Quitting time

Each year, 18 percent of teachers leave their schools. At turnarounds, faculty attrition is higher. CPS spends millions to hire replacements, but children in failing schools with the highest turnover pay a steeper price—in lost learning.
Slowing the revolving door

By Lorraine Forte
Editor-in-Chief

Sometimes a telling story emerges virtually by accident. That’s what happened with our report on teacher attrition at turnaround schools, published in this issue of Catalyst In Depth.

Deputy Editor Sarah Karp was poring over state teacher service records and noticed that, surprisingly, teacher turnover didn’t end once a turnaround was in place. Not only did most existing teachers disappear with the turnaround—a process that requires teachers and other staff to reapply for their jobs—but most of the handpicked teachers who replaced the veterans quickly vanished too.

Karp interviewed a number of former turnaround teachers who described constant pressure to raise test scores, work long hours, adhere to checklists for how classrooms and bulletin boards should be decorated and maintain strict discipline. Hallways were to be at “zero,” completely silent, at all times.

Though we were surprised by the findings, many of our readers were not. Dozens of them weighed in and posted comments on the online version of Karp’s article. Many of the comments were written by former turnaround teachers who expressed relief at escaping from the high-pressure turnaround culture.

In one comment, a reader questioned how such a mass exodus could be taking place given the contract requirements of the Academy for Urban School Leadership (the teacher training program that manages all but a few turnarounds). Teachers must agree to work in CPS for several years after completing their AUSL residency.

In reply, a reader who self-identified only as ‘Another anonymous former AUSL teacher,’” wrote: “Many teachers would rather pay the hefty $3k-11k penalty than fulfill their contract.”

A top AUSL leader interviewed for the story said high attrition wasn’t a pressing concern. The goal, he said, was to put “effective teachers” in front of students, “not necessarily the same teacher.”

Yet experts point out that high teacher turnover has the worst impact on poor children of color, the very children enrolled in turnarounds. On a broader scale, any good business leader—and today’s education reformers like to espouse business principles—will say that constant workplace turnover is costly and a likely sign of subpar management.

AUSL was launched with great promise, featuring a year-long residency meant to train aspiring teachers for jobs in the toughest schools. In a 2007 op-ed published by Catalyst Chicago, AUSL founder and former venture capitalist Martin Kolodye wrote that “meaningful change will come only when talented professional educators are given the freedom and opportunity to truly change the circumstances for children in public schools.”

So far, most turnarounds have made only modest improvements on state tests. How can teachers create meaningful change when they’re out the door almost as quickly as they arrive and never get the chance to become part of a stable community of dedicated educators, working with the community to create a truly high-quality school—not just a quick uptick in test scores?

As a respected educator observed, “It’s a shame because their [residency] model is exactly what our profession needs. … It’s not the model, it’s the execution.”

IN CPS AS A WHOLE, ANNUAL ATTRITION is 18 percent. Of those, about 40 percent of teachers transfer to another CPS school, but a growing number head for suburban districts. And as the Consortium on Chicago School Research has shown, turnover is worst where poverty is highest. Catalyst’s analysis found that among 132 schools where more than 90 percent of students are low-income minorities, a third of schools lost more than half their teachers between 2008 and 2012.

Part of the problem is the stress and, for many new teachers, the culture clash of teaching in a school surrounded by entrenched poverty. Sending rookies, fresh out of school and usually white and middle-class, into a failing school in East Garfield Park or Roseland is almost inviting them to crash-and-burn.

Smart educators know that it takes a particular outlook and sense of dedication to handle these jobs. The late University of Wisconsin professor Martin Haberman, for one, pioneered a protocol for selecting teachers with the personal qualities necessary for teaching in urban schools.

Cultural competence is essential, too. At the University of Illinois at Chicago, students in the School of Education complete service projects before they start student teaching. Dean Alfred Tatum theorizes that showing students the power of changing children’s lives will help provide an incentive for them to stick with it when the going in urban schools gets tough.

Tatum also recruits black male high school juniors for a leadership academy that includes tutoring for elementary students. The hope is to draw some of these young men into teaching, a profession that is in dire need of more black males.

