Community Responses to School Reform in Chicago:

Opportunities for Local Stakeholder Engagement

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This is a report on how community stakeholders, including parents, teachers, community leaders and advocates, think about current efforts by Chicago Public Schools (CPS) to "turnaround" Chicago's lowest-performing schools and their expectations for future school reform actions. It was prepared by Public Agenda, with support from the Joyce Foundation.

Insights for this study were collected through two focus groups of parents, one focus group of public school teachers, and interviews with sixteen thought leaders with first-hand experience in school reform in Chicago. Parents and teachers were recruited to represent several neighborhoods in Chicago's south and west sides – those neighborhoods that have been affected most profoundly by recent school reform. Details of the methodology and the sample are summarized in the Appendix.

This work builds on Public Agenda's recently published nation-wide study on community responses to school reform ("What's Trust Got to Do With It?" Public Agenda, 2011). Though the scope of this study is significantly smaller and designed to highlight Chicago-specific points of view, its conclusions are generally consistent with the findings of the national study. The report's recommendations build upon Public Agenda's wealth of experience in public engagement around education reform (in both the K-12 and higher education spheres).

Based on our interviews and focus groups, we identify here five tensions that might characterize the state of school reform actions in Chicago. The recommendations (pp. 16-21) focus on engagement strategies that could help resolve these tensions over time.

Tensions

TENSION 1: **A Legacy of Distrust.** Although CPS has recently taken steps to incorporate community concerns and improve communication, many parents, teachers and community leaders bring a long history of skepticism and distrust to the table. They wonder whether recent attempts to reach out are genuine and whether the District has any long-term commitment to them.

TENSION 2: **The Limited Impact of Information.** Parents, teachers and community leaders voice a number of reasons for resisting school closure and turnaround, such as fears over losing a neighborhood institution, concerns about accessibility and selective enrollment at new schools and worries about safety if and when children have to travel to new schools in different neighborhoods. For district and turnaround leaders, the main strategy for countering these concerns is to provide more data and hard facts that document the persisting problems of a school. But information alone isn't adequate. Given the legacy of distrust, information is often questioned, and even when people accept the statistics, data by itself does not address people's concerns.

TENSION 3: **Differing Perspectives on School Quality.** District leaders focus on standardized test scores when determining how well a school serves its students, but parents, teachers and community leaders resist such a narrow evaluation of schools. Their assessments include whether a teacher cares about the needs of individual students, and whether the principal is visible and active. They also believe that school assessments need to take into consideration the demographic and cultural make-up of the community to which a school belongs.

TENSION 4: **Accountability for Whom?** Teachers and some community organizers are directly impacted by accountability measures. They are frustrated that the District seemingly forges ahead with school reform models with scant evidence that they will improve student outcomes. At the same time, teachers, principals and community-based organizations are increasingly pushed to demonstrate the effectiveness of their teaching and programming.

TENSION 5: **Differing Definitions of Parent Engagement.** Stakeholders across the board — parents, teachers, community-based organizations, policy experts and CPS administrators — agree that parental engagement is absolutely essential for the improvement of a school. However, the various groups don't yet share a vision of what parental engagement should look like and how it can be achieved.

A Legacy of Distrust

TENSION 1

Although CPS has recently taken steps to incorporate community concerns and improve communication, many parents, teachers and community leaders bring a long history of skepticism and distrust to the table. They wonder whether recent attempts to reach out are genuine and whether the District has any long-term commitment to them.

Distrust in Chicago Public Schools was a prevailing theme across our conversations with stakeholders from the community. **Parents** we spoke to felt that the District was out of touch with families and neighborhoods. They were skeptical that public hearings and meetings were conducted with genuine interest in community input. Some parents viewed District decisions to close schools or put them on probation as politically motivated.

> *The powers that be, I believe they're out of touch with just the reality of the situation. You get a report on this school, and you might come in and visit and speak to somebody for 20 minutes, and get back in your car and leave. You're out of touch with the community, the parents, the teachers, the students ... They're not really there to see.*
>
> - Chicago father
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> *It's too political. You get somebody — they're appointing somebody for this position, that position. You … have no experience. Your education says you can do this, but you don't have [any] experience to fill these roles. You don't know what's going on. You don't know what it is [like] to live here. You don't know what it is to walk these streets. You don't know what it is to starve or to move from household to household within six months.*
>
> - Chicago father
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> *I believe … they have already made their decisions. When they bring it to us, they already know what they're gonna do, no matter even if 500 parents show up at the meeting.*
>
> - Chicago father

Teachers, too, were skeptical of the District's communication and engagement practices. Most had been part of efforts launched by the District to involve teachers in school reform (e.g. internal committees that proposed school improvement plans). However, the teachers we spoke to generally felt these engagement efforts were not taken seriously by leadership and that ideas and suggestions were not taken up by district leaders and turned into action. One teacher described the disappointment among her colleagues when confronted with a new school improvement plan that looked much like a previous one and had not incorporated suggestions:

> *It was very similar to plans that had been written before. I think it was a lot to do with the fact that most of us were so discouraged and depressed. We just felt like nobody was going to help us or understand us or anything.*
>
> - Chicago teacher

To another teacher it was utterly counterintuitive to close a school — a vital neighborhood institution — instead of supporting it with more resources. He made this comparison:

> *If you had a neighborhood that suddenly was taken over with crime, you wouldn't close the police station. You'd bring in more resources. I think another option, instead of saying, 'If your school doesn't improve, you're going to lose your job,' is to ask what additional resources can we bring in to support you and prop you up and help you do your job better?*
>
> - Chicago teacher

Some representatives from community organizations recognized that the District had made changes that might signal a greater commitment to community engagement (e.g. the Office of Community and Family Engagement, a CEO with a background in education, networks and network chiefs). As one organizer acknowledged:

> *Well, I would give them this, that the new CEO actually has an education background. That hasn't happened in the last couple of CEOs … I'm glad that at least the [network chiefs] that are working in my area are a little bit more action prone, which is good.*
>
> - Chicago organizer

However, for the most part, community organizers remain doubtful that the District has a genuine commitment to engaging with parents, students and community organizations. They have not yet seen that parents' — and students' — opinions are taken seriously at public meetings.

> *It has become harder and harder for students especially to testify at board meetings … They've made repeated attempts to testify about issues of zero tolerance and then for a variety of reasons have been told that they couldn't.*
>
> - Chicago organizer
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> *The process that they want to use, it's not an inclusive process. They don't engage parents in their ideas before they present these ideas as solutions … You're pretty much saying, "You guys just do what we say to do," and then people are upset because they're the ones who are impacted by this and they don't get a voice. That hasn't changed, not one bit.*
>
> - Chicago organizer

In fact, a few organizers pointed to the recently announced "longer school day" policy as evidence that the District's communication strategies had not yet improved. They said that — like other changes before — the "longer school day" was introduced with little information provided beforehand on what the policy would mean for schools, and with little consideration of parental concerns. One organizer attended a school meeting in which even the principal was unable to address parents' questions about the longer school day, because he didn't have the information himself.

> *There's a feeling that [a longer school day] could be a good thing, but people really don't know, because they don't know what resources there will be … There was a lot on the news about it, and then there may have been a letter that was sent home explaining that it was underway … But the principals aren't able to answer any of the questions about resources because they don't know either.*
>
> - Chicago organizer

When we asked organizers what specifically they expected from the new Office of Community and Family Engagement, most appreciated that this office had been put in place but voiced skepticism as to whether this office would have sufficient influence to advocate for and develop truly collaborative community relationships.

She's great [the Head of the Office of Community and Family Engagement]. I think they could … allow that office to really engage with the people in a way that has impact ... however to the extent that it interfaces with these other departments that make … decisions, we'll have to see how it can be impactful because if the decision is coming up higher from where they are and it's pushing almost through them to the community that's not going to be helpful.
- Chicago organizer

I hope they can do a whole lot of things ... The question is what is she [Head of the Office] there for? We have seen no sign yet … that she's there to build bridges.
- Chicago organizer

I think that the challenge with the office [Office of Community and Family Engagement] is that the Emanuel administration has a very clear agenda on public schools … this office is being used more to just promote that agenda, and try to engage parents in a way that will address that agenda ... I think that the most important thing that office can do is to actually listen to the real concerns that community groups have about the turnaround model and school closings, and really work in a meaningful way to address those concerns, and we have not seen that happening yet.

- Chicago organizer

When we spoke with **district leaders and their associates** (i.e. consultants and contractors) about the communities' mistrust of the District, these leaders acknowledged past problems and agreed that communication and engagement strategies had been insufficient and ineffective. In contrast with what we heard from the majority of community stakeholders, district-level leaders seemed more convinced that relationships between the District and communities had already improved, and that new communication and engagement practices were effective.

We've done a very poor job of educating our community about the problems in many of our schools… CPS, starting a year ago, [made] a decision that it's silly for us to enforce school actions on a community that doesn't understand some of the deficiencies that their schools have; so we spend an entire year in the schools working in those communities…
- District administrator

CPS has actually gotten better … as of late, they're giving a grade to each school … with clear metrics around student performance, and around parents' involvement, around student and teacher attendance. All of these metrics go up into a dashboard … I think that's helping parents to clearly understand where if their school is a high performing school or not.
- Turnaround leader

The Limited Impact of Information

Parents, teachers and community leaders voice a number of reasons for resisting school closure and turnaround, such as fears over losing a neighborhood institution, concerns about accessibility and selective enrollment at new schools, and worries about safety if and when children have to travel to new schools in different neighborhoods. For district and turnaround leaders, the main strategy for countering these concerns is to provide more data and hard facts that document the persisting problems of a school. But information alone isn't adequate. Given the legacy of distrust, information is often questioned, and even when people accept the statistics, data by itself does not address people's concerns.

Echoing what we heard in the national study,[1] many **parents**—along with some teachers and community advocates—saw a school closure as a sign of neighborhood decline. They foresaw empty lots and rising crime. For most parents, retaining a school but replacing its staff was a conceivable alternative only in dire cases, and even then, not an appealing one. Many of the parents we spoke with feared seeing teachers they valued being replaced with outsiders. Even when a school is struggling, we heard from parents and community leaders that parents can typically name individual teachers they value and recognize as part of their community. As one organizer put it, parents have "*a lot of passion for their neighborhood school*".

The **teachers** we interviewed shared the parents' sense that closing a school is taking something away from a community–even if that school is low-performing.

> *If you close all of the failing schools in struggling communities, what is that going to do for the community as well? Now, there is no place for local kids to go for education. It would just be a very sad message to send to the community as a whole, that we're not even going to have a school because one can't function.*
> - Chicago teacher

> *When you close [a low-performing school], you're taking something away, and the way [that reflects on] the community — it is like pouring salt in the wound to the community there.*
> - Chicago teacher

Teachers also voiced some resentment at school turnaround teams that, in teachers' view, often do not understand the dynamics of the school or the community and therefore fail to comprehend the full nature of the problem and possible solutions.

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[1] "What's Trust Got to Do With It? A Communications and Engagement Guide for School Leaders Tackling the Problem of Persistently Failing Schools," Public Agenda, 2012. http://www.publicagenda.org/pages/whats-trust-got-to-do-with-it

> *The people who come on this turnaround team, they haven't been in the trenches like the teachers have. They haven't experienced it on a day-to-day basis, but they profess to be experts, and they profess to know what is best for us or whatever school that they're assigned to.*
>
> - Chicago teacher

> *[With] a lot of the students who were problem students — who were non-achievers — kicking them out is not necessarily making your situation better, because you're dealing with a different problem altogether. I think that had the old regime been allowed to do what the new regime is doing, I think the old regime would have gotten better results than the newer people.*
>
> - Chicago teacher

Community organizers we spoke to were wary of neighborhood schools being replaced with charter schools that could "cream" the best local students, forcing the rest to travel to schools in other neighborhoods. Some felt that school closures and turnarounds had been used in the past as a means of speeding up neighborhood gentrification and pushing low-income families out.

> *Our neighborhood was … challenged by gentrification… We were targeted shortly after No Child Left Behind was passed as an area to undergo massive school closings. It was the first part of a plan we later learned was called Renaissance 2010 … We knew intuitively it had a lot more to do with opening schools that were more attractive to the people that were moving in and less about a quality education for all children.*
>
> - Chicago organizer

Pondering over how to best address community concerns and resistances, some of the ***district leaders and turnaround experts*** believed that community stakeholders simply missed the facts, and that easy-to-digest information — presented before school closures or turnarounds were announced — would go a long way towards motivating needed change.

> *Once it's explained to parents … as to why my school is low performing and what it's benchmarked against, they tend to come away with a clear understanding and want better for their children … As of late, they're giving a grade to each school … with clear metrics around student performance, and around parents' involvement, around student and teacher attendance. … I think that's helping parents to clearly understand whether their school is a high performing school or not.*
>
> - Turnaround leader

> *The information dissemination very much brought things to a head. We were very transparent in talking about, 'The school is underperforming'. We have let the kids down. We need to do something.*
>
> - District administrator

Insights gained from our focus groups with parents and teachers suggest that accessible, compelling and, of course, accurate information about a school's persisting under-performance — presented, in our case, as hypothetical scenarios — can help shift the conversation and encourage parents and teachers to seriously weigh different options. As

with our national-level study, we saw in Chicago that most of the parents and teachers we interviewed did not embrace the idea of closing a school building even when confronted with compelling data of chronically low performance; however, when asked to consider a school that had been ineffective for more than a decade, many did agree that some sort of serious shake-up was warranted.

If you are closing a school, then I don't think you're putting a lot of thought into it or… I mean, I don't think that they should close schools, and I don't think putting a school on probation is effective. I think that they do need to shake things up and move things around.

- Chicago mother

[If it's] the same thing—for ten years—clean house—clean it up. You should get a stronger and better staff, and then you go forward. When you get new people, you get new ideas. You get different results. If you're doing the same thing, you're going to get the same results. If you try something different, you get a better result.

- Chicago teacher

Moreover, our conversations with community stakeholders in Chicago and across the nation suggest that providing information to parents about district performance can only be the first step toward addressing community concerns. Step two—as emphasized by many **community organizers**—is to let community concerns and ideas significantly inform the conversation and add local nuance to reform plans that too often start out as "one-size-fits-all".

If you want to say, 'This is Option A. This is Option B, and then Option C later on, which is close the school down and redo it,' people have to get the information first, and then they should be part of the process of the solution development.

- Chicago organizer

Begin to genuinely meet with the community, and not just meet with the community to say that they've met, but to actually really listen to the suggestions and concerns that communities have, and then really adjust their strategy based on that.

- Chicago organizer

Differing Perspectives on School Quality

District leaders focus on standardized test scores when determining how well a school serves its students, but parents, teachers, and community leaders resist such a narrow evaluation of schools. Their assessments include whether a teacher cares about the needs of individual students, and whether the principal is visible and active. They also believe that school assessments need to take into consideration the demographic and cultural make-up of the community to which a school belongs.

Parents we spoke with understood that public schools—principals and teachers—are held accountable for student progress with standardized tests, but believed that test scores alone cannot capture the qualities and problems of specific schools. As in our national study, Chicago parents resisted the term "failing school" when they could think of personable teachers who made an effort to keep them informed about their children's progress and a principal who was visible and active in the school on a daily basis—in the hall, visiting classrooms, and talking to teachers and students—not cloistered in his or her office. Overall, parents evaluated schools from many different perspectives, and they wished district leaders, policy makers and school turnaround experts would do the same.

> *What I like about my son's school is that they go extra, they send out notices. If they feel like my child isn't doing what they know he can do, they'll make an effort to let me know.*
>
> - Chicago mother
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> *Don't just look at the numbers on paper. That can be the flag, but go into the school. Spend a couple of weeks in the school. Sit in the classrooms. Try to engage with the parents. Find out what other dynamics are going on to make this school a 'failing school'.*
>
> - Chicago mother
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> *There [are] a lot of factors involved in this. It's not just, 'This school — the test scores are bad. Everybody's failing. We're closing the school.' But has anybody taken the time to really look at what's going on here? Is it the parent involvement? Is it the fact that we have 35 students, 40 students in this classroom that only has 7 books?*
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> - Chicago father

Although improvement in test scores is one important way for teachers to measure student progress, the teachers we spoke with were virtually unanimous in their view that standardized tests are culturally insensitive, don't match curricular goals and don't speak to students' experiences.

Across the board, when I speak to teachers, they say that they don't care much for the standardized tests — that they are biased tests, and it is hard to get the kids to know the material that is on the test, because what we're teaching in the curriculum, it looks like tests are so different than the curriculum, so much more advanced than the curriculum.

- Chicago teacher

I've looked at the questions on those standardized tests, and I really believe they are biased. [It's like] a foreign language. I encourage the use of Standard English in the room and use of Standard English in their writing assignments, but it is so difficult, because the speech patterns that they have are so engrained. I think [the test results] give irrelevant information that I can't really benefit from it, and I don't think the kids can benefit from it either.

- Chicago teacher

Community organizers, too, were concerned about what one organizer called the "cookie cutter approach" to education which, in their view, ignores socio-economic disparities between schools and between the communities they serve. Those who had seen schools struggle to meet the national standards were particularly frustrated. To them it did not seem fair that all schools were held up against the same narrow standards.

Accountability to Whom?

Teachers and some community organizers are directly impacted by accountability measures. They are frustrated that the District seemingly forges ahead with school reform models with scant evidence that they will improve student outcomes. At the same time, teachers, principals and community-based organizations are increasingly pushed to demonstrate the effectiveness of their teaching and programming.

Teachers and community organizers bring their own professional stakes and concerns to education. Two issues were particularly striking in our conversations. First, both teachers and community organizers expressed frustration that school closure and turnaround policies are often implemented without clear evidence that these interventions improve student academic performance or even reduce CPS debts. As one community organizer put it:

> *The research hasn't been very promising around at least the majority of turnarounds in terms of improving student achievement. To us, it seems more of a politically expedient way to show that something is being done around chronically under-performing schools, but that it's not really grounded in research … and that where there are gains it's very possible that it's because the lowest performing or most high need students are being pushed out of those schools.*
>
> - Chicago organizer

As these educators and organizers see it, such experimentation is in contrast to the standards placed on the daily work of teachers and CBOs, who must regularly provide evidence that their work is effective (i.e. that children progress academically and that programs make a difference in communities). Therefore, teachers and organizers we spoke to stressed that they wanted their experiences to be considered as school reform initiatives are discussed.

> *They shouldn't be trying to do something new. They should take what's working, they should be engaging us, they should be working closely with us ... Why aren't they talking to us — why aren't they calling us?*
>
> - Chicago organizer
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> *I dislike the fact that the new principal who came in would not take the experience from some of the older people who had gone through this, and use that information. In other words, they said everything that was done is not any good anymore, so we're bringing something entirely new in there.*
>
> - Chicago teacher

Second, a few community organizations also expressed concerns over recent proposals to improve teacher development. Debates on how to attract and develop new teachers, they argue, focus too much on prospective teachers' instructional skills and ignore the need for local knowledge and local leadership. They worry that entry tests limit access to the profession for individuals from low-income communities of color and thus cut off potentially powerful links between school buildings and their surrounding neighborhoods.

Differing Definitions of Parent Engagement

Stakeholders across the board — parents, teachers, community-based organizations, policy experts and CPS administrators — agree that parental engagement is absolutely essential for the improvement of a school. However, the various groups don't yet share a vision of what parental engagement should look like and how it can be achieved.

A. Engaging parents to build better schools

Across the board, parents, teachers, community organizers and district-level experts believed strongly that low-performing schools could be improved by getting parents involved. **Parents** we spoke to recognized that teachers alone should not be held accountable for student learning. To them, one of the obvious differences between a successful school and a failing school is the number of parents in the school, in the classroom and on the playgrounds.

> *My child was in a school that was failing, and she was also in one of the top schools before as well. Between those two, all it was, was involvement, involvement from the students, involvement from the parents and the teachers. When she came to the failing school, none of that existed.*
>
> - Chicago mother
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> *You've got to get the parents involved. I don't think changing the staff is gonna help. You have to get the community and the parents involved in the kids' education.*
>
> - Chicago father

Teachers also want to see more parents involved in the school. As one put it:

> *I would like to see more parents come in and just be involved. It would be wonderful for me, because I have to take on the stress and the issues of the students that they bring from the home.*
>
> - Chicago teacher

In an earlier Public Agenda study,[2] researchers examined parent and teacher views on

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[2] "Playing Their Parts: Parents and Teachers Talk About Parental Involvement in Public Schools," Public Agenda, 1998. http://www.publicagenda.org/reports/playing-their-parts

three types of parental engagement: 1) parents becoming more involved in governance and policymaking decisions about what schools should look like; 2) parents providing support for schools by joining coaching teams, volunteering, raising money, organizing out-of-school activities, etc.; and 3) parents being more active and involved with their children at home. This last category included classic parental tasks like checking homework, but also included helping children develop attitudes and habits such as persistence, respect for teachers and classmates, love of knowledge and an admiration for education overall.

For the current study, we collected a long list of possible examples and themes for parent engagement from focus groups and interviews. Those include: attending school meetings; corresponding with teachers; visiting the classroom; attending events at the school; reading with children; providing space, time and supervision for homework; understanding academic milestones and communicating expectations to the child. In the eyes of the **principal** we interviewed, all these activities and more have to come together to make an engaged parent:

> *[Engaged is] if the parents are an integral part of what's going on within the school, that they're active on a regular basis … whether it's volunteering in classrooms or organizing activities outside of the school; being there to support the teachers; being part of different activities that are productive ... making sure that parents know and understand what their children should be learning and doing in the school… [and] making sure that the parents have high expectations so that they know what questions to ask.*
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> - Principal

Teacher and community leaders put a lot of thought into how to best encourage parents to become more engaged — a question that school and community leaders around the country struggle with. One teacher had adopted the following model: She organized a potluck every month for students and parents during which she gives parents a packet of students' grades. In that way, she explained, parents look at test scores while students are there to talk about their learning experiences. Parents and students can then discuss children's performance with her and share their goals for improvement. In her experience these conversations helped parents to see that their children want to learn.

Most of the **community organizers** we spoke to worked for organizations that had a long history of running programs that help parents establish long-term and collaborative relationships with their children's teachers, principals and other school staff. Their experience tells them that it takes time, effort and shared responsibility to effectively engage parents.

> *I think everybody has a responsibility. I think CPS has a responsibility to inform, principals have a responsibility to invite, teachers have the responsibility to be open and receptive to parent participation, and parents have the responsibility … to be involved and to participate.*
>
> - Chicago organizer
>
> *Parents are going to get involved in a handful of different ways ... On the one hand, we say that a core group of parents is a great start … I think we should be satisfied with having a strong group of parents or a small group which we train, [but] the model should be, 'how do we bring in more?'*
>
> - Chicago organizer

According to many of the community organizers we interviewed, the fruits of these efforts will be long-lasting relationships between schools and homes and mutual trust, thus laying the foundation for honest discussions about what needs to be done to help children succeed in school. Here is how some organizers described it:

Our work is about [connecting] the culture of the home and the school … As parents feel more comfortable in the building and have a better understanding of what the teachers and the administrators are trying to do … you've got buy-in for the things that are good, and then secondly you've got a place for honest discussion.

- Chicago organizer

It really is work that engages parents, certainly for at least a year, oftentimes for a lifetime. Not only are the parents doing things in the school, but they're actually learning about the culture of education, the culture of a school, and they can then process what they think is good and not so good and really make real change. In the same way, the teachers are no longer so isolated from the community. You end up with a win-win.

- Chicago organizer

B. Engaging parents in school reform decision making

To rebuild community trust in CPS, everyone (parents, teachers, community and district-level leaders and contractors and consultants close to the District) agreed that parents need to be better informed on a wide variety of issues — including school quality indicators, academic milestones and teacher evaluations, as well as school turnaround options — before decisions are made, as decisions are being made and when reform is being implemented. The challenge moving forward is that for some interviewees the key goal of parent engagement is providing information and hosting meetings during which parents can ask questions and officials answer. Meanwhile, most of the community stakeholders we spoke with hoped for more.

To many of our participants, involving parents as partners and as resources in school reform meant allowing parents to make decisions and bringing parents in as change agents. It also meant facilitating long-term relationships, investing in continuous communications and developing the social and organizational infrastructure that allows for follow-up and parent leadership development.

I think parents do have connections with teachers and principals, and what I think works is [when] you get long-term relationships with communities. With teachers and the community, and parents and the schools, and students and their teachers. When you just uproot everyone … you're pretty much breaking up all those relationships and starting anew with no guarantee.

- Chicago organizer

[The District] needs to be transparent in terms of exactly what it is that they really want parents to do. It's not just about making sure that you have a monthly parent meeting, seeing how many parents show up at the school assembly. It's also part of educating parents about what their school should be providing [to parents], providing their students, and what [parents] should expect from the District. Any information that's given out … would be helpful, but if there's no follow through in terms of how to utilize the information…

- Principal

Recommendations

Among our interviewees there was broad acknowledgment that much of the school district's legitimacy in the next few years will depend on the kinds of engagement efforts it invests in. To rebuild community trust, our focus groups and interviews suggest that engagement must be broad based — including parents, teachers, principals, students and community organizations — and be conducted with a genuine commitment to collaboration among all stakeholders.

Our recommendations for Chicago build on a set of principles that can help leaders build trust and promote constructive dialogue among community stakeholders, which we developed as part of our nationwide study on community responses to school reform (see "What's Trust Got to Do With It?" Public Agenda 2011). These principles were gathered in a strategy session of education, communications and public engagement experts convened by Public Agenda, and were further augmented by our own experience from 20 years of organizing community forums and public engagement campaigns on education issues.

We have adapted these ideas to the education reform context in Chicago and to the issues, concerns and suggestions that were brought up in the focus groups and interviews we conducted for this report. We hope to provide a list of starting points for further discussions on how to improve community engagement in upcoming reform initiatives in Chicago public schools.

1 Lay the groundwork by talking with parents, students, teachers, community leaders and residents early, often and in ways that are accessible and personable.

In our conversations with parents, teachers and other community members, we saw a hunger for greater and more consistent inclusion in the decision-making process. Many community stakeholders distrusted the District in part because they found the processes they had seen for soliciting community input to be unfair or inadequate. Even some of those closer to the District acknowledged that this was something that needed to improve.

