About this issue

Teaching that makes reading come alive

"Reading itself is fun....Reading instruction can be boring." Lots of kids could tell you that. But these words come from a prestigious commission that wrote a landmark report, Becoming a Nation of Readers. In 1983, the National Academy of Education convened the Commission on Reading to analyze studies of human cognition, or knowledge acquisition, from the fields of the psychology of language, linguistics, child development and behavioral science. The Commission also reviewed research on what goes on in classrooms.

The result was a report that brought the process of reading and learning to read into much clearer focus. Reading is not simply adding up the meanings of words, sentences and paragraphs, as was commonly believed. Rather, the report says, "Reading is a process in which information from the text and the knowledge possessed by the reader act together to produce meaning."

Much reading instruction, however, is based on the old stepping-stone definition. Children fill out worksheets, practice reading "skills" such as identifying character traits, and read the predigested stories of basal readers, which are reading textbooks with controlled and limited vocabularies. At the end of these stories, they answer questions asked by the publishers. As the Commission observed, reading instruction can be boring.

In this issue, CATALYST visits the classrooms of Chicago teachers who are making reading fun for children in preschool through high school. A common, strong bond among them is that they build bridges between reading (and writing) and the lives of their students. Reading real books and writing for real audiences, not just the teacher, are main thrusts as well. Common sense suggests these classes are more interesting and that children who are interested in what they read will read more, thereby becoming better readers.

Linda Lenz, editor

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In preschool, kindergarten
Playing with language is serious business

by Ann Cox Porter

When an infant gurgles or waves or kicks, she is talking to you. When a four-year-old produces an authoritative sequence of circles, dots and slashes to accompany the story he is telling, he is writing.

And when a kindergartner makes up a story to match the pictures in a book, she is reading to you.

That's what proponents of a new theory of literacy development believe, and their beliefs are slowly transforming early childhood classrooms across the country. Called "emergent literacy," the theory views the development of reading, writing and other communications skills as a seamless process that begins with a newborn's first cry and extends throughout a lifetime.

"From day one through adulthood, we are all emerging readers and writers, speakers and listeners," explains Lynn Cherasky, a kindergarten teacher at Dumas Child Parent Center in Woodlawn.

Cherasky and other early childhood teachers who believe in emergent literacy do not make the traditional distinctions between pre-reading and reading, between scribbling and writing, between babble and speech. As a result, they see their role as coaches who bring out and advance the literacy skills of their students. Much like parents encouraging their children to learn to talk, these teachers teach largely through their reactions to what the children say and do.

Many emergent-literacy practices resemble those used by "language experience" advocates in the 1970s and progressive educators of the 1920s. What's new in the 1990s is a substantial body of research on how children learn to read and write that bolsters this child-centered approach.

Overwhelmingly, early childhood experts agree that the emphasis must be placed on encouraging children's play with language rather than on teaching isolated skills through worksheets. Providing a stimulating learning environment is key.

Barbara Bowman of the Erikson Institute estimates that "90 percent of youngsters who are immersed in a rich literacy environment will be well on their way to acquiring reading and writing skills long before formal instruction begins." Children who come from homes that highly value reading, writing, talking and listening are clearly at an advantage. Consequently, advocates of emergent literacy feel a special urgency about schools modeling these values for children whose homes do not offer such an environment.

The essentials

There is no recipe for teaching, but adherents share a number of principles and practices. They include:

Reading aloud to children from infancy.

Storytime has long been a staple of preschools, but now there is added emphasis on selecting excellent books, on starting this practice at the earliest ages and on reading day in and day out. Becoming a Nation of Readers, the 1985 report of the Commission on Reading, verified that there is a clear connection between being read to and becoming a successful reader and writer.

Talking to children from infancy.

"Many parents think that if babies can't talk, there's no point in talking to them," says Trudi Gowens, head teacher at the Dorothy Gouthro Child Center in Altgeld Gardens. Gowens explains to parents that children learn to talk by following the model of the important people in their lives. She helps them interpret their infants' smiles, gurgles and gestures as part of an essential dialogue. Later, she helps parents accept and value being "talked to death" by their preschoolers.

At a family daycare center in Logan Square, Judi Minter incorporates spontaneous verbal exchanges in her daily routines with infants. On-the-fly songs and jingles accompany diaper-changing, feeding, cooking and cleaning. She supplies names for things and describes babies' actions and discoveries for them. ("Oh, DeeDee, do you want to swing?" she asks with delight as her eight-month-old gestures urgently in the direction of the swing.)

Viewing children's painting and drawing as a form of expression.

At ROAR (Reach Out and Read), a family literacy program in Hyde Park, director Dale Lipschultz helps parents understand, value and support the connection between their children's artistic early efforts and their later ability to read and write.

For example, when Carl purposefully paints three fat red lines at the easel, Lipschultz explains to his mother that he is discovering through his paintbrush that he can make a gesture permanent by putting it on paper—and that this is his Lochness monster version of writing.

Providing "scaffolding."

This new concept refers to the practice of capitalizing on a child's uncertainty about something by asking him leading questions or making suggestions that nudge the youngster over the obstacle to a higher level of literacy development.

Deneita Farmer, who teaches three- and four-year-olds at the State Pre-Kindergarten Demonstration Program in

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Center, a branch of Woodson North Elementary School in Kenwood, offers this example:

When Bill was dictating a get-well card for his grandmother, he was searching for a way to end his message. Farmer offered him several options—"love," "from," "sincerely," "hugs and kisses"—and they discussed the meaning conveyed by each expression. When Bill learned that "sincerely" meant that you "really really mean what you said," that was his choice. As Farmer helped Bill sign his name to the card, he noticed for the first time that there were two "I's" in "Bill." Taking advantage of the moment, Farmer asked him what that "illuh" sound felt like at the back of his throat. These interactions, arising from the immediate needs of the child, constituted instruction about letters, phonics and vocabulary.

Building bridges between children's experiences and print.

For example, Cora Petty, a Head Start teacher at the Alexander Graham School in Canarville, takes daily story dictation from children and then offers them the opportunity to act out their stories with their classmates while she reads their stories aloud. "It is tremendously exciting for children when they begin to figure out that what comes out of their heads can be translated into a written form that can be read and enjoyed by others," she notes.

When B.J. Walker, Judy Minet's partner, hosts a potluck dinner for families of her preschoolers, she asks children to bring dishes starting with the first letters of their names (dumplings from Dandara, melons from Maya).

And a tactile experience becomes poetry at Jackson Language Academy when teacher Sarah Cohen records her kindergartners' comments as they pass a pinecone around the circle. ("Feels soft/Like a bumble/Like a tree with thorns/Like a flower ready to bloom/It has spikes/Like a tree with leaves getting old/Points look like they have honey inside.")

