues of teaching and learning.

However, Duncan is probably best known for Renaissance 2010, Mayor Daley’s controversial plan to close low-performing schools and replace them with 100 new ones, including privately run charter, contract and turnaround schools. At the latter, entire faculties were laid off, forcing teachers to reapply for their jobs.

In 2009, Duncan took these, as well as some less-disruptive initiatives, with him to his new job as U.S. secretary of education.

Duncan’s successors — Ron Huberman and Terry Mazany (under Daley) and Jean Claude Brizard (under Mayor Rahm Emanuel) — were not around long enough to set any new directions.

However, Emanuel has had a big impact from Day 1. In a first, he hand-picked not only the school system’s CEO, but also Brizard’s leadership team. They didn’t work out. (Brizard’s successor, Barbara Byrd-Bennett, resigned and was recently indicted on federal corruption charges in connection with a no-bid $20 million contract.)

Emanuel also lengthened the school day, a long-sought reform, but did it in a way that ignored school-level realities. And his combative stance against the teachers union paved the way for a seven-day strike, the first since 1987.

More recently, Emanuel stirred opposition with a structural reform that likely would have won favor in better financial times: student-based budgeting, which promotes equity in school staffing but tends to push out veteran, and thus more expensive, teachers when budgets are cut.

On the positive side, Emanuel has increased long-running investments in two areas known to make a difference: early childhood education and principal leadership.

However, Emanuel is likely to go down in history as the mayor who closed 49 schools in largely poor, African-American neighborhoods.

Few of the reforms adopted since 1995 had a full public airing, and that has fed growing activism by students.

There is a widespread misconception that the school board was elected before the mayor regained full control in 1995. So listen up: CHICAGO HAS NEVER HAD AN ELECTED SCHOOL BOARD.
Of the all the reforms that have swept through Chicago Public Schools in the past 25 years, the creation of local school councils is one of the few that persists.

Although their authority has been curtailed over the years and not all new or struggling schools have them, the councils in many ways continue to deliver on the initial vision of allowing parents and community members to be catalysts for change at their schools.

Created by the Legislature in 1988, these elected bodies of parents, teachers and community members were assembled to connect school leaders and teachers with families and make schools accountable to the people who know them best.

“What we wanted was the full participation of parents in the decision making in schools: principal selection and curriculum design, and the overall monitoring of the quality of education,” says Sokoni Karanja, founder and president of Centers for New Horizons, a Bronzeville-based social service organization that was a leader in the creation of LSCs in 1988.

“In the first few years, they were very effective and we saw major turnarounds at some schools,” Karanja added. “And there are still diehard parents that maintain their commitment to the LSCs, although there has been continuous reductions in their power.”

For our 25th anniversary issue, Catalyst talked with parent leaders at two schools in two of the neighborhoods that have changed the most since 1990: Belmont Cragin and Englewood.

In Belmont Cragin on the Northwest Side, a mother who moved there as the neighborhood swelled with Hispanic families describes how her initial worries about getting involved have given way to concerted activism to get more classrooms to relieve overcrowding.

Across town in Englewood, an African-American neighborhood experiencing dramatic enrollment declines and school closures, another mother works alongside the principal to improve the school and convince other families that it is one worth attending.

Short-lived support for LSC elections

There was great enthusiasm around the first LSC elections, held in October 1989 — 17,000 people ran for 5,400 seats. But the enthusiasm quickly subsided as foundation support for campaigns and training dried up and CPS declined to step in.

In the second election, held in 1991, there were just over 8,000 candidates, and in the most recent, 6,000.

Dion Miller Perez, a political consultant who sat on three LSCs in the 2000s and previously chaired the Chicago office of the now-defunct Cross-City Campaign for Urban School Re-
form, blames declining support from CPS leaders and foundations for the lower participation rates.

“There was a fickleness of funders supporting parental involvement in a grassroots way,” he says. “There used to be more foundation money for LSC training and parent involvement in general. That doesn’t exist anymore.”

In addition, in the early years, before the school system returned to unfettered mayoral control in 1995, the councils had support from Chicago’s business community, says Julie Woes-tehoff, who retired last year as executive director of the advocacy group Parents United for Responsible Education. Local companies used to encourage employees to run for seats but “you don’t hear about that anymore,” she added.

**Hard to measure impact**

The return of strong mayoral control so soon after LSCs came into existence makes it difficult to assess their impact on schools. However, research by the University of Chicago Consortium on Chicago School Research shows a correlation.