“You have to ignite that fire in them, and keep it lit,” Tatum says.
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 policy makers.

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Call it the great migration. Every year, on average, 18 percent of Chicago teachers leave their schools. Some are fired or laid off. Some take a job in another CPS school or, increasingly, in another district. Some abandon teaching altogether.

Though teacher turnover in CPS remains higher than the national average, the good news is that it has decreased slightly in recent years. That's likely because more teachers—like all workers—clung to their jobs during the recession. Nationally, about 15 percent of teachers leave the profession each year or go to a new school, according to the U. S. Department of Education's 2008-2009 Teacher Attrition and Mobility survey, the most recent available. Cities, suburban and rural districts tend to lose about the same percentage of teachers, according to the survey.

The price of turnover is high. The National Commission on Teaching and America's Future, which looked at several school districts nationwide, estimates that CPS spends $17,872 to fill each vacancy and recruit, interview and provide induction for new teachers. The price tag to fill about 4,000 vacancies between 2011 and 2012: $71.5 million.

The academic cost of turnover is highest for poor students of color in distressed communities, who are most likely to see their teachers leave for easier jobs in other districts and other careers.
Teacher turnover is highest in schools that are predominantly black and low-income: An average of 23 percent of teachers from these schools left between 2011 and 2012, according to a Catalyst Chicago analysis of Illinois State Board of Education teacher service records. Integrated schools and those that enroll more white and middle-class children retained the most teachers.

What’s more, schools with a student population that is mostly black or Latino and low-income tend to have high turnover year after year. Between 2008 and 2012, 132 schools—about one in five of all CPS schools, and more than one in three of poor, predominantly minority schools—had to replace more than half their teachers.

Research on the importance of teacher retention and student learning has been mixed. But a newer study found convincing evidence of a correlation between high teacher turnover and stagnant achievement. When controlling for other factors, students in schools with high turnover have significantly lower test scores in language arts and math compared to children in schools with low turnover, according to the 2013 study.

“The harm is more pronounced in lower-performing schools that serve black students,” says Matthew Ronfeldt, assistant professor of educational studies at the University of Michigan and author of the study, which was published in the American Educational Research Journal. “We don’t know exactly why this is, but it is in the very schools with the highest turnover that the harmful effects are most pronounced.”

Barbara Radner, the director of the Center for Urban Education at DePaul University, points out that keeping teachers is not just about what happens inside the classroom. “Teachers build relationships in and outside of the building,” she says. “The connectivity adds an intangible value.”

JENNIFER PHARES RELUCTANTLY made the most common move: She went to another CPS school. About 40 percent of CPS teachers who leave their schools end up elsewhere in the district.

By all the evidence, Phares is a good teacher. She is National Board certified and, in 2009, she won a Golden Apple teaching award. Last year, 86 percent of her third-graders met standards in math and 93 percent in reading.

Phares started her career at Bright Elementary, a school in South Deering on the Far Southside where all the children come from poor households. Teacher turnover at Bright was dramatic, so much so that Phares almost didn’t bother to learn the names of new teachers. Most were young and inexperienced, and were quickly overwhelmed by the challenges of the environment.

At one point, Phares was that young, inexperienced teacher—and felt the weight of it. She laughs and says that during her first year, she only taught reading because she couldn’t figure out how to get through the rest of the curriculum.

Her principal, for better or worse, didn’t bother her much. Phares recalls that she could have used more support, but she also didn’t feel a ton of pressure from a principal looking over her shoulder. She had a small class, only 24 students, and that helped keep the workload manageable. Phares shut the classroom door and tried her best. “The kids had nothing,” she recalls. “That time in our classroom was ours. We were in our own little bubble.”

Phares grew to love the students and their families, who warned her early on that they feared she would leave. When she passed by moms and dads on her way to school, they waved to her.

Phares didn’t see herself as another teacher who would quickly take off. But two years ago, she did. And she left for a reason that studies show is typical of why teachers leave schools like Bright: Most new teachers are white and middle-class and live far from poor black and Latino neighborhoods. When Phares had a baby, she wanted to work closer to her home in Lincoln Park.

