



The Challenge of Implementing Districtwide Standards in High Schools: Preliminary Findings From Two Sites With Small Schools in Chicago

by

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To investigate the implementation of districtwide standards, the authors have conducted a preliminary analysis of data collected from two high schools in Chicago. This *Spotlight* summarizes the key findings of this analysis.

In 1987, the Chicago Public School (CPS) system was deemed the worst in the nation, and an era of reform began. In 1995, following 7 years of limited success with decentralization, the state legislature turned over the city's public schools to the mayor. Authority over school policy was partially recentralized, and a variety of school-reform methods were instituted. The new governing structure, which we term "Integrated Governance," created the position of Chief Executive Officer, reduced competing authorities, and tightened linkages with other governing organizations. To improve school performance, Chicago now uses sanctions, school choice, curriculum support, academic accountability, business and nonprofit partnerships, and professional development.

High-School Redesign in Chicago

In 1996, CPS launched its high-school redesign plan, known as the Design for High Schools. This plan was developed through focus groups, forums, informational presentations, and public meetings. Interested parties such as parents, teachers, students, administrators, businesses, universities, and

others concerned with the state of education in Chicago participated in the planning process (Chicago Public Schools, 1997). During negotiations, the task force assigned to create the plan called for a radical restructuring that would break up all large schools into small schools, with as many as eight small schools housed in larger facilities (Hess, 2000). The final plan emphasized personalized experiences for students and included higher standards and student accountability measures, which the previous decentralization reform lacked. This "guiding document" attempted to combine two educational philosophies through a series of initiatives.

The key elements of the plan are divided into design priorities and reinforcements (Chicago Public Schools, 1997). The priorities include (a) academic accountability, (b) student development, (c) advanced academics, and (d) paths to success. The reinforcements include (a) human development and (b) partnerships. Implementation of the new priorities began in the fall of 1997. Academic accountability includes subject-area standards, a structured core curriculum, an assessment system, and new graduation requirements. Student development is accomplished through an advisory system and character education. Advanced academics include an international baccalaureate, advanced placement, magnet schools, Project Excel, and College

Bridge. The paths to success are the Junior and Senior Academies along with focused programs such as school-to-career. To reinforce these efforts, the school district promotes staff learning opportunities and partnerships with area businesses.

Standardization and Personalization

The reform programs outlined in the Design for High Schools are based on two seemingly competing philosophies. The first, which may be broadly termed "standardization," calls for high standards for all students, a core curriculum across the system, and a rigorous testing framework designed to end the practice of social promotion. This standards-based agenda has very specific criteria concerning what students should know at certain benchmarking grade levels. The agenda also implicitly accepts the value of standardized curriculum and testing (Clinchy, 2000).

The second philosophy, which may be broadly termed "personalization," favors school autonomy in curricular choice and in differentiation. Along with school decision making, the autonomy advocates call for less, not more, districtwide mandating and control—for less standardization. They prefer assessment systems like student portfolios that cater to the individual. In their view, schools should be small and

provide personalized learning experiences for each child (Clinchy, 2000). Some proponents draw on the work of John Dewey (see Schubert, 2000), for whom democracy is more than just a system of government; it is a form of associated living, and a democratic education requires that the native abilities of each individual be harnessed for the social good without subordinating the individual to society. Accordingly, the aims of education will vary for each person being educated by the state (Dewey, 1914/1966). This personalized ideal is stated as a goal in the 1996 Chicago high-school reforms, and the student advisories are designed to meet this objective. As one administrator noted, "The issues of variances and alternative assessments are of particular importance to the proponents of small schools, because they desire both the flexibility and autonomy to create curricula that reflect their themes and instructional philosophy and the ability to design a variety of methods for assessing their students' proficiencies" (Rizzo, 2000, p. 141).

High-School Pilot Study Findings

To understand how schools and teachers adapt to these two reform philosophies, we conducted a pilot study of two Chicago high schools. The schools were selected for two reasons. First, the schools are subject to districtwide intervention (including standards) because of their low student performance. Second, the schools have focused on developing small schools (which tend to be personalized) within the building as their key reform strategy. These two conditions are likely to illuminate the nature and scope of the tension between the two philosophies. Within the first school studied here, there are five small schools, each with a distinctive academic and vocational cluster that attempts to prepare students for college or employment. Indeed, some of the first charter schools in Illinois were created by teachers from this institution's small schools. The second school is a freestanding small school with a college-preparatory curriculum.

In the two school buildings, most small-school teachers have not used the

Chicago Academic Standards mandated by CPS in a substantive manner to guide reform; instead they have considered the standards *ex post facto*. Although half the teachers in these small schools occasionally use the CPS structured curriculum for specific activities, they have an aversion to standardized educational methods, and there are competing goals and curricula within their individual small schools. In addition, while a majority of teachers use the Chicago Academic Standards Examinations as part of their students' final course grades, many note difficulty in attaining the required test results.

Because the initiative to cooperate with external partners from businesses, foundations, and universities provides small-school teachers with new ideas tailored to individual classroom settings, this initiative shows some success in small schools. Teacher workshops may inform teachers of the new initiatives under the Design for High Schools, but they do not often do so in a manner that highlights how each initiative contributes to the overall improvement plan or that stresses how the measure helps teachers in unique classroom settings.

The student advisories, which are the district's attempt to personalize the learning process, conflict directly with the standardized lesson plans. While most teachers do focus on character development as the Design for High Schools intends, many also use the time dedicated to this priority to pursue individual or schoolwide goals. Some teachers were unaware of the Junior and Senior Academies initiative, but this incognizance has not necessarily undermined the program because teachers observe school-level goals that are consistent with this reform.

Preliminary evidence suggests that the small schools tend to have a beneficial impact on student achievement. This finding is particularly true for students who self-select into one particular small school within the first institution. The opportunities for students to select their programs of study tend to account for better achievement in small schools. Program choice is likely to raise student and

teacher satisfaction with their small school community, but it may also widen learning opportunities between small schools within the institution.

A significant problem stems from the fact that personalization as an educational goal is likely to come into conflict with standardization during implementation in the small-schools setting. Consistent with the small-schools framework, teachers in the two buildings have tended to shy away from what they consider top-down reforms, such as the structured curriculum. Instead of finding a middle ground to resolve the tension between the reform philosophies, the two case studies suggest teachers tend to resist the standardized in favor of the personalized. The challenge, then, is for the districtwide leadership to identify support and coping mechanisms that may ease the tension between the standards-based agenda and the small schools' philosophy and practice.

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