“In that period just after decentralization, we do see improvements in a lot of schools,” says Consortium Director Elaine Allensworth. “A lot of schools did show improvements in student test scores, though it seemed to be related to the economic conditions in the community. ... Then we start to see [scores] flatten out when mayoral control came in.”

Carlos Azcoitia, a former CPS principal, administrator and, most recently, School Board member, says that from his experience, councils are most effective when principals work to inform parents of upcoming decisions in a way that’s collaborative and trustful.

“The issue becomes, ‘Am I equipping councils and the community to know what students are supposed to learn and if they are learning it?’ And if they don’t learn it, what can the school do to make it happen?” says Azcoitia, who became a principal after he was chosen by Spry Elementary’s first-ever LSC in 1990.

But participation in a local school council that has power over principal selection and budget approval is not the only way for parents to have an impact on their schools.

Research by the Consortium, for example, has found that teachers at elementary schools are much more likely to stay on the job when there’s more parent participation such as picking up report cards, attending parent-teacher conferences, volunteering to help in the classroom, or raising money.

“When teachers feel like they’re working with parents as partners in educating students, that actually is the strongest predictor of the climate of safety and order in a school,” says Allensworth.
Belmont Cragin

From timid to tough

Speaking little English, Margarita Vasquez at first found school volunteer work intimidating. Now she is on the LSC fighting to relieve overcrowding.

By Melissa Sanchez

As with many parent activists, Margarita Vasquez’s involvement in her children’s schooling began slowly with the basics, encouraging them to do their homework, to study and not to drop out, as she had done as a teenager in Mexico City.

It was the late 1990s, and Vasquez and her husband both had full-time jobs as factory workers, so they had little time to devote to the schools their two children attended, Hanson Park and Schubert elementary.

It wasn’t until their third and youngest child, Alicia, was born a decade later that she decided to quit work to spend more time with her children.

“I finally had more time to volunteer at the school,” says Vasquez, who would help out in her daughter’s classes at Hanson Park two to three full days a week.

At first the prospect of volunteering was intimidating because Vasquez doesn’t speak much English. It’s a similar story for many other parents at Hanson Park, where about 44 percent of students required bilingual services last year.

That’s more than double the percentage of Hanson Park students who needed those services 25 years earlier, a reflection of how dramatically the neighborhood has changed. When Vasquez’s family first arrived in Belmont Cragin in the early 1990s, the area was starting to make the transition from a white, middle-class neighborhood with Polish roots to the majority-Hispanic neighborhood it is today.

Belmont Cragin is the neighborhood that’s seen the biggest overall population gains since 1990 — including the most new Hispanic residents, the most new public school students and the biggest loss of white students attending public and private schools. The newcomers are both new immigrants and
families that have been displaced from gentrifying communities farther east, like West Town and Logan Square.

As a result of these demographic shifts, more community organizations are getting involved in neighborhood-level education issues. The Albany Park Neighborhood Association, for example, changed its name to Communities United in part out of recognition that many of its previous members had moved west to neighborhoods like Belmont Cragin, where the organization now has a full-time education organizer who works with parents like Vasquez.

After several years of volunteering at Hanson Park, Vasquez was encouraged by teachers and staff to run for the local school council — that was two years ago. “I got 57 votes,” she says, still a little stunned that she was elected. “I didn’t think so many people would support me.”

Participating in the LSC elections felt like a unique privilege to Vasquez. Although she’s in the U.S. legally, she is not a U.S. citizen and cannot vote in general elections.

One of seven parent candidates for six seats, Vasquez won easily. Not all schools generate such interest — in last year’s LSC election, a third of the schools failed to attract enough parent candidates to fill the available seats.

**Bursting at the seams**

Vasquez was very familiar with the school’s No. 1 issue, overcrowding. Hanson Park parents, in collaboration with the school’s principal and Communities United, are petitioning the Board of Education for an annex and to make building improvements to a set of classrooms that are leased from a church across the street.

“The kids are crammed into that building,” says Vasquez. Even so, she says, parents tend to keep their children at Hanson Park because they work and siblings have to walk them home.

While other neighborhoods are struggling with declining enrollment and school closures, in Belmont Cragin most schools are at or over capacity.

According to CPS data from the 2014-2015 school year, 11 of the 18 schools in the Belmont Cragin area were at or above 100 percent capacity, and six of those depend on mobile classrooms or leased space elsewhere to handle all the students.

For Hanson Park, that means using a half-dozen mobile classrooms behind the main school building and an additional 18 classrooms from a shuttered Catholic school across the street — one of the dozens of parochial schools that have closed in the city since 1990.

