

Inspiring path from dropout to principal

Teacher would lead one of 19 new schools in Renaissance 2010

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As a high school student, Robin Walker-Johnson barely scraped together 10 credits over four years.

Administrators told her mother that the troubled teenager would never amount to anything.

On Tuesday, Walker-Johnson, now 32, will be introduced as the leader of one of 19 new schools being proposed to the Chicago Board of Education, in the fourth round of the ongoing Renaissance 2010 reform.

Several of the proposed schools would try to replicate the programs of successful district-run schools, such as the North Side's Disney Magnet School and Burroughs Elementary on the Southwest Side. The school district received a \$1 million grant from Boeing Co. last year to help re-create its best-performing schools.

Four of the new schools would be led by administrators with strong Chicago roots, including Walker-Johnson.

The 19 schools that Chicago Public Schools staff will recommend include six high schools, one middle school, nine elementary schools and three that combine different levels. Most would operate on the South and West Sides, though the locations of many have not been determined.

If the board approves the proposals at its Oct. 24 meeting, 15 of the schools would open in 2008 and four the following year, school officials said.

The aim is to create 100 new schools by 2010, replacing low-performing schools with

new schools in underserved communities. So far, 58 new schools have opened under the plan. About 32 under-performing and underutilized schools have been closed under the reform, school officials said.

The proposed schools would be a combination of charter schools and performance-based schools, staffed by union employees. Students living in neighborhoods where the schools would be set up would get first preference; admission would then be opened to students across the city, said Malon Edwards, a CPS spokesman.

For Walker-Johnson, whose school would open in her childhood neighborhood of West Garfield Park, it is an opportunity to show that the right kind of school can help lift students out of the most difficult circumstances.

"The fact that I am there proves that the students in the West Garfield community can do more if given the opportunity," she said. "I guess I would be an example of that."

Walker-Johnson, currently an assistant principal at the LEARN Charter School in North Lawndale, will lead an effort to re-create that school's program in a kindergarten-through-8th-grade school in West Garfield Park.

LEARN, a charter created in 2001 with roots in a 1980 community school in North Lawndale, touts its small student-teacher ratios, extended school year and mandatory parent involvement.

"I'm excited for the opportunity to go back and serve the same children where I grew up," Walker-Johnson said.

Walker-Johnson's course through the Chicago schools took a sharp turn shortly after she began high school at Lane Tech on the North Side. Walker-Johnson said that when she was 14, she was assaulted by a neighbor, which left her emotionally scarred. "I think that kind of triggered all my problems in school," she said.

After one year at Lane Tech, she earned less than one credit and passed only drafting and gym classes, she said. She moved on to Orr and Hubbard High Schools until her 16th birthday, when she was told by school officials to pack up.

"I don't know if they were waiting for my birthday or what, but I just know that on my 16th birthday I was called into the office and told to hand in my books and that was it," Walker-Johnson said. The defiant teen began attending the Double E alternative high school in the Loop during the day and evening classes at Kelly High School to catch up. But Walker-Johnson became pregnant with her daughter, India, and dropped out of school for nearly a year.

After her daughter was born, she began attending the Austin Educational Career Center, another alternative high school, because she knew she needed to find a job to support her daughter. She credits teachers at the West Side school with pushing her to go further.

"I guess they saw that I had potential and the intellectual ability to do more. The teachers began to question [me] by asking, 'Why are you only trying to reach for a mediocre job? Why don't you go to college?'" she said.

She took classes at Malcolm X College after promising to take evening high school classes at the same time. After two years of schooling and work, she earned a high school degree and transferred to Chicago State University, where she earned a degree in psychology.

She began teaching at the school that would become LEARN in 1997 before earning a master's degree from National-Louis University.

She was promoted to master teacher two years ago and is an assistant principal in charge of discipline. She said that as she moves on, she hopes to share with her pupils what helped her succeed.

"Had I not had the experience in the alternative school, I wouldn't be here," she said. "That's the piece I want to give the children. I want them to be able to see beyond their environment and where they are."

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