The rationale for building bridges between print and a child's experiences is simple, explains Roxanne Henkin of National/Louis University: "What we're interested in, we have sustained attention for."

Writing and reading for authenticity, or real, purposes.

Rather than marching her children through a sequence of skills-driven tasks, Lynn Cherkasky stocks the interest centers (fine arts, math, science, home and family, transportation) in her kindergarten classroom with related reading material of all kinds and with a variety of writing tools. The children then become researchers, reviewers and scribes in all of the content areas. They develop math journals, record the growth of plants and graph classmates' preferences on various issues.

"Reading and writing for these authentic purposes makes a kind of sense to children that they can never get from workbooks and basal readers [reading textbooks]," Cherkasky asserts.

- Showing children that language is power.

Both Trudi Gowens and Deneita Farmer emphasize the power of language to express and manage feelings. Farmer reminds a child, "Use your power—tell her how you feel when she does that."

Respect is key

The basic principle underlying all of these practices is respect for children—respect for their individual rates and styles of communicating and respect for the languages, cultures, experiences and knowledge they bring with them when they come to school.

When Cora Petty takes dictation, she respect for the child's authorship is shown as she consults about each step of the process. ("What color of marker shall I use? "Do you want to say more or have this be the end?" Shall I read it back to you?")

Lynn Cherkasky offers her pupils many opportunities for ownership. Her kindergartners work with her in developing the rules and checklists (often headed "We Decided") for different ways they can review books or present something they have written for publication. They become shareholders with an investment in their own literary development.

Evidence of the success of this approach is beginning to emerge in better scores on standardized tests, but more important to emergent literacy teachers, it also is seen in serendipitous moments: A three-year-old carries his book to bed with him like a teddy bear; a shy child has become able to say with authority and without prompting, "Juan, I don't like it when you punch me in the leg."

There is no question that this method of teaching is more complex and more difficult than following the script of a teacher's manual. But learning is easier for the child when the whole child is brought into the activity, notes Sarah Cohen of Jackson Language Academy, and that has rewards for the teacher, too.

Ann Cox Porter is a Chicago writer.
In first grade

Reading Recovery sends slowest readers to middle of class

by Debra Shore

In kindergarten three years ago, "Maria" could barely talk. Her teacher, Judy Zostautas, had little hope that the child would fare well learning to read. In first grade, however, Maria was enrolled in a new program called Reading Recovery and made gains that Zostautas could hardly believe.

In second grade at Seward Elementary School, Maria was assigned to her class's middle reading group.

Reading Recovery is an "early-intervention" program that scoops up first-graders who are not making it and puts them into daily, half-hour tutoring sessions with highly trained teachers. Typically, after 12 to 15 weeks the pupils improve to the point where they are average readers for their class. And they maintain their gains without additional special help, studies have shown.

The program appears quite simple—one teacher, one pupil, story books, paper, pencil and some plastic letters. In fact, the teacher is carefully studying and reacting to the pupil's every word and action, changing the lesson to fit the child's needs. The goal is to steer struggling, beginning readers to discover for themselves the strategies, or ways, good readers use to tackle and draw meaning from text.

Intensive teacher training

A Reading Recovery session typically begins with the pupil reading from a "little book," one in a series of storybooks of increasing difficulty. When a student stumbles on a word, the teacher asks questions that prompt the child to solve the problem and learn how to get out of trouble by himself. "What letter would you expect 'couch' to begin with?" the teacher might ask. Or, "What sound do you hear?" "What word would make sense there?"

Numerous other techniques, familiar to good reading teachers everywhere, are used, such as having the student compose and write a sentence, which the teacher then cuts up by words, shuffles and has the child reassemble into the original sequence. Students re-read texts from their preceding session and begin a new text, which they attempt to read on their own. And each day a child selects one of two "little books" to take home overnight to read to his or her family.

Children are "discontinued" from Reading Recovery tutoring when they can monitor their own reading and correct their errors and are reading at the average level of their class.

Veteran teacher Cheryl Watson has seen numerous innovative programs come and go in her 24 years at Revere Elementary School, 1010 E. 72nd. For her, Reading Recovery clicked; she hopes it's here to stay. "If the child can figure it out himself, why, it's locked in," she says, "but if we keep giving him the answer, he'll never get it for himself."

The secret to Reading Recovery's success lies in intensive teacher training and in the development of a genuine pupil-centered attitude, which has proved so fruitful in teaching across the curriculum—from math to social studies to language arts.

Reading Recovery teachers are in training for a year, attending workshops and tutoring four children a day. The workshops are unique for they include observation of demonstration lessons through a one-way window. As the lesson unfolds, a teacher leader and the teachers in training discuss what they see and hear. Then each trainee goes "behind the glass" with a pupil so their colleagues can observe, discuss and critique.

These sessions and the individual tutoring virtually compel Reading Recovery teachers to become sophisticated and acute observers of children—an invigorating and fertile experience. "It's turned my philosophy around," says Martha Silva, who received Reading Recovery training three years ago and recently became principal of Philip Sheridan Elementary School. "Before, we were just teaching subjects, transferring material. Now, we're watching children and their behavior."

The Reading Recovery program was developed in New Zealand by educator and psychologist Marie Clay. It came to the United States in 1984, imported by a group of educators at Ohio State University, who,
Cost-effective?

However, Reading Recovery was not tried in a major urban school system with a significant population of low achievers until 1988-89, when the Chicago Public Schools launched the program with eight teachers in four schools.

With support from the Illinois State Board of Education and the Chicago-based John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation, Chicago’s program has grown. Last school year, it included 79 teachers in 43 schools and served about 560 children. A formal evaluation is now being prepared.

The University of Illinois at Urbana and National-Louis University in Chicago have become Reading Recovery training sites, and state officials hope to spread the program across Illinois. “Reading Recovery is the hottest ticket I’ve sold in a while in this state,” says Carolyn Farrar, manager of Intervention and Improvement Services for the Illinois Board of Education. “The problem is financing it. Once it’s in the schools, they’ll sell the family jewels to keep it.”

Money. Yes, indeed, objections to Reading Recovery center on its cost.

In Chicago, two Reading Recovery teachers generally share a classroom. One tutor four students in the morning while the other teaches the rest of the class; in the afternoon they switch. Thus, the school has to cover the cost of an extra teacher and, for the first year, some training costs, including transportation and materials. That amounts to about $62,000 the first year and about $52,000 each year thereafter, or a minimum of $2,250 per child. CPS pays half a school’s costs the first three years, using federal Chapter I funds. Most schools have used their own federal Chapter I funds to pay the remainder.