And still, the main hallway doubles as a library, teachers don’t have a lounge, lunch spans six periods, starting at 10:30 a.m., and there is no storage space, so lunchroom supplies and boxes sometimes crowd the hallways.

Jorge Prieto Math and Science Academy was opened six years ago to help alleviate overcrowding, but that barely made a dent. In fact, Hanson Park’s enrollment has grown from 1,340 in 2009 to just under 1,600 last school year.

“This neighborhood is saturated with young people,” says Hanson Park’s principal, David Belanger.

**Volunteers hard to get**

Despite the activism around overcrowding, Vasquez says it’s always a challenge to recruit other parents to serve as volunteers. “We used to have 27 volunteers and now we have nine,” she says. “I think it’s because parents have to work so much, it’s hard to make time for the school.”

In addition, Vasquez still finds parents who, like her, are intimidated by the language barrier — even though she’s learned that “nowadays every school has somebody on staff who speaks Spanish.”

Overall, Hanson Park ranks better than average for family involvement, as measured by indicators that the University of Chicago Consortium on Chicago School Research developed. Teacher surveys indicate “strong” levels of teacher-parent trust and outreach to parents. But parent involvement in the school, as measured by volunteering in the classroom or contacting teachers about student performance, was rated “neutral” — which is still slightly higher than the CPS average.

(Belanger encourages and celebrates parent involvement at the school. For example, as the school year came to an end last year, Belanger cooked breakfast for parent volunteers one morning and rewarded those parents with certificates of recognition.)

In addition, the school partnered...
Belmont Cragin

Margarita Vasquez, second from left, is a regular volunteer at Hanson Park Elementary. She was nominated for secretary of the school’s parent advisory committee but said she was too busy and voted for someone else. [Photo by Michelle Kanaar]

with Communities United for a year-end “education conference” that included a concert as well as workshops on issues ranging from scholarships to undocumented students to health care to renters’ rights. More than 500 parents and students showed up, Belanger said, marveling at the turnout on a weeknight.

**Academics saved principal’s job**

The Hanson Park LSC has had a sometimes shaky relationship with the principal, who had to lobby hard to convince enough members to vote to renew his contract two years ago. Belanger, who has now been principal for six years, blamed it on internal politics, as test scores and other metrics at the school have improved in recent years.

Vasquez says that LSC members finally agreed to keep Belanger because of improved academics, a decision validated by the school’s attaining CPS’s highest level, 1-plus, last year.

Despite the high rating, Belanger worries about the fairness in using the same metrics across all CPS schools — especially attendance. Elementary schools with average daily attendance rates of 96 percent or higher get the most points on that part of the district’s accountability system. But for Hanson Park, which is a “cluster school” for students with disabilities and other special needs, it takes extraordinary work, and the school still fell a fraction of a percentage point short.

“That’s a pretty high bar, especially when you add in the 80-some kids who are in that low-incidence program, kids who are medically fragile, who have trach tubes or feeding tubes or ventilators,” Belanger says. “They miss a lot of days.”

For students who don’t have severe health problems but are still chronically absent, Belanger asks teachers to send letters home to remind parents that attendance is compulsory. In addition, he’s asked a neighborhood police sergeant in charge of schools to make a handful of home visits to talk with parents — although he assures there have been no arrests. “It’s a delicate balance,” Belanger admits.

So far, Vasquez says, she’s satisfied with the principal’s performance — but will evaluate closely whether he helps Hanson Park meet its goals. She and other parents have asked Belanger to work on improving the school climate and do a better job of evaluating teachers and giving feedback, particularly to those in a wing of the school that is dedicated to students with disabilities.

“There’ve been improvements,” Vasquez says. “But the school can still do better. And the council will keep asking for more improvements.”
Sabrina Jackson, a parent and former LSC member at Bass Elementary, is a school crossing guard through the city’s Safe Passage program. Since she is on the CPS payroll, she can no longer serve on the council, under state law. [Photo by Michelle Kanaar]

All in the family

Though on probation for decades, Bass Elementary in Englewood still attracts parents who, like Sabrina Jackson, see it as an extension of the family.

By Melissa Sanchez

Sabrina Jackson says she never really wanted to send her children anywhere but the school down the street, Perkins Bass Elementary.

It’s where she attended when her family moved back to Chicago’s Englewood neighborhood after trying their luck in the South for a few years. Her mother, aunts and uncles, nieces and nephews, and now even her great nieces and nephews have all had classes in this weathered brick building alongside Ogden Park.

