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CHICAGO'S SCHOOL REFORM: NO "MIRACLES" HERE

by MICHAEL KLONSKY

“It [the educational system] is a system largely determined by the very economic inequality which it seeks to solve; and the power to administer the system lies all too largely in hands interested in privilege rather than in justice and in class advantage rather than in democratic control.” —W.E.B. DuBois, 1941¹

INTRODUCTION

School reform efforts at Chicago Public Schools (CPS) have always been and continue to be contested territory, much like the civil rights movement in

general. Public education in our city, and in the nation, has always been closely connected with the larger struggle for democracy, human rights and social justice. One question must continually be asked: has the system changed much from the one Dr. DuBois described nearly 70 years ago?

THE SMALL SCHOOLS MOVEMENT

In order to change the system, the University of Illinois at Chicago's Small Schools Workshop launched the small schools movement in Chicago nearly twenty years ago. Our research and our instincts as educators led us to believe that restructuring and redesigning CPS's large, factory-model schools into smaller, more personalized learning environments would benefit both teachers and students. The benefits small schools would provide were especially important for children of color and those from low-income families – students who had become anonymous victims of the large bureaucratic system that was, and is, CPS. Ultimately, our instincts and research proved right: dozens of new small public schools were created across the city, through partnerships between the teachers union, parents, local foundations, and community-based organizations. The early results were impressive, according to many external studies.² CUNY professor and distinguished researcher Michelle Fine, one of the authors of the first large scale study of Chicago's emerging small schools, called them “probably the single most powerful intervention for urban education in America.”

The new small schools energized hundreds of teachers; enabling them to work together in collaborative teams and helping them personalize instruction and make every student more visible and less anonymous. But like many reform efforts, the Chicago small-schools movement was susceptible to cooptation once politicians and the large foundations discovered it's potential. By 2000, the small schools ideal, its language and many of its features became absorbed into the school bureaucracy, leaving behind its social-justice focus and becoming at best, a technical reform and at worst a tool for gentrifying and re-segregating transitional neighborhoods. Its successes were credited to the very same bureaucracy and to politicians who had opposed it from the beginning, and were used to create many of the myths of Chicago school improvement under Mayor Daley's administration, that would ultimately propel his schools Chief Education Officer (CEO) Arne Duncan into the Secretary of Education post under the Obama administration.

THE TEXAS "MIRACLE"

The full story of how that powerful movement for better urban schools was ambushed and reversed during the past decade is fully described in our book, *Small Schools: Public School Reform Meets the Ownership Society*.³ But one short story, not in the book, may be instructive and relevant to understanding the Chicago reform story. It takes place in Houston, home of the so-called "Texas Miracle," during George W. Bush's term as governor. The "Texas Miracle" refers to George W. Bush's claim, now disproven, that an increased emphasis on high-stakes testing resulted in greater overall student achievement and decreased dropout rates. This myth allowed Bush to take on the mantle of "education president," and paved his road to the White House, taking along with him, Houston Superintendent, Rod Paige, who Bush would name the Secretary of Education.

Paige and other district leaders tried to coax white, middle-class parents and students back into inner-city Texas high schools, populated mainly by African-American and Latino students, by promising them their own small schools within the city's large schools. White and middle-class students would be able to attend public schools, avoiding the minority student population, and the huge tuition fees being charged at nearby private and parochial schools because the school would remain racially segregated on the inside. This would establish a pattern of internal tracking and re-segregation, within the walls of otherwise "integrated" buildings.

Standardized test scores, however, would be aggregated along with those of the whole school population. Then, pursuant to Texas law, the top-scoring 10 percent of those graduating would receive a full scholarship to the University of Texas. Since the white, middle-class students generally outscored poor, immigrant and minority students on these tests, the small school-within-a-school would be a stepping stone to a free education at the University of Texas, while also boosting lagging school-wide scores in the face of mounting pressure from the Dept. of Education. A win-win, right? Well, maybe not.