Could the Reading Recovery program be revised to cut costs? For example, could the training period be shortened? That’s been tried and found wanting. Careful research has been done on three-week intensive Reading Recovery training sessions with supervised apprenticeships and continued follow-up work. The teachers simply did not turn out to be as well trained as those who went through the yearlong program.

“As a method of staff development, I think it’s unparalleled. It truly creates real change.”

—Dorothy Strickland, reading expert, Rutgers University

Studies also have compared Reading Recovery with several less intensive special-help programs, including conventional small-group reading instruction. Children in every program made gains but only those in Reading Recovery made significant gains.

Whole class benefits

Most proponents contend that Reading Recovery is cost effective in the long run because it precludes the need for remedial help later on.

“I don’t see that we have any other program that is as effective as Reading Recovery,” says Phyllis Mentar, an administrator of government-funded programs for the Chicago Board of Education. “Not all children in regular Chapter I (remedial programs) are raised to the level of their classroom without need for further remediation.”

Further, by changing how teachers teach, Reading Recovery benefits all the children in a class, not just those who get one-on-one tutoring.

“Its true benefit is the change that takes place in the teachers,” says Dorothy Strickland, a nationally regarded reading expert at Rutgers University. “As a method of staff development, I think it’s unparalleled. It truly creates real change.”

Charlie Stamps, a 27-year veteran at Sumner Math and Science Academy, is a case in point. “Reading Recovery made me look at myself,” she explains. “I used to give children a lot of help. Now I try to make them independent, and they put more effort in trying to do it themselves rather than just appealing to me to give them the answer. I’m praising them more now, and their responses are so much better.”

Reading Recovery teachers usually rethink their assumptions about all their teaching, especially in the language arts, advocates say. They begin to incorporate curriculum and methods into a wholeness that gives meaning to schoolwork. Some of these methods—whole language, learning across the curriculum, process writing, critical thinking, student empowerment, active learning—may seem trendy, but they are consistent with the most respected views and research about how learning happens.

As Reading Recovery founder Marie Clay originally said, “Many children are labeled ‘not reading’ because they can’t get to the program. Making the program go to the child is exactly what Reading Recovery is geared to do.”

Debra Shore is a Chicago writer. For more information on Reading Recovery, contact Mattie Williams, Director of Language Arts, Chicago Public Schools, 1819 W. Pershing Rd., Chicago, Ill. 60609. (312) 535-7914.
In elementary grades

Children grow as readers while adults debate phonics

by Lorraine V. Forte

Once a month, Nancy Singer’s fifth-graders bring pillows and blankets to school and curl up on the floor with a favorite book. Singer curls up with them, children’s book in hand.

“The first time I did it, they thought I was crazy, but they got down on the floor with me,” recalls Singer, who teaches at Spencer Elementary School, 214 N. Laverne. Now, as the third Friday of the month approaches, Singer’s pupils remind her that read-a-thon day is coming, she says.

“We don’t do basal reading,” says student Roosevelt Moneyhan, referring to the reading textbooks that dominate reading instruction. “That’s boring. We have our own books, a real library.”

At Pulaski Community Academy, 2230 W. McLean, the window ledge of Jim Bailey’s bilingual first-grade class is covered with books his pupils have written, including “La Rosa Hermosa” (The Beautiful Rose) and “El Avion y El Raton” (The Airplane and the Mouse).

Real reading, real writing

Bailey schedules a book-making period every other week or so. But that isn’t enough for his pupils, who now come up to him when they finish other work and ask: “Can I make a book?”

Real reading and real writing. These are the instructional mainstays for Singer, Bailey and an increasing number of teachers who are gathering under a banner labeled whole language. These teachers believe that literacy, like talking, develops naturally from children’s experiences with adults and other children. As a result, they see their role as creating rich environments where children at various stages of literacy development can grow. To whole language enthusiasts, literacy is not something that is taught to youngsters; it is something that is drawn out of them.

Typically, whole-language teachers center reading, writing and other activities around themes, such as oceans or outer space. They have children work together in small groups, reading to each other, critiquing each others’ writing. The focus is on meaning, or comprehension, not just getting the words right by sounding them out or spelling them correctly.

In contrast, traditional instruction is based on the theory that children learn to read and write by mastering the components of reading and writing, such as sounding out letters and identifying main ideas. For traditional teachers, the components, or sub-skills, are the focus. Phonics drills, spelling lessons, worksheets and basal readers (which are reading textbooks with limited, controlled vocabularies) are the mainstays of their instruction.

While there is consensus that real reading and real writing should be a part of every reading program, there is a heated dispute among some researchers over how the mechanics—phonics, spelling, grammar—should be taught. (Phonics is the relationship between letters and their sounds; it’s the “sounding out” part of reading.)

In whole language instruction, teachers coach children in the mechanics as the children engage in reading and writing; teachers do not rush to correct mistakes in identifying words or in spelling, so long as children are pursuing meaning. Children are encouraged to decipher new words by using context clues and pic-
First person: ‘Reading is not taught; rather it is acquired’

by Alice Orey Brent

My first experience with basals, or reading textbooks, some 35 years ago was not a pleasant one. I couldn’t understand why the Big Book had fewer than 10 words (see, run, Dick, Jane, Spot, and so on) nor why the children in the book spoke differently than I did. Fortunately, when I brought Little Books home, my mother did not correct me when I “read” “Stop, Sally, stop, stop” and accompanying pictures as “The wagon is going so fast. Jane better run faster to catch up with Sally, her little sister.”

When I began teaching 15 years later, my pupils “read” much the same way. They would see “Nan ran to the van” and might well read “Nancy ran to her father’s silver van so she could get to school on time.” The children noticed that a man was in the driver’s seat, the van was shiny.

Alice Orey Brent teaches at Whittier Elementary School, 1900 W. 23rd.

Nancy was running (presumably so she wouldn’t be late) and was carrying a book (and therefore must be going to school). I accepted this “reading” but still used the conventional publisher’s skill sheets to test the students. The parents were pleased, the administration was pleased and I was pleased with my “teaching.”

It was only after I began reading to my own three toddlers that I fully realized that reading is not taught; rather, it is acquired—through being read to, through pretend reading and writing, through conversation, through debate. Instead of reading to my children the nonsensical plights of Nan, Pam, Nat and Ted, I was reading about Alexander, a Giving Tree and a mouse that was a philosopher.

I decided to apply this experience to my classroom. I placed the basals (reading textbooks) on the reading

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Reading Reform Foundation in Tacoma, Wash., contends that this approach creates a frustrating “guessing game.” Children read inaccurately by substituting words (pony for horse), skipping words or reversing letters (grist for first), because they haven’t been taught that letter order and sound-letter connections are important, she says.