“They say churches can be a stabilizing force in a neighborhood, but schools are too, especially if they’ve been in the neighborhood forever,” says Jackson, whose four children have or are currently attending Bass.

Englewood is an area that could use stabilizing. Since 1990, the neighborhood has lost more black families than any other in Chicago. And enrollment at Bass has been falling for years, reflecting the population trends. It dropped from more than 700 in 1990 to 336 by the start of the 2012-2013 school year.

The following year, Bass became a receiving school for children displaced by the closing of 49 schools, including six in the Englewood area, and saw its enrollment soar to 566 students. Still, enrollment took a slight hit again last school year, dropping to 522 students.

The school’s probationary status hasn’t helped, says Jackson. Although the school has been improving in recent years, Bass has been on CPS probation for nearly two decades.

Even Jackson, who sees this place as an extension of her own family, admits
Englewood is an area that could use stabilizing. Since 1990, the neighborhood has lost more black families than any other in Chicago. And enrollment at Bass has been falling for years, reflecting the population trends.

Still, it was only marginally better than Bass and, so, after Orlando graduated from 8th grade, Jackson felt compelled to transfer her daughter back to Bass. “Bass had been in my family for four generations,” she says. “It’s part of my heritage.”

At the time, Jackson, a single mom, was working full-time and attending community college. She occasionally attended parent meetings at Bass but didn’t have time to commit to much else.

Then in 2006 Jackson and her family moved to South Bend, Ind., taking advantage of an opportunity to live in affordable housing, but she returned a year later to care for her ailing parents. At that point, she was unemployed and had time to spend at the school.

That year, 2007, she became a regular classroom volunteer. She joined the school’s parent advisory committee and ran for a seat on the local school council. “Shortly after that, I became chair of both of them,” she says. “It was basically … going up to the parents, introducing yourself, shaking their hands, getting to know them, inviting them into the school and talking with them, trying to be their support system.”

Hiring a new principal

However, her most important contribution to the school came in 2012, when she participated as an LSC member in recommending a new principal for Bass when the former principal retired. (Because the school was on probation, the school council’s choice had to be approved by Central Office.)

Jackson led a group of parents and teachers who interviewed more than two-dozen candidates for the job and eventually offered the post to Carolyn Jones, who took over during the 2012-2013 school year.

Two of Jones’ big selling points were her knowledge of the Common Core State Standards and her use of data to improve academics. Jones, who had gotten her start as a teacher in district-run schools, learned about both during a brief stint in administration at a charter school network that was an early adopter of the standards.

In Jones’ first year at Bass, about 31 percent of students met or exceeded state standards in reading and math. The following year, with Bass absorbing more than 300 students from closed schools, test scores plummeted, with just under 23 percent meeting standards.

Last year, Jackson’s third at the school, she brought in a personalized learning program that includes interim assessments. “This way we test students four times a year to get a temperature of their progress,” Jackson said. “These interims gave us an opportunity to actually give feedback because we get the data within 48 hours of the students taking the assessment. Now teachers can come back to the table and plan based on that data, so that instruction matches students where they are.”

While the district has not released last year’s official test score data, Jones says the growth she sees helps put the school on track to jump from a Level 3 — the lowest rating in the district’s five-tier system — to a Level 1. (The highest level is a Level 1-plus.)

Apart from the interim assessments, Jones was also able to hire more than a half-dozen teachers in her first year, due to a number of retirements. “It was almost like a turnaround,” she describes. Putting a team in place that she helped choose — including teachers she’d worked with at other schools — has helped her build the school culture she wants.

Parent involvement outside the LSC

Soon after Jones’ arrival, several members of the LSC resigned, citing conflicts within the council. Jackson declined to elaborate, saying only that “there was a lot of negativity” between various members. District officials considered the council “non-functioning” and essentially dissolved the body for nearly two years until the next elections.

During that period off the LSC, Jackson took on a part-time paid position as
a monitor for the school’s Safe Passage program. Under the district’s ethics policy, parents and community members are prohibited from joining councils if they are on the payroll of CPS or a subcontractor. So when elections took place again in the spring of 2014, Jackson decided that the financial stability of the job was more important for her family than a position on the council, and she didn’t run.

“I hate that there’s a conflict of interest,” she says. “I wish I could do both.”

Last year just four parents ran for six available seats on the Bass LSC. Jones says the employment policy can make it challenging to recruit parents for the council in low-income neighborhoods with few employment options.

“They want jobs, and they know that they can’t do both,” Jones notes. “These are people who … know the community, so I want them on these spots along the way, keeping my kids safe. At the same time they’d be the advocates for the help that I need to keep moving the school in the right direction [through the LSCs].”