At just about the same time, Prescott, on the west end of Lincoln Park, was undergoing some major changes. Few families in the neighborhood sent their children to Prescott. But a new principal had come in and saved Prescott from being closed. He replaced almost the entire staff as he tried to improve the school. Phares became part of the transition.

Phares says she loves and misses the children at Bright. But she admits that some things are easier at Prescott. The parents can be more involved. The students are more prepared.

“These kids, for the most part, have a safe place to go to at night,” Phares says, looking at her sixth-grade class of third-graders.

She also loves that Prescott is diverse. Children of all races mix and learn together, and Phares says they do not worry about differences.

A SMALL BUT GROWING NUMBER OF TEACHERS leave CPS for suburban schools. In 2005, Catalyst Chicago found that 1 percent did between 1999 and 2003. Then, between 2008 and 2012, that figure rose to about 4 percent.

Though she felt like a traitor, Cheryl Filipek eventually decided to make that move.

Filipek was the band teacher at Lincoln Park High School for seven years before accepting a job at Niles North in solidly middle-class Skokie. In the end, the opportunity to work in a school with abundant resources convinced her to take the job. One example: Niles students had Google Chromebooks, while CPS teachers and students often relied on outdated textbooks.

Filipek also loves the ability to get new instruments and take her band students to high-level competitions. “I couldn’t dream of doing the things I do here with my students from Chicago,” she says, noting that several former CPS employees work at Niles North.

Support from the administration has also been impressive. Filipek says she is observed eight times a year, compared to just once or twice a year in CPS. “This allows me to grow as a teacher,” Filipek explains. In areas where she wants to improve, she can take courses for free. “I find my-
There’s also less isolation. Not only are Niles parents more involved, but if a student has problems, a team of social workers is on hand.

“The biggest difference about working here is that I wasn’t called a bitch [once] all year,” Filipek says. “A student might roll their eyes at me, but they wouldn’t dream of calling me a bitch.”

CPS HAS NEVER HAD a strong, districtwide program to retain teachers. Yet officials point to investments in initiatives like the New Teachers Center, which helps principals work with new teachers. Some teacher training programs, like the Academy for Urban School Leadership and Teach for America, offer their alumni support after they are placed in schools.

At individual schools, principals use their own strategies to keep teachers from leaving. When Donella Carter became principal at Gregory Elementary 13 years ago, she pushed out some teachers who did not meet her high expectations. But now that she has a faculty that she feels is on board with her goals, she wants to retain them.

Carter gives teachers the chance to be leaders and mentors, encouraging them to participate in committees and make changes at the school. As Gregory has improved—the school earned the highest CPS rating this year—Carter sees teachers taking pride in their work.

Carter says she makes teachers create an academic improvement plan for each child. If that plan doesn’t work, she has them develop a plan B.

Teachers like to work at a place where they feel they are effective, Carter says. “They know it is not just Mrs. Carter that is doing it. It is a team effort.”

Some educators, however, worry that turnover will worsen as test scores become a significant part of teacher evaluation.

Teachers feel a lot of pressure regarding test scores, yet so many factors affect scores that teachers say they don’t have complete control over whether their students do well, says Carol Caref, research consultant for the Chicago Teachers Union.

Caref says teachers are put in the untenable position of having their job threatened if they can’t raise students’ scores quickly. If a teacher receives an “unsatisfactory” rating, for instance, he or she has just 90 days to bring the rating up two levels to “proficient” to avoid being fired.

One teacher who is on an evaluation committee at his school says that their network chief is questioning principals who gave teachers high ratings even though their students’ scores haven’t improved. This position is particularly disturbing, he says, because it “will push the best teachers away from the hardest to serve.”

Alfred Tatum, dean of the School of Education at the University of Illinois at Chicago, says that the emphasis on testing and compliance squeezes out the power of teaching.

Tatum started a leadership academy program for black male high school juniors in which they tutor fourth-grade boys. He hopes that some of these young men will see that they can make an impact and consider going into education.