Meaning is undoubtedly the primary goal, Hinds agrees. But, she says, “Until you can get the words off the page, you can’t comprehend the meaning.” Hinds also argues that children need phonics to help them write because “you can’t write accurately if you can’t make the sound-letter connection.”

Whole-language critic Groff attacks a key underlying belief, too. Reading and writing do not necessarily grow out of talking, he contends, noting that some cultures have no written language. “We’re born to speak,” Groff says. “We’re not born...
to read and write.”

Research on the effectiveness of whole-language programs is still in its infancy. The U. of I.’s Stephens compiled and summarized 38 studies for a paper entitled “Toward an Understanding of Whole Language.” She says these and other studies “solidly back the approach.”

But opponents say most whole-language research is unscientific because it relies on observations and anecdotes, not hard data, such as scores on standardized reading tests. Such tests “aren’t perfect, but they’re certainly much more reliable than someone just going into a classroom to observe,” says Patrick Groff.

Stephens counters that test scores “reflect the values of a traditional classroom. In whole language, the idea is that if scores go up, it’s OK, but the [real] goal is to help children become readers and writers both in and out of the classroom.”

While academics debate the merits of whole language, practitioners often head for middle ground. For example, the American Association of School Administrators recommends a three-part approach that includes early, intensive phonics, real literature and a focus on comprehension as well as “getting the words right.” Research supports this approach, according to the 1985 landmark report, Becoming a Nation of Readers.

Meanwhile, publishers are rushing to cash in on the middle ground, marketing “whole-language basal” and whole-language flash cards. Whole-language proponents decry such materials, saying they ignore the need to work from children’s experiences and capitalize on their individual interests.

Stephens concedes, however, that a mixed approach may be necessary as a transition. Simply tossing out basal readers isn’t the answer for every teacher, she says. Newer basalts often have good selections of stories and can provide guidance for teachers who feel they need more structure, she notes.

Unless a teacher has a real knowledge of children’s literature and how to choose books appropriate for different reading levels, “children are going to be in trouble,” says Stephens.

Teachers who are comfortable with whole language appear to have invigorated their pupils. At the end of the school day, Jim Bailey’s students rush to choose a book from their small Spanish-language library and take it home to read.

And Nancy Singer’s students proudly say they read “real books” and “like to read” more now. “I like to read hard books so I can learn bigger words,” says LaToya Timms. “If you get to read hard books, you’ll know hard words when you get in [the] higher grades.”

“I like to make my own books,” chimed Donna Alexander. “We write stories about what we read. We get to write what we think in our own words.”

Lorraine V. Forte is a CATALYST staff member.

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First person: ‘We must do whatever it takes to turn our students on’

by Daniel P. Peterson

Last year, Sawyer Elementary School had a problem fifth-grader—call him Mike—who was reading at the second-grade level. His stunted reading ability was not his main problem, though. His main problem was that he hated everyone. He hated his mom, his dad, school and, most of all, his teachers. He constantly assaulted us with the “F” word.

Having exhausted the options for dealing with Mike’s problem, the principal finally assigned him to see me, a Chapter I remedial reading teacher, three times a week. As we knew, Mike needed far more than help with reading; he needed help building his self-awareness and self-esteem. But where does one begin to unravel such a complicated and rebellious personality?

Mike told me in no uncertain

Daniel P. Peterson teaches at Sawyer Elementary School, 5248 S. Sawyer.

terms that he did not “do” books. I asked, “How about this book?” “F--you,” he replied. So, we talked instead; session after session we talked. One day, unbeknown to Mike, I hid a tape recorder under his desk and recorded our conversations for several days. Then I transcribed Mike’s words and bound the pages in a booklike manner, adding an attractive cover.

At our next session, I told Mike I had a book he might be interested in. I got the usual response: “I told you I don’t read no f------ books!” I said, “I think you might enjoy this one. Look who wrote it.” Mike was amazed to see his name on the cover, but he grumbled, “I never wrote no book.” I countered, “On the contrary, you did write this one.” He opened “his” book and began to read—for the first time in a long time.

Mike was fascinated with his own words coming to life on the printed page. I had transcribed his words verbatim. The sentence structure and the usage were all his. It was not a literary masterpiece.

Once Mike got over the shock of actually enjoying a reading experience, I proceeded to use his own “written” words to teach him language arts skills. For example, I explained, “Mike, in this sentence ‘F--’ is the first word, so that’s why it’s capitalized.” I pointed out that “son of a b--” is not run together as one word. Needless to say, Mike was flabbergasted, but he was learning—and the learning was fun.

To maintain Mike’s enthusiasm for reading and learning, I chose a reward gimmick. Correct answers earned him points to be deposited in a “checking account.” Every Friday, Mike could “write a check” and procure something from the Reading Store in my classroom. At first, Mike always opted for candy. One week he did not write a check, and I asked him if he had forgotten his check-

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In high school

Prize-winning Prologue teaches English for life

by Lynda Gorov

The final reports of the year are on love, and the teenagers in Deborah Stern’s English class consider themselves experts on the subject. Each presents a song or poem, then leads a discussion of the material. The conversations are rambling and revealing, veering from equality among partners to infidelity in a relationship. Stern encourages her students to be candid about their own experiences but occasionally must remind them not to get too personal about their love lives.

Whether students are writing in journals, reading Johnny Got His Gun or analyzing song lyrics, Stern tries to link the assignment to their lives. And many of the youngsters attending Prologue Alternative School, a tuition-free private high school at 1105 W. Lawrence, have had extraordinarily troublesome lives.

Prologue is considered a “last chance” school. Most of the 60 some pupils dropped out or were kicked out of Chicago public schools. Many of the female students are mothers. Traditional teaching methods could not motivate these youngsters. At Prologue, begun by nuns 18 years ago and funded by government and foundation grants, teachers know they must take a different approach to both the basics and their students.

Tap into students’ lives

“We can’t pretend our students don’t have problems. We have to know what’s going on in their lives,” insists principal Dale Russell. “Our philosophy is that you have to be in tune with the students. That’s what we try to do with all the classes. Deborah has really pushed that.”

Working through thematic units dealing with passion, sex, reason, violence, justice, power—all the biggies,” she remarks—Stern aims to make the written word enticing and to provide students with general communication skills. Her efforts led the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) to cite Prologue in 1990 as one of only five “centers for excellence” for at-risk students nationwide.

“Prologue makes a real attempt to engage students’ lives and to do it in a non-condescending manner,” concludes Allan Glatthorn, associate dean of Graduate Studies at East Carolina University and the NCTE consultant who visited Stern’s classroom.

In other words, Stern doesn’t talk down to her students. She doesn’t let them forget who’s boss, but she also doesn’t judge them. She does ask that they learn to express themselves, which can mean letting them curse. Stern, who previously taught at Washburne Middle School in Winnetka, now barely flinches at even the worst of words.

Stern describes her methods as straightforward. She asks students to read and write, write, write. But her program is more complicated than that. What she makes them read and what she allows them to write are equally important. Students choose the themes they will study.

Prologue’s goal isn’t just granting diplomas. “There’s a certain amount of consciousness raising,” Stern says. “The whole point is to help them look more critically at the choices they have made and will make in their lives.”

For example, during a unit on sex roles, power and identity, students wrote in their journals about sexual stereotyping, betrayal and participating in one’s own oppression in a relationship. They read The Color Purple and wrote reports about how they would respond as Celia’s caseworker. As always, they brought in relevant materials of their own. The unit concluded with a discussion of rapper Ice T’s song “Power.”

Throughout each unit, Stern’s goals for students are threefold: to read a difficult book in its entirety; to give written proof that they understand the issues in the book; and to reflect orally on those same issues. Stern says she never asks students what happened in the book. Instead, she asks what questions they have about the story.

“It’s not important that the kids
have a longstanding love of literature. I’m not sure that’s relevant,” Stern says. “They have very difficult lives. Few will go on to college. We want them to do better with what they have.”

In his NCTE evaluation, Glatthorn rated Prologue “excellent” for improving English skills, giving students ample opportunity to publish, offering a balanced, multicultural language arts program and using cooperative learning strategies. But he also had concerns about a lack of structure.

Students do seem to take assignments casually: Near the end of the school year, Stern announces that only one student in her morning class is caught up on homework. She also concedes that she places far less emphasis on correct grammar than on the general ability to communicate. Stern is especially proud of a student-compiled test on the language of the streets. Called “The Uptown Guide to the Life of Youth,” or UGLY, it is intended to show that standardized tests are culturally biased.

Not typical success

As Prologue’s principal concedes, Prologue would not rank as a success using typical measures. The school has just six teachers and an annual budget of $275,000. Classes are held on the third floor of a dank building that is steamy in summer, icy in winter. There is no formal library, and books discarded by other schools are boxed in the hallway.

Russell says just 20 percent of Prologue’s students—one half African-American, the remainder Asian, Hispanic or white—graduate. The Class of ‘91 numbered five, compared with 17 the previous year. A collection of student essays from 1989 is titled “The Few, The Proud, The Remaining Students.”

“We try hard to keep them here, and sometimes you just can’t do it,” says Russell, who doubles as a U.S. history and government teacher. “There are some real success stories, but not many. Look, we’re not college prep. But we give them an opportunity to get the basic skills.”

Before Prologue, many students made little more than perfunctory appearances at school. Stern is no longer surprised by students who have never read a serious book. She has them tackling classics such as To Kill A Mockingbird. She also tells them that their opinions count.

The students react to Stern, who has long blond curls and is a hip dresser, with equal parts respect and adoration. When she tells one student, who lives in a shelter, that he is a good writer, his head bobs gratefully and he breaks into a huge smile. With one look, she silences a mouthy girl, who tenses audibly when Stern asks to see her after class.

During one discussion period, most everyone jumps in with an opinion on whether love makes someone stronger or weaker. The responses are printed on the blackboard, and students are asked to use them in a poem.

“Before, I didn’t even know how to write an essay. It was like, ‘How was your summer vacation?’ What a joke. It meant nothing to me,” says Dave Foster, 16, self-described graffiti muralist who says he left Lane Tech High School when other students threatened him. “Here I’ve learned about honesty, growing up male, how to act. It’s made it easier to understand life. If you can write something down, it unclutters your life.”

Despite the students’ accolades, Prologue’s philosophy isn’t likely to infiltrate Chicago Public Schools any time soon. Size is one reason: A typical CPS teacher might see 150 students daily, against 60 at Prologue, where creating a family atmosphere becomes relatively easy. Another is Stern. She is an exceptional teacher who cannot be easily duplicated citywide.

“In the public high schools, teachers have too many students to be sensitive to each one of their lives,” says Lolita Green, an English teacher at Dunbar High School and a member of the NCTE’s certification committee for at-risk schools. “It also takes an extraordinary teacher who has a wealth of information, but non-traditional information. Chicago Public Schools have a set curriculum. It doesn’t allow us to be innovative.”

Some educators such as Glatthorn, however, would like to see public schools try harder to incorporate students’ lives into their school work. He points out that some adventurous schools are attempting to do so on a modest scale, but the only way is to make the method a genuine part of the school’s overall philosophy.

“Public schools are institutions and institutions play it safe. Prologue is taking risks,” Glatthorn says. “In too many instances, the program is not deeply imbedded but the result of one idiosyncratic teacher. At Prologue it is institutionalized.”

Asked if local educators have studied Prologue’s approach or visited its classrooms, Principal Russell shakes his head. “I think this is one model that people should look at seriously,” he says. “But as a system, the Chicago Public Schools have no interest in us whatsoever.”

Lynda Gorov is a Chicago writer.

More reading about reading

Becoming a Nation of Readers (1985). This landmark report from the Commission on Reading is available from the Center for the Study of Reading, 51 Gerty Dr., Champaign, Ill. 61820. To obtain a free brochure describing this and other Center publications and videotapes send a request and a business-sized, stamped, self-addressed envelope to the Dissemination Manager.


At Lane Tech
We didn’t start the fire
but we sure have kept it burning

by Michael J. Fahy

“We think it’s a strategy to control that election,” Supt. Charles Almo said on Sept. 26, 1989, referring to Lane Tech High School’s stonewalling of the election process by withholding the names of local school council candidates.

I had read that quote in the morning Tribune. The superintendent's accusation was accompanied by an appeal for parents to register as candidates. I decided to do it. I had not wanted to, but Almo's blast was a challenge I could not resist. I drove the seven miles to register at Lane that evening, not really believing it possible for us to reform the 2.3-billion-dollar cash cow we call our public school system. More optimistic parents had said I was wrong: We would now have a say in the management of our own school.

Excitement ran high throughout Chicago as the first LSC election neared. It was the Autumn of '89, and cataclysmic change was no longer just the stuff of distant dreams. The hated Berlin Wall was falling; how difficult could it be for us to topple the bloated bureaucratic wall of our school system? Cries of reform followed the new openness—both in Chicago and in Eastern Europe. And in the Soviet Union, glasnost was paving the way for perestroika.

Glasnost and perestroika, the very words mean openness and reform!

I arrived at Lane with no time to reconsider. After running across the lawn into the office, my registration form was time stamped 7:00 p.m.—the last minute of the last day. Had I hit one more red light on Western Avenue, you would not now be reading of this reluctant reformer.