Despite the low LSC participation, family involvement at Bass is slightly better than at demographically similar schools and slightly behind the district as a whole, according to survey research by the University of Chicago Consortium on Chicago School Research. The Consortium’s 5Essentials survey identifies how well schools are organized for improvement based on five indicators, including family involvement.

Under that category, Bass is considered to be doing a “neutral” job on measures of parent outreach, teacher-parent trust and parental involvement in the school.

Even though Jackson is no longer on the LSC, she continues to volunteer at the school and head its parent advisory committee. She’s a dogged door knocker who routinely is spreading the word about the improvements happening at Bass — “bragging about the school,” as she puts it — and trying to convince new families to consider it as an option.

She works on the Safe Passage route before and after school, but is inside the building most of the day in the parent room. “We have computers, a TV, fridge, microwave. Parents can come in, find resources, search for jobs,” she says.

Bass has also teamed up with parents and administrators from other neighborhood schools to share resources and outreach for community meetings. They bring in local organizations that offer classes in computer literacy, financial stability, parenting skills and even stress management, Jackson says. “We invite each other, and everybody helps build up the rapport in the community with parents.”
In the past two and a half decades, the number and types of schools in the Chicago Public Schools have risen dramatically even as enrollment has declined. The face of the student body and teaching corps has undergone significant change. And although the system still lags behind the state on many measures, CPS has seen improved test scores and rising high school and college graduation rates.

By Kalyn Belsha
THE DISTRICT AT A GLANCE

1990

- 507 schools
- 13% high school
- 87% elementary

Enrollment: 401,554

ALL 507 district-run

2015

- 660 schools
- 27% high school
- 73% elementary

Enrollment: 395,079*

Note: In 2015, there were also 13 alternative learning option programs, but CPS does not include them in the total school count.

STUDENT DEMOGRAPHICS

1990

- 58% black
- 27% white
- 15% Latino
- 3% other

- 70% low-income
- 11% English learners
- 10% special education

2014

- 39% black
- 46% Latino
- 12% white
- 6% other

- 88% low-income
- 17% English learners
- 13% special education

The percentage of schools with 95 percent or more students of the same race has dropped from 50% to 43% since 1990, but the total number has increased. Reflecting the district’s demographic trends, there are 18 fewer black schools but 51 more Hispanic schools.

TEACHER DEMOGRAPHICS

1990

- 48% black
- 44% Latino
- 6% white
- 2% other

- 16.7 average years experience
- 42% with masters degree

2013

- 50% white
- 58% with masters degree
- 24% black
- 19% Latino
- 7% other

- 11.9 average years experience**
- 42% graduated within six years

Notes: *Enrollment figures are from the Illinois state report card. At press time, 2014 numbers were the latest available. **The latest data on average years of teaching experience are from 2011. ***On Oct. 1, CPS released re-calculated graduation rates from 2011 on because some dropouts were miscoded.

Student achievement

NAEP 4th-Grade Reading

<table>
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<th>Year</th>
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NAEP 4th-Grade Math

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HIGH SCHOOL GRADUATION AND BEYOND

- 27% of the Class of 2000 immediately enrolled in a four-year college. Of those, 42% graduated within six years.
- 33% of the Class of 2006 immediately enrolled in a four-year college. Of those, 49% graduated within six years.

Notes: "Enrollment figures are from the Illinois state report card. At press time, 2014 numbers were the latest available. **The latest data on average years of teaching experience are from 2011. ***On Oct. 1, CPS released re-calculated graduation rates from 2011 on because some dropouts were miscoded.

Sources: Chicago Public Schools, Illinois state report card, National Center for Education Statistics, University of Chicago Consortium on Chicago School Research
‘Considerable unsung progress’

By Elaine Allensworth

W

ith budget cuts, union discontent and a sizeable list of pernicious problems, the education landscape in Chicago today looks a lot like it did 25 years ago. Yet for all the unsolved challenges that remain, Chicago has also seen considerable unsung progress.

Twenty-five years ago we knew astonishingly little about the state of the school district. Today we complain that student achievement data provide an incomplete picture of what is happening with our children and schools. Twenty-five years ago we didn’t even have reliable measures. Today, we fear that the contentiousness of public discourse will distort data and facts. A quarter century ago, the discourse was just as contentious, but there were no data.

Conversations today, though still difficult, are significantly better-informed.

Part of that progress comes from having a coherent framework for understanding what schools must have in place before they can improve.

