Introduction

Prior to 1995 the Chicago Public Schools (CPS) were in a state of deterioration. Elementary school scores had flat-lined and high school scores were in a disturbing downward trend. The system was plagued with frequent teacher strikes and financial instability. A 1988 reform law had given a high level of control to each of the 596 local schools through the initiation of Local School Councils. These elected councils struggled to improve student performance while attempting to move away from issues of governance. But time and time again they went to the state legislature for additional funding, and finally in 1995 the legislature gave control of CPS to Mayor Richard M. Daley.

An Effective Approach

Change came to Chicago because there was an overriding and immediate need for change. Even during the first year, significant improvements began to occur. Mayor Daley, upon taking control, instituted a new management team and, more importantly, a new management approach. The team was led by Chief Executive Officer Paul Vallas and Board President Gery Chico. Vallas was the former budget director for Chicago, and Chico was the former chief of staff for the mayor. Vallas and Chico immediately set about the business of solving the financial crisis, bringing about labor peace with the unions and,
more significantly, setting the course for instituting high learning standards for all Chicago schoolchildren. These high standards were instituted through reorganization of the Central Service Center and by the development of the Office of Accountability.

The new leaders brought a new and important energy to CPS. They believed that schools could show immediate, substantial improvement, that too often educators want to take two years to research and pilot an idea, one year to review the pilot, and another year to expand it before beginning full implementation during the fifth or sixth year. With the average tenure of most superintendents being less than three years, one can imagine how many pilot projects ever make it to full implementation under this system.

The administration also sought to effect change by implementing the Chief Executive model of management in the school system. This model puts a non-educator in charge of the system, changing the dynamics of the system. Through use of the Chief Executive model, a new and innovative perspective was assimilated into the process of improving schools, and educators were forced to develop and implement systematic improvements while justifying these plans to people with business—not education—backgrounds.

**Building a Base for Solid Foundations**

Since the inception of the 1995 reforms, CPS has shown continued and dramatic improvement. There is still a long way to go, but great improvements have been made and solid foundations for continuing improvement have been set. The original 1988 reform law set the standard of measurement for improvement, calling for assessment of student performance through the use of the Iowa Tests of Basic Skills (ITBS) and their
high school counterpart, the Tests of Academic Proficiency (TAP). Performance standards for these nationally normed tests were high and were based on the percentage of students reading and computing math at or above national norms. Although scores had lagged or declined in all areas tested prior to 1995, since that time scores have improved in both elementary and high schools in the areas of both reading and math.

Table 1
Percentage of Students At or Above National Norms

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Assessment Area</th>
<th>1990</th>
<th>1995</th>
<th>2000</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Elementary Reading</td>
<td>23.5</td>
<td>26.5</td>
<td>36.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Elementary Math</td>
<td>27.1</td>
<td>29.8</td>
<td>26.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High School Reading</td>
<td>30.6</td>
<td>23.6</td>
<td>35.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High School Math</td>
<td>21.6</td>
<td>25.3</td>
<td>45.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Leaving No One Behind

Another vital statistic is the number of students reading in the lowest quartile (Table 2). This number was alarmingly high prior to 1995, making teaching to high standards a very difficult task. This number has declined dramatically in the past five years, meaning that fewer of our current students fall into that bottom quartile.
Table 2
Percentage of Students in the Lowest Quartile

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Assessment Area</th>
<th>1990</th>
<th>1995</th>
<th>2000</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Elementary Reading</td>
<td>46.0</td>
<td>42.8</td>
<td>28.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Elementary Math</td>
<td>48.3</td>
<td>44.1</td>
<td>24.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High School Reading</td>
<td>40.4</td>
<td>43.3</td>
<td>21.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High School Math</td>
<td>51.8</td>
<td>51.3</td>
<td>26.5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Just as importantly, in the last three to four years, the rate of improvement for African American and Latino students has increased. The student population at CPS is nearly 90 percent minority, with African Americans and Latinos comprising the highest numbers of minority students. Prior to 1995, the mean grade equivalent for White and Asian students was more than double the rate for African American and Latino students. Since 1995, however, the rate of improvement for African American and Latino students has accelerated and surpassed the rate of improvement for White and Asian students. The Consortium on Chicago School Research at the University of Chicago has verified this acceleration and notes that the rate of improvement is greatest in twelve- and fourteen-year-old students.

System-wide Improvement

Nearly 90 percent of CPS children are identified as low-income through their eligibility for free or reduced-cost lunches. While the number of low-income students increases each year, so does the improvement on our nationally normed tests. This is also the result of system-wide accountability and improvement.
Additional data indicate that CPS students are benefiting from institutional improvement in a wide range of areas. Consider the following:

- Attendance rates are higher than they have been since prior to 1980.
- Mobility rates are at the lowest since prior to 1980.
- Student reading scores continue to rise each year.
- In high schools the composite ACT Assessment® score has increased each year and is at the highest rate since prior to 1980.
- The dropout rate has declined for three straight years, and the graduation rate has improved each year.
- More students are taking Advanced Placement (AP®) Exams and students are passing the exams at a higher rate. Minority student participation and passing rates on the AP Exams have risen at a more accelerated pace than the rate for nonminority students.

These are real improvements. The question is, how have these improvements taken place? The answer is that they have been supported by authentic system-wide accountability.

**Accountability = Action**

In 1995, accountability was a rare word in public education. Although many districts were beginning to use the term, in most cases the term had not translated into action. The charge for the Office of Accountability and all offices at the Central Service Center was to bring immediate and real improvement to the schools. The new system embraced the belief that all children, given the opportunity, can and will learn.
What exactly is accountability? Accountability is not simply making lists of bad schools. Too often systems only go this far in bringing accountability. One must go beyond the lists to really improve schools: real accountability means doing something with those lists. This means giving support, but it also means bringing sanctions when necessary. Urban schools are in crisis. They are doing an inadequate job of educating the next generation. Schools may be working hard to serve children, but many suffer from low expectations and a belief that they, in fact, are doing an adequate or even a good job. Sanctions are a necessary part of making schools aware that they need to improve.

It is also too often the case that systems are quick to bring accountability measures to schools but are less expedient in initiating and implementing support systems to ensure their success. At CPS, accountability is required of all participants. With this accountability comes a system of focused support that is virtually unheard of in public education.

**No One Left Unaccountable**

So, who is accountable in Chicago? In simplest terms, *everyone* is responsible for improving student performance.

**Administrators are accountable.** In the Chicago Public School System, administrators must perform or they will be dismissed. To maintain their positions, leadership must show evidence of increased student performance. Central office administrators have no contracts. They work at the request of the Chief Executive Officer. At the same time, principals are accountable. Principals in Chicago have four-year contracts awarded by their Local School Councils. More than fifty Chicago principals have been removed since 1995 for their inability to improve school performance.
Teachers are accountable. Through the Department of Teacher Accountability, teachers must perform at an acceptable level or they may be removed. Chicago’s Department of Teacher Accountability works with principals to remove poorly performing teachers while ensuring that the contractual rights of the individual teachers are protected. From 1990 to 1995, fewer than ten teachers were removed for reasons related to pedagogy. Since 1996, nearly three hundred teachers have been removed.

Students are accountable. Chicago’s children are also accountable for high academic performance. Social promotion was officially ended in 1996. Now students are retained at grades three, six, or eight if they do not have acceptable grades and attendance and score below an acceptable range on standardized tests. Students in Chicago have risen to meet these high standards, and research shows that these promotion standards are one of the primary reasons for the city’s improved academic performance. Over 90 percent of students meet these high standards for promotion. Even as the standards continue to rise, the number of students not meeting the promotion standards continues to decline. The most critical group of students, those not meeting the standards for a second time, numbers around 500 out of a system of over 435,000 students.

Parents in Chicago are accountable. This year Chicago introduced a parent report card. Officially called the Checklist for Success in Education—Nurturing the Home-School Connection, the report card allows educators to provide ratings in four main areas (student punctuality, parent-school communication, parent involvement, and student health/safety) and comment on topics such as parent attendance at school functions, student completion of homework, and appropriate school dress. At this point, the report card program is optional, and schools may use it as a
resource to support educational improvements in any way they see fit. Nearly 200 of our 596 schools have volunteered to use this checklist for the first time.

**Measures of Support: Rewards and Punishments**

Finally, there is a comprehensive accountability system that includes both rewards and punishments. Schools in Chicago are rated as either Level A, B, or C; remediation; or probation. Schools on probation are the lowest-performing schools in the city. There were 115 schools performing at this level in 1996. Using the same assessment criteria, only 42 schools are currently eligible for probation. As the number of schools on probation declines, however, the standard for removal from probation rises. Due to these new and more stringent criteria, there are currently 76 schools on probation.

**A Three-Tiered Support System**

Probation brings a massive amount of focused support for improvement. Schools do not want to be on probation. The schools that ended up on probation are the same schools that had been working hard to improve prior to 1995 but making little progress. The old adage about working hard but not working smart applied to many of these schools. Simply giving these schools more money does not solve the problem. Using additional resources in a focused way, however, does bring improvement.

The first measure of support that is utilized when a school is on probation is the assignment of a probation manager. This manager is a current or former successful principal who is given a stipend to head the probation team at the school and to mentor the principal. Probation managers know how to improve schools
and use this knowledge to guide principals to improve their schools.