'I am still here'

Would I be allowed to contribute to a changed and improved Lane Tech, or would I be spinning my wheels in a bureaucratic quagmire? Would parents really be granted the authority to open and change this archaic, failed school system? It is now two years later, and I still do not know. A soldier on the firing line never knows whether he has won or lost until the war is over. He only knows that he is still there. And I am still here.

Like most Lane parents, I had been content to put up with Lane's inflexible, unresponsive administration because Lane has the best students. With Illinois' largest high-school enrollment and the nation's largest high-school building, Lane has a reputation built largely upon the high caliber of its students rather than its curriculum.

The quality and diversity of Lane's student body leaped to new highs when girls were begrudgingly admitted in the 1970s. Opening the school to girls was forced upon Lane by the federal courts, and is still bemoaned by some teachers. I do not mean to imply that girls are smarter than boys, but with twice the number of applicants, the test scores required for admission became considerably higher after girls were permitted to apply. The unanticipated result of admitting girls is a student body whose goal is to enter not just college, but the best college attainable. As eighth-graders, they had scored among the highest in the nation. If allowed to learn to the best of their ability, they are truly capable of becoming the future leaders of our country.

But reform comes hard to some, and while the governmental bureaucrats of Eastern Europe have long since disappeared or been jailed, ours are still firmly entrenched. Somewhere students are enjoying new learning experiences, and discovering new found freedoms; but for the students of Lane Tech and Tiananmen Square, openness and reform are still the stuff of dreams.

Lane's curriculum has not kept pace with its increasingly capable student body. The strongly vocational, building-trades curriculum has not yielded to the needs of Lane's students. But should the school change to meet the needs of today's students? Principal George Mazarakos, a former wood shop teacher, claims, "Ninety-nine percent of the students who come here do so for the curriculum." His claim, however, is hotly disputed by Marty Giannini, a student elected to the LSC on the curriculum issue.

"The school's curriculum is perfect the way it is," says Bernie Joseph (Class of 1940), a suburbanite who

Michael J. Fahy is an attorney, the chairman of Lane's LSC and the parent of four Lane students in the past four years.
heads the Lane Tech Alumni Association. Retorts a chemical engineer whose daughter attends Lane: “The curriculum is more appropriate for 1940 than for the 21st century.” Indeed, over 50 years after the last horse clopped along Western Avenue, Lane’s foundry was still making horseshoes. Is it absolutely necessary for Lane students to take wood shop? Is anything made of wood anymore?

“Should the students meet the needs of the school, or should the school meet the needs of the students?” The Tribune quoted my rhetorical question, and the issue had been framed!

The reply came swiftly and suddenly. “If you don’t like the curriculum, go to another school,” students were told by one LSC member. The war had begun. But the battle was not over curriculum; the battle was over whether we were allowed to discuss curriculum. In lining out items on the LSC agenda, the principal made his position clear: There would be no discussion. Discussing curriculum or even thinking about it is heresy.

Those suspected of heresy were rounded up and summarily fired. I was fired as chair of the LSC (but reinstated after filing a lawsuit), parent Bill Eyring was fired as chair of the hated Curriculum Committee, parent Pete Tremmel was fired as chair of the Finance Committee, which had begun probing into internal accounts, and Yudita Mauersberger was fired as chair of the Language Department. Thousands of students had used their only two electives for language courses, thus Yudita was suspect. Later, all LSC committees were abolished, never to be reinstated. Parental involvement had been stifled.

Story censored here

The principal’s reign of terror was widely reported in Chicago’s daily and neighborhood newspapers, but censored from Lane’s school newspaper. A small news article did, however, appear in New Expression, the independent newspaper written by high school students. The 2,000 copies delivered to Lane were immediately confiscated. The next issue of New Expression put our story on page one: “Mystery at Lane Tech... Why Lane Tech Students Can’t Read This Paper.” The article, written by Lane student Jessica Ashley, detailed Lane’s 20-year history of repeated attempts to stifle student expression.

We didn’t start the fire! Lane students have been fighting for reform since the new breed of students arrived in the 1970s. Because of what Lane student Burt Fujishima and two of his classmates did in the early 1970s, our First Amendment freedom of speech is fully enjoyed by high school students throughout the United States. They authored and distributed the Cosmic Frog, a newspaper highly critical of Lane’s discipline chief, the same man who is now principal. When these honor students refused to be intimidated, they were dragged from their classrooms, harrased and suspended. They filed a lawsuit, lost in the trial court, but did not quit, and then won a landmark decision in the U.S. Court of Appeals.

We are continuing the work begun by Burt and other reformers of the past. We are standing on their shoulders to seek further improvement. We have kept the fire burning!

So what did all my hard work at Lane these past two years accomplish? Precious little of a substantive nature. Lane still has not adapted to meet the needs of our largely college-bound student body, but we have accomplished much in bringing issues to light. A brilliant spotlight now illuminates the curriculum issue and other issues that have never been talked about in the past.

But when? How long before we achieve true reform? When will our schools be run for the benefit of our students rather than for the benefit of our employees? Chicago’s children cannot wait much longer. Last July, the Illinois Legislature passed a new school reform law that is supposed to give us the authority to change our schools. If it does, let’s get it done. If it does not, you can line your cat box with the new law, which is more than you will be able to do with a CPS diploma.

Letters

New voting rules prompt many questions

Questions abound concerning the election of local school council members on Oct. 9. Because voting procedures are unfamiliar and the possibility of confusion before and on election day is real, I want to share with CATALYST readers some of the questions (and our responses) most often asked of the Lawyers’ School Reform Advisory Project:

■ Who runs the election? The Board of Education, in consultation with current local school councils, is responsible for conducting elections. A detailed election guide, collaboratively developed by the board’s Office For Reform Implementation and an election task force, should be available now at all schools. In order to ensure the integrity of the elections, the board engaged Project LEAP (Legal Elections In All Precincts), an independent election watch-dog group, to train election judges, recruit and train election-day monitors and organize the resolution of pre-election and post-election challenges.

■ How has the method of selecting local school council members changed? The six parent and two community resident representatives will be elected by eligible parent and community voters at each school; the two teacher representatives and student member (at high schools only) will be appointed by the Board of Education following “a non-binding advisory poll” at each school.

■ Who is eligible to vote for the parent and community representatives? Anyone who is a parent or legal guardian of a student currently enrolled at the school and anyone who is 18 years or older, lives in the school attendance area or voting district (at multi-area schools) and is not a parent of a student enrolled at the school.

■ Can staff members vote for parent and community candidates at a particular school? Yes, but only if he/she qualifies as a parent or community resident at that school—for example, a teacher who is
also a parent of a student enrolled at the school where she teaches.