To build community trust, engage community stakeholders well in advance of an official announcement or decision, and plan engagement efforts carefully to facilitate continuous engagement throughout the decision-making process. Strive for consistency in interactions between district leaders and community members. Procedural fairness, careful listening, honest dialogue and a significant investment in time and energy go a long way towards building trust.

A. Turn the page on past community relations by acknowledging previous missteps and developing new modes of communicating and working together.

Given that distrust in CPS was a major theme in this research, a crucial step to rebuilding relationships might be simply to talk with communities about the way that reform has been handled in the past, but doing so within the context of setting new norms and putting new practices into play. Though community stakeholders don't all agree on "what went wrong" or "what's right" about current reforms, our interviews suggest that many parents, teachers and advocates are still waiting for an acknowledgement from the District that mistakes have been made. We doubt much can be gained by defensiveness about past community relations. A better approach is to recognize past mistakes and misunderstandings and to then turn toward establishing better working relations.

B. Make information and services user-friendly.

Although the District shares a wealth of data about its schools on its website, community organizers told us that some parents lack the tools, resources and technical literacy to make good use of it. This points to a need for more easily-digestible, relatable information that meets the needs of the "consumer" first and foremost.

A variety of organizations and community players could be helpful in communicating CPS performance data to parents more effectively — both interpreting the information, and making sure it gets to parents. CBOs, LSCs, PACs (parent councils) and other bodies like these are likely candidates, though resources will vary from community to community.

As a side note, a research and policy expert, when asked what the District can do to better serve parents, stressed that her first priority would be to simplify the public school application process. Many parents find the current school application system overwhelming, as different schools have their own application timelines and processes. Our interviewee suggested that this system should be the same for all schools.

In all of these measures, it is important to start by considering the community's needs and interests. There may be information that the District wishes to make public for the sake of transparency, and there's no reason not to do that. But it makes sense to ask community members what information they find most useful and how it might be presented so that they can readily make use of it.

C. Clarify and personalize lines of communication between the District and the community.

Representatives of community-based organizations reported that they would benefit from more consistent, reliable communication with the District. Constant leadership turnover compels community organizations to try to engage with a "moving target." Some of our interviews with community organizers suggest that the District's new "network chiefs" may be helping to serve this need, though later research might investigate how strong these new relationships are.

Going forward, it will be important that those tasked with engaging with the public — whether they be network chiefs, the new Family and Community Engagement Office or other district-level stakeholders — take seriously their responsibility to acknowledge community questions or requests. Moreover, teachers are always an important point of contact for parents with the schools, and it's important that teachers be thought of and treated as important communicators. Our research on accountability indicates that the public values and evaluates institutions to a great extent based on the quality of personal interactions with individuals who represent them.[3]

D. Reach a broad cross-section of community members — including those who aren't "the usual suspects" — by engaging community stakeholders in multiple ways.

Communities aren't monolithic, and when a school changes there are few uninterested parties. Thus, it's important to engage people with diverse perspectives and ensure that diversity by making opportunities for community engagement many and varied.

Chicago may be particularly ripe for opportunities to bring many different stakeholders to the same table. Parents, advocates and district-level leaders we spoke to could name at least one other group or organization with whom they wanted to discuss school reform issues more often, including students, principals, teachers and parents, as well as community-based organizations (CBOs), faith-based organizations, local school councils, other CPS administrators, policy makers, turnaround consultants and charter school operators.

In practice, inclusive and varied engagement can take place through well-designed and well-facilitated community conversations, online platforms and social networking, community-leader workshops, brown-bag lunch sessions open to the public and more traditional structures, such as PTA and School Board meetings that can be redesigned to better engage community members on important issues. Often, these sorts of vehicles, platforms and processes should be viewed as more than information sharing. Instead they should be viewed as problem-solving opportunities where viewpoints are valued, alternatives are examined and solutions are sought. The objectives of these kinds of measures are to build common ground, negotiate differences, develop priorities for action, open up channels of communication and spur and strengthen school-community partnerships. If they are well-designed and well-facilitated they can do exactly that.

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[3] See *Don't Count Us Out, How An Overreliance on Accountability Could Undermine the Public's Confidence in Schools, Business, Government, and More*, Public Agenda, 2011. http://www.publicagenda.org/dont-count-us-out

2

Don't dismiss parents' resistance to school actions; understand what their core concerns are and try to address them.

Though administrators have had access to data about "low performing schools" for some time, it is crucial to respect parents' concerns and not to interpret them as simply "fear of the unknown" or "fear of displacement," to name two commonly-given reasons. While district-level administrators may think that parents would not resist a school closing if they fully understood how the school was doing, parents will argue that the District would never close a school if it understood what that meant for the neighborhood. We don't take the view that a school closure is never the right thing to do, but we've come to learn that community resistance to closures can be rooted in a number of core values and concerns, and these must be weighed with great care. If a parent does not trust that better opportunities will become available, that is a serious concern that must be clearly addressed. If residents feel they will be losing one of the anchors that make their community special, that is a serious loss that must not be dismissed lightly.

3

Help parents help their own kids succeed.

Parents and other community stakeholders are ready to see more parents as partners in the day-to-day activity of schools. At the building level, organizers, working with parents, have seen small-scale but impressive successes with programs like parent mentoring and parent-to-parent outreach around truancy.

However, solid and beneficial parent engagement in schools takes time and resources. Support programs that have been shown to increase parent engagement in schools; investing in programs like this will help build links with the community and help repair distrust between the District and community stakeholders. Also highlight the benefit of parents' engagement for both the individual child as well as the school as a whole. Parent engagement can change schools, and thus benefits all students, not only those whose parents are active in the school.

4 | Develop trusted community engagement channels by investing in those that are already present.

A. Teacher-parent relationships are an engagement asset.

Teachers are often in the best position to develop one-on-one relationships with parents and are looked to as a trustworthy source of information. In addition, many of the teachers we spoke with wanted to be more involved with their schools, and some had already been part of efforts by the District to involve teachers in school reform (e.g. internal committees that develop school improvement plans). However, these teachers generally felt that past efforts were not prioritized by leadership and that their suggestions were usually not adopted. Future teacher engagement efforts must demonstrate a genuine appreciation of teachers' experience and ideas, as well as the central role of teachers as prime points of contact between the school system and many community members.

B. Work through community-based organizations.

Many of the community organizations we interviewed had gained deep experience working with parents in neighborhoods where schools and students are struggling, and could share intimate knowledge about those neighborhoods and their residents. We heard that community-based organizations, including religious organizations, are often well trusted among parents. Although organizers remain skeptical as to how committed CPS and its Family and Community Engagement Office are to collaborating with them, they do view recent changes as generally positive and signaled a desire and willingness to collaborate with the District. The recent passing of SB630 (the Chicago Schools Facilities Act) — a clause in the law mandates the development of community-level and building-level 'master plans' — may constitute a particularly good opportunity to bring community-based organizations to the table.

C. Consider re-engaging and strengthening the capacity of Local School Council (LSC) members.

The community organizers and school and district-level leaders we interviewed for the most part agreed that local school councils (LSCs) were underused resources for engaging communities in school reform. They believed that LSCs varied widely in knowledge and effectiveness, with some neighborhoods having active, well-informed LSCs (and, often, schools with something to show for it), while others have LSCs that are little more than rubber-stamps for administrators. Since LSC members are drawn from the community, some interviewees suggested the District might support systematic efforts to empower all LSCs by improving the way new members are educated and prepared for their role and responsibilities and by using this structure as a means to reach residents in local neighborhoods.

Appendix

HOW THE RESEARCH WAS DONE?

The observations that underpin this report were drawn from two focus groups of parents, one focus group of public school teachers, and semi-structured interviews with sixteen thought leaders.

For the focus groups, parents were chosen to represent a variety of neighborhoods in Chicago's south and west sides — those hit hardest by most of the city's past school actions — and teachers were selected based upon their experience working in those same neighborhoods.

The focus groups explored several key themes:

• How people rate the Chicago schools and the District itself.

• How people define a "failing school".

• How they respond to the different strategies the District has adopted for reforming schools that haven't served their students well: closing schools and sending students to other charter or public schools; breaking schools into smaller administrative units; replacing the principal and staff; or giving schools more resources and professional support.

Similarly, each of the informants whom we interviewed one-on-one had first-hand experience with school reform and school turnarounds in Chicago. A majority of these interviewees (9) hailed from community-based organizations with frequent contact withparents and students in public schools, and in many cases with teachers and principals. We also spoke with two high-ranking Chicago Public Schools administrators and to three individuals who had been consultants or contractors connected to the District's school turnaround work. We also gathered the perspectives of a school principal who had been involved in turnarounds and a research professor and policy expert with extensive knowledge of the Chicago public school system's history.

The findings we describe here are generally consistent with the results of a national research project on the same topic ("What's Trust Got to Do With It? A Communications and Engagement Guide for School Leaders Tackling the Problem of Persistently Failing Schools," Public Agenda, 2011). For more information, visit: http://www.publicagenda. org/pages/whats-trust-got-to-do-with-it

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