

# A Chicago School Reform Project: Monitoring Local School Restructuring Efforts

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*This study examines the impact of a school reform project involving a subset of Chicago Public Schools and focuses on changes observed in these schools since the advent of state-mandated reform in 1988. The results suggest that the schools have changed with respect to their basic management structure, the nature of their professional development activities provided for the constituencies of the school community, and the degree of involvement of the children in activities designed to enhance their personal and social development. The results also indicate that these fundamental changes in the schools have contributed to an improved school climate and provided a foundation for supporting academic growth.*

## Introduction

The purpose of this review is to report on school restructuring efforts in the Chicago Public Schools. Following the advent of state-mandated school reform in Chicago (see, for example, Hess [1991] and McKersie [1993] for descriptions of Chicago school reform and restructuring), a new project entitled Creating A New Approach to Learning (CANAL) was developed and implemented by the Chicago Public Schools. While the long-term goal of CANAL was to improve the achievement levels of minority students in racially identifiable schools, the initial phase of the project was conceived to be a five-year comprehensive training program focusing on four subgoals: (a) implementing school-based management/shared decision-making; (b) instituting professional development in instruction and management; (c) enhancing student participation in academic activities; and (d) improving school climate.

The project emphasis was directed toward changing the environments of the participating schools and was based on the principles expounded by Comer (1988) and Edmonds (1984), among others. Many aspects of CANAL have been described in some detail elsewhere (see Evans [1994] and Kaufman [1994], for example, for accounts detailing project structure and implementation). Also, Evans and Perry (1992) presented some preliminary findings related to project implementation and progress made by the participating schools toward the attainment of the four CANAL subgoals.

At the conclusion of the fifth year (1994-95) of project implementation, an evaluation was initiated to assess the

progress the schools had made in their restructuring efforts during the initial phase of CANAL. As part of this evaluative effort, each of the 14 participating schools was required to prepare a *Summary Evaluation Report* that assessed progress along the four subgoal dimensions. The purpose of this study is to describe and summarize both the quantitative and qualitative data provided across schools and to assess the progress these schools have made toward the accomplishment of the subgoals of CANAL.

## Methodology

At the conclusion of the 1994-95 school year, each school was to complete a comprehensive *Summary Evaluation Report*. In terms of support for the completion of this task, the schools were provided with a document that presented an outline of the *Summary Evaluation Report* organized around a set of guiding questions the schools were to follow in addressing each of the four dimensions. Schools were also provided an example of a *Summary Evaluation Report* that contained concrete ideas for reporting and presenting information in a variety of formats. Also, technical assistance was provided to the schools as they collected and analyzed pertinent data sources. They were also given ongoing feedback through both formal and informal mechanisms. The four areas of the *Summary Evaluation Report* were obviously directly related to the CANAL subgoals and also paralleled characteristics that described effective schools. A short description of how the schools were guided to address important issues and complete each section of the report follows.

1. *School-Based Management/Shared Decision-Making*: schools were guided to address the background, participation, structure, and stability aspects relating to the ways in which the schools organized the management structure and the interactions between the various governing bodies to insure all school constituencies were provided the opportunity to be involved in the decision-making process.

2. *Staff Development*. Schools were guided to address the background, participation, and evaluation practices employed in their staff development program, comparing these practices prior to participating in CANAL with more recent professional development activities.

3. *Student Activities*. Schools were guided to address background, participation, and evaluation practices and describe the types of student activities initiated in the schools and the impact on the social and personal development of the children.

4. *School Climate*. Schools were guided to provide and compare the results of the *Effective School Battery* (ESB) from the first year of administration (1990) with the results obtained from the 1995 administration. According to the authors of the ESB, these surveys provide reliable and valid measures of school climate and "can be used to describe the climates of schools within which research projects are conducted to provide a context for understanding research results" (Gottfredson, 1984, p. 9).

This study describes and summarizes the information and data obtained from a content review of the individual school reports and the results related to each of the four subgoals are presented in the sections which follow. The reader is cautioned that, in assessing progress made by the schools, data were aggregated and, in some cases, averaged in order to present a group profile; thus, the overall group results presented may mask variations from one school to another. However, as a descriptive report, the data should generally portray the progress the schools have been

making in attaining the goals of CANAL.

#### *School-Based Management/Shared Decision-Making*

Much of the initial training provided by CANAL focused on the implementation of the principles and processes associated with a model of school-based management/shared decision-making (SBM/SDM). The data reported by the schools in their *Summary Evaluation Reports* indicate that models of SBM/SDM have been implemented in the schools utilizing design teams, which have been organized around particular sections and topics addressed in the School Improvement Plan. In most of the schools, typical design teams include those involved with the following aspects of school improvement planning: professional development, student activities, school climate, student outcomes, discipline, safety, and parent involvement. In terms of membership, the size of the design teams vary somewhat from team to team and from school to school, with the smallest team size being reported as having five members and the largest team reported by one school as having 22 members; in most schools, all of the constituencies of the school serve on design teams.

According to the schools, the models of SBM/SDM employed have provided the opportunity for all the members of the schools' constituencies to participate in the decision-making process. Through the utilization of consensus building techniques, most schools report an increased feeling of cohesiveness among faculty and staff with respect to school improvement initiatives. The kinds of decisions that the schools' constituencies have been involved with include the selection of instructional models, curriculum, methods of assessment of student outcomes, and most all other facets of the total school environment. By way of a summary, Table 1 shows the level of involvement of school constituency groups in the decision-making process from their first year of involvement with Project CANAL as compared with the level of participation during the past school year for decisions regarding both instruction and manage-

Table 1  
*Average Number of Participants in Decision-making Process*

GROUP	DECISION TYPE			
	INSTRUCTIONAL		MANAGEMENT	
	1990	1995	1990	1995
Principal	1	1	1	1
Faculty	12	41	4	40
Career Service	0	15	0	21
Parents	0	11	1	19
Students	0	12	0	6
Community Members	0	3	0	4

ment issues. These data support the conclusion that the introduction of models of SBM/SDM has fostered increased levels of involvement of all the constituencies of the school in the decision-making process.

#### *Professional Development*

In their *Summary Evaluation Reports*, the schools described how their approaches to staff development changed as a result of participating in CANAL. For example, before 1990 most schools had no systematic approach to staff development. Since that time, workshops have been provided on a regular basis for a greater number of participants and for members of other constituencies of the school community. In addition, most staff development activities prior to 1990 came about as the result of an administrative decision. Since then, the various decision-making bodies--composed primarily of faculty, but also including members of the other constituencies--participate fully in the planning of staff development activities.

The schools also described how, before CANAL, their meetings and workshops generally had no common focus or integrative approach. As a result of their participation in the project, they now tend to integrate the various staff development training workshops to enhance student outcomes. This is evident in the School Improvement Plan, which is developed by the various decision-making bodies in each school. Another result of being a part of CANAL was the idea of regularly evaluating staff development. Now, workshops of all kinds are regularly evaluated, and the feedback is used to develop and improve future training.

The changes in professional development practices are summarized in Table 2. These data support the notion that the various approaches to professional development have promoted the participation of all the constituencies of the school in these activities. In addition to the staff development activities described in Table 2, the schools have insti-

tuted other kinds of meetings and events as a result of their participation in CANAL. Some of these, for example, are design team meetings, administrative team meetings, and curriculum meetings. Also, the majority of the schools have instituted staff retreats, where all members of the school community spend weekends engaged in training and development activities. The evaluation findings with respect to the retreats suggest this is a useful mechanism for enhancing a sense of community among the constituencies of the school. The value of the professional development activities is also reflected in the school climate data described elsewhere in this evaluation study.

#### *Student Activities*

The data reported by the schools in their *Summary Evaluation Reports* indicate that, since the inception of CANAL, the number of extended day programs as well as extracurricular activities has expanded dramatically. Each year, the number of programs, activities, and clubs has grown as has the level of student and staff participation. In reviewing the types of student activities initiated by the schools, it seems fair to conclude that all students have been provided with frequent opportunities to participate actively in activities that are responsive to their cultural needs and that are aligned with the instructional foci of the schools. School level evaluation findings suggest that the activities have been beneficial in enriching the children--mentally, physically, socially, and academically. The most typical kinds of student activities, i.e., those activities that were implemented by a majority of the schools during the past year, include: fine arts, dance, drama, history, science, and computer clubs, mentoring and tutoring programs, choir, basketball, cheer leading, and student governance councils.

Evaluation data provided by the schools indicate that the expansion of student activities has been a positive fac-

Table 2  
*Changes in Professional Development Practices*

ACTIVITY/PARTICIPATION	1990	1995
Number of total school meetings	8	38
Number of faculty attending university courses	6	18
Total site workshops	0	8
Special constituency workshops	0	13
Workshops at school	3	14
Percent of faculty participation	70	98
Percent of nonfaculty (staff) participation	12	95
Percent of parent participation	27	97
Number of parents participating	4	112

Table 3  
*Social and Personal Development ESB Average Raw Scores Converted to Percentiles*

ESB SCALE	1990	1995	GAIN
Social Integration	45.7	76.4	30.7
Positive Peer Associations	32.3	48.5	16.2
Positive Self-Concept	52.4	67.8	15.4
Interpersonal Competency	29.1	43.2	14.1
Educational Expectations	72.3	82.8	10.5

tor in the social and personal development of the children and has provided a foundation that is supportive of the academic growth of the students. Table 3 provides the average raw scores converted to percentile rank scores on the five social and personal development climate scales from the ESB, as reported by the students, prior to CANAL participation and for the most recent administration of the climate survey. The average gains across those years are also reported and, in every instance, the gains have been fairly substantial and suggest, for this set of measures, students seem to feel better about themselves and their interpersonal skills. In one sense, these climate measures serve as student outcomes measures in non-academic areas; and these results support the conclusion that the personal and social development of the students has been enhanced over the past five years.

#### *School Climate*

The literature (Bernstein, 1992; Corcoran, Hansen, & Shidowski, 1988; Evans, 1994; and Evans & Perry, 1992) suggests that the implementation of school-based management should lead to changes in the climate of the school in several specific and meaningful areas. The ESB climate

measures found in Table 4 are those that best reflect those aspects of school climate likely to have been impacted by CANAL. For each of the teacher-reported ESB scales, the average raw scores from 1990 and 1995 converted to percentiles are reported as well as the gains noted across the five years. All of the gain scores from the ESB demonstrate improvements of varying degrees, as indicated. These findings support similar results found in the literature and suggest that the climates of these schools have been changing in some very positive ways.

Before CANAL, schools were not required to evaluate their climates, and therefore most had no systematic method for doing so. The ESB has been incorporated in the schools to help them determine anonymously annual changes in the opinions of all teacher-certified personnel and students regarding the climates in their schools. Moreover, administering the ESB helps send the message to teachers and students that their opinions are valuable and will be used to improve conditions. The use of these surveys has helped school personnel see the importance of school climate as a dimension that impacts on the well-being of all students, teachers and staff, and ultimately on student achievement.

Table 4  
*Average Gains in Raw Scores on Teacher ESB Scales Converted to Percentiles*

ESB SCALE	1990	1995	GAIN
Social Integration	33.7	94.4	61.7
Positive Peer Associations	43.3	70.5	27.2
Positive Self-Concept	56.4	82.8	26.4
Interpersonal Competency	43.1	69.2	26.1
Educational Expectations	52.3	74.8	22.5

ation instruments. As a result, many policy decisions based on these survey results have been incorporated into the School Improvement Plans.

### Conclusion

The evidence gathered from the schools suggests that they have successfully begun to implement strategies that have the potential to improve achievement levels among their students. These strategies include changes in the basic management structure of the school, the nature of professional development activities, and the involvement of the children in activities that are focused on their academic, personal, and social development. The evidence provided by the schools in the *Summary Evaluation Reports* suggests that these fundamental changes in the schools have contributed to improved school climates and have provided foundations for supportive environments that will foster the academic growth of the students. Future studies focusing on the efficacy of this school reform effort should determine the actual impact of these practices on student outcomes measures.

The results parallel those reported by Corcoran, Hansen and Shidowski (1988) regarding teacher-reported changes in school climate observed following the implementation of SBM/SDM. The results also support the findings of Bernstein (1992) regarding changes in school climate in urban schools following the introduction of school reform and, generally, support many of the predictions made about the impact of school reform in Chicago (Hess, 1991). Finally, the results expand on the findings reported in a preliminary study of CANAL by Evans and Perry (1992), which suggested that these schools are changing in some very positive ways.

It seems important to note that this is a descriptive study. The presentation of results has focused on only what has occurred in these schools since they began participating in CANAL with respect to the four project subgoals. Obviously, much more rigorous experimental controls should be established before cause and effect relationships can begin to be implied. However, for this small subset of Chicago Public Schools, the results provide some implications for potential replication and dissemination efforts for schools interested in implementing strategies that can promote successful educational practices.

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