■ How many votes can a voter cast in the election for parent and community representatives? A total of five votes only. Remember, voting for more than five candidates will spoil your ballot, and it will not be counted; voting for less than five candidates is okay.

■ How should the five votes be distributed among the candidates? Any way the voter wishes, provided the total number of votes cast is not more than five.

■ May a voter give more than one vote to an individual candidate—for example, all five votes to one parent candidate? No, there is no cumulative voting. But, a voter may give all five votes to five parent candidates.

■ Would voting for more than two community representative candidates spoil your ballot? No. But only two will be elected.

■ Will there be absentee voting? No. Voters must vote in person at the school where they are eligible to vote.

The quality of representation on local school councils and the success of school reform depend on an informed electorate and broad participation in the election itself. I urge voters to ask candidates questions about their positions on education issues at their school and to be sure to vote on Oct 9 for the candidates of their choice at both elementary schools and high schools.

Peggy Gordon, Director
Lawyers' School Reform Advisory Project

Article on subdistricts disappointing

I was very disappointed with your article on subdistrict offices (June 1991).

First, it was inaccurate in stating that "The Chicago School Reform Act .... gave the subdistricts a broad but vague mandate: promote communication between local school councils and staff, disseminate research on innovative educational techniques, coordinate training of local school councils, promote joint operation of programs and services and resolve school disputes."

Those duties and responsibilities are assigned to the subdistrict councils. The law does not mention subdistrict offices per se.

Second, the article failed to mention the duties and responsibilities that the reform act assigns to subdistrict superintendents. These include monitoring the performance of schools and identifying and making recommendations to councils on schools that fail to develop and implement school improvement plans or fail to abide by laws, union contracts and other regulations.

Subdistrict superintendents also conduct annual evaluations, in consultation with local school councils, of principals in their districts and make the final selection of a principal when a local school council cannot agree.

Marjorie Branch, Superintendent
Subdistrict 10

We welcome guest editorials and letters. They may be edited for clarity and space. Include your address and phone number.

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shelves along with trade books, catalogs, TV guides, children's magazines, adult magazines and copies of the students' own stories bound into several books.

Once a day, I read to the entire class, to half of the class and to small groups of three or four children. Every day, every child "reads" to me. A fourth of my first-grade students are picture readers, half are pretend readers who emphasize and point to some familiar words in every book—e.g., puff, blow your house down. [Brent now teaches second grade—Ed.]

The children write for 20 minutes each day. When I tap a bell, they may illustrate or continue writing for another 10 minutes. During illustration time, I listen to each child "read" his or her story. I note the words they use and chart the evolution of their writing and spelling, for example, l k evolves into like and b d becomes bld, then bling and finally building.

Each evening I type out their stories and make them booklets and words for their individual word banks.

Reading and writing lessons can trickle into mathematics tasks as the children create problems to solve. For instance, Steven built a six-story building; each story was 10 units in size. How tall (in total units) was Steven's building? Two parents sent actual blueprints of buildings. The children generated a floor plan of our classroom, then the first floor of the school. The children made buildings using graduated blocks called Cuisenaire rods. They had to replicate their designs on graph paper, which required much measuring, comparing, thinking and discussing.

Language and the primary child are inseparable. They talk all the time. In the whole-language classroom, they are expected—no, encouraged—to talk, to express their thoughts and not mimic the teacher's thoughts. And to share all their discoveries. The room is, therefore, a little noisy, but ideas must not be kept silent. If we adults want authentic learning we must discard some of the traditional ways we ourselves learned and adopt new ways that stimulate and nurture our children's desires to learn.

PETERSON continued from page 8

book. "No, Mr. P", he replied, "I'm saving my points for something more expensive." Mike accumulated points for several weeks until—to my shock and his mother's utter astonishment—he bought a book, a real book, a book he thought he would enjoy.

By the end of the year Mike had made a four-year gain on a reading test. More important, Mike had achieved an important goal. With tears in his eyes, he hugged me and said, "Mr. P, you are right. Impossible dreams can come true. Thanks."

What's the moral of this teacher's tale? There is no such word as 'can't.' As teachers, we must do whatever it takes to turn our students on. We do this by starting where they are, not where we think they should be.

With Mike, Hulk Hogan and motorcycle magazines were our first outside instructional reading materials. It was much later that we got to those real books—but we got to them.
Board cuts jobs at all levels

To open schools on time Sept. 4, the Board of Education cut more than $100 million in spending for old and new programs. It is now negotiating with school employee unions over 7%-percent salary raises agreed to last year by the Interim School Board. Funding them would require another $78 million in cuts or new revenue.

Cuts made by the board include:
- $23.2 million in desegregation spending intended for new programs for children "at risk" of dropping out. The board pledged to the federal court it would fund these programs in future years.
- $17 million by eliminating 355 central and district office positions and cutting contractual services. The jobs include 61 home/hospital teachers for sick children. The board retained a pool of 15 and will offer stipends to regular teachers who sign up to teach sick students. Also cut were another 50 jobs supported by categorical, or earmarked, funds. Savings from these cutbacks did not help balance the budget.
- $12 million from funds for supplies and equipment, resulting in a 90-percent drop from last year.
- $11.5 million by eliminating 237 teaching and 36 teachers aide jobs in the state-funded Reading Improvement Program, which last year served more than 200,000 children in 330 schools. The money will be used to pay regular teachers who teach reading, which is permitted by the state, says Robert Sampieri, the School Board's chief operating officer.
- $10 million in building repair funds.
- $7.5 million by eliminating about 110 high school teaching jobs—positions in excess of those required by course enrollments—and 81 assistant principal positions.
- $6 million by eliminating 256 custodian jobs from the Service Employees union.
- $5 million by "cutting" a summer school program for some 6,000 special education students. This program is mandated by the state and federal governments, so the board will have to find money for it by the end of the school year; it is looking to "salvage" that accumulates when, say, jobs are not filled for the entire school year.
- $2 million by eliminating 108 clerks who kept records on special education students. The board had been spending $3.1 million a year on the clerks but now will pay about $1.1 million in stipends to regular clerks to do the extra work.
- $1.5 million intended for a free summer school for high school seniors who needed one or two courses to graduate on time.

The board also revised some of its revenue and spending estimates. For example, it "cut" $2.8 million by lowering the estimate of the number of teachers who will earn enough graduate credit to receive $6,000 bonuses provided by the current contract. Last year the board banked on 1,000, but 3,000 qualified. The board believes the pace will slow.