The second measure of support is the assignment of an external partner. This partner, usually a representative of an area college or university, brings instructional and curricular support to the school and to its teachers. Through the years, Chicago has learned that the best model for support is the “M&M” model, in which external partners model and monitor the instructional program. This means that partners become an integral part of the school, often working three or four days a week in the building. By being school based and making long-term commitments to the schools, they become a part of the school community itself, not outsiders who come in to provide staff development. They are in the classrooms, they see the problems firsthand, and they are thoroughly involved in the schools’ improvement efforts.

The third measure of support for schools on probation is in the form of a school business manager intern assigned to each school. This intern is often a business graduate student or a retired business professional. He or she is trained to take leadership of the noninstructional issues that distract good principals from focusing on classrooms. The interns may take care of administration concerns relating to finances, building maintenance, or lunch programs.

**Intervening to Ensure Improvement**

Through the employment of these educational support systems, the lowest-performing public schools in Chicago have shown continuous and consistent improvement. Schools that do not improve are eligible for more severe actions. Some of these actions might include the removal of principals and Local School Councils. Schools can also be reconstituted. Seven Chicago
schools have been reconstituted up to this point. In addition, schools can be put into “reengineering.” Thirteen schools are currently in this process of peer review. Finally, a school can be placed into “intervention,” the most stringent action possible. There are currently five schools on intervention status. As a last resort, schools that continue to decline can be closed completely.

Helping Schools Make the Grade

As in probation, the key to system-wide improvement is a systemic balance of sanctions and support. Without this support, it is foolish to attempt to bring accountability to schools. The support system in Chicago is extensive and impressive. CPS committed to a system of high standards when it developed the Chicago Academic Standards for all grades during the 1995–1996 school year. Since the introduction of the standards, CPS has also been committed to a system of academic support for all Chicago schools and schoolchildren. In order to assist the students in meeting these high learning standards, the system’s first commitment is to increase instructional time. All systems agree with this concept and struggle to find the best and most cost-effective way to bring this concept to reality.

Extending the Learning Day for Students

Chicago has instituted an extensive Lighthouse program in the vast majority of its public schools. Through this program, children receive an extra hour of instruction after school, an hour of social interaction, and dinner. Lighthouse instruction is focused and, in many cases, individualized. This educational support system is comprised of a large group of tutors recruited from the ranks of college students and retired teachers.
The second method of increasing instructional time is through the Summer Bridge program. Over 200,000 students participate in this summer program. Summer Bridge is an intensive support program for students failing to meet the promotion criteria in June. However, in actuality, only about 10 percent of the students in Summer Bridge are there because of the prohibition of social promotion. Summer Bridge is also a program of social activities, programs for gifted students, tutorial programs for students in the nonpromotional grades, and a variety of other special programs and activities. Because of this program, many Chicago children enjoy going to school in the summer.

The Lighthouse and Summer Bridge programs enable Chicago to extend the learning day at a cost that is significantly less than simply extending the school day or the school year. By offering these options, principals are able to select their faculty based on performance without additional worry over seniority issues. It gives principals the extra time they need and the extra flexibility to ensure that this time is utilized most productively.

Support also comes to the schools in the area of targeted class size reduction in the primary grades of the 125 lowest-performing schools. As part of this class size reduction program, targeted students get intensive instruction each morning in reading and math. Teachers in this program undergo an intensive four-week program of training to improve their skills and to highlight basic reading-improvement instruction techniques. Additional tutorial support is given to the targeted students in the afternoon and for one additional hour after school four days per week as part of the Lighthouse program.

Additionally, Chicago high schools have expanded support to the students by offering after-school and evening programs. Through a pilot this year, Chicago is offering a three- to five-year
plan of completion for entering freshmen to ensure that all students are able to complete coursework and meet the high standards necessary for graduation. When Chicago’s high school students receive a diploma, it means something, and it is not just a piece of paper.

**Comprehensive Professional Development**

Support comes to Chicago teachers and administrators through one of the most comprehensive systems of professional development in the nation. In partnership with the Chicago Principals and Administrators Association, both new and experienced principals are offered ongoing support. The Association also offers an outstanding internship for prospective principal candidates.

Through the Departments of Curriculum and Instruction and Professional Development, new and experienced teachers are offered a focused variety of hands-on assistance to ensure high levels of instruction. Two new schools are planned for 2001 and 2002, one high school and one elementary school. Both will become teacher training centers where hands-on work will be the norm.

**Conclusion**

The success of the Chicago Public Schools is based on two basic principles. One is accountability, real accountability with rewards for good performance and sanctions for lack of improvement. The second principle is targeted and focused support. The support is much more than giving schools additional funding. It is bringing schools the answers they need in regard to their questions of how to improve academic performance and, more importantly, the hands-on assistance to
make it happen. Even the lowest-performing school systems can improve if these two factors are in place. All children can learn. All children want to learn. Helping children learn is a job that must be done, and it is our responsibility to make sure that it happens. We cannot wait any longer. We have already waited too long.