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ABSTRACT

In 1988, the Illinois State Legislature passed the Chicago School Reform Act giving local schools significant decision-making authority to restructure management. The Act gives reform-specific powers to a local school council, which is composed of six parents, two community residents, two teachers, and the principal, all elected by their respective constituencies. The teachers' role is set in an advisory capacity that includes making recommendations to the principal with respect to curriculum, school improvement plans, and other educational matters. A summary of significant studies indicates that without teacher input and participation in decision-making, reform has no positive or long-lasting effects. The current study elicited information on the status of school reform from the perspective of educators working in the Chicago Public School system. Subjects, both beginning and experienced teachers (N=19) from one public elementary and one public high school, were asked to complete a survey instrument that solicited opinions in the following areas: (1) general knowledge of local governance; (2) effect of school reform on educational improvements; (3) obstacles to educational improvement under school reform; and (4) general impact of school reform on the schools. A copy of the questionnaire, including responses, is provided. (Contains 14 references.) (LL)

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Chicago Public School Teachers'
Opinions on School Reform

Edna L. Brown

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Public and policy-maker perceptions that American school children fared more poorly than their Asian and Western European counterparts gave impetus to a national education reform movement. A wave of national reports criticized teaching and teacher education. At this point we are moving beyond the proposals and calls for reform. Changes are taking place. But, what is reform? It goes by many names-- site-based management, collaborative decision making, school choice, personalized learning, integrated curricula and collegial staffing, just to name a few.

In Chicago, reform means that each school has the obligation to develop its own vision of what well-educated youngsters will know and be able to do in the future. But, this is more easily said than done. Where is this vision going to come from and when it comes will it be different enough from the status quo to prompt the increases in learning that Chicago's children so urgently need,

Much has been said, researched and written about the school reform movement as respects LSCs and principals' authority and accountability. Far less, however, has been written about teachers' participation in, contributions to, or even thoughts about school reform in the Chicago Public Schools.

One reason for the dirth of information on teachers' opinions on school reform may be shortcomings in the Chicago School Reform Act, itself. For example, while the act gives specific powers to LSCs and principals, the act sets the teachers' roles in reform in an advisory capacity. In other words, teachers through their Professional Personnel Advisory Committees (PPACs) established under the act, can give advice, but nobody has to take it.

With no specific accountability or delineated power for teachers under the act, it is difficult to assess their impact on school reform. This paper will attempt to uncover teachers' attitudes toward reform and and their involvement in the reform process.

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In 1988, the Illinois State Legislature falling in line with a national movement to reform and improve education in the United States, passed the Chicago School Reform Act. Public Act 85-1418 restructured the management of the Chicago Public Schools by giving local schools significant decision making authority. This act sought to replace the traditional bureaucratic control with a three-way division of power through (1) parent-dominated Local School Councils (LSCs); (2) increased principal responsibility and accountability; and (3) increased teacher participation in decision making.

At the core of Chicago's reform design is a local school council. Each council is composed of six parents elected by parents at the school, two community residents elected by residents in the school's attendance area, two teachers elected by staff at the school and the principal. High school councils also have a nonvoting student member, elected by students.

In spite of much controversy and concern over the fair representation of racial and ethnic groups, Chicago's first local school councils were off to an encouraging start. A study by Chicago Urban League researchers James H. Lewis and D. Garth Taylor (1990) found that although the first councils as a whole were fairly representative of the race and ethnicity of eligible candidates and voters, there were small but significant differences in each of the elected groups. The greatest difference between results and "expected" results occurred in teacher contests where blacks won 58 percent of the seats while comprising only 48 percent of the candidate pool. Whites won 33 percent of seats, while accounting for 44 percent of the teachers. Hispanics won 6 percent of the seats and made up 7 percent of the teaching force.

The reform law called for teachers and other staff in the school to elect a PPAC to advise the principal and local school council on curriculum, school improvement plans and other educational matters. Each school was to decide how its PPAC was organized, and how many people would be on it. In theory, the PPAC, local school council, and principal would all work together to improve the school. However, PPACs may have been the biggest secret of reform. There was no press coverage of them and teachers received no training on how to make them effective.

In April 1990 a conference called "Teachers as Leaders" was held. It was the first conference on the reform law organized by and for teachers. More than 300 Chicago Public School teachers came together to talk about the teachers' role in school reform. The conference addressed the two most critical issues facing teachers. First, how to build the role of teachers in school reform through the Professional Personnel Advisory Committees; and second, how to use the new openness to make the kind of educational changes that would help students learn.

Conference participants agreed that participation and activism by teachers was and integral part of the reform movement. Several major proposals for teacher involvement were offered by the group including

- . Reorganizing classrooms and school days to give students more responsibility and teachers more preparation time.
- . Exploring new ways of teaching reading, writing, math, and science.
- . Developing curriculums that reflect community values and history.
- . Exploring new, more useful testing methods.

A study by Ogletree and McHenry (1990) underscored the findings of the teacher conference. A study of 100 Chicago teachers in 10 schools was conducted to evaluate the Chicago school reform effort. Survey responses were categorized according to teachers' opinions on school reform, effects of reform on the schools, suggestions for improvement, the politics of reform and open-ended comments. An analysis of survey results concluded that teachers did not consider themselves to be an integral part of the school restructuring process. The findings suggested that unless school restructuring efforts actively involve teachers in decision making, the quality of education, student retention and graduation rates, and teacher autonomy will not improve.

In another study, Ogletree and McHenry (1990) examined the effectiveness of Chicago school reform. Responses indicated that no gains had been made in student achievement, school discipline, teacher morale, collegiality, or school climate.

Griego-Jones (1990) examined the first year of Chicago's school reform efforts as experienced in a predominantly Hispanic school. The methodology for the study involved interviews with school personnel, parents, administrators and community groups; a teacher survey; and observations. Findings indicated that reform processes and outcomes are influenced by different levels of groups, individual school context and degree of ethnic diversity. The study concluded that communication, connecting community organizations, family participation, and an interactive principal are needed for successful program implementation. These results, contrary to those of most educators and researchers, seem to leave teachers out of the reform equation altogether.

In 1991, the Chicago Consortium on Chicago School Research undertook what was probably the most comprehensive research on Chicago teachers' opinions of school reform up to that time. The Consortium's survey of 12,708 Chicago public elementary school teachers elicited an overall response rate of 70 percent. Findings revealed that citywide, teachers were moderately positive about school reform. However, although a majority of teachers support school reform, the overall level of endorsement is not a consensus of opinion. Further findings indicated that teachers with a higher sense of self-efficacy and who are more involved in local school governance are more likely to report change in classroom practices. These findings seem to support Ogletree and McHenry (1990) and the observations of the Teachers as Leaders Conference observations (1990).

Sebring and Camburn (1992) undertook a study of similar magnitude to examine the level of teacher engagement in Chicago school reform. The findings of this survey, which was mailed to teachers in 473 elementary schools and yielded responses from 12,000 teachers in 401 schools (an average response rate of 78 percent for each school), echoed the Consortium on Chicago School Research (1991) findings. That is to say, teachers had a generally positive attitudes toward changes in their schools and the potential for change. As in Ogletree and McHenry (1990), Sebring and Camburn concluded that teachers were more favorable toward reform in schools characterized by shared decision-making, strong leadership, teacher collegiality, and community support.

In 1993, Catalyst, a Chicago school reform publication of the Community Renewal Society, conducted a study of the opinions of Chicago Teachers Union delegates, chairs of professional personnel advisory committees and chairs of local school councils on the progress of Chicago school reform.

PPAC and CTU questionnaires were mailed to school addresses; LSC questionnaires went to home addresses. The highest response rate was from CTU delegates with 59 percent, returning questionnaires. PPAC chairs were next with 52 percent responding. Only 37 percent of LSC chairs returned a questionnaire.

Most questions asked respondents to give a positive or negative rating on a scale of 1 to 5. Consistently, about one-third of the respondents chose 3, which was considered neutral.

A solid majority of responses to Catalyst's survey were positive or neutral; relatively few fell into the negative categories. Following are other highlights of the survey:

- . The statements "I believe this school has the potential to raise student achievement significantly" and "Since reform, I am more optimistic this school will improve" generated the highest rate of positive responses in the survey. But parents and teachers differ sharply when it comes to judging concrete results; 60 percent or more of LSC chairs, but roughly 40 percent of teacher leaders agree that discipline is better, that time spent on learning has increased and that students are learning more since reform.
- . In an open-ended question, respondents were asked to name the one thing they would change to improve their school, other than money. The most frequent answer given by both LSC chairs and CTU delegates was to change the roles and responsibilities of school leaders. PPAC chairs most frequently said they want to see increased parent involvement.
- . When asked to describe the biggest change in curriculum and instruction at their schools since 1989, a number said nothing had changed, while others wrote about new programs.
- . Only about half of PPAC chairs and CTU delegates agree that their schools have a professional development program that promotes teacher growth.
- . The inability to obtain sufficient funding was ranked as the top obstacle to reform, overall. Funding was the only one of 22 roadblocks listed in the survey that was seen as a definite or serious problem by a majority of respondents from each group.

agreed that reduced class sizes, increased instructional support staff, adequate instructional material and more support from the administration on student discipline problems would enhance the education process. Only 37 percent of the respondents agreed that greater teacher autonomy in the classroom and in running the school would improve education. Teachers, however, rejected reducing student enrollment per school as a means of improving education. The concern here seems to be with the loss of teaching positions, rather than improvement of education.

When asked to rank the factors which would improve education under school reform, the respondents consistently ranked reduced class sizes, more preparation time for teachers and more parental support as the three most important factors

In the final section of questions on the general impact of school reform on their schools 38 percent of the teachers agreed that, in general, school reform is succeeding. This seems to concur with earlier studies where teachers were moderately supportive of school reform efforts in their schools. However, most teachers (68 percent) answered that principals are less effective under reform and 63 percent said that reform has politicized the school.

Responses to the open-ended questions at the end of the opinionnaire varied with the individual schools, however, the most frequently answered question (15 of 19 respondents) was "What is (are) the weaknesses of school reform?" Typical responses to this question were as follows:

- . With the beginning of school reform student discipline began to decline because students were under the impression that the teachers were no longer in charge.
- . Issues tend to be emphasized according to the most vociferous majority -- simplistic solutions lead no where.
- . Duties of LSC members are not adequately defined. Teacher LSC members do not represent teachers.
- . Rules keep changing and rules that help learning are not enforced.
- . Most are concerned with meeting goals, criteria and due dates rather than targeting real problems -- smaller classes, better handling of money and direction of that money. This is a paper pushers delight. Too much bureaucracy.

- . No movement toward curriculum improvement.

The majority of responses to this question, however, indicated that the teachers felt that school reform had politicized the schools.

Another open-ended question asked "What changes would you make to improve school reform?" Responses to this question varied and are summarized as follows:

- . More authority for principals to hire and fire teachers. (A response that supports the Catalyst study.)
- . Make sure parents have some working knowledge of what goes on in the classroom that helps, not hinders the learning process.
- . Restructure the LSC -- five parents, five teachers and principal -- eliminating community representatives.
- . Principal should have more control over the school budget.
- . More preparation time for teachers to work within departments to provide quality, consistent curriculums.

In response to the question "How has school reform improved your school?", the teachers indicated that no real improvement has been seen. This may be particularly significant in view of the fact that five years after implementation of school reform, teachers still see no improvement in their schools.

Overall, the findings of this study tend to support the research hypothesis and earlier research,. That is that teachers do support reform, but that support is tempered by individual experiences in individual schools. Teachers agree that they should take a more active role in the reform process. They agree that their role in reform is not clearly delineated under Illinois PA 85-1814.

Since teachers generally agree with the goals of reform, administrators and state legislators should make an attempt to channel this agreement into more active participation by giving teachers greater input and power in the reform process. A larger study of teachers' opinions on reform currently being conducted by the Consortium for School Research may give greater validity to this study.

- . In response to the statement "The LSC in my school is an effective policy-making body," 68 percent of LSC chairs said their council is definitely effective, while only 48 percent of PPAC chairs and 38 percent of CTU delegates agreed.
- . Roughly one half of PPAC chairs and one third of CTU delegates reported that the PPAC at their school definitely helps to improve curriculum and instruction; that the PPAC clearly plays an important role in making decisions about school operations and programs; and that teachers at their school participate in planning staff development and designing curriculum.

While the Catalyst study points to progress since reform, especially in increased efforts to improve curriculum and instruction, the study concludes that without the full-fledged participation of teachers in crafting change, it is unlikely that schools will take on the hard work of meaningful, lasting change.

Summary

Most significant studies on the role of teachers in school reform agree that without teacher input and participation in decision-making, reform will have no positive or long-lasting effect on Chicago Public Schools. The purpose of the current study was to explore Chicago Public School teachers' opinions on school reform.

Procedures

Population/Sample

Nineteen Chicago teachers from one public elementary and one public high schools participated in this investigation. Teaching experience ranged from one and one half to 32 years. Of the participants only two were members of the PPAC.

Instrument

The instrument developed for the study was the Teachers Reform Opinionnaire (TRO). The TRO consisted of 54 items seeking the participants opinions in the following categories:

1. General knowledge of local school governance.
2. Effect of school reform on educational improvements
3. Obstacles to educational improvement under school reform.
4. General impact of school reform on the schools.

Subjects were asked to answer questions either yes, no, or don't know. In addition they were asked to rank obstacles to educational improvement under school reform from 1 (most important) to 15 (least important). Finally, subjects were asked to supply comments to three open-ended questions.

TABLE I
SCHOOL REFORM OPINIONNAIRE

The purpose of this survey is to determine the status of school reform from the perspective of educators working in the Chicago Public Schools. Please do not sign your name, but indicate the school in which you work. School identification will be used only to identify the number of schools participating in the survey.

1. School _____
(Check one) Elementary High School
2. Your Position _____
3. Your knowledge of school reform? (Circle one)
 Excellent Good Fair Poor
4. Number of years with CPS _____
5. Are you a member of LSC? PPAC?
6. Both educators on your LSC are: a. Classroom teachers
 (Circle one) b. Non-classroom educators
 c. One of each

Please answer the following questions by circling "yes", "no", or "dk" (don't know).

	Yes	No	Dk
1. Should principals be members of the PPAC?	32	53*	11
2. Is your principal an official member of your PPAC?	18	53*	26
3. Are you satisfied with the performance of PPAC?	47	32	18
4. Should classroom teachers be members of the LSC?	97*	3	0
5. Should counselors, facilitators, assistant principals, etc. be members of the LSC?	84*	11	5
6. Should there be more teachers on the LSC?	74*	11	16
7. Do LSC teachers have more influence with the principal than non-LSC teachers?	32*	32	36
8. Should principals retain their tenure as a teacher?	63*	26	5
9. Has the authority of your principal been diluted by school reform and the LSC?	47	47	5
10. Should LSC teachers vote on the principal's contract?	84*	0	16
11. Do LSC teachers really represent the faculty?	53*	32	18
12. Does your LSC represent the community?	47	37	18

Has school reform improved education in the following areas:

13. Student achievement and norms	10	74*	16
14. Student discipline	5	89*	
15. Student dropout rate	10	74*	16
16. School climate	21	68*	11
17. Classroom climate	16	68*	5
18. Teacher morale	0	84*	16
19. Teacher collegiality	16	84*	0
20. Teacher involvement in decision-making	32	58*	9
21. Job satisfaction	0	95*	5

PLEASE CONTINUE ON OTHER SIDE

22. Administration support	21	63*	5
23. Parental support	37	47	16
24. Teacher working conditions	0	89*	11
25. Student attendance	0	89*	11
26. Graduation rates	11	68*	5
27. Learning in the classroom	11	79*	5

**Which factors would improve education under school reform?
(Please rank your answers from 1--most important, to 15--
least important.)**

28. Reduced class sizes	63*	11	
29. More security in schools	53*	16	5
30. More support from administration on student discipline	63*	11	5
31. Solve student discipline problems	58*	5	5
32. Adequate instructional materials	63*	11	
33. More parental support	47*	21	5
34. Greater teacher autonomy in the classroom	37*	21	16
35. Greater teacher autonomy in running the school	37*	21	16
36. Reduction in administrative paper work for teachers	68*	5	
37. More preparation time for teachers	68*		5
38. More effective use of teacher aids	68*		5
39. Increase instructional support staff	63*	5	5
40. Increase teacher salaries	53*	21	
41. Reduce student enrollment per school	26	32	16
42. Increase state and federal financial aid	68*	5	

General impact of school reform on the schools

43. Schools have become politicized	63*	16	16
44. Most parents are effective LSC members	26	74*	0
45. Parents interfere with the operation of the school	42	45	11
46. In general, school reform is succeeding	21	58*	21
47. The principal is more effective under school reform	11	68*	21
48. The principal generally sides with the LSC	47*	5	42
49. The principal generally sides with teachers	16	42*	32

Please express your opinions on the following questions:

52. How has school reform improved your school?

53. What is(are) the weakness(es) of school reform?

54. What changes would you make to improve school reform?

*Significance at .05 level

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