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Moore, Donald R. (1998)

What Makes These Schools Stand Out: Chicago Elementary Schools with a Seven-Year Trend of Improved Reading Achievement.

Chicago, IL: Designs for Change

<http://www.designsforchange.org>

Summary: This report examines Chicago elementary schools with a seven-year trend of substantially improved reading achievement. Using data from the Consortium on Chicago School Research, it found that these schools were significantly more likely to have effective local school councils (LSCs) than schools with modest or no gains. In Chicago, LSCs must have a majority of parent members, elected by parents and community residents.

In 1988, the Illinois legislature passed the Chicago School Reform Act. A key feature of the legislation required local school councils (LSCs) at each public school. As a result, Chicago is the most decentralized large city school system in the country. Each LSC must have 11–12 members:

- Six parents, elected by parents and local residents.
- Two community members, elected by parents and local residents.
- Two teachers, elected by the school staff.
- The school principal.
- A student elected by students (in high schools).

Local school councils have strong powers: They select and evaluate the principal. They develop an annual school-improvement plan focus on achieving student learning standards. And they develop and approve a school budget, including about \$500,000 a year in flexible funds.

The Consortium on Chicago School Research is based at the University of Chicago and staffed by a team of experienced researchers. Designs for Change is a member of its steering committee. In its report, *LSCs—Local Leadership at Work* (1997), based on survey responses from LSC members, the Consortium found that LSCs are “viable governance organizations that responsibly carry out their mandated duties . . .”
More-effective LSCs

- have a thorough process for selecting and evaluating a principal.
- actively develop and monitor the school-improvement plan.
- are involved in approving and monitoring the school budget.
- press for improved academic programs.
- increase parent involvement and collaborations with community agencies.

Using teacher survey data collected by the Consortium, Designs for Change studied whether schools with more-effective school councils were also more likely to have

improved student achievement. First, the study identified two groups of schools. “No Trend Schools” were low-achieving in both 1990 and 1997 (20 percent of students reading at or above the national average). “Substantially Up Schools” were low-achieving in 1990 but improved by 1997 (37 percent of students reading at or above the national average). Then the researchers explored whether the Substantially Up schools used “distinctively different practices” from the No Trend schools.

Findings

This study found that “elementary schools that improved reading achievement substantially from 1990 to 1997 were significantly more likely to have effective local school councils, as rated by the school’s teachers” (Executive Summary, p. 9).

Using 27 indicators of school practices developed by the Consortium, the author found five areas where Substantially Up schools scored higher than No Trend schools. These areas were statistically significant after controlling for student background:

- **LSC contribution.** Teachers rated their school’s LSC more highly in “having contributed to improving various aspects of the school’s educational program and environment.”
- **Principal as instructional leader.** The principal was rated more highly for setting a vision, involving people in decision making, and insisting on high standards for staff.
- **Principal supervision.** Principals were more likely to supervise the process of change.
- **Teacher influence on decision making.**

Less strong, but also significant, was the practice of higher teacher outreach to parents. The study found, however, that even the Substantially Up schools were not fully using a range of strategies to engage parents. The author suggests that the impact could be higher if the practice were stronger.

Conclusions

These findings contradict the view that school leadership is a “win-lose process,” where the principal can be a strong leader only if the LSC and teachers are weak. In fact, the study found that “cooperative adult effort” among all the adults involved in the school was “a powerful force for improving student achievement.”

Chicago’s local school councils and the social networks among parents, neighbors, and school staff that have developed as a result of LSC initiative are a unique, nationally significant model of the kind of civic engagement that Putnam and other social scientists have identified as being key to improving the quality of a community . . . LSCs and school-level decision making deserve attention and support as a proven mechanism for building social capital in Chicago, at a time when other indicators reflect a major decline in civic involvement across the city. (p. 103)

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