Under Tatum, students in the School of Education complete service projects before they begin student teaching. Tatum’s hypothesis is that if they experience changing a child’s life, they will keep that memory as they experience the drudgery and challenges of teaching.

“You have to ignite that fire in them, and you have to keep it lit,” says Tatum.

Tell us what you think. Go to catalyst-chicago.org to leave a comment, or email karp@catalyst-chicago.org.
Turnaround to turnover

‘If a teacher is absent for a few days... students start to wonder if they are ever coming back,’ says one teacher.

By Sarah Karp

In the summer before a turnaround, schools that have been left to languish for years experience an adrenaline rush of frenetic energy.

The hand-picked teachers, the new principal and even the security guards gather in the school library every day for five weeks of intensive training and team-building. They take walks in the community to get a complete, on-the-ground view of the isolated, poverty-stricken neighborhoods where their soon-to-be students live—the boarded-up houses, vacant lots and street memorials to shooting victims that too often appear with the advent of summer.

For many of the mostly white and middle-class new teachers, it is eye-opening and sobering. They stop and talk to the children and try to strike up conversations with their parents. Yet the adults are often wary of the newcomers. Many of the displaced, mostly black teachers taught generations of the community’s children and knew the neighborhood and its challenges. The message the new teachers strive to convey to residents is that, “We are here and we are committed.”

Inside, the school gets a facelift. The walls get a fresh coat of paint, cracked windows and tiles are replaced and the floors are given an extra buffing.

But the district’s biggest investment, $300,000 per school, is in the teachers.

“They make it sound wonderful, like we have a chance to give children who really need it a chance at a good education,” says one teacher, who spent the summer of 2013 in a school in Humboldt Park.

“We believed in the values, we believed in what we were doing,” says Janice Patterson, a 20-year veteran who was teaching at a therapeutic day school before she landed a job at Morton Elementary in East Garfield Park.

But at many of the turnarounds, the optimism almost immediately begins to unravel. Nowhere is this more evident than with the revolving door the turnaround sets in motion with teachers.

THE PRACTICE OF “TURNING AROUND” schools began when then-CEO Arne Duncan decided that some schools were so bad that they needed to be blown up and given a fresh start. Under Renaissance 2010, Duncan handed the management of most turnaround schools to the Academy for Urban School Leadership—the first time that CPS ceded control of a school to a private, albeit nonprofit, entity. AUSL was founded in 2001 as an alternative teacher training program. AUSL would feed its newly minted teachers into the turnarounds.

The creation of turnarounds accelerated under Mayor Rahm Eman-
uel, who brought two former AIJSL leaders into the CPS administration: Tim Cawley, now chief administrative officer, and School Board President David Vitale. Emanuel’s handpicked school board has approved 23 new turnarounds, more than doubling the number in place when he took office.

Turnarounds and other drastic actions became a central focus of Duncan’s administration at the U.S. Department of Education. But nationally, they have not caught on. Kathy Christie, vice president of knowledge/information management and dissemination of the Education Commission of the States, says that handing out layoff notices to a slew of teachers is not an easy thing to do. Often, not enough good teachers are available to replace those who have left.

“It is unbelievably hard work,” she says. “It is a tough slog.”

A 2012 Center for Education Policy survey found that in Idaho, Maryland and Michigan, hiring replacements for principals and staff was a major problem. Other schools were perceived to have better working conditions or reputations, and too few good candidates existed.

Instead of turnarounds, districts are relying on less-drastic action such as transformation, in which
Turnaround Schools

outside partners are brought in to help schools improve.

CPS officials insist that the effort in Chicago has been successful because test scores have improved at a somewhat quicker rate in most turnarounds.

Yet more than 61 percent of turnarounds are still on the lowest rung of the CPS performance rating scale and nearly 80 percent are in the bottom 25 percent of schools on state tests.

In addition, a large number of the hand-picked teachers, who spent weeks getting to know each other and becoming a team, leave within a few years.

