



## Community must demand high-quality schools

by Phyllis Lockett

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Thank you for drawing attention to the high demand for more quality public school options in Chicago. Your recent article on school choice (“The challenges of choice”) notes that 62% of African-American CPS students are attending schools outside of their neighborhood for high school. This is a startling figure and testament to the need for more and better options across our city.

At the Renaissance Schools Fund, the independent fundraiser and strategic partner to CPS for Renaissance 2010, we are working to ensure the city is creating high-quality schools in communities that need them the most. So far, we have supported the launch of 54 new schools since 2005. These schools are the work of passionate educators who have seized an opportunity to start fresh. They receive control over their school’s budget, staffing and academic model in exchange for greater accountability to the district.

In general, these schools have opted to offer smaller classes, longer school days and/or years, more professional development for teachers, active parent engagement programs and are showing higher rates of attendance and faster test score growth than their neighborhood counterparts. At the same time, the new schools are open to any student. Students are selected by a blind lottery and then on a first-come, first-serve basis if seats are still available. We are seeing schools that help students from largely low-income communities overcome the odds.

The theory undergirding Ren10 is that by endowing parents with choice and creating quality options, they will demand more and pressure the system to change. Already, we are seeing competition catalyze reform. In fact, in Catalyst’s own story (“Specialties not a big draw”), Sarah Karp notes that the Coles Elementary principal is maximizing his magnet cluster program to compete with the new magnet and charter schools in his area. We have also seen the district respond to the new schools example – by starting the school year earlier for at-risk freshmen, by seeking a longer school day in the teachers’ union contract, and by giving high-performing schools more freedom in exchange for accountability through the AMPS program.

RSF will be the first to acknowledge that more needs to be done, especially when our goal is to achieve dramatically better outcomes for all Chicago children. While we have begun to see change, this is only the beginning. We urge all partners in this effort to focus on the following:

- 1) Vigilance around the quality of newly proposed schools and courage to shut down schools that are not achieving their aims
- 2) Developing a strategic approach to solving the facilities shortage to make sure new schools are able to open in communities that need them the most
- 3) More aggressively engaging parents and community members as ongoing partners in the launch of new schools and their children's education
- 4) Establishing a reliable standard of metrics (not limited to test scores) that parents and administrators can use to track student progress. This would include stopping our state from continually lowering the ISAT cut scores and rendering the ISAT meets/exceeds percentages almost meaningless
- 5) Lifting the charter cap and giving more schools flexibility in exchange for accountability
- 6) Providing further support to programs that identify and retain strong teachers and leaders, and
- 7) Developing a sustainable means of transferring best practices district-wide.

We urge potential partners – parents, educators, community leaders – to get involved and help develop actionable and scalable solutions to ensure Chicago children have equal access to a high-quality public education. Finally, more school funding, which we strongly support, must come with reform and accountability to make a lasting difference.

Looking at the statistics – just 3 in 100 African-American or Latino CPS male students graduate from college – it frustrates me that more members of the community are not demanding, and working, for change. In today's fierce global economy and as a basic issue of justice, we cannot for one more minute allow Chicago children to languish in schools that are not preparing them for a better future. We can make sure any Chicago child – no matter where they live or what their background – has the opportunity to receive a high-quality public school education. But we must come together and put children first.

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