In the early 1990s, a coalition of researchers, policymakers, principals, teachers and local school council members came together under the umbrella of the Consortium on Chicago School Research to develop a framework. The final product consisted of five essential supports: effective leaders, collaborative teachers, involved families, ambitious instruction and a supportive environment.

Since then, Consortium research has found that schools that are strong on at least three of the 5Essentials, as they are known, were 10 times more likely to improve than those that were weak on three or more Essentials.

In Chicago and beyond, these ideas have gained broad buy-in as beacons that can guide school improvement. While they don’t offer a tidy roadmap, they do help us identify where there has been progress, where the district is stumbling, and why.

Unintended consequences

A school district has a fairly broad set of policy levers: holding back low-achieving students; administering tests; expanding the school day; threatening schools with probation or closure if they don’t improve, and on and on. While each of those policy levers ostensibly aims to improve student achievement, in reality few build school capacity. A policy might address one aspect of the 5Essentials but have adverse consequences for others.

Schools already strong on the 5Essentials may be able to use a new policy to their advantage, while for others it becomes yet another district-mandated burden on top of myriad other demands.

Take, for example, a longer school day. For a school that thinks strategically about their 5Essentials, it could be a boon to teacher collaboration, allowing for more collaborative planning and group problem-solving.

But it could also have negative effects on school climate — think exhausted kids with more time to get in trouble and more programs and structures for staff to manage. In disorganized schools, a well-meaning influx of support can actually lead to a decrease in program coherence and lower student achievement. This doesn’t mean they don’t need resources or interventions; it means there is no such thing as a quick fix.

It starts with adults inside the school

Statewide surveys of teachers and students show that Chicago outpaces the rest of the state on effective leaders and ambitious instruction. The notion of the principal as an instructional leader is now commonplace. Twenty-five years ago it was revolutionary.

Teachers view their jobs differently, too. When Chicago’s dropout rate was over 50 percent, many teachers didn’t think they could do anything about it. Some students were going to drop out, and that was that.

But when Consortium research showed that course failure and absences in 9th grade were driving dropouts — and the district followed up with actionable data to identify and prevent students from falling off-track — dropouts became a problem that teachers could own, work on together and solve.

Community context matters — a lot

Compared to other districts in Illinois, Chicago is weaker in family engagement. It’s not hard to hypothesize why. Fewer than half of students attend their neighborhood schools, so travel times are long and parents may live far away.

At least as important, though, is the fact that 88 percent of CPS families are low-income. While there are examples of successful schools in high-poverty neighborhoods, there is no denying that it’s harder to have a strong school in neighborhoods with extreme poverty.

In the past 25 years, Chicago has seen major shifts in demographics, housing and the economy. But it hasn’t solved entrenched poverty, and the schools facing extreme disadvantage are struggling on multiple fronts.

Still, on average, Chicago students today make much stronger learning gains than students in the rest of state. Graduation rates are way up, and so are the achievement levels of those graduates. We learn more everyday about how to support schools, teachers and students. Continued progress in the next 25 years will depend on whether we put that knowledge to work — not quick-fix policies.
Public schools losing the public?

By Peter Cunningham

Does the public have confidence in public education? That’s the foremost question on my mind as Catalyst marks its 25th year reporting on the third-largest school district in the country and the larger national trends shaping public education.

The biggest threat to public education is not low expectations, increasing poverty, teacher unions or education reform. The real threat is if Americans stop believing in the power of public education to lift the masses into the middle class and strengthen society. Today there are several indications that public confidence in public education is waning.

First off, most opinion surveys show that voters, especially parents, think our education system is on the wrong track, even as they profess high levels of satisfaction with their own schools.

Second, the parents of nearly 10 million children — 17 percent of all kids — have left traditional public schools for private schools, charter schools or homeschooling. Is there a tipping point — 25 percent, 40 percent, 50 percent — where enough parents and taxpayers bypass the system that they are less willing to pay for it? With voucher programs now in 13 states, and more expected each year, the trends are ominous.

It is, perhaps, not a coincidence that state funding for public education is also way down. As of last fall, 35 states were spending less on education than before the 2008 recession.

Poor children of color a majority

Meanwhile, for the first time in history, a majority of public school students are both low-income and members of minority groups. Are the elected representatives of the broad middle class signaling that they will not fairly or adequately fund a school system serving mostly low-income children of color? The fact remains that America spends, on average, more per-pupil than most other countries, but averages mask inequity. We spend much less on poor kids than on wealthier ones.

Americans also don’t want to pay teachers on par with professions like law and medicine. When pollsters inform taxpayers of actual teacher salaries — the national median is $55,000 — support for pay increases goes down. Not surprisingly, in some states, fewer students are entering the field, and teacher shortages are increasingly common, especially in high-need specialties like bilingual, math, science and special education.

Why is public confidence in public education declining? After all, test scores, high school graduation rates and college enrollment are at an all-time high.

Meanwhile, reforms have taken hold all across America. Currently, 43 states allow public charter schools, and 46 states have raised learning standards. All but a handful of states are implementing new ways of evaluating teachers to identify the best, help others improve and counsel out the truly ineffective ones.

Arguing with increasing acrimony

We should be celebrating this progress, but instead we’re arguing with increasing acrimony. Reformers continue to insist that the status quo is not working and demand higher standards, more accountability and choice. Opponents of reform insist poverty is the real problem, that accountability scapegoats teachers, that choice creams the better students, and that inappropriately high standards doom kids to fail.

Meanwhile, a small but growing number of parents frustrated with over-testing are opting their children out of state tests, undermining our ability to track progress. In some states, teacher unions actively encourage parents to opt out, weakening the case for reform.

The reality is that change is hard and slow. Today, a quarter century after the first charter opened in Minnesota, a third of the nation’s 6,700 charter schools outperform traditional schools. Twenty-five years after Teach For America began recruiting top college students to go into teaching, most teachers still come from second-rate schools of education.

Education reform has successfully created many islands of promise in an ocean of mediocrity, but few if any places have taken reform to scale. In a decentralized system like our country’s, with 14,000 school districts of varying shape, size and need, systemic change is near impossible. But we can still hope.

We can hope that increased transparency around student outcomes will empower a new generation of parents to impose organic accountability on schools and demand better education for their children. We can hope that reformers reflect on the unintended consequences of their policies, like over-testing, and work to minimize them.

We can hope that teachers unions recognize that resisting accountability is not in their self-interest because it may be driving people out of the system and helps make the case for defunding. We can hope that business interests and fund state politicians will convince them that education is a needed investment to keep America competitive in a global economy.

The only way to rebuild public confidence in public education is by confronting our problems, not denying them. If we reach a point where America’s will to improve our schools more closely matches the need to improve our schools, our children just might get the education they deserve.
‘In decline since the ’70s’

An expert on urban schools no longer sees education as the great equalizer

In a wide-ranging interview earlier this summer, Pedro Noguera, a leading national voice on urban education, told Catalyst that these days “education is largely reproducing the inequities in society.”

Noguera is a distinguished professor in the Graduate School of Education and Information Sciences at the University of California, Los Angeles, where he also directs the Center for the Study of School Transformation. His research focuses on how schools are influenced by social and economic conditions.

He spoke with former Editor-in-Chief Lorraine Forte and Associate Editor Melissa Sanchez.

A lot of people say public education is dead or under assault. Is that true? Well, I definitely think it’s under assault. This is not just a Chicago issue. It’s happening in every major city across the country. But we have to look at it two ways. On the one hand, the reason for the assault is because there has been pervasive failure in those schools.

On the other, what has emerged as the solution is charter schools, a dismantling of the public system. There are real problems with that — the main one being that there’s no means to have real, deep civic engagement through charter schools. Charter schools are quasi-public institutions. They’re not accountable to the broader public. They’re not even accountable to the people they serve. They’re accountable to their boards.

Beyond that, if public schools historically have been important anchors to communities … then why have we allowed our public schools to have such an impoverished view of reform? The schools we’ve created and the vision of reform — and Chicago has exemplified this — is not about attracting middle-class people back to public schools.

How could schools attract middle-class people? Desegregation triggered some of the flight of not just the white middle class, but black middle class. The only thing that would make it possible to have schools that [are] integrated on the basis of race and class is high quality. That should be the vision driving reform — high-quality schools that offer a range of opportunities to kids and enriched education that would make people say, “Yeah, I want my kids in there.”

Does that mean that Chicago is going about it the wrong way? Most cities are. And the sad thing is that we’re not even doing as good as we did in the ’60s. I was talking to a colleague yesterday who was describing the high school he went to in the Bronx. At that time, it had 5,300 kids and was integrated — race and class integrated. It offered physics and was sending lots of kids to college. It was a school middle-class people put their kids into. Now, it has more homeless kids than any school in the city, more recently incarcerated kids.

Here in Chicago there’s a real distrust of the district. Nobody trusts CPS. For good reason. It’s such an inefficient system. They are creating so many charter schools without any real thought about population, and so you have all these schools now that are under-populated right next to new schools. It makes no sense.