School closings: Round 1

The Board of Education voted unanimously to save $2 million by shutting down six schools and seven programs, but future closing decisions are likely to be much tougher. Here's a rundown of the impact of Round 1:
- Buildings vacated: Five. They are Irving Park Elementary, 3815 N. Kedvale; Goldsmith Elementary, 10211 S. Crandon; Mulligan Elementary, 1855 N. Sheffield; Chicago Metro High, 160 W. Wendell; and Las Casas Occupational High, 9511 S. Commercial, a leased facility that will be vacated by Feb. 1, 1992.
- Students dispersed to new schools: 831 from Irving Park, Goldsmith and Mulligan.
- Students whose programs were transferred intact: 337 from Chicago Metro, an alternative school where students develop individualized programs, and 144 from Las Casas Occupational High. Las Casas students will go to Bowen, 2710 E. 89th. Metro students were protesting their transfer to Crane, 2245 W. Jackson.
- Students who will stay at same location: 652 from the seven educational-vocational guidance centers (EVGCs), which were special programs for very low-achieving elementary students, and 135 from McLaren Occupational, located at Flower High, 3545 W. Fulton.

At least one reform group, the Chicago Panel on Public School Policy and Finance, criticized the EVGCs for segregating the low achievers. Very few students went on to graduate from high school, a panel study showed. EVGC students will now attend regular classes. Robert Sampieri, the Board's chief operating officer, says the poor quality of EVGC programs was a factor in the closing decision.

While McLaren, Las Casas and Metro programs remain intact, the board saved money by downgrading principals to program directors and eliminating administrative and clerical jobs.

Metro, Goldsmith and two of the EVGCs were among 20 schools slated for closing in 1982 by then-Supt. Ruth Love. But then-Mayor Jane Byrne objected, and the schools remained open. In contrast, Mayor Daley has pushed school closings. Seventy-seven schools are operating at less than 50-percent capacity according to a 1990 School Board report.

For Round 1, the board considered enrollment at the closed schools and the space available, condition and location of receiving schools, Sampieri says. But future closings will take performance—student and teacher attendance, how well the local school council functions and student test scores—into account. The board is now developing specific criteria.

Lorraine V. Forte
RESOURCES

Reform law summary. A summary of the Chicago School Reform Act, including recent changes, and a pamphlet describing reform are available in English and Spanish from Designs for Change. They cost 15 cents each. To obtain copies, call Rochelle (312) 922-0317.

Job skills. A 12-page guide to the skills and personal qualities students need to enter the workforce is available free from the Secretary's Commission on Achieving Necessary Skills (SCANS) of the U.S. Department of Labor.

To order up to 10 copies of "What Work Requires of Schools," call (800) 788-SKILL. For more than 10 copies, write U.S. Department of Labor, SCANS, 200 Constitution Ave., Washington, D.C. 20210.

Teaching math. How can schools help students develop positive attitudes toward math? What does the latest research say about math curriculum content? These and other questions are answered in "EdTalk: What We Know About Mathematics Teaching and Learning."

To order a free copy, write the North Central Regional Educational Laboratory, 1900 Spring Rd., Suite 300, Oak Brook, Ill. 60521.

Tips for parents. "Little Things Make A Big Difference" is a 17-page booklet on ways parents can help their children succeed in school. Developed by the National Association of Elementary School Principals and World Book Educational Products, the booklet can be obtained free by calling (800) 621-8202. An accompanying videotape can be rented free from any Blockbuster Video store.

To purchase the videotape ($19.95) and multiple copies of the booklet (25 cents each, minimum order of 25), write the NAESP at 1615 Duke St., Alexandria, Va. 22314. NAESP members receive a 25-percent discount.

WORKSHOPS/CONFERENCES

Black Youth. "Motivating Black Youth to Learn" will be the topic of a lecture by educator Jawanza Kunjufu at 4:30 p.m. Oct. 3 in Schmidt Academic Center of DePaul University, 2323 N. Seminary. The sponsor is the University of Chicago-DePaul University Chapter of Phi Delta Kappa. Tickets will be $10 at the door. For more information, call Heidi Rock at (312) 752-3263 or (312) 335-4086.

School improvement. "School Reform: Starting the Second Round" is the theme of a two-day conference sponsored by the Citizens Schools Committee. It will be held from 8:30 a.m. to 4 p.m. Nov. 2 and from 12:30 p.m. to 5 p.m. Nov. 3 at the University of Illinois-Chicago Circle Center, 750 S. Halsted.

Workshop topics include student attendance, overcrowding, budgeting, grant writing, and AIDS. Those on overcrowding and AIDS will be offered in Spanish. The cost is $20 for individuals and $15 for CSC members. LSCs pay $30 for two members. For more information, call Susanna Lang (312) 726-4678.

Learning disabilities. The emotional development of learning-disabled students and promoting their self-esteem and empowerment in the classroom are the topics of a free workshop scheduled for 9 a.m. to 1 p.m. Nov. 2 at St. Xavier College, 3700 W. 103rd. It is sponsored by the Chicago Association for Children with Learning Disabilities. For more information, call Judy O'Connell (312) 455-5830.
Stagg boys club boosts learning

Peer pressure from gang members had made underachievement a way of life for many talented young boys at Stagg Elementary School, 7424 S. Morgan. In an attempt to break this mental hold, the school organized a "rival" club.

Open to seventh- and eighth-grade boys, the club strives to help members develop qualities of scholarship and service to the community. "We are teaching them to be leaders," says basketball coach Orlando Woods, one of the sponsors.

The club is named for former teacher Charles Driskell, who urged staff to start it.

The boys meet every Friday for 1 1/2 hours of basketball, volleyball, gymnastics or other sports. They also take field trips to university basketball games, museums and amusement parks. To participate fully, boys cannot receive more than three Fs during a marking period, must maintain a 92-percent attendance record and must stay out of any trouble that would require a parent to visit the school.

"The time may come when we are more strict with our (academic) requirements," says sponsor Barbara Cooley. "But we didn't need to save the bright students. We needed to save the boys who were making these kinds of grades."

If a student gets more than three Fs he goes on academic probation and must attend a tutoring session each day for one hour until his grades improve. While on probation, members can take part in the Friday athletics but can't go on field trips.

The effort is showing signs of paying off. Before the club was organized, there were only four boys in Stagg's honor society, the Beta Club. None of the boys was a seventh- or eighth-grader. Now, the Beta Club, which requires a B average, has 12 members from the boys club.

The boys work to maintain good grades because "they want to be part of something positive," Woods says. Boys who aren't on probation often attend tutoring sessions to make sure they keep their grades high.

At least some members are being steered away from gangs, too. "We just had to pick new friends," says Pampero Short. "Being in the boys club makes you feel like a better person. It's a better place for us to meet without getting into a fight about some stupid thing on the street." Adds Chad Roberson, "If we need help, we help each other and we aren't ashamed when we don't know how to do something."

For more information, contact Sherry Gage (312) 535-3565.

Charlotte Smarte-Foal