The "Texas Miracle" was the basis for education reform policy during the George W. Bush presidency. The Federal No Child Left Behind law was designed to implement the Texas law on a national level. Reform at CPS, away from the small schools movement and towards a business model was based, in

part, on the “Texas Miracle.” The reality is, however, that the “Texas Miracle” failed our nation’s most needy students and failed to truly prepare high school students for success following high school. The impact of reform in Chicago was largely the same.

THE HISTORY AND STATUS OF CHICAGO PUBLIC SCHOOLS

Not long before the “Chicago Miracle,” in 1987, President Reagan’s Secretary of Education, William Bennett journeyed to Chicago to announce that the city had the “worse school district in the nation.” Twelve years later, President Clinton praised Chicago as a “national model” of school reform. What happened in the intervening years was the most radical and far-reaching, community-based movement for school reform in the nation dating back to the desegregation struggles in the south during the ‘50s and ‘60s. Now realizing of course, that both Bennett’s and Clinton’s announcements were highly exaggerated—Chicago wasn’t the “worst in 1987, nor the “model” in 1999—the progress made, especially in the city’s elementary schools during that period cannot be denied and that progress can only be attributed to the extraordinary high level of community engagement. That intense level of engagement in communities previously ignored by the Daley Machine, followed in the wake of the movement that elected Harold Washington as the city’s first African-American mayor—a feat that, for this city, had many of the same qualities, and reverberated as loudly in the neighborhoods, as did President Obama’s election last November.

In the weeks leading up to the appointment of CPS CEO Arne Duncan as Obama’s Secretary of Education, there was new chatter in the local media about a “Chicago Miracle” in education. This time around, however, it was definitely a manufactured miracle. It was political spin, lacking substance and lacking the movement at the base that was seen during and immediately after Mayor Washington’s tenure.

This miracle was not about the improvement of neighborhood schools for the children already attending those schools. Rather, it was about closing schools, many of which were based in the poorest, resource-starved and isolated city neighborhoods on the city’s south and west sides. School closures would take with them, badly needed social services, special-education dollars and gathering points for the community. More importantly, they would take away public

voice and decision-making in educational policy making. The wave of school closings would also coincide with the demolition of public housing and the resettlement of thousands of African-American families and their children in a ring of poor suburbs around the south side of the city. Replacing these shuttered shells of neighborhood schools were new, better-equipped and staffed selective-enrollment schools like Northside College Prep and Walter Payton; schools that would offer only the elite students a curriculum that would take them to college or put them on a path toward economic success and a piece of the "American dream". Other parents might have a small chance at getting their kids into one of the few new charter schools on a first-come, first-serve basis while the rest would be dispersed throughout the city into existing large schools that were ill-prepared to receive them.

Rather than maintaining the spirit of the earlier small schools movement, the new charter schools, many of which are now being run by private charter management organizations (CMOs), limit the enrollment of students with special needs, disabilities, behavioral problems or English language learners, claiming that their schools are "too small" and have too few resources to take care of students that regular neighborhood schools had to accept. For instance, the Knowledge Is Power Program (KIPP), is notorious for their high attrition rates, pushing out students with low test scores in large numbers, students who often have learning difficulties, are English-language learners, have behavioral issues, or who simply are bringing down KIPP's test score averages. This is the practical substance of the "miracle" in Chicago and its much-ballyhooed school Renaissance 2010 initiative. While conditions for most of the city's 400,000 public school students remain basically the same, for many in those impoverished and racially isolated communities conditions are worsening.

CHICAGO'S PROPOSED "SOLUTIONS" TO AN INADEQUATE SYSTEM

When Chicago Mayor Richard Daley was handed power to run the school system, school reform became a mish-mash of politically driven gimmicks that had no basis in research. For example, in 1997 there was an effort to end "social promotion" which succeeded only in increasing the high school dropout rate, which has perennially hovered above 50 percent. This dropout rate is, in fact, actually much higher when you exclude the selective enrollment schools and special education students.

This effort was then followed by a succession of failed punitive strategies based solely on test score results. Another CPS reform policy was high school *Reconstitution*, essentially meaning the wholesale re-staffing of schools. Reconstitution, like most top-down reform efforts, was later considered a disastrous failure and CPS moved on. Next, CPS has launched a mandatory “turn-around” program on its neighborhood high schools, remarkably similar to *Reconstitution*, requiring entire staffs to be replaced. Only this time around, a scripted curriculum is put in place for teachers to follow. Each reform initiative lasted about a year and was then replaced by another even more unreliable measure, all of which led to the current “turn-around” and pay-for-test scores initiatives.

The first wave of successful reform in the 1990s, the small schools initiative, showed us what was possible when entire communities became energized and engaged in the change effort. Hundreds of schools with active, elected Local School Councils (LSCs) and minimal CPS central office intervention, made credible measurable gains in student learning outcomes while teachers gained a measure of control over their classrooms. This had previously been denied under the unwieldy and top-heavy bureaucratic system that was CPS.⁴

Neither the “Miracle” of closing schools in Chicago nor the Mayor’s mis-named *Renaissance 2010* has succeeded in substantially narrowing the so-called achievement gap. Instead they have only hastened and intensified the drive towards a two-tiered system of education that leaves behind hundreds of thousands of kids. In fact, only about six percent of CPS students graduate from universities by the time they are in their mid-20’s.⁵ High school dropout rates continue to hover around 50 percent, much higher among African-American and Latino students,⁶ and high school test scores showed no improvement during the four years leading up to Duncan’s appointment as Secretary of Education.⁷ This is not to put the blame solely on the school system, Duncan, the teachers, or the schools themselves. Rather, it has become increasingly clear that without real improvements in the living conditions of CPS students and their parents—life outside of the school—no substantial improvement in city-wide learning outcomes is possible.

Nor has there been any significant narrowing of the racial inequities that have longed stained the city’s image. The current state of Chicago’s highly segregated school system can be traced back to the period following World War II when the city’s African American neighborhoods expanded and school officials

adjusted boundary lines to assure that school districts remained as segregated as the housing market. The very idea that schools could somehow be significantly improved, while a system of de facto segregation was being enforced and continuously replicated, goes to the very heart of Mayor Daley's botched reform efforts. Chicago-style school reform continues to place the burden for change directly and entirely on the schools while placing district school policy at the service of city redevelopment and downtown business interests—the enforcers of segregated housing, and thus school attendance patterns.

THE SOCIAL JUSTICE HIGH SCHOOL STORY

As we move into the final year of the Chicago's Renaissance 2010 plan and the 13th year of the Mayor's autocratic rule over the city's public schools, the students at a small school called Social Justice have become the conscience of the community. On January 21, 2009, students from Social Justice High School in the predominantly Mexican immigrant Little Village neighborhood, stood before a federal judge in Chicago and "begged for better schools."⁸ The students pleaded for more diversity, for more seats for neighborhood kids in the city's top selective-enrollment schools, for more and better books, for more bilingual education, and for more qualified teachers in those schools which CPS leaders claim they have been unable to desegregate as ordered under the consent decree signed 28 years ago. There, in front of Judge Charles Kocoras, the students offered a strong, well-documented case. A case that has been made over and over again since 1954; not only have we as a society failed to live up to the promise of *Brown v. Board of Education*, which formally outlawed school desegregation, but we have failed to even take *Plessy v. Ferguson* (separate, but equal) seriously.

Social Justice High School provides an interesting case study. In 2001 a group of Little Village parents staged a 19-day hunger strike. This strike was a culmination of years of petitioning and pleading for a new high school to relieve overcrowding in their burgeoning immigrant community. Further, the parents had spent years watching the city build new, expensive, well-staffed and resourced selective-enrollment high schools and magnet schools in the hope of reversing white-flight migration of the new urban technical and professional class. The strike drew widespread community support and led to the funding and construction of the new Little Village Community High School. The new school was designed under the parents' watchful eyes, to house four small,

highly autonomous schools, including the aptly named Social Justice High. The school's curriculum would focus on preparing students as leaders, planners and problem solvers and active participants in their own community's growth and development. It also tapped into the student's interest in grassroots politics and in their daily confrontation with oppressive conditions.

Standing against the Social Justice High School students and their parents was a CPS spokesman and the district's lead attorney arguing to keep the desegregation consent decree in place. Their argument was that Chicago had already done its part, thus demonstrating to the kids and the judge, that when it comes to desegregation, to quote the old 43rd Ward's alderman Paddy Bauler, "Chicago ain't ready for reform."⁹

"We feel that we are in compliance with the terms and the spirit of the consent decree and we are meeting the needs of our [English as a second language] students," said CPS spokesman, Michael Vaughn. He expressed little contriteness. He failed to apologize for the hundreds of thousands of children of color lost to the streets under their watch. Nor was there any remorse for the spike in school violence that followed in the wake of Renaissance 2010 school closings or the forced, destabilizing cross-town migrations to unprepared schools. There was not even a tip of the cap to the courageous kids and their parents who ventured into these intimidating surroundings to be interrogated by the robbed and gaveled distinguished judge of the high court.

Instead CPS continued to make the same argument; "We are in compliance "in terms and spirit." CPS could take no further action to desegregate this system of 400,000 students, arguably the most racially segregated in the entire country. Was Vaughn really claiming that this was the finished product of the historic battle for school desegregation? Was he implying that being one of the most segregated school districts in one of the four most segregated state school systems in the nation was a *fait accompli*, in fact, living up to the terms and spirit of the decree? If so, then the students could not be blamed for concluding that the system wasn't broken at all, but was working just fine, just as intended—as a sorting and tracking machine rather than as the nation's best and only hope for social mobility through public education.

CHICAGO PUBLIC SCHOOLS: A BUSINESS MODEL

CPS no longer uses the term “superintendent”, instead imposing a “business model”, the system is run by a Chief Education Officer, or CEO. The district may as well refer to the schools chief as the CNE, or “Chief Non-Educator” since the new model seems to require that the chief executive have absolutely no educational background or teaching experience. The business model management strategy has once again been reinforced by the mayor’s recent appointment of Ron Huberman as Arne Duncan replacement. Huberman has no experience in the field of American public education. He is a former police officer, Daley chief of staff, and, most recently, president of the Chicago Transit Authority. CHICAGO SUN TIMES reporter Fran Spielman noted, “The Huberman appointment is vintage Daley. The mayor has long believed that “good managers can manage anything” — even if they don’t have a clue about the agencies under their command.”¹⁰ Spielman continued, “Daley has had a progression of fair-haired boys — from Forrest Claypool, David Doig and John Harris to Paul Vallas and Bill Abolt — who have hop-scotched from job-to-job before falling out of favor with the notoriously demanding mayor.”¹¹ It’s not hard to figure out the code language of “fair-haired” in this context. The mayor’s latest CEO is not likely to lead a shift in policy we heard articulated by the Social Justice High School students and parents.

The “business model” needs no Wikipedia definition here, it is just what it sounds like. Its imposition on public schools certainly does not stem from its trail of great successes, either in areas of equalizing historic racial disparities, improved learning outcomes, or even in achievement of its own bottom-line standards in the global marketplace, as the latest financial collapse surely reveals. Recent studies have revealed, for example, that privately managed charter schools in urban districts like Philadelphia, failed to outperform even the most run-down neighborhood schools.¹²

NO-CHILD LEFT BEHIND AND THE SO-CALLED “ACHIEVEMENT GAP”

While the past eight years have seen more big government in public education, No Child Left Behind (NCLB) has become a boon to an emerging class of school entrepreneurs and politically-connected providers of charter school

management (Educational Management Organizations or EMOs), after-school programs and teacher “training.”

NCLB with its single-minded focus on standardized testing, calls for punitive measures against schools whose students’ scores fail to make Annual Yearly Progress (AYP). Punishments include offering their few high-scoring students a transfer to other schools, teacher/principal firings and school closures. These closings will result in a further loss of school-based social services, including community health facilities, job training and evening adult school. However, with few accessible better schools to which to transfer, neighborhood school parents stood strong and NCLB’s transfer policy was a failure.