Would an elected school board help? I don’t think that by itself is any kind of cure. The fact is that in cities that have elected school boards, a lot of people don’t even vote. A lot of people run unopposed. A lot of people don’t really know about the decisions that are being made.

You were on an elected school board. That’s why I know they’re overrated.

In Illinois, like elsewhere, it’s getting harder to become a teacher. How do you balance this drive for more quality with getting human beings into buildings? It’s a huge problem. There are so many examples, particularly in education, where they’ll seize upon a solution and never understand the consequences. They make the exams more rigorous, but they’re not working to make the job more attractive. They’re not figuring out what’s the best predictor for who’s going to be a good teacher. Is it this test or is it other things that matter?

What do you do to attract teachers? You have to make the work conditions better. It is primarily the work conditions that drive a lot of people out of teaching. They’re in schools that are under-resourced, they’re in classrooms where they’re overwhelmed by the needs of the kids. They’re not well-prepared. They’re not well-supported. Those are not conditions that lead highly skilled people to want to stay in teaching.

Most teachers are young white women. What do you say to them as they start teaching in predominantly poor and black or Hispanic schools? I would say that I hope she is going to get support. That she’s not going to be asked to teach the most challenging classes, which is what we often do to new teachers. I hope she is going to know how to develop alliances with the kids and the parents so she doesn’t feel isolated and overwhelmed. And I hope that she is going to know not simply the content, but how to teach the content to the children.
Catalyst caught up with Pedro Noguera, of the University of California, Los Angeles, in June at the University of Chicago's Logan Center, where he took part in an education conference. [Photo by Marc Monaghan]

she’s going to have in front of her.

Because that’s the real challenge: developing that relationship between teachers and students, especially when they come from a different background from the kids. If they don’t know how to build that relationship, a lot of times, regardless of where they got their degree, they may not be effective.

**How do you rate the impact of U.S. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan’s policies over the past seven years?** Very much a lost opportunity. Most of the policies that have come out of the Obama Administration have been identical to those of the Bush Administration. Race to the Top was just another version of No Child Left Behind, which brought in many ill-conceived plans to improve schools or to judge teachers by test scores. Only in the last year, through their civil rights department, have we started to talk about disparities in opportunities and raised equity as an issue.

**What kind of choice do parents want?** What parents don’t want is to be forced to go to bad schools. So if choice gives them a way to get out of that, then yeah, they’ll take that. But most parents would prefer a neighborhood school that they can walk to, with good after-school programs for their kids.

**Do you think education can still be the great equalizer?** Not the way it’s being conceived now. Right now, education is largely reproducing the inequities in our society. We’ve been on a period of decline since the ’70s. But there was a time when we saw gaps closing in this country, and it was because of what we were doing not only in schools but outside of schools to support families. It’s about the vision. If you start by saying, we want to create schools that this community will be proud of, we want to create schools that will attract people of diverse backgrounds … you would end up with very different schools than you have now.

**There’s been a lot of talk about integration in recent months. How do you do that in a district like Chicago, where 90 percent of kids are black and Hispanic?** But look at the demographics of the city. You have a lot of white people living here. You can’t force anybody to put their kids in the schools. But high-quality schools, particularly in neighborhoods that are more integrated largely because of gentrification, create an opportunity to have more integrated schools.

**It is true that some neighborhood schools are becoming more integrated. But poor people are being pushed out of the city.** That’s why you can’t expect schools to do this by themselves. That’s where the mayor has to step up and think about what kind of housing policies are needed to stabilize communities for low-income residents? How do you deal with transportation, jobs and services in those neighborhoods?
Thank you to the host committee for our “Celebration and Send-off,” the culminating event in Catalyst’s yearlong community engagement, “Education: Then, Now, Next. Celebrating 25 years of Catalyst Chicago.”

Co-chairs:
Robin Steans and Terry Mazany

Members:
Dom Belmonte
Nancy Brandt
Vicki Chou and Steve Tozer
Rev. Curtiss de Young
Cornelia Grumman
Anne Hallett
Martha Jantho
Alton Miller
Ted and Susan Oppenheimer
Penny Sebring and Charles Lewis
Don Wycliff

Thank you!

To the hundreds of people who participated in our Classroom Story Slams and Critical Conversation forums, wrote “My Catalyst” stories and shared our “Then, Now, Next Almanac” postings.

To our story slam winners:
Ray Salazar, Dakota Prosch and Abdel Shakur

To our event partners:
WTTW / American Graduate, the Chicago Public Library, The School Project and the Union League Club of Chicago

To our sponsors: