

# Chasing the Blues Away



## Charter Schools Scale Up in Chicago

by Robin J. Lake  
and Lydia Rainey

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# Preface

Chicago has long been a crossroads for the nation. Today, public education in the Windy City is at a similar junction. The city's public schools are making commendable strides, thanks to a variety of strategies designed to help improve and expand educational opportunities for Chicago's young people. But, there is still plenty of work to be done; too many students are not well served by the public system in Chicago. To address these challenges, Chicago policymakers have embarked on a bold initiative to reform its public schools and dramatically expand its charter schools during the next decade.

To help inform the conversation about Chicago's new education reform strategy and share the city's unique experience with national policymakers, the Progressive Policy Institute's 21st Century Schools Project asked Robin J. Lake and Lydia Rainey of the University of Washington's Center on Reinventing Public Education to examine charter schooling in Chicago. Lake and Rainey study the history, status quo, challenges, and future of charter initiatives in Chicago. There is reason for optimism about Chicago's new education reform strategy, Renaissance 2010, but policymakers must be keenly aware of the many challenges that accompany an initiative of this nature.

Lake and Rainey's report is an important resource for educators, policymakers, journalists, and others with interest in charter schooling in Chicago and throughout the nation. This report is the eighth in a series that analyzes state and urban experiences with charter schooling. Previous reports examined California, Minnesota, Arizona, Ohio, Texas, Indianapolis, and New York City. Later this year, the 21st Century Schools Project will release similar analyses about charter schooling in Washington, D.C., and Colorado.

A generous grant from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation made it possible for the 21st Century Schools Project to produce this report. We are grateful to the Gates Foundation for their support of this project and their overall commitment to educational improvement.

The 21st Century Schools Project at the Progressive Policy Institute works to develop education policy and foster innovation to ensure that America's public schools are an engine of equal opportunity in the knowledge economy. The Project supports initiatives to strengthen accountability, increase equity, improve teacher quality, and expand choice and innovation within public education through research, publications, and articles; an electronic newsletter and daily weblog; and work with policymakers and practitioners.

The Project's work is a natural outgrowth of the mission of the Progressive Policy Institute, which is to be a catalyst for political change and renewal. Its mission is to modernize progressive politics and governance for the 21st century. Moving beyond the right-left debates of the last century, PPI is a prolific source of the Third Way thinking that is reshaping politics both in the United States and around the world. Rejecting tired dogmas, PPI brings a spirit of radical pragmatism and experimentation to the challenge of restoring our collective problem-solving capacities—and thereby reviving public confidence in what progressive governance can accomplish.

Andrew J. Rotherham  
Director, 21st Century Schools Project  
June 2005

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## Executive Summary

*“It is hopeless for the occasional visitor to try to keep up with Chicago—she outgrows his prophecies faster than he can make them. She is always a novelty; for she is never the Chicago you saw when you passed through the last time.”*

—Mark Twain, *Life on the Mississippi*, 1883

As Mark Twain observed, Chicago is constantly remaking itself, and its schools are no exception. Stung by then-U.S. Education Secretary William J. Bennett’s 1987 declaration that it had the worst schools in America, the Windy City has been striving ever since to erase that blot on its reputation. Reform began with a community-focused school decentralization plan in the 1980s followed by the mayoral takeover of the Chicago Public Schools (CPS) in the 1990s. Then, when Illinois passed a law in 1996 allowing school districts to create public charter schools that enjoy freedom from regulation in exchange for heightened accountability, Chicago leaped at the opportunity.

Shortly after his takeover of CPS in 1995, Democratic Mayor Richard Daley appointed Paul Vallas as school superintendent. Together, they sought ways to create new, high-quality schools that would be free from bureaucratic constraints, but still accountable for high results.

The first Chicago charter school opened in 1997. Since then, CPS has opened as many charters as the original 1996 law allows. It has even tested the limits of the law, allowing some high-performing charters to open multiple campuses. With eight years of charter experience now under its belt, CPS has earned a well-deserved reputation for having one of the country’s most thoughtful approaches to authorizing this new breed of independent public schools.

Chicago’s public school system has pursued a slow-growth, high-quality strategy toward its charters. It has sought homegrown proposals to run the schools and nurtured their development in partnership with local businesses and nonprofit groups.

The charter oversight by CPS succeeds because it is:

❑ **Proactive:** Unlike most other Illinois school districts, CPS is not a passive charter authorizer. Instead of waiting for groups to propose new

schools, CPS actively seeks out potential operators and clearly describes its vision of a successful school through its request for proposal (RFP) process.

❑ **Selective:** Between 80 percent and 85 percent of the charter applications CPS reviews have been denied.

❑ **Stringent:** The CPS annual audit process closely monitors schools’ financial management and compliance with legal regulations.

❑ **Transparent:** The RFPs and accountability contracts for CPS include extensive guidelines and evaluation criteria. These details help charter applicants understand the school district’s expectations and let school operators know what they must do to have their charters renewed.

❑ **Protective:** Often, CPS shields charter schools from central office bureaucrats looking to extend their reach.

Chicago’s charters have thrived thanks to support from the mayor and other political heavyweights. Community organizations, such as the University of Chicago and the Children’s Choir, have also stepped up and opened charter schools to advance their missions.

As a result, Chicago charter schools are demonstrating impressive results. The most noteworthy outcomes are:

❑ strong graduation rates, in all but one school;

❑ wild popularity among families, with waiting lists of as much as 10 times the number of seats available;

❑ higher attendance rates, in all but one charter school, compared to the schools charter students would otherwise have attended; and



- ❑ school models that are being replicated in other school districts.

Even a cautious analysis of students' test scores shows that:

- ❑ since 2001, seven of 10 Chicago charter elementary schools improved faster than CPS as a whole;
- ❑ all Chicago charter high schools outperformed the average scores of public schools that charter students would have otherwise attended; and
- ❑ two studies by Harvard economist Caroline Hoxby show impressive results in one of Chicago's multicampus charter schools, as well as among charter schools all across Illinois.<sup>1</sup>

Chicago's charter community is now in full stride, with 27 campuses demonstrating they can improve student performance and provide desirable public school options for Chicago families. Still, only 3.6 percent of all Chicago students attend charters, leaving the vast majority in subpar schools.

Mayor Daley and Chicago's current schools superintendent, Arne Duncan, recently announced a plan backed by the Chicago Civic Committee and other foundations to take the city's charter school experiment to scale. Their Renaissance 2010 initiative would replace as many as 70 low-performing traditional public schools with 100 new charter and contract schools, as well as more autonomous district-run schools.<sup>2</sup>

The plan faces significant hurdles, however, including the recent departure of key charter allies, resistance within the CPS bureaucracy, and lingering community opposition. The outcome will depend on whether the entire Chicago community—educators, city officials, foundations, and businesses—can come together to build grassroots support, reconstruct the central office, fund new schools fairly, and incubate start-up expertise and leadership.

As one of America's most charter-savvy big cities, Chicago has plenty of lessons for school districts nationwide. They include the following:

### ***Make Student Performance Goal #1***

Raising student performance consistently ranks as the top goal for charter schools in Chicago. As Greg

Richmond, former chief officer of CPS's New Schools Development Department, says, "Chicago already has enough bad schools." Everyone associated with Chicago charters knows that if their students are not improving, their schools may be closed.

### ***Build Stable Leadership at the City, District, and Community Levels***

The mayor and city hall, the school district, and businesses and nonprofits all help charter schools in valuable and complementary ways.

### ***Be Proactive***

Some school districts grudgingly issue charters to placate their supporters and then quietly hope the new schools will fail. Chicago, in contrast, actively seeks out prospective charter operators and considers the schools a vital part of its reform effort. The CPS charter office sets clear criteria for charter applications and renewals. And, unlike most other urban school districts, CPS oversees charters with a light touch.

### ***Mix the Fixes***

Chicago relied heavily on "mom and pop" schools to launch its charter movement. On the one hand, these schools are unique and reflect the communities in which they arose. On the other hand, they are tough to replicate. As the city tries to take charters to scale, it should consider adding national, more easily replicable school models to its mix of homegrown designs—a lesson that other school districts around the country should heed as well.

Chicago has created an excellent charter school model with help from across the city. Mayor Daley supported the reform, CPS developed a thoughtful and proactive approval process, business and civic leaders championed the movement and provided technical support, and teachers and community groups accepted the challenge of opening new schools. All deserve credit for the success to date.

Hopefully, all of these actors can pull together again and make Renaissance 2010 an equally historic success. There are challenges ahead, but there is also more than enough capacity in the "city of big shoulders" to tackle this one.

# Introduction

Charter schools have grown steadily but unevenly in Illinois since their authorization in early 1996. The vast majority of the 15,481 Illinois charter school students in September 2004 were in Chicago, which sees chartering as a way to create good schools within its public school system.<sup>3</sup> School boards in suburban Chicago, meanwhile, have approved only one charter school and the Illinois State Board of Education has been reluctant to approve such schools on appeal.

“Downstate” school districts (those outside metropolitan Chicago) have experimented with charters to a limited degree.

This report examines the history and future of charter schools in the “Land of Lincoln” and how they are being used to spur education reform, reach underserved populations, and reinvigorate urban areas. It also recommends changes at the state level to boost the chances of success for Chicago’s Renaissance 2010 plan.

## Other Big Cities Using Charter Schools as a Tool for Improvement

Chicago is not the only large American urban school system using chartering as a reform strategy. New York City, San Diego, Los Angeles, Indianapolis, Philadelphia, and Miami-Dade County, Fla., have chartered or are planning to charter substantial numbers of schools, and the list is growing. These cities have adopted charter schools for different reasons. Like Chicago, Indianapolis is primarily concerned with improving academic quality. San Diego is using chartering as part of its high school reform strategy, breaking up large high schools into smaller, more focused learning communities. Other common motivations include encouraging innovation and diversifying public school options.

## The Law

Charter schools came to Illinois in 1996, but Chicago approached them differently than other districts in the state. Early on, Chicago Public Schools (CPS) saw charter schools as a way to boost education reform as well as economic and community development. Many other districts saw charters as a threat to the status quo. The Illinois law specifies local school boards as the primary authorizers, and therefore charter schools can flourish in one district while they falter in others. The CPS school board was the only one to embrace charters, and today 90 percent of all Illinois students in charter schools are from Chicago.<sup>4</sup>

### *Important Elements of the Illinois Law*

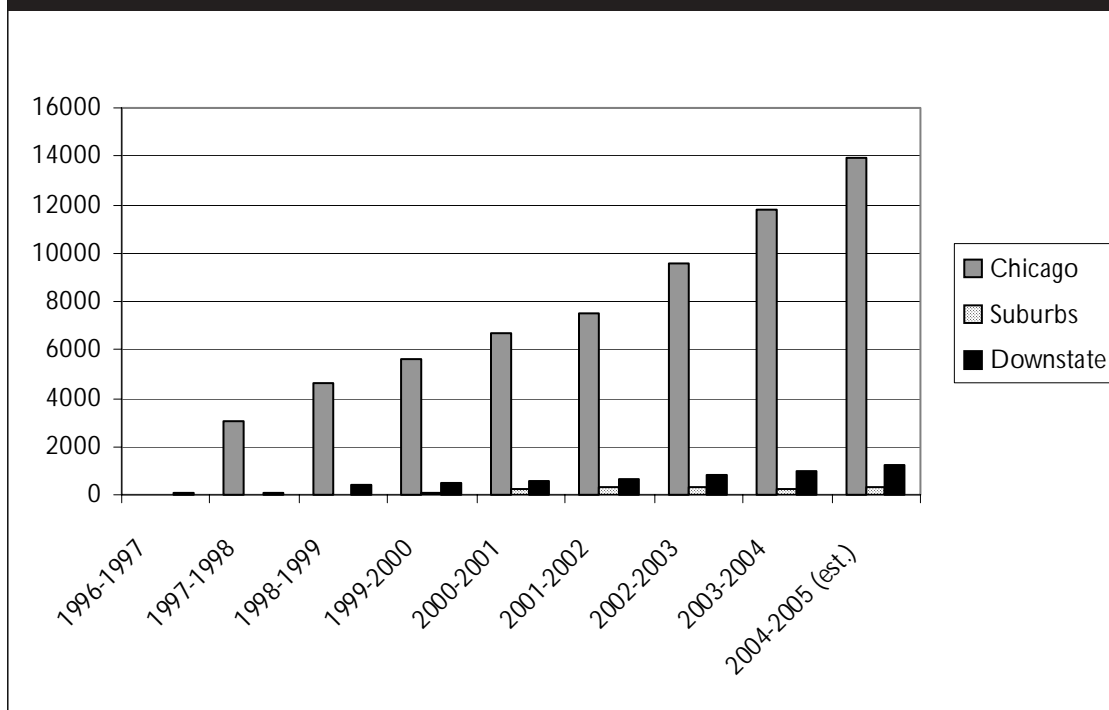
The 1996 law allowed the creation of up to 45 charter schools: 15 in Chicago, 15 in the surrounding

suburbs, and 15 downstate. The law's primary intent was to create public school options for families while improving student performance. It also gave preference in the application process to schools serving at-risk children (see Table 1 on pages 10-11).

Since its passage, three major amendments have been added to the law:

- ❑ The 1996 law stipulated that only local school boards could authorize charter schools, with no right of appeal for those denied charters. An amendment was added in 1997 allowing prospective charter operators to appeal denials to the Illinois State Board of Education (ISBE).
- ❑ Local school boards successfully lobbied in 1999 for "impact aid" for the first three years of each

**Chart 1: Total Students in Chicago Charter Schools**



SOURCE: "Illinois Charter School Annual Report," Illinois State Board of Education, January 2005, [http://www.isbe.state.il.us/charter/pdf/charter\\_annual\\_05.pdf](http://www.isbe.state.il.us/charter/pdf/charter_annual_05.pdf).



charter school's operation. The state now funds 90 percent of a charter's operating costs in its first year, 65 percent in its second year, and 35 percent in its third year.

- ❑ The original law did not specifically forbid charters from opening multiple campuses, and CPS used this loophole to get around its 15-school cap. In 2003, CPS lobbied the state capital, in Springfield, Ill., to have the cap raised to 30 schools, and a compromise was struck: The original 15 charters can continue to open additional campuses, but new charters cannot. For-profit charters were also forbidden from multiple campuses and the schools were required to raise their percentage of certified teachers.<sup>5</sup>

### *Negotiating the Elements*

Today, Illinois charters remain largely experimental with low caps and only local school boards as authorizers. Meanwhile, ISBE has overturned few of the charter denials brought before it on appeal. Thus, the national charter community generally considers Illinois's law to be weak. However, the law was passed with little opposition. This begs the question: If there was little opposition, why is the law not stronger?

In the early 1990s, the Illinois Education Association (IEA) began contributing to Republican candidates for the state legislature, eventually winning the teachers union a spot at the table when it came time to negotiate the charter law's specifics. At the time, IEA was willing to experiment with charter schools.<sup>6</sup>

Starting in 1994, members of the state Business Roundtable began urging Republicans to be open to education reform through chartering. In 1995, the state House and Senate passed different charter bills, but could not agree on a provision that would have required school districts to keep jobs open in case charter teachers chose to return to a traditional public school. Finally, 1996 marked the third time that a charter bill was considered by the legislature and the second time one came before a Republican-controlled legislature. The bill that became law in 1996 contained a variation on the rule supported by IEA. The American Federation of Teacher's Chicago affiliate opposed the bill, but generally stayed out of the debate.<sup>7</sup>

The IEA wanted all charters to be approved by local school boards and all charter teachers to be certified. It won the first point, but lost the second. As a further concession to the IEA, the law gave charter teachers a maximum of five years to return to a traditional public school with full seniority rights.<sup>8</sup>

**Table 1: Key Provisions of the Illinois Charter School Law**

<b>General Statistics</b>	
Number of Charter Schools Allowed	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 30 in Chicago</li> <li>• 15 in Chicago suburbs</li> <li>• 15 in the rest of the state</li> </ul>
<b>Approval Process</b>	
Eligible Chartering Authorities	Local School Boards
Types of Charter Schools	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Converted public schools</li> <li>• New starts</li> <li>• No home-based schools</li> </ul>
At-Risk Children Provisions	Preference goes to charter applications designed to serve a substantial proportion of at-risk children.
Formal Evidence of Local Support Required	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Conversions must be supported by a majority of parents, teachers, and the local school council (where applicable).</li> <li>• New starts must show evidence that all seats will be filled; preference goes to charter applications that demonstrate high levels of student, parent, teacher, and community support.</li> </ul>
Appeals Process	Applications denied by a local school board can appeal to the State Board of Education.
Term of Initial Charter	Up to 5 years
<b>Operations and Monitoring</b>	
Waiver from Most State and District Education Laws, Regulations, and Policies	Automatic
Legal Status	Schools are legally independent of the school district, organized as nonprofits with tax-exempt status.
Opportunities for Charters to be Run by For-Profit Organizations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Chicago: Charter schools may not contract with for-profit operators or managers.</li> <li>• Outside Chicago: Charters may not be granted directly to for-profit organizations, but they may manage schools.</li> </ul>
Reporting Requirements	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Schools must submit an annual financial and administrative audit conducted by an independent outside auditor.</li> <li>• Local school boards must submit annual evaluations of charter schools to the State Board of Education.</li> <li>• State Board of Education must submit an annual report to the legislature and governor comparing performance of charter students with that of comparable students in other public schools and reviewing the exemptions from state laws for charter schools.</li> </ul>
Accountability Standards	Charter schools must meet all achievement goals, standards, and assessments established by the state.

Funding	
Amount	The amount is negotiated with the sponsor district and specified in the charters, but it must be more than 75 percent and less than 125 percent of per-capita student tuition in the district in which a charter school is located.
Path	Funds pass through the district to a charter school.
Start-Up Funds	The State Board of Education may make grants to charter schools to cover their start-up costs, but the grant may not exceed \$250 per student enrolled in the charter school.
Teachers	
Collective Bargaining/District Work Rules	Charter schools are not bound by school district collective bargaining agreements. If a bargaining unit of charter school employees is formed, it must be separate from any bargaining units formed from employees of a school district in which the charter school is located.
Certification	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Charter schools may employ non-certified teachers if they have a bachelor's degree, have several years of experience in the area of degree, a passing score on the state teacher tests, and evidence of professional growth.</li> <li>Beginning in 2006-2007, Chicago charter schools established before April 16, 2003 must have 75 percent of their teachers certified; schools established after April 16, 2003 must have 50 percent of their teachers certified.</li> </ul>
Retirement Benefits	Charter schools must participate in state's retirement system.
Students	
Eligible Students	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Schools must have open enrollment (with a lottery if overenrolled).</li> <li>The Chicago Board of Education can designate attendance areas to relieve overcrowding or to better serve low-income or at-risk students for up to 10 charter schools.</li> </ul>
Preference for Enrollment	Preference is given to students enrolled the previous school year and their siblings. Also, preference may be given to students residing in the school's designated attendance area (if an area has been designated by the Chicago Board of Education).
Enrollment Requirements	Same as other public schools

SOURCE: Adapted from the Center for Education Reform (<http://www.edreform.com>) and Education Commission of the States (<http://www.ecs.org>) profiles of the Illinois charter school law, and the Illinois State Board of Education's Illinois Charter School Annual Report, 2005. Updates provided by the authors, February 2005.

# Into the Loop

## *A Brief History of School Reform in Chicago*

Being deemed the worst urban school system in America can really kick-start reform. That was exactly what happened in 1987, when then-U.S. Education Secretary William J. Bennett pinned that label on the Chicago Public Schools (CPS).

Observers have grouped Chicago's reforms during the intervening 16 years into waves. The first wave began in 1988 and focused on decentralization. Its main feature was the creation of locally elected councils delegated to individual schools or neighborhoods, with the primary task of hiring and firing the principals of their assigned schools.

The second wave began in 1995 when the Republican-controlled legislature and GOP Gov. Jim Edgar granted Democratic Mayor Richard Daley sweeping authority over Chicago's schools. Many wondered whether the Republicans were setting up the powerful Chicago Democrat for a fall, but Daley quickly dispelled that notion. Under the leadership of CPS's new chief executive Paul Vallas, who previously served as Daley's city budget director, accountability became the school system's watchword. The 15 Chicago charter schools authorized by state lawmakers one year later became a small but fundamental part of Daley and Vallas's push for results.

Slowly but steadily, student test scores in Chicago's 600 traditional public schools began to improve. Many thought that when Arne Duncan succeeded Vallas as the school system's CEO in 2001, the third wave of reform would concentrate on centralized efforts to improve instruction. But Daley unveiled the Renaissance 2010 plan in June 2004 and thus defined the third wave as a drive for new schools. The ambitious effort to create 100 performance-focused schools by 2010 incorporates many of the ideas central to chartering and builds on CPS's expertise in authorizing charters.<sup>9</sup> In some ways, the district ultimately turned to chartering out of necessity. Decentralization and accountability failed to improve student performance fast enough, especially in high schools. The district approached chartering, and now Renaissance 2010, with a "maybe *this* will work" attitude.<sup>10</sup>

### *How Chicago Came to Embrace Charter Schools*

Shortly after state lawmakers passed the charter law in 1996, the business community urged Daley and Vallas to pursue this reform strategy aggressively. It did not take much convincing: The two officials believed it was fruitless to try to improve student learning by simply pouring money into dysfunctional, traditional public schools. In his initial letter inviting charter school applicants, Vallas said:

*"The creation of charter schools is an opportunity to continue with the innovative restructuring that is taking place throughout Chicago. We also view the charter legislation as an opportunity to revitalize teaching, increase learning, and restructure school organizations. We will be particularly interested in charter applications that propose to serve secondary students and to develop new models that stimulate and support student achievement. Finally, we believe that schools have much to learn from each other and can enhance the education of all when they work jointly. We will be open to receiving proposals for multiple schools and from groups that seek to join forces under a single charter to reinvent education for their collective students."*<sup>11</sup>

The Chicago-based Joyce Foundation encouraged Leadership for Quality Education (LQE) to open its Charter School Resource Center to provide the new charter schools with technical support. There were several reasons for turning to LQE for help. The leaders of Chicago's most successful businesses created LQE to foster improvements throughout CPS. The nonprofit had contacts in the business community, Chicago's major foundations, and the city's educational reform community, who would be needed to lend support for a strong charter school initiative. In turn, LQE urged CPS to create a charter school office and appoint Greg Richmond, a lobbyist for the district, as its director. The two organizations recognized that the new charter

## Helping Charters Succeed: Two Technical Assistance Groups in Chicago

### *Leadership for Quality Education*

Leadership for Quality Education (LQE) is a nonprofit organization under the umbrella of the Civic Committee of the Commercial Club of Chicago that works to support Chicago Public Schools (CPS). It first got involved in the 1988 reforms and then developed the CPS small schools program. The group had strong influence with CPS chief Paul Vallas and played a large role in initially convincing CPS to try chartering. Since then, LQE functioned as the primary technical assistance provider to Chicago's charter schools. In this role, LQE:

#### *Provided Direct Assistance to Schools*

- Finding facilities and start-up funds
- Sponsoring workshops for newly approved schools
- Fielding questions and concerns regarding special education, building regulations, etc.

#### *Brokered Expertise and Relationships*

- Distributed resumes for available teachers
- Compiled lists of available facilities, pro bono attorneys, and accountants
- Brought in experts to serve as resources on topics such as governance, special education, and even purchasing furniture
- Supported networking and mutual support among charter schools with regular roundtable meetings

#### *Served as a Neutral Third Party Between Charter Schools and Chicago Public Schools*

- Helped charter schools to maintain their working relationship with CPS by negotiating on behalf of schools on sticky issues such as funding levels
- Ensured that charters knew CPS timelines and procedures

### *Illinois Facilities Fund*

Founded in 1990, the Illinois Facilities Fund (IFF) is a community-development financial institution that makes capital loans to nonprofit organizations serving low-income and special-needs populations. The IFF first became involved with Chicago charter schools when LQE and CPS asked it for help reviewing the first round of applications. Later, CPS hired IFF to help charters during the start-up process. In this capacity, IFF:

#### *Provided Facilities Expertise*

- Distributed lists of pre-approved architects
- Helped schools select and work with contractors
- Offered general guidance on building acquisition, renovation, and regulation

#### *Loaned Money to Schools for Capital Expenses*

- Made capital loans to schools through a \$2 million revolving loan fund set up with CPS

#### *Provided Ongoing Monitoring and Assistance to Schools*

- Advised schools once they were up and running
- Monitored the operations and financial health of schools according to size and type of loan

SOURCE: Ayers, John and Greg Richmond, interviews by author, January 2005.

schools would need an advocate “on the inside” to preserve their independence and fend off attempts at re-regulation.

### ***A Slow Growth, High Quality Approach***

Chicago’s public school system pursued a “slow growth, high quality” strategy to chartering. The state-imposed cap guaranteed the process would remain slow. Charter advocates, meanwhile, decided their goal would be to create high-quality schools that improved student performance. Richmond and the CPS charter office took this goal seriously and developed tools to help ensure it was achieved.

First, the CPS charter office developed a complementary working relationship with LQE: While LQE would recruit potential charter operators, connect them with community resources, and help them with their applications, the CPS charter office assumed a hands-off relationship with the schools since it would ultimately rule on each applicant’s proposal. The two groups also studied other regions’ challenges with chartering to avoid the same pitfalls. For example, they observed that charter schools in many other urban areas had trouble securing funds to bring their facilities up to code. In response, CPS and the Illinois Facilities Fund (IFF) collaborated to create a revolving loan fund. The IFF used \$2 million supplied by CPS to provide charters with low interest loans for facilities and equipment. Later, IFF helped the district evaluate charter applications and advised charters once they were up and running.

Other groups were also important actors in the start-up process. The mayor and the business community let other groups know that this was a serious initiative. Many teachers, especially from small CPS schools, developed charter proposals. Foundations and community groups provided additional funding and expertise and many partnered with schools. For example, in 1999 the Alain Locke Charter Academy opened in partnership with the 21st Century Urban

Schools, a civic organization committed to supporting high-quality education in Chicago’s historically underserved communities, with major funding support from the Patrick G. and Shirley W. Ryan Foundation and the Inner-City Teacher Corps. This level of community support is common for Chicago charter schools.

### ***The Political History of Illinois Charter Schools***

The history of charters outside Chicago could hardly be more different than that of the city. One downstate district, East St. Louis, has begun chartering and approved multiple charter schools. Only one suburban Chicago district has approved a charter proposal, and Illinois State Board of Education (ISBE) has overturned just two charter denials, both by applicants with extensive political connections.

The Thomas B. Fordham Institute recently issued a national report on the state of charter school authorizing.<sup>12</sup> Its chapter on Illinois vividly illustrates the differences between Chicago and the rest of state: Many of these sections begin with the qualifiers “outside Chicago” or “except in Chicago.”

An earlier Fordham report on barriers to approving charters in suburban districts made the following observations about Chicago and the rest of the state:<sup>13</sup>

- ☐ Outside Chicago, parents are the largest category of charter applicants;
- ☐ Chicago’s clearly defined application process may attract higher quality applicants;
- ☐ Politics loomed large in ISBE’s two decisions to overrule districts’ denials of charter applications; and
- ☐ Districts typically cite finances as the reason not to approve charters, despite the availability of state impact aid.



## On a Solid Foundation

The Fordham Institute's report on charter school authorizing praised Chicago for its positive attitude toward charters, clear application process, and technical assistance.<sup>14</sup> Its national reputation as a charter trailblazer is built on its oversight, external support, and first-rate school developers.

### *Oversight*

The Chicago Public School (CPS) charter school office has become a national model for charter school

authorizing. Greg Richmond, the office's former chief, founded the National Association of Charter School Authorizers, which is devoted to developing first-rate authorizing practices. The CPS oversight practices have been adopted by many other authorizers. The charter school office is successful because it is:

- ❑ **Proactive:** Unlike most other Illinois school districts, CPS is not a passive charter authorizer. Instead of waiting for groups to propose new schools, CPS actively seeks out potential operators

**Table 2: Authorizing for Success**  
The Tools of the Chicago Public Schools Charter Office

<b>Request for Proposal (RFP)</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Explains the purpose for Chicago Public Schools (CPS) to solicit charter school proposals, the characteristics expected of charter schools, and a suggested format</li> <li>● Each proposal must include: mission statement, goals and student performance standards, student/recruitment/selection provisions, educational program, governance and operations, school logistics (i.e. transportation, insurance, food service), budget, evidence of community support, and term of the charter.</li> </ul>
<b>Charter Agreement</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● A standard contract based largely on the requirements in the Illinois Charter Schools law, with additional topics not fully covered in the law</li> <li>● Builds from the school's application and includes all of the elements requested in the RFP</li> </ul>
<b>Accountability Agreement or "Performance Report"</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Includes indicators for pupil performance, fiscal management, and compliance, and rates each as high (performance is clearly satisfactory), medium (performance may be satisfactory, unsatisfactory, or inconclusive), or low (performance is clearly not satisfactory)</li> <li>● Pupil performance indicators cover test performance based on state standards, transfer-out rate, attendance rate, and unique standards determined by the school (see Table 4)</li> <li>● Fiscal management indicators cover budgets, financial audit findings, and financial obligations.</li> <li>● Compliance indicators cover health and safety statutes in the state code and charter school operations outlined in the school's charter agreement.</li> </ul>
<b>Annual Audit</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Each school must hire a firm to audit its financial statements and ensure that it meets all aspects of the administrative code and health and safety laws.</li> <li>● Audits are due to the Chicago Board of Education each October.</li> </ul>
<b>Reauthorization Process</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● For renewal, each school must submit a proposal that includes the most recent performance report, audit, and any proposed changes for the new agreement.</li> <li>● The Chicago Board of Education may choose to revoke or not renew a charter if the school committed a material violation of the contract or failed to make adequate progress toward pupil performance, content, or fiscal standards.</li> </ul>

SOURCES: "Renaissance 2010: Request for Proposals for Schools Opening Fall 2005," Chicago Public Schools, September 2004, <http://www.ren2010.cps.k12.il.us/request.shtml>; Chicago Charter School Accountability Documents, 1998, <http://www.cps.k12.il.us/schools/Charter/pdf/acctPlan.pdf>.

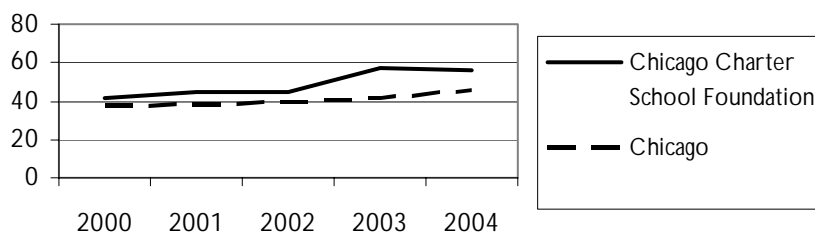
## Demonstrating Chicago's Expertise

### *Three Chicago Charter Schools Built With Help From the Community*

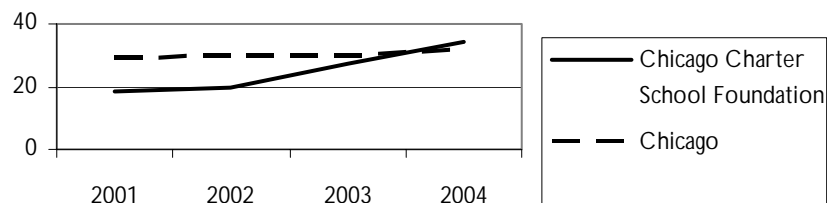
**Chicago Charter School Foundation:** *Serving grades K-12, with 74 percent low-income and 93 percent Hispanic or Black students*

The Chicago Charter School Foundation (CCSF) operates seven K-12 charter school campuses that provide disadvantaged students with a rigorous college preparatory education. Created by the board of a local private scholarship fund, CCSF contracts with a Chicago-area education management organization and Edison Schools, a for-profit company, to run the campuses. The foundation functions as a miniature school district central office, handling all “back office” functions, allowing each campus to concentrate on instruction. The CCSF can terminate contracts to run schools if the schools are not performing to their specifications. Most of its students are in kindergarten through 8th grade and have been promised a spot in one of the foundation's high schools. That pledge has created a sense of urgency to open more campuses, but it has been hard for CCSF to find new facilities.

**Chart 2: Chicago Charter School Foundation**  
Percent Meeting or Exceeding Standard  
(Elementary Illinois Standards Achievement Test)



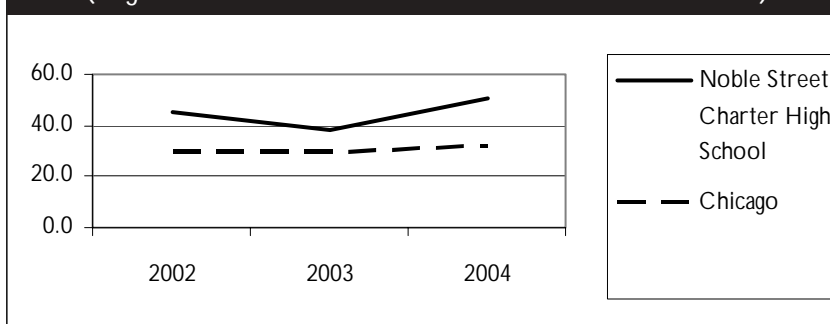
**Chart 3: Chicago Charter School Foundation**  
Percent Meeting or Exceeding Standard  
(High School Prairie State Achievement Examination)



**Noble Street Charter High School:** *Serving grades 9-12, with 86 percent low-income and 95 percent Hispanic or Black students*

Noble Street Charter High School is a primarily Hispanic high school founded by two former Chicago teachers in collaboration with Northwestern University Settlement House, a neighborhood social services and community center. The school's mission is to groom urban youth for success by emphasizing educational excellence, civic responsibility, and respect for the community, the environment, and others. Noble Street employs a rigorous college-prep curriculum that includes a daily "advisory class" that covers study skills, career exploration and college preparation, conflict resolution and ethical behavior, and physical fitness and nutrition. Noble Street is expected to open a second school in Chicago as part of the Renaissance 2010 initiative. A New York City group, Replications, Inc., is also opening a charter there based on Noble's model.

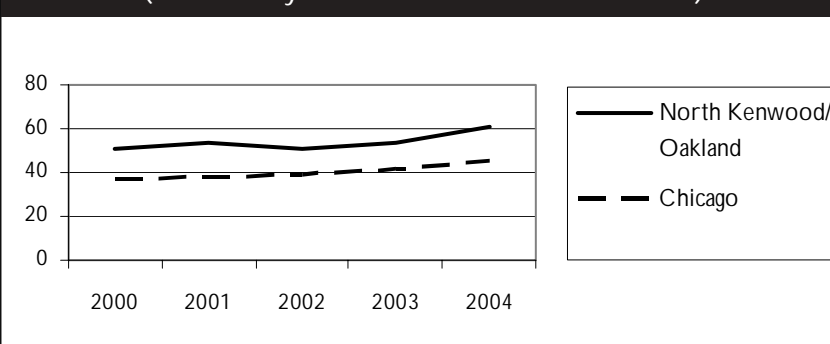
**Chart 4: Noble Street Charter High School**  
Percent Meeting or Exceeding Standard  
(High School Prairie State Achievement Examination)



**North Kenwood/Oakland:** *Serving pre-K-8, with 68 percent low-income and 100 percent Hispanic or Black students*

Located on Chicago's South Side, North Kenwood/Oakland (NKO) began as a demonstration school for the University of Chicago's Center for Urban School Improvement. In addition to educating children, the school serves as a professional development center for urban teachers. Providing a challenging, technology-rich curriculum based on the most current research in literacy and mathematics, NKO also instructs students in reading, writing, mathematics, science, and social studies, all with an emphasis on the arts. In August 2005, NKO will open another school under the Renaissance 2010 initiative.

**Chart 5: North Kenwood/Oakland**  
Percent Meeting or Exceeding Standard  
(Elementary Illinois State Achievement Test)



SOURCES: Information on school missions and partnerships drawn from author interviews with school leaders and school websites, February 2005. Enrollment and achievement data adapted from: Illinois State Board of Education, "Illinois Charter School Annual Report," January 2005, [http://www.isbe.state.il.us/charter/pdf/charter\\_annual\\_05.pdf](http://www.isbe.state.il.us/charter/pdf/charter_annual_05.pdf).

and clearly describes its vision of a successful school through its request for proposal (RFP) process.

- ❑ **Selective:** Between 80 percent and 85 percent of the charter applications CPS reviews have been denied.
- ❑ **Stringent:** The annual audit process for CPS closely monitors schools' financial management and compliance with legal regulations.
- ❑ **Transparent:** The RFPs and accountability contracts for CPS include extensive guidelines and evaluation criteria. These details help charter applicants understand the school district's expectations and let school operators know what they must do to have their charters renewed.
- ❑ **Protective:** Often, CPS shields charter schools from central office bureaucrats looking to extend their reach.

### *External Support*

The charter initiative has also enjoyed tremendous support from civic, business, and other community leaders. Mayor Richard Daley's active backing, for instance, drew other groups to the cause. Two of these groups, Leadership for Quality Education (LQE) and Illinois Facilities Fund (IFF), guide schools through the difficult start-up process and provide expertise in areas such as facility maintenance, budget analysis, and legal knowledge. This crucial help frees new charters from having to "reinvent the wheel" and allows them to exchange ideas and focus on advocacy. Foundations

and other donors, meanwhile, have provided generous financial support. Since Chicago charters receive about 20 percent less per-pupil funding than traditional public schools and no money for facilities, they need extra aid for everything from supplies to extended-day programs. Philanthropists have helped fill the gap. In 2004, for example, an anonymous donor matched, dollar for dollar, the \$1 million that the L.E.A.R.N. (Lawndale Educational and Regional Network) Charter School raised during its capital campaign.

Of course, Chicago's charters do have opponents. Unions dislike them because their teachers are not unionized and do not have to be certified. Local school councils oppose them because charter school boards are not elected. These critics have not gained traction, however, because of CPS's single-minded focus on creating high-quality schools. This advantage will loom large as Chicago begins taking its charter experiment to scale.

### *Quality School Developers*

Good schools rely on good people, and many of Chicago's best have stepped up to open and support charter schools. The University of Chicago, for example, opened a charter in part to give students in its school of education hands-on training. It also offers its expertise to the city's other charters. Nonprofit organizations and community groups also view charters as an extension of their missions. In addition, many leaders in Chicago's small schools saw chartering as a way to gain more autonomy from the central office, and thus started charter schools. ASPIRA, Inc. of Illinois, a Puerto Rican nonprofit group, launched the Mirta Ramirez Computer Science Charter School to serve Puerto Rican, Latino, and inner-city youth and their families.<sup>15</sup>

# Outcomes

Chicago has created an extremely positive environment for charter schools. But are those schools producing positive results? The following chapter attempts to answer that question first by looking at the number of students served by charter schools in Chicago and the rest of Illinois. It then takes a closer look at performance expectations for Chicago charters, and finally it examines student achievement and other outcomes.

## *Students Served*

Like most other U.S. urban districts, Chicago Public Schools (CPS) overwhelmingly serves minority and low-income children. Chicago's charter schools are no exception. The state's other charter schools also serve disproportionately high percentages of at-risk children, consistent with the Illinois charter law's requirements (see Table 3).

As noted previously, charters continue to enroll just a fraction of the state's children—only 3.6 percent in Chicago and less than 1 percent statewide.

## *Setting Expectations*

Charter schools in Chicago and the rest of the state have a clear and overriding directive: Improve student performance. The schools know they are under a microscope. Their performance is carefully tracked and reported in a legislatively mandated annual report. Also, CPS issues a separate annual charter school performance report.

This emphasis on results was not always that clear, however. Test scores in Chicago's charters remained low after their inaugural year and Greg Richmond, the chief of CPS's charter office, knew the state capital in Springfield, Ill., would not be pleased. He and his staff went back to the drawing board and emerged with a

**Table 3: Illinois Charter Schools by the Numbers: 2004-2005**

	Illinois Charter Schools (2003)	All Illinois Public Schools	Chicago Charter Schools	All Chicago Public Schools
Total number of schools	27	4,271	20 (27 campuses)	613
Total student population	15,481	2,081,156	13,971	426,812
Percent Black and Hispanic	89.1%	38%	94.3%	87.8%
Percent low-income	77.4%	37.5%	81.1%	84.9%

SOURCE: Illinois State Board of Education, "Illinois Charter School Annual Report," January 2005, [http://www.isbe.state.il.us/charter/pdf/charter\\_annual\\_05.pdf](http://www.isbe.state.il.us/charter/pdf/charter_annual_05.pdf).

**Table 4: Components of the Chicago Charter School Accountability Agreement**

*All Chicago charter schools are evaluated on the following measures as part of their annual performance review. Evaluations are made on a low, medium, or high basis.*

Measurement	Results
Iowa Tests of Basic Skills (ITBS) and Test of Achievement and Proficiency (TAP): Reading and Math	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Percent of students at or above national norms</li> <li>• Growth in test scores from prior year</li> <li>• Multi-year trend in test scores</li> </ul>
Illinois Goals Assessment Program (IGAP)/ Illinois Standards Achievement Test (ISAT)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Illinois State Board of Education classification (current year only)</li> <li>• Percent meet or exceed state standards (multi-year trend)</li> </ul>
Prairies State Achievement Exam (PSAE)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Percent of students with a satisfactory composite score (based on CPS average)</li> </ul>
Student Measures	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Percent of students who transfer out of the school during the year</li> <li>• Attendance rate</li> </ul>
Unique Standards and Assessments	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Each school can develop unique measures upon which they will be evaluated</li> </ul>

SOURCE: Chicago Charter School Accountability Documents, Chicago Public Schools, 1998, <http://www.cps.k12.il.us/schools/Charter/pdf/acctPlan.pdf>.

performance contract (see Table 4) that was incorporated into each school's annual audit. Using data from these audits, CPS produces its annual performance report, which examines student test scores three different ways: the percentage of students meeting standards in the current year, how these figures changed from the year before, and how the figures compared to those in the schools that charter students would have otherwise attended. The report also tracks other performance indicators such as attendance rates and transfers.

### ***Academic Outcomes***

There are mounds of raw data on the performance of Chicago and Illinois charter schools.<sup>16</sup> But because different groups slice the data different ways, reports conflict and can be confusing. It is also surprising that no one has ever conducted a sophisticated districtwide analysis of Chicago charter schools versus traditional schools. The system deserves a careful and fair analysis.

### ***Charter Elementary Schools***

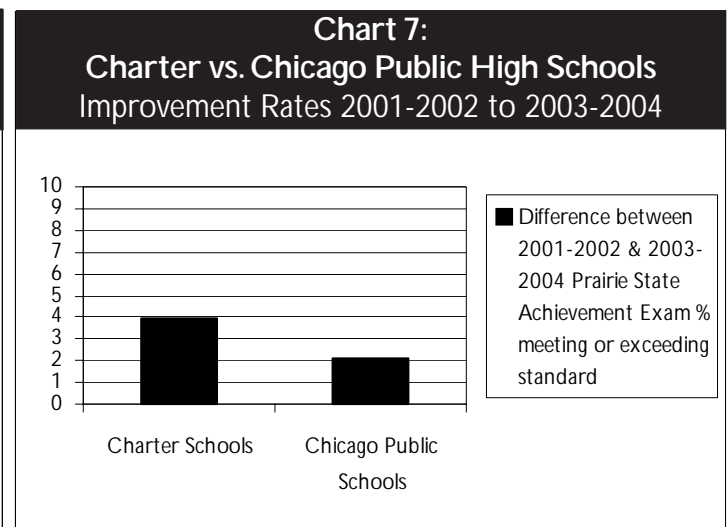
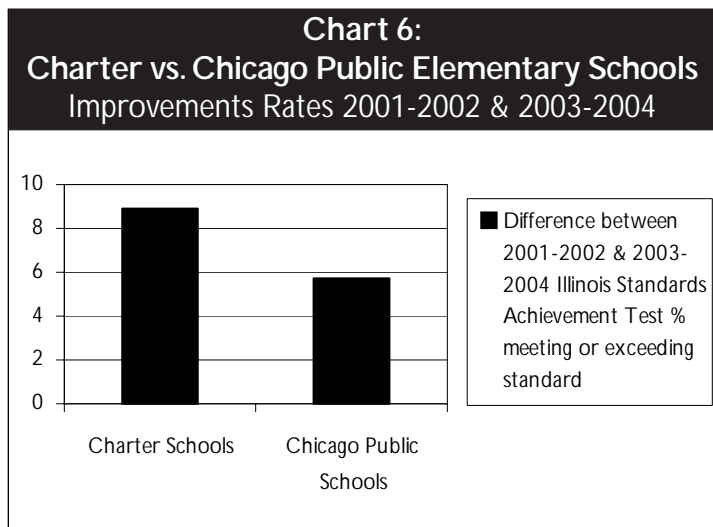
Test scores have been improving throughout Chicago's elementary schools. A quick analysis of the Illinois performance data produces promising results:

- ❑ **Overall scores:** In 2003-2004, seven of 13 elementary charters had higher percentages of students meeting or exceeding standards compared to CPS at large.<sup>17</sup>
- ❑ **Comparison schools:** In 2002-2003, all charter schools outperformed the schools their students would have attended, as measured by results on the Illinois Standards Achievement Test (ISAT).<sup>18</sup>
- ❑ **Growth:** Since 2001, seven of 10 charter elementary schools improved faster than CPS as a whole. Chart 6 compares the improvement rates of charter and district elementary schools between 2001-2002 and 2003-2004.<sup>19</sup>
- ❑ **Statewide:** Ten of 17 elementary charters had higher percentages meeting or exceeding the standards of their home districts.<sup>20</sup>

### ***Charter High Schools***

Chicago charter high schools also outperform the schools their students otherwise would have otherwise attended. This is notable since high school reform has been a tough nut to crack, not just in Chicago but nationally.





SOURCE: "Illinois Charter School Annual Report," Illinois State Board of Education, January 2005, [http://www.isbe.state.il.us/charter/pdf/charter\\_annual\\_05.pdf](http://www.isbe.state.il.us/charter/pdf/charter_annual_05.pdf).

- ❑ **Overall scores:** Two of the six charter high schools have higher percentages of students exceeding the district average on the Illinois state standards.<sup>21</sup>
- ❑ **Comparison schools:** All but one Chicago charter high school outperformed the schools their students would have attended.<sup>22</sup>
- ❑ **Growth:** Only one of six charter high schools had a lower test score improvement rate than CPS. Chart 7 compares the improvement rates of charter and districts high schools between 2001-2002 and 2003-2004.<sup>23</sup>
- ❑ **Statewide:** The two charter high schools outside Chicago do not beat their districts' average for the percentage of students meeting or exceeding state standards.<sup>24</sup>

In 2004, Harvard researchers Carolyn Hoxby and Jonah Rockoff produced two analyses of charter school achievement using data from Chicago and Illinois.

In the first study, Hoxby and Rockoff examined the impact of charter schools on student achievement using data from three of the oldest campuses under the Chicago International Charter Schools (CICS) charter.<sup>25</sup> This study took advantage of the fact that each school has had more applicants than open seats. By comparing the performance of students who won the lottery for seats in the charter schools to the

performance of those who lost, this study attempted to control for self-selection of students. The study found that students who applied to the charter school between kindergarten and 5th grade and who spent an average of two years in the school scored about 6 national percentile points higher in reading and math.<sup>26</sup>

In the second study, Hoxby analyzed 2002-2003 national achievement data for charter schools compared to nearby traditional public schools with similar racial compositions.<sup>27</sup> In this analysis, Illinois charter schools fared quite well compared to traditional schools: Charter schools on average had 16.2 percent more students rated as proficient in reading and 21 percent more students rated as proficient in math. These results are impressive relative to charter school performance in other states.

### Success?

While both of Hoxby's studies have limitations and should not be considered definitive, they do paint a very positive picture, especially when considered in tandem with national comparisons.

They show that Chicago charter schools have increased the growth rate of students meeting state standards and have created effective new high schools for traditionally underserved populations. The annual CPS report, by which Chicago charters live and die, shows that charters outperformed the schools their students would have otherwise attended in 72 percent of the measures. The vast majority of the schools are meeting the goals set for them by the city.

## *What Happens to Poor Performers?*

In Chicago and the rest of the country, there are academically excellent charter schools and there are schools that are not meeting their end of the bargain. Although judging how charter schools are doing as a whole is important to determine the effectiveness of charter schooling as a policy, the more important question for individual students and parents is how well individual schools are doing. One of the key policy benefits of chartering is that if a school is not successful, it can and should be closed.

In 2004, the CPS charter office recommended closing the Academy of Communications and Technology (ACT), one of the city's underperforming charter schools. However, when the district's Board of Education learned that ACT students would be forced to attend even lower-performing and possibly unsafe traditional public schools, it kept ACT open under a probationary charter renewal. In the board's view, keeping ACT open was better than the alternative. While it is too early to judge, there are hopeful signs that the probationary renewal was successful: ACT's Prairie State Achievement Examination scores improved from 21.6 in 2003 to 40.1 in 2004, but their ISAT scores remain low.

## *Other Outcomes*

Chicago's charter schools are phenomenally popular judging by the demand for enrollment. In September 2004, all but one Chicago charter had more applicants than seats

available. Nine had three times more applicants than seats, and the most popular school, L.E.A.R.N. (Lawndale Educational and Regional Network) Charter School, had 10 times more applicants than seats.<sup>28</sup>

Although test scores are an important indicator of charter school success, there are others, and parents are picking up on them.

- ❑ **Graduation rates.** A recent study by the Consortium on Chicago School Research found that three of the city's seven charters serving high school students had higher graduation rates than expected given their student populations.<sup>29</sup> Only one charter had a lower than expected graduation rate.<sup>30</sup>
- ❑ **Attendance.** In 2002-2003, all but one charter had higher attendance rates than the schools their students would have otherwise attended.<sup>31</sup>
- ❑ **Replication.** If imitation is the sincerest form of flattery, several Chicago charter schools should be very flattered. The CPS has encouraged several of the original 15 charter holders to submit applications for Renaissance 2010 schools. Also, Replications Inc., a New York City organization that promotes successful school models, has received a grant from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation to study what makes the Noble Street Charter High School a success. As mentioned on page 17, the group plans to open a school in Harlem, N.Y., based on the Noble Street model.

# Renaissance 2010

## ***“Slow but Steady” Approach Not Reaching Enough Students***

Despite the aforementioned success of the city’s charter schools, the vast majority of students in the Chicago Public School (CPS) system still attend low-performing schools. Two recent reports highlight the need to create richer schooling options for Chicago students.

The Civic Committee’s 2003 “Left Behind” report examined data collected in accordance with the federal No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) and concluded that Chicago is not preparing most of its children for the increasingly high-tech workforce.<sup>32</sup> It also concluded that 30 charter schools is too small a number to leverage change among the city’s 585 other public schools. While the report admits that some charter schools will fail and need to be closed, it recommends that “Chicago should have at least 100 new charter schools located predominantly in inner-city neighborhoods that are today served mostly by failing public schools.”<sup>33</sup> Systemic change depends on charters reaching this scale, it concludes.

Chicago’s public school system recently commissioned the Illinois Facilities Fund (IFF) to study the adequacy of all of the city’s schools. In “Here and

Now: The Need for Performing Schools in Chicago’s Neighborhoods,” IFF concluded that only 16 percent of the city’s high school students and barely one-half of the city’s elementary students had access to effective schools.<sup>34</sup>

## ***The Mayor’s Answer: Renaissance 2010***

In June 2004, nine years after gaining control of CPS, Mayor Richard Daley announced his Renaissance 2010 initiative to overhaul the city’s schools.<sup>35</sup> As explained earlier, “Ren 10” will close between 60 and 70 low-performing schools and open 100 replacements, divided roughly between charters, contract schools, and performance schools (see Table 5). Chicago’s experience with charters is clearly driving Ren 10. Greg Richmond, the original head of Chicago’s charter office, was promoted to chief officer of the newly created New Schools Development Department, but has since resigned. The business community has stepped up to support the initiative. Through the newly created group New Schools for Chicago (NSC), it has promised to raise \$50 million to help defray the new schools’ start-up expenses and other costs.

Ren 10 uses a more sophisticated process for locating new schools and choosing their operators. The

## **The Vision and Purpose of the Renaissance 2010 Initiative**

*“The Chicago Public Schools’ experience with alternative, charter, and small schools since 1995 provides a record of performance that calls for an expansion of these alternative educational opportunities to more Chicago students and families, particularly those in our neighborhood schools that are underutilized, overcrowded, or have a history of chronic underperformance. That experience confirms that through these new schools educators, community members, and parents can offer Chicago students more flexible and innovative educational techniques and programs.”*

SOURCE: “Renaissance 2010: Request for Proposals for Schools Opening Fall 2005,” Chicago Public Schools, September 2004, <http://www.ren2010.cps.k12.il.us/request.shtml>.

**Table 5: Renaissance 2010 School Types**

<b>All Schools</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Schools will receive a high level of autonomy, but will be accountable for performance.</li> <li>• Students in schools that closed have a right-to-return when a new school reopens.</li> <li>• Schools will be schools of choice that focus on serving a particular community and will be open to all community residents. Some may be designated to serve the entire city.</li> </ul>		
	<b>Charter School</b>	<b>Contract School</b>	<b>Performance School</b>
<b>Chicago Public Schools (CPS) Description</b>	Authorized by state law, charter schools are run by an independent organization approved by CPS. The schools are exempt from some local and state regulations, but they must meet the same educational standards as other schools in Chicago.	Contract schools are also run by an outside organization. They follow all state education laws and may be the best model for groups that ultimately want to start more than one school. They differ from charters in that they can be unionized by local unions and all of the teachers must be certified.	These are schools run by CPS and granted specific autonomies regarding budgeting, hiring, schedule and curriculum. They will be bound by current collective bargaining agreements, and all teachers must be certified.
<b>Status</b>	Charter schools operate under a charter or contract with CPS, renewable every 5 years.	The CPS negotiates a contract with a third party to operate Renaissance 2010's contract schools.	Most like a traditional public school, however performance schools will be held accountable to the stipulations in their "performance contract" with CPS.
<b>Governance Structure</b>	Governing board	Governing board or traditional or alternative local school council (LSC)	Traditional or alternative LSC
<b>Teacher Union</b>	The school can decide to unionize or not.	The school can decide to unionize or not. If so, may or may not be part of Chicago Teachers Union.	All teachers are part of Chicago Teachers Union.
<b>Teacher Certification</b>	In schools created prior to 2003, 75% of teachers must be certified; 50% in new schools.	100% of teachers must be certified.	100% of teachers must be certified.
<b>Teacher Compensation</b>	Determined by school	Determined by school	In accordance with CPS salary schedules
<b>Teacher and Staff Employment</b>	Charter school board or subcontracted management organization	Contract school board or subcontracted management organization	CPS
<b>School Calendar</b>	School day/year can be longer, but must meet state minimums.	Calendar is negotiated and can be different from CPS, but contract schools must meet state minimums.	Must meet state minimums; may or may not follow CPS
<b>Curriculum</b>	Must meet state standards as specified in Charter School Agreement, not linked to CPS initiatives	Meets CPS and state learning standards as specified in Performance Agreement; may or may not participate in CPS initiatives	Meets CPS and state learning standards as specified in the Performance Plan; may or may not participate in CPS initiatives

SOURCE: Adapted from CPS Renaissance 2010 materials, <http://www.ren2010.cps.k12.il.us/types.shtml>, and "Chicago Public Schools: Types and Anomalies," Business and Professional People for the Public Interest, [http://www.bpicchicago.org/pe/pe\\_pubs.html](http://www.bpicchicago.org/pe/pe_pubs.html).

“Here and Now” report by IFF on school performance identified the city neighborhoods with the worst schools. New Ren 10 schools will have to open in these priority areas, in many cases taking over facilities that were used by the subpar schools that CPS is closing.

Chicago’s school board selects the new schools based on recommendations by a Transition Advisory Council made up of community members. Seventeen new Ren 10 schools will open in the fall of 2005: seven new charters, two new campuses for existing charters, three performance schools, and eight regular schools.

No contract schools have been approved to date.

The mayor has repeatedly said that Renaissance 2010’s goal is to increase the number of good schools available to Chicago families. Some observers speculate there are unspoken goals as well, including: anticipating the need to close schools under NCLB; getting around the state cap, this time by opening charter-like schools; and attracting middle-class African-American families back to the city. Others note that New York City and Los Angeles have also recently announced similar initiatives, which suggests an element of competition among America’s leading cities.

# Challenges Ahead for Renaissance 2010

The Renaissance 2010 initiative faces many daunting challenges, including turnover among key leaders, the threat of re-regulation, skepticism in the community, paying for facilities, fundraising, and a potential shortage of high-quality teachers. Other cities undertaking large reforms will almost certainly face the same problems.

## *Leadership Turnover*

Chicago's charter and Renaissance 2010 schools lost two key allies in February 2005 when Greg Richmond of the New Schools Development Department and Leadership for Quality Education (LQE) Director John Ayers resigned. The newsletter *Catalyst Chicago* reported that both quit "after they saw significant parts of their portfolios moved elsewhere."<sup>36</sup> Richmond's office was relegated to the selection of new schools while a new project team was created to oversee the school start-up process. The role of LQE as "external partner," meanwhile, is increasingly being filled by the New Schools for Chicago (NSC).

Just weeks after Richmond and Ayers' departures, Lisa Schneider and Karen Daniels resigned from their posts in the start-up project team. The four resignations created a large leadership void.

New leaders must be found for the charter community and Renaissance 2010. With respect to charters, it will take the Chicago Public Schools (CPS) time to find a leader who understands the role of a charter authorizer and who can ferret out promising new school proposals. Leadership could emerge from the recently formed Illinois Network of Charter Schools, which is poised to assume the technical assistance role formerly filled by LQE and will lobby for charters at the state level.

The NSC could provide leadership for Renaissance 2010, but this group has been shrouded in so much secrecy that it is hard to know what its role will be. Lead by Phyllis Lockett Martin, NSC has so far raised millions from businesses and distributed start-up grants to some schools, but it is still unclear if it will remain a

fundraiser, evolve into an advisory board or school evaluator, or partner with CPS in other yet-to-be-defined ways to make Renaissance 2010 a success.<sup>37</sup> Its high-profile membership all but guarantees that it will be a key player.

Chicago newspapers frequently report on power struggles over Renaissance 2010. The recent departures of Richmond and others make these reports all the more troubling. Chicago's charters and yet-to-be-born "Ren 10" schools currently lack a reliable authority with a deep institutional memory and a commitment to the original goals and visions of reform. Success depends on new leaders rising up and taking charge.

## *Compliance Creep*

A recent *Chicago Tribune* editorial highlighted a serious concern for charters and Renaissance 2010 schools: In an effort to keep schools from running afoul of laws and other mandates, CPS was "loving (charter) schools to death" with new reporting requirements and oversight visits.<sup>38</sup> Using the metaphor of "over-watering," the article outlined a series of bureaucratic changes, including 14 mandatory meetings for Renaissance 2010 schools and an on-site campus manager at each building housing more than one school. These mandates were intended to help new schools avoid the same mistakes others have made, but clearly reflect a bureaucratic mindset.

To be sure, Chicago is in uncharted waters; few urban school districts have attempted to ride herd over a vast number of truly autonomous schools. Richmond is a national leader in light-handed but thoughtful charter oversight, but even he admits that finding the right level of control is a daily judgment call.<sup>39</sup> Now with Richmond gone, CPS will have to learn how to help independent schools flourish without killing them with kindness.

## *Calming Community Opposition*

The public schools system's handling of the Mid-South Initiative, a precursor to Renaissance 2010, sheds



light on the continuing challenge to overcome community suspicion of and opposition to reform.

In the summer of 2004, CPS planned to close all the schools in four high-poverty neighborhoods in Chicago's South Side, and reopen them under new management. This sparked opposition when leaked to the media. While CPS maintained that the plan was only in the exploratory stages, its discovery ignited a firestorm of protest and led to the plan being shelved. This misstep highlights CPS's difficulties with community relations and propensity for behind-closed-doors planning.

Like most big-city school districts, Chicago exists in a politically charged, damned-if-you-do-and-damned-if-you-don't environment. Just about anything it does is likely to upset someone. The teachers union wants to make sure its members' jobs are protected. The elected local school councils fear that schools will become unaccountable to the public once again if the councils are shunted aside. Some community groups even suspect that Renaissance 2010 is a stalking horse for wholesale neighborhood gentrification.<sup>40</sup> The CPS has largely ignored such concerns, and as a result some fear that a rebellion against Ren 10 is in the works.

It is evident that CPS needs to do a better job anticipating and addressing community concerns about Ren 10. Mayor Richard Daley can play a bigger role in this regard. For example, he could take a lesson from Indianapolis Mayor Bart Peterson, whose office produces an annual 30-minute television show on charter school options in the city.

### *The Facility Catch-22*

Almost all Chicago charter schools receive less money than their public school counterparts, especially when capital costs are considered. The CPS average per-pupil expenditure in 2001-2002 was \$7,650.<sup>41</sup> By comparison, each Renaissance 2010 charter and contract high school will receive \$6,500 per student and each elementary school will receive \$5,500 per student. And after "take backs" associated with using a CPS facility, the actual amount is \$5,075 for high school students and \$4,325 for elementary students.

Keep in mind that Ren 10 will require charter, contract, and performance schools to open in specified

neighborhoods. For some larger charter and contract schools, moving into a CPS facility vacated by a defunct traditional public school will be an attractive option. Smaller schools face a tougher choice: Move into an available CPS facility, give the district its per-pupil "take back," and hope you can make ends meet; or take your chances on finding a suitable, affordable facility (if you can find one at all) in one of your limited choices of neighborhoods. Chicago's public schools will have to put a lot of creative thinking into solving this tough challenge.

### *Dealing With Funding Inconsistencies*

Like many other charter schools across the country, Chicago charters have depended on foundation grants and other donations to supplement their budgets. Many Chicagoans wonder if there is enough of this private money to go around to support high-quality education at 100 new Renaissance 2010 schools, not to mention the city's existing charters.

Similarly, Renaissance 2010 schools were told to expect up to \$500,000 for start-up and planning costs, but in March 2005 the schools received checks for just \$79,000 and warned that this is all they should expect before school starts in August.<sup>42</sup> A \$421,000 shortfall will be hard to overcome.

### *Tapping the People Pipeline*

Some of Chicago's most successful charter schools were started by outstanding CPS teachers. Fifty-seven proposals for Ren 10 charters were submitted, indicating plenty of interest in starting a school. Still, many wonder if there are enough teachers with the right qualifications to fill the ranks at 100 new schools, many of which will have very specific themes, orientations, and missions. Also, who will teach in Chicago's traditional public schools if all the highest quality teachers move to Ren 10 schools? This is a tough problem fraught with huge political ramifications, and CPS has paid it little attention, if any. The University of Chicago, which trains beginning and veteran teachers at its charter school and is involved in Renaissance 2010, could provide the expertise needed to solve this problem.

# How Chicago Can Ensure the Success of Renaissance 2010

The following recommendations speak to the challenges outlined above and the concern that Chicago lacks the wherewithal and community support to create 100 new schools. While most of our suggestions are for Chicago Public Schools (CPS), we also urge the broader community to step up to the plate. It is inevitable that many in the school system will resist or outright oppose change of the magnitude proposed by the Renaissance 2010 initiative. Chicago's municipal, business, philanthropic, and civic communities have helped Chicago's schools in the past, and they will be counted on again to create and sustain support for new schools.

## ☐ ***Work to Build Community Support for Renaissance 2010***

It will be impossible to get every Chicago interest group to back Renaissance 2010. But the city has many leaders and groups to rally support. The mayor, CPS, New Schools for Chicago (NSC), existing charter schools, and community groups should launch efforts to explain why the reform is necessary, what its goals are, and how schools will be selected for opening or closure. It will take a broad-based coalition to build an even broader base of support.

## ☐ ***Reconstruct the Chicago Public Schools Central Office to Fully Support New Schools***

Ultimately, CPS itself must be reformed to support new, autonomous schools. Without central office reform, those schools could very well distort into dysfunctional, micromanaged traditional schools. The mayor and business leaders should commission a plan to reorganize the central office. For schools, the bottom line should be accountability for results and not regulatory compliance. The reorganization plan should consider:

- how to create incentives for CPS staff to offer the new schools a wide variety of central office services at the lowest possible price;

- how to limit bureaucratic rules to those that protect the public interest;
- how to create a strong teacher hiring pool without making staffing decisions for schools; and
- how to create transparent accounting practices that ensure equal funding across all school types.

## ☐ ***Create a Facilities Trust for Renaissance 2010 Schools***

Facilities will be a problem for Renaissance 2010 schools, as buildings are hard to find in the private sector and leasing CPS facilities costs too much. Chicago business leaders and CPS could help solve this problem by jointly creating a real estate trust to develop and lease buildings to house the schools. These facilities could be subleased to charters and contract schools. Portland, Ore., for example, has been experimenting along these lines. The public school system should also collaborate with “Chicago’s biggest landlord”—the mayor. It could cooperate with the city to use vacant or underutilized municipal buildings as school facilities. These policies could help relieve Renaissance 2010 schools’ financial burdens and should be part of the central office reform plan outlined above.

## ☐ ***Create an Independent Incubator for Renaissance 2010 Schools***

An organization outside CPS could ease new schools’ start-up problems by helping them resolve policy quandaries, find leaders, and learn from each other through networking. A new schools “incubator” could exist as a stand-alone organization or be part of a larger technical assistance organization. The Illinois Network for Charter Schools or NSC are obvious candidates for the job. The endeavor would need civic and philanthropic support as well. New York City’s Center for Charter School Excellence is a promising model.

## The Community Plays a Starring Role in Chicago Charter Schools

Community involvement often adds a spark to charter schools. By providing schools with additional funding, administrative support, and technical assistance or by sharing their facilities with schools, community groups help charters succeed while addressing pressing local needs. Here is a sampling of Chicago's current partnerships between charter schools and community groups:

- A group of Chicago's construction industry leaders have joined to create the Architecture, Construction, and Engineering Technical Charter High School.
- The Inner-City Teaching Corps and the Ryan Foundation partnered to develop the Alain Locke Charter School.
- The Chicago Children's Choir's charter school, The Choir Academy, is part of a national replication project of the Boys Choir of Harlem Academy in New York City.
- ASPIRA, Inc., a Puerto Rican nonprofit organization, started the Mirta Ramirez Computer Science Charter School.
- Northwestern University Settlement Association worked with two former Chicago Public Schools teachers to open the Noble Street Charter High School.
- The North Kenwood/Oakland Charter School is an elementary school and a development center for urban teachers run by the Center for School Improvement at the University of Chicago.
- The Octavio Paz Charter School is affiliated with the United Neighborhood Organization, Chicago's largest Hispanic community-based organization.
- Asian Human Services works with Passages Charter School as part of its mission to serve metropolitan Chicago's Asian-American community.

As Renaissance 2010 ramps up, potential charter school partners include Chicago's world-class museums, sports teams, musicians, and individuals or groups connected with the city's elected local school councils. Partnership models in other parts of the country include:

- Boston: The Media and Technology Charter High (MATCH) School partners with universities—Boston University, Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Harvard, and Boston College—as well as the high-tech, venture capital, legal, and finance communities.
- Denver: The Community Challenge School serves at-risk youth in collaboration with Adolescent Counseling Exchange.
- Indianapolis: Goodwill Industries of Central Indiana collaborated with the Big Picture Company to open the Indianapolis Metropolitan Career Academies.
- Los Angeles: Pueblo Nuevo Development, a nonprofit community group, founded the Camino Nuevo Charter Academy.
- Milwaukee: The Academy of Learning and Leadership operates in partnership with the LaVarnway neighborhood Boys and Girls Club.
- New York City: Amber Charter School was started by the city's teacher union and operates with a very abbreviated union contract (six pages versus the 200-page contract for the rest of the city).

### ❑ ***Cultivate New Political Leadership***

Renaissance 2010 needs day-to-day leaders within and outside CPS to guide new schools through bureaucratic minefields. With the departures of Greg Richmond and other members of the charter school “old guard,” the school district, civic community, and larger charter community should help the new managers learn the history of charter schools in Chicago and the goals of Renaissance 2010, and give them the support and authority they need to make Ren 10 a success.

### ***What Legislators Can Do to Help Charter Schools Flourish in Chicago and the Rest of the State***

Without legislative changes, chartering will soon reach its apex in Illinois. Chicago is near its charter cap and there is little reason to think that suburban and downstate districts will suddenly embrace the reform after holding it at arm’s length for so long. It will take the following legislative changes to truly take charters to scale in Chicago and the rest of the state.

### ❑ ***Raise the Charter Cap in Chicago***

Chicago is just under the maximum of 30 charter schools, with 27 schools chartered. Charter advocates are pessimistic about the possibility of increasing the cap and afraid of what kind of bargain they would have to strike to get an increase. Because of the legislative deal made to raise the cap in 1993, charter school expansion in Chicago is arbitrarily limited to

the small number of schools allowed to operate multiple campuses. The cap should be eliminated altogether or raised to allow Chicago to meet state performance expectations as it sees fit. If eliminating the cap proves to be outright politically impossible, the legislature should consider:

- allowing all charter schools in Chicago to operate multiple campuses;
- not counting existing schools that choose to convert to charters against the cap; and
- conditioning expansion on performance (e.g., the cap could grow every two years as long as most charter schools outperform the schools their students would otherwise attend).

### ❑ ***Create an Independent, Statewide Charter Authorizer***

The state’s charter law simply does not work outside Chicago. Nearly all other local school systems are hostile to charters and the Illinois State Board of Education has proven itself reluctant to overturn charter denials for even the most worthy proposed schools. Having a charter law is pointless if it effectively blocks the creation of charter schools. The legislature should emulate many other states and let existing state institutions, such as universities, grant charters or create a new independent agency to do so. The existence of other charter authorizers would also provide healthy competition for CPS and encourage it to keep charter school funding and policies as friendly as possible.

# Using Charter Schools for Reform

## *Lessons from Chicago*

Other districts, cities, and states will inevitably look to Chicago as they start to think about how to use chartering to leverage reform. The following are the most important and portable lessons from Chicago's chartering experience.

### ***Make Student Performance Goal #1***

School districts nationwide are not nearly as focused on student achievement as they should be. They frequently grant charters to schools that have interesting themes, but no idea how to produce better outcomes. This is where Chicago really stands out: Improving student performance consistently sits at the top of its hierarchy of goals for charters. The city recognizes that empowering parents to choose among bad schools is pointless and that traditional schools will feel no pressure to improve if the competition is equally dismal. Chicago also recognizes that the only way charters can resist bureaucratic creep and make friends in high places is if their students shine. Chicago Public Schools (CPS) makes sure that each of its charters knows how good is good enough. Through its accountability contract and annual report on charter performance, each school knows where the performance bar is set and where they rank.

### ***Build Strong Support Within the District Central Office***

Having an office within CPS that fully understands the mission and purpose of charter schools has been crucial to the schools' success. The CPS charter school office sets strong standards for school performance, created reliable processes for authorization and reauthorization, and advocated for charters within the system. When a district is the authorizer, charters need to have an ally on the inside to survive. Districts need to find competent people for this role and give them authority, resources, and support.

### ***Provide Political Cover***

Politics can make or break school reforms. And in Chicago, Mayor Richard Daley worked hard to create a hospitable political climate for charters. By incorporating charter schools into his larger plan to reinvigorate Chicago and promote economic development, he sent the message that this was a serious reform that was not going away. His strong support gave business and community groups political cover to invest and get involved in charter schools, and freed CPS to focus on creating high-quality schools. Charter schools everywhere need heavyweight champions like Daley—be they mayors, governors, business tycoons, or elder statesmen.

### ***Use Community Expertise to Support New School Development***

Chicago is an expert at leveraging community expertise to help its charter and Renaissance 2010 schools. Opening a charter is a lot like opening a small business. Many of them fail not because their education programs were flawed, but because they lacked effective crucial elements like governing boards or strong financial plans. Chicago's charters get vital start-up help on such matters from CPS partners in the business and nonprofit communities. These partners frequently advocate on the schools' behalf at the city and state levels. Universities, local education funds, and community groups play similar roles for charters in other cities and states across America. Some go one step further and open their own charters. It is a mutually beneficial relationship: The groups get a new way to advance their missions, and the schools gain added administrative, financial, and community support.

Finally, Chicago deserves recognition for developing novel ways of working with communities during the school selection and development process. Renaissance 2010 could reshape how communities view their involvement in public education and how authorizers throughout the country award charters.

## *Be Proactive*

All too often, school districts and states award charters simply to placate especially vocal community groups rather than for sound educational reasons. In this kind of passive-aggressive authorizing, ill-conceived charters are allowed to open, usually with little support, if any, in the hope they will fail.

Chicago, in contrast, sees charters as a vital part of its broader school reform effort and actively recruits the best possible people and groups to run them. Chicago's requests for charter proposals, for example, were carefully tailored to address the CPS focus on high schools and the city's neediest students. The district also sets clear criteria for selecting applications and transparency in the renewal process, and it provided minimal oversight. This type of management is uncommon in urban school districts, which tend to focus on regulatory and legal compliance. To be effective, charter authorizers in other parts of the

country will have to cultivate new capabilities. They will also need an advocate for charters on the inside to ensure the district is out of the charters' way.

## *Mix the Fixes*

To date, Chicago has relied largely on "one-off" or "mom and pop" schools to begin its charter movement. This has led to the creation of unique and successful schools that reflect the communities in which they emerged, but has also made it difficult to take chartering to scale. Chicago's experience shows that communities can greatly benefit from a mix of homegrown charters and more easily replicated schools, such as those managed by for-profit educational management organizations. Chicago and other communities should also reach out to think tanks, university-based education centers, and others with national school design models and continue encouraging their teachers and principals to propose new charter schools.



# Conclusion

In the past eight years, Chicago has created an excellent charter school model with help from across the city. Mayor Richard Daley supported the reform, Chicago Public Schools developed a thoughtful and proactive approval process, business and civic leaders championed the movement and provided technical support, and teachers and community groups accepted the challenge of opening new

schools. All deserve credit for the success to date. Renaissance 2010 will dramatically alter the landscape for Chicago's charters during the next five years. Hopefully, all of these actors can pull together again and make the Renaissance 2010 initiative an equally historic success. There are challenges ahead, but there is also more than enough capacity in the "city of big shoulders" to tackle this one.

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## About the Author

Robin J. Lake is the executive director of the National Charter School Research Project. This new project, housed at the Center on Reinventing Public Education at the University of Washington, aims to bring rigor, evidence, and balance to the national charter school debate. Joining the center in 1994, Lake specializes in charter school research and policy development that focuses on effective accountability policies; scale and supply; and how school districts can use chartering as a central reform strategy. Lake is the author of numerous studies, white papers, and policy briefs on charter schools, including the first national study of charter school accountability sponsored by the U.S. Department of Education.

Lydia Rainey is a research associate at the University of Washington's Center on Reinventing Public Education, where she specializes in urban politics and public school choice. She currently serves as lead project coordinator for the Center's National Charter School Research and Doing School Choice Right projects.

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600 Pennsylvania Avenue, SE, Suite 400, Washington, DC 20003

(202) 547-0001 ☐ Fax: (202) 544-5014

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