Typically failing schools have kids from the lowest income families and resource-starved neighborhoods, reaffirming the correlation, proven many times over between standardized test scores, the racial divide, and family income. It is not that some selected poor or predominantly African-American schools are not capable of outperforming other schools in the area, or that African-American or Latino kids are not capable of excelling academically. Instead the exceptional cases are turned into an excuse for affirmation of the two-tiered system of education. University of Wisconsin educator, Gloria Ladson-Billings refers to this as, “the education debt,”¹³ calling attention to the build-up of historically rooted inequities which make the so-called “achievement gap” impossible to transcend for most.

To meet the demands of urban gentrification, Renaissance 2010 shifted the focus from new-school creation to neighborhood school closings. With dozens of CPS neighborhood schools, almost all in African-American communities on the south and west sides on the chopping block, and hundreds of teachers being given pink slips, the EMOs moved in and were offered new charter schools to run and replicate, often with new facilities and low-paid non-certified teachers with no collective-bargaining rights.

Some liberal education groups, showing a naïve faith in the Bush administration’s intentions, argued that NCLB with all its faults was still needed in order to ensure accountability and educational equity. Every child, they argued, should be mandated to be above average by the year 2014—a new twirl on the Lake Wobegon Effect espoused by radio host Garrison Keillor. So Arne Duncan went to Washington, as did most other urban superintendents/CEOs with future political aspirations in mind, and bowed down to NCLB and its

mandates. He praised the very same Bush approach he had sharply criticized a year earlier.

CONCLUSION

I bring up all this sordid history, not to dampen our spirits as we head into the new era of so-called *post-racialism*. Nor do I raise these issues to denigrate Mr. Duncan, whom I hope will make a good Secretary of Education. My point here is simply to show that the whole system operating behind federal policy, along with CPS's business-model response, was bound to widen rather than close the gap between the measurable learning outcomes of the city's students of color and their white, middle-class counterparts. Neither federal law, nor local education policy is connected with any meaningful plan to improve the living or working conditions of the city's poor and working class—the very ones whose children fill the bulk of those 400,000 classroom seats.

Looking ahead to the Obama era, hope fills the heart. There are already signs that President Obama's education stimulus package could substantially increase the national education budget. Furthermore the language of school reform is shifting once again. This time we are hearing more out of Washington about repairing thousands of broken schools and building new ones. Charter schools still offer the potential to become the incubators of innovation they were originally intended to be; a critical voice within public education, rather than a stalking horse for privatization, union-busting, and business-model replications. Already we are starting to see a rippling effect from Barack Obama's path-breaking victory on the consciousness of African-American youth and other minority students. A small, but important brick in the wall has been removed. One small study even reported a short-term boost in measurable learning outcomes traced directly to Obama's victory. Just think what might happen when many or all bricks are removed.

NOTES

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- 3 M. Klonsky and S. Klonsky, *Small Schools: Public School Reform Meets the Ownership Society*, (N.Y. Routledge, 2008).
- 4 See Designs For Change, *The Big Picture: School-Initiated Reforms, Centrally Initiated Reforms, and Elementary School Achievement in Chicago (1990 to 2005)*, September 2005, available at <http://www.designsforchange.org/pubs.html>
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- 12 Paul Socolar, *Suppressed Study on EMO Contracts*, Philadelphia Public School Notebook, May 26, 2007, available at <http://www.thenotebook.org/content/suppressed-study-emo-contracts-posted-notebook-website>; Ron Zimmer, Suzanne Blanc, Brian Gill, and Jolley Christman, *Evaluating the Performance of Philadelphia's Charter Schools*, (Rand Education Working Paper WR-550-WPF, March 2008), available at http://www.rand.org/pubs/working_papers/2008/RAND_WR550.pdf
- 13 Gloria Ladson-Billings, *Presidential Acceptance Speech at AERA National Meeting: From Achievement Gap to Education Debt: Understanding Achievement in U.S. Schools (2006)*, available at http://www.aera.net/uploadedFiles/Publications/Journals/Educational_Researcher/3507/02ERv35n7_Ladson-Billings.pdf