In all but one of the 17 schools turned around between the 2006-2007 and 2010-2011 school years, half or more of teachers are gone by the third year of the turnaround, according to a Catalyst Chicago analysis of Illinois State Teacher Service Records and CPS employee rosters.

Catalyst Chicago

Four years after the third year of the turnaround, one-third of teachers are gone, and nearly 80 percent are in the bottom 25 percent of schools on state tests.

Catalyst Chicago

Yet more than 61 percent of turnarounds are still on the lowest rung of the CPS performance rating scale and nearly 80 percent are in the bottom 25 percent of schools on state tests.

Catalyst Chicago

In the 2009 report “Why Teachers Leave,” the Consortium on Chicago School Research begins with the premise that some turnover is to be expected, but high attrition is problematic. “It can produce a range of organizational problems at schools, such as discontinuity in professional development, shortages in key subjects and loss of teacher leadership,” according to the report.

Michael Hansen, senior research director for the American Institutes of Research, says there has been surprisingly little research about whether changing the majority of a teaching staff truly sparks improvement. “The strategies that are being prescribed under Arne Duncan are under-researched,” Hansen says.

One study showed that turnarounds in California improved more than schools subjected to other, less drastic action. But Hansen notes that the schools were also given extra resources to help meet students’ social and emotional needs and those extras might be a more significant factor. “There are many moving parts going into it,” he says.

Hansen attempted to isolate the impact of human capital by analyzing rapidly improving schools in Florida and California. He found that new teachers and veteran teachers were equally responsible for the positive changes. “There is not a clear-cut story on who is improving what,” he says.

High attrition after a turnaround is a potential red flag. “It is possible you may cause more harm than help,” he says.

And though the management of AUSL might not think retention within a school is important, some of its administrators do. Morton Principal Peggie Burnett says that she is doing her best to hang onto the staff she inherited last year when she took over Morton, the highest-performing AUSL turnaround, in East Garfield Park.

“I love my teachers,” she says. “It is good for the community to keep the same teachers and also I make an investment in my teachers. We are a team and I don’t want to lose the team.”

MORTON ELEMENTARY SCHOOL’S initial turnaround in the 2008-2009 school year was fraught with trouble. Between the first and second year, half the staff left and test scores dropped.

The first problem, according to Janice Patterson, was a poor relationship between the new principal and the school’s families. “She seemed afraid of the parents and students,” Patterson recalls. “She didn’t talk to them or look at them.”

Patterson says the new principal, who was white, wasn’t culturally sensitive to the surrounding black neighborhood. The school did little to celebrate or acknowledge new President Barack Obama’s historic victory, though he was a black man from Chicago and could have served as an example to students.

That principal was forced out af-
ter the first year because the AUSL leadership was frustrated with the lack of progress. (Only two principals who launched turnarounds are still at the helm of their schools—which means that so far, none have lasted five years, the length of time experts say is necessary to provide stability at a failing school.)

Chadra Lang, who went to Morton for the first turnaround, says she felt that AUSL micromanaged the school, making it difficult for the school’s leaders to do their job.

Patterson also felt there was little emphasis on teaching. Instead, there was a lot of focus on how the room looked. “It was more about the bulletin board than the lesson plan,” she says.

Leaders seemed obsessed with discipline, too. For example, having the halls completely silent at all times was a priority and a teacher was reprimanded if he or she couldn’t get students to be quiet.

“Here these kids come to a school where they don’t see one damn familiar face, and there are all new rules,” she says. “It is like they woke up in another country.”

Former AUSL teachers interviewed by Catalyst voice the same complaints. AUSL’s stated approach is to work on the culture and climate of a school first. At Bradwell, doing that meant hiring nine security guards, up from just four the year before. Herzl in 2012 went from two to eight security guards.

The emphasis on discipline was discouraging to some teachers, who had a difficult time getting their students to buy into the strict rules. (AUSL turnaround schools have extraordinarily high suspension rates, according to CPS data.)

Principals are required to enforce a 36-point checklist that includes, among other things, curtains and lamps, motivational sayings posted on the walls and college readiness standards placed visibly in the school. Teachers acknowledge that some of these requirements improve the school’s climate, but they feel AUSL sometimes seems to focus on appearances rather than instructional quality.

The teacher who left the Humboldt Park turnaround says that the school had visitors as often as two or three times a week, even though it had just become a turnaround and teachers were still trying to figure things out.

Before the visitors arrived, the principal was hyper-vigilant with the checklist and about student’s behavior. At those times, students who acted out were more likely to get suspended, the former Humboldt Park teacher recalls.

“I would put on a show whenever people would come into the room,” she says. “It is not an authentic learning environment. Everything is for show.”

Chadra Lang, who is now teaching at Ray Elementary in Hyde Park, says she didn’t mind fixing up the school and felt that it sent a message to the students that teachers care about their education.

However, Lang, too, didn’t like the fact that the AUSL administration often stopped in with visitors. “I felt like I was walking on eggshells,” she says.

Concerns extended to other areas. One special education case manager, who asked not to be identified, says she was frustrated because special-needs children didn’t have the aides called for in their Individual Education Plans. When she tried to call the central office’s special education staff, administrators considered it a negative, as though she was trying to expose the school’s problems.

She says some special education aides were used to help around the office or go get lunch for adminis-
trators. In one case, a special education teacher was placed in a regular eighth-grade class because the eighth-grade teacher left mid-year, leaving the special education classroom with no teacher.

“I just didn’t feel like we were doing right by kids,” she says. The case manager now works at a North Side school, where she says she is encouraged to ask central office for help with getting special services.

Concerns about children with special needs were raised as CPS considered this year’s turnarounds. However, Sanford insists that complaints are individual issues and not endemic to the network.

WITH THE CHECKLIST, the constant visitors and ever-present pressure to raise test scores, the teachers who seemed to fare the worst were the new ones, who made up a substantial percentage of AUSL faculty. Forty percent of the 719 teachers who were initially hired for the first 17 turnarounds had less than three years of experience. (State teacher service records are only available through the 2011-2012 school year, so Catalyst was unable to determine the experience level of teachers at the 15 schools that became turnarounds the next two years.) In comparison, about 9 percent of CPS teachers are in their first or
panic attacks.” She was also put off by the idea that teachers were expected to work long hours without additional pay. Other former first-year teachers complained that they also were expected to call parents during what should have been their lesson preparation periods, for instance.

Turnaround principals must hire a certain number of former AUSL residents. One former turnaround teacher says residents are rated: red, yellow or green. The principal then gets to pick a certain number of teachers with each rating.

That teacher says he ran into problems because he got placed in a school with a principal with whom he did not get along. “If she had interviewed me, we would have known it was not a good fit,” he says.

Dustin Voss, one of the few teachers still left from the first year of Fenger High’s turnaround, says these schools are among the hardest to work in and that teachers need a certain disposition to survive.

Fenger’s turnaround was managed by CPS. Voss notes that he went through a lengthy process to land his job, including several interviews and teaching a sample lesson.

“The first group of teachers was smart and talented, but young and inexperienced,” he recalls. Voss had just one year behind him, at South Shore High, but was one of the veterans. “A lot of them were not quite ready for the kind of experience that they had at Fenger,” Voss says.

Almost immediately, teachers began leaving. “Some in the first year, some the second year,” Voss says. They left and they left. What really hurt was when the instructional leaders left.”

Many went to jobs at better schools where the work was less stressful, he says. Other factors contributed to the exodus. Fenger began losing money when fewer and fewer students enrolled, and a federal grant for the turnaround ran out—making it apparent that layoffs were coming.

This year, 30-some teachers and other employees were laid off. “Class sizes got bigger, security staff was lost, the one social worker was let go,” Voss says. “It is hard to say whether the turnaround was a good thing. It is difficult to parse out the benefit of the money and the value of recruiting a whole new staff.”

VETERANS WHO WERE FORCED OUT by turnarounds hear about the constant churn at their old schools and question whether it was really necessary to fire them.

At Marshall High, only 20 of the 68 turnaround teachers are still on the job. One teacher, Raminder Dua, was part of the displaced teacher pool for a while and eventually landed a position at Kelvyn Park High.

Dua believes outsiders do not understand how difficult it is to teach in high-poverty schools like Marshall, in East Garfield Park. But she was committed to Marshall, had been there for seven years and had no plans to leave.

She points out that the teachers who left Marshall mostly got jobs at other similar schools.

“The students are the same, the building is the same, and the results are the same,” she says.

Arthur Baumgartner, another former Marshall teacher, says the problem with turnarounds is that everyone is let go. “You throw the baby out with the bath water,” he says. “In my opinion, they do not want teachers like my wife, who taught for 35 years at the same school and retired from there.”

Baumgartner was not just any Marshall teacher: He was Captain Commando, dressing up for sports events as the school’s mascot. Now, from what he hears from teachers still there, a lot of time is spent poring over data—so much so that teachers feel that the school operates on an Excel sheet.

With an overemphasis on data and compliance instead of creativity in instruction and building a community among teachers, young teachers probably get fed up, don’t feel supported, and leave.

Says Baumgartner: “They think, ‘Why did I go to college for four years?’”

second year of teaching.

Among the teachers who left turnarounds, 59 percent have less than five years of experience.

Since she is a counselor, the case manager at the North Side school says other teachers often came to her for help. “They were mentally and physically getting sick,” she says. “They were crying and having panic attacks.”

While more veteran teachers, like Lang, were given some latitude, new teachers were given a scripted curriculum and told what to teach when.

“They literally had everything blocked off into 15-minute lessons,” says the teacher who left the Humboldt Park turnaround. AUSL often switched curricula and teachers had to change course at every
Keeping a faculty whole

Brian Metcalf didn’t try to clear the decks when he took over Field Elementary. Instead, he jumped in the trenches to work with teachers instead of showing them the door.

By Sarah Karp

When the principal of Field Elementary left abruptly in April 2011 and a spry Brian Metcalf took over, math teacher Roger Gutierrez was not sure what to think.

He didn’t know if Metcalf would want him to stay on at Field, and he wasn’t sure he wanted to stay on either. Metcalf was youngish—in his late 30s—and a fit, slightly built man with a lot of energy. Gutierrez thought Metcalf might want to hire up-and-comers in his own mold.

Though it was only his third year of teaching, Gutierrez was a career-changer, old enough to have a receding hair line and three children. To get to work, he traveled from the Far Southeast Side to the Far North Side, so he half-way thought about finding a job closer to home.

But Gutierrez had begun to develop a rapport with his students and their parents, especially the Mexican mothers and fathers who considered him an ally.

“I had gotten to know the community,” he says. “I think people want to stay at a place, to get to know the kids and be able to make a difference.”

Gutierrez worried that Metcalf would not want him because he had been hired by the principal who just left so abruptly. Gutierrez was “that guy’s guy”—so much so, that Gutierrez suspected colleagues viewed him as a spy for the administration.

Especially at low-performing schools like Field, principals often set about doing their own unofficial “turnaround,” pushing out existing teachers to bring on hand-picked hires to carry out their vision.

And Field, in Rogers Park, was in desperate need of vision. The school had sunk to the bottom rung on CPS’ academic performance scale. Fewer and fewer students enrolled each year, and half of the children in the school’s attendance boundary didn’t go to Field, according to CPS data. Single-family homes in the area sell for as much as $650,000 and condos for $350,000, but the school is 98 percent low-income.

Metcalf was Field’s fourth prin-
METCALF DEVOTES MUCH OF HIS TIME to being “in the trenches” with his teachers, observing them in their classrooms and spending weeks at a time with those who are struggling. He believes they can improve, and he demands that it happen.

He demands that it happen. He believes they can improve, and teachers, observing them in their to being “in the trenches” with his METCALF DEVOTES MUCH OF HIS TIME the school for personal reasons, Field in that time. One returned to also improved. predict high school graduation, has hood children. But under his lead- into a consistently high-achieving star principal who transforms Field that attracts more neighbor- school that attracts more neighbor- ship so far, students' academic growth is far above average, as is ers can improve, it isn't always easy. One day, he Metcalf points to April Harper and tells her, only half-jokingly, that she’s responsible for some of his gray hair. Harper responds that if it weren’t for him, she likely would have left teaching altogether.

Harper is just in her second year of teaching and had a difficult time her first year. Metcalf hired her because of her passion for one of the toughest jobs in a school: teaching special education.

Before enrolling at Northeast- ern Illinois University to become a teacher, Harper worked as an aide in a classroom for autistic children and fell in love with the job. “That was it,” she says. “That was my calling.”

At Field, she was placed in a special education classroom for sixth-, seventh- and eighth-grade students who had a variety of learning or behavioral disabilities and different skill levels. Almost right away, she felt overwhelmed.

An admonishment from a former professor stuck in her head: “He said that what you do as a child’s teacher changes his or her life,” Harper re- calls. The weight of that responsibility was too much at times.

At first, Harper had 19 students—more than the maximum al- lowed for special education classes. Scheduling was another challenge. The students attended different classes with non-special education students, so there was a flow of children in and out of the room.

Metcalf hired another teacher to split up the class so Harper would have no more than 12 students.

But she still found it daunting to teach to each student’s ability level, keep up with schedules and com- plete all the required paperwork. “There were so many times that I was in tears, ready to leave,” Harper says. “There were so many blank spaces in their academic [background] that there was so much area to cover.”

Metcalf soon realized she was in trouble. So he camped out in Har- per's classroom, observing where she struggled and giving her teaching strategies to help. He also met with her for hours after school and on Saturdays, helping her plan lessons and put together systems to make her classroom run smoothly.

A year later, Harper is much more at ease. On the white-board at the front of her class, she breaks the day into 20-minute segments of time to keep track of the work to be done.

Mid-morning one Monday, Harper has her students read a short passage on Cleopatra, each one taking a section. One boy stumbles on several words, such as “snake.” Without missing a beat, Harper tells him the word and then praises him for doing a good job. Then she reads the whole passage out loud and has students answer a few questions. Each of them appears to follow along, and they answer the ques- tions correctly.

“So you all got it,” Harper says to the class. Without wasting any time, she tells three students, the seventh-graders, to go to their regular-education class with other students in their grade. She quickly starts a math lesson with the remaining three eighth-graders.

Harper says she could stay at school for 20 years, doing the same thing. “I just love it. I just love the children,” she says.

FOR MORE VETERAN TEACHERS, Metcalf takes a different approach.

Last year, Saul Rodriguez, the fifth-grade reading teacher, and a colleague suggested to Metcalf that the students be split into an all-boys class and an all-girls class. “Our strength was working with boys, so we thought that splitting them up would force us to get better in working with girls,” says Rodriguez.

But Metcalf was not so sure. “I was not a fan. I was saying ‘No’ and they were saying ‘Yes.’ There was push-back, but it was never disre- spectful. I have the ultimate veto power, but if they could frame it in a way [to show] that it is better for children, I was open to it.”

Metcalf had concerns, but finally agreed to let the teachers try it.

Rodriguez says that the boys have skyrocketed under this ap- proach, but there are still some concerns with the girls.

In addition to seeing teachers as collaborators and being open to their ideas, Metcalf also believes in treating them as professionals. For one, he seeks out opportunities to send teachers to conferences of the professional organizations for their subject areas. “It is a very sacred thing to attend conferences,” Met- calf says. “We want our children to be lifelong learners, so we need to be the first partakers of [learning].”

Gutierrez took a pass the first time Metcalf invited him to attend the National Council of Teachers of Mathematics conference, partly be- cause it was such a foreign idea in CPS that he didn’t see how it could be valuable. But he has attended now for the past two years and raves about the experience.

“They have been career-affirm- ing,” he says. For one thing, Gutie- errz gets a chance to kibitz with teachers from across the country, and realizes that he isn’t alone in the struggle to meet ever-higher expec- tations for teaching and learning.

He also got a whole bunch of new ideas. “I came back with a suit- case full of resources,” he says. “It was really, really wonderful.”
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