

Chicago School Reform Could Be a U.S. Model

By Maria Glod
Washington Post Staff Writer
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CHICAGO -- At Cameron Elementary School west of downtown, most kids don't know the alphabet when they start kindergarten, nearly all are poor, and one was jumped by a gang recently, just off campus. But the school this year posted its highest reading and math scores ever -- a feat that earned cash bonuses for teachers, administrators, even janitors.

City schools chief executive [Arne Duncan](#), President-elect [Barack Obama](#)'s choice for education secretary, pushed that performance-pay plan and a host of other innovations to transform a school system once regarded as one of the country's worst. As Duncan heads to Washington, the lessons of Chicago could provide a model for fixing America's schools.

"Obama chose Arne Duncan for a reason, and part of that reason is the experimentation that Duncan has done in Chicago and his real attention to data and outcomes," said Elliot Weinbaum, assistant professor at the [University of Pennsylvania](#)'s Graduate School of Education. "Duncan's willing to try new things and see if they work, hopefully keep the ones that do and drop the ones that don't. I expect that experimentation to continue on a national scale."

With a 408,000-student system, smaller than only New York's and Los Angeles's public schools, Chicago has become a laboratory for reform in Duncan's seven-year tenure. Officials here court new charter schools, teacher training is being reinvented, and some low-performing schools have been shuttered and reopened with new staff. Officials are also offering some students cash for good grades and seeking proposals for boarding schools. In addition, Duncan backed a plan to start a gay-friendly high school. For the most part, the changes came with little organized opposition, except for some skirmishes with the teachers union.

Duncan, a longtime Obama friend and basketball buddy, helped shape the incoming administration's education platform. As education secretary, he will be Obama's point man for carrying out the No Child Left Behind law and negotiating revisions with Congress. Through regulatory power, federal funding and a pulpit he can bring to classrooms nationwide, Duncan will be able to push for changes in schools.

Duncan, appointed by [Mayor Richard M. Daley](#) in 2001, has shown unusual longevity for a big-city school leader, cultivating ties with unions, nonprofit groups and other stakeholders. The wide-ranging reforms he has pushed appeal to struggling school systems and highly regarded suburban districts looking to boost performance. Many educators in Chicago say Duncan's efforts have upended school culture, building a record of progress, although the high-poverty system has far to go.

"This is no utopia. It's no Candy Land," Cameron Principal David B. Kovach said one day this month. "But teachers enjoy their job more, because they are learning and getting better at it, and the kids are able to do things that they weren't able to do before."

Across the city, educators point to improvements. At Noble Street College Prep charter school, every senior graduated last school year, and the class logged nearly \$2 million in college scholarships. The flexibility given to independently operated charter schools means a longer school day, with a class dedicated to helping seniors complete college applications, navigate financial aid and write résumés.

At the National Teachers Academy, another Chicago school, Erin Koehler Smith did a better job teaching fourth-graders to estimate centimeters and meters with help from a mentor teacher. Next year, the former theater major and other trainees will take on classes of their own in struggling schools.

Little more than half of Chicago students graduate on time. But since 2001, fewer students are dropping out and more are heading to college. The number taking Advanced Placement classes has tripled. Chicago students lag behind the statewide average on Illinois tests, but the gap has narrowed.

Cameron's Kovach said the 1,040 students at the red-brick schoolhouse come from a high-crime, high-poverty area in West Humboldt Park. Teachers, worried about the safety of neighborhood parks, agreed to work an extra 20 minutes each day to ensure that kids can have recess and to maximize class time.

"Our kids come in two steps behind," Kovach said. "We can't control what happens to them on the outside -- drugs, gangs, an incarcerated parent."

Cameron Elementary is using powerful tools to jolt teaching and boost achievement: money, coaching and collaboration. With the overwhelming approval of teachers, the school last year began a performance-pay pilot program now in place at numerous city schools. Much of the money for the program has come from a federal grant and private foundations.

Teachers earn extra cash for taking on additional responsibilities and are judged in a series of evaluations. Entire staffs get bonuses when state test scores rise. Slightly more than 50 percent of students passed the latest state reading exam, but the trend is up. The gains meant about a \$1,000 bonus for most teachers, about \$250 for janitors and \$625 for the principal.

Teacher Erin Montana, 33, fresh out of education school and a three-month student teaching gig, took over a class in chaos two years ago. Students cursed, fought, even threw desks. "Every day I came in thinking I was doing the worst job ever," she said.

One afternoon last week, Montana's fifth-graders huddled quietly, reading a story about a boy who destroys a neighbor's garden in a vegetable-throwing fight. The students then built "story mountains," identifying characters, plot and theme.

"They trash Mr. Bellavista's garden," said Shanygne, 11, a slight girl with a ponytail. She scrawled the sentence on a Post-it note and added it to her "mountain."

Montana, crouching to check the group's progress, pointed to a picture of the glum boy. "What do you think is happening here?" she asked. "Do you think it's important?"

Eleven-year-old Shawnell, nodding at her teacher, began writing that the boy "felt sorry because he looked at the garden and the mess he made."

Montana said the isolation of her first year has disappeared. Her class is well-behaved, thanks partly to her growing experience and partly to advice from colleagues, including the "doing the right things raffle" she started at the suggestion of a mentor teacher.

Teachers meet weekly to discuss the best way to reach kids. Master teachers pinpoint where students fall short, study research and script lessons to target weak spots. They try lessons on a handful of kids, and when they find an approach that works, the school takes it to all kids.

"It's not like pulling something out of a book," Montana said. "We know that it's really thought through specifically for our kids."

Washington area schools have launched experiments similar to Chicago's. Charter schools are multiplying in the District, and D.C. schools are trying cash incentives for students. A [Fairfax County](#) initiative bumps salaries for some teachers who work a longer year and take on extra tasks, such as coaching colleagues. Pay for performance is underway in [Prince George's County](#), tying some teacher bonuses to test scores.

What sets Duncan apart, education experts said, is his willingness to embrace a range of reforms and his ability to work with people who hold diverging, often conflicting views on how to fix schools. He has straddled the reform divide: