

Rethinking Schools

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Parents Fight School Closings

Summer 2005

By [Julie Woestehoff](#)

During the night and on into the morning of Wednesday, Aug. 25, 2004, a determined band of Chicago Public School (CPS) parents and community activists camped at the front door of school board headquarters. We wanted to be first in line to sign up to testify against Renaissance 2010 at the monthly Board of Education meeting where the plan was up for consideration.



Photo: George N. Schmidt

As the day dawned, more than 300 protesters joined us. They marched up and down the sidewalk, filled the hearing rooms, and stood in solidarity with each of the nearly 40 speakers as we made our presentations. One parent called the plan an "academic holocaust." Others accused the board of disrespect, of pitting communities against one another, and of risking the lives of children.

Why are we so stirred up? Parent and community anger over Renaissance 2010 has focused mainly on the heavy-handed way Chicago Public Schools has been closing neighborhood schools with little concern for the disruption it causes families and communities. Each school closing disbands a local school council (LSC), our locally elected, parent-majority governing bodies that have the authority to hire principals and approve the school budgets.

When Mayor Daley announced the Renaissance 2010 plan, parents and community residents began to step up our opposition to the school closures and lack of input from the community.

First we did our homework. We learned about the significant damage student mobility can cause. A 1996 study of our own CPS students by University of Chicago researcher David Kerbow found that, even after controlling for socioeconomic status, mobile students on average have lower student achievement scores than their stable counterparts. His research shows that over a period of six years, students who have moved more than three times can fall a full academic year behind stable students. CPS has already put hundreds of children at risk by forced school moves, even before the Renaissance 2010 plan. For example, CPS closed Einstein Elementary in 2000 and sent its students to the Donahue school. CPS closed Donahue in 2003 and sent those students to Doolittle East and West schools. Doolittle West was one of the 10 schools closed this past June; its children were sent to Fuller or Doolittle East. And CPS plans to close both these schools before 2006 under Renaissance 2010.

CPS has developed no plan to provide special support to these student nomads and is not tracking them to determine how the multiple moves affect their academic progress. How can a program that requires so many forced moves claim to have the best interests of children in mind?

District press releases touting the 2010 plan claimed that the CPS charter schools, the model for many Renaissance schools, were outperforming similar regular public schools. This claim is not supported by national evidence on charters. And a recent analysis by the Chicago Teachers Union shows that Chicago charters enroll a smaller proportion of special needs students, a smaller proportion of economically disadvantaged students, and a smaller proportion of limited English proficient students than CPS schools as a whole.

Renaissance 2010 and the federal No Child Left Behind act (NCLB) weaken accountability and parent and community involvement even as they proclaim

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the opposite. The most obvious example is that Renaissance 2010 disbands the LSCs in closed schools and replaces them with advisory boards selected and appointed by CPS. Despite a history of interference by the CPS central office, LSCs have played an important role in the steady progress of Chicago's schools. New research by Harvard Kennedy School of Government professor Archon Fung found that LSCs provide strong school accountability and active parent and community participation, especially by low-income and minority residents. Thousands of LSC members have developed into highly effective advocates for students and schools.

Of course, many schools in Chicago really do need improvement. But improvement requires stronger, not weaker, accountability. We need more, not less, parent and community participation. We need to use more than standardized test scores to gauge student learning. We need to focus on sustained improvement across many significant areas, not arbitrary and unrealistic demands to boost test scores in reading and mathematics. We need to replace threats, sanctions, and disruption with capacity building, professional development, and fair, adequate resources for our children where they are. We need greater accountability from those who control our schools. They should not be able to pass their responsibilities on to privatizers.

As a result of the intense community opposition, CPS drastically cut the number of schools it will close by the summer of 2005, and officials have stated that they will not close any school attended by children who had been displaced by a school closing the previous year. But the program remains CPS's central school improvement strategy.

History reminds us that the Renaissance was a time when poor people were not allowed to go to school, and learning, the arts and culture were increasingly concentrated in the hands and homes of the elite.

Everyone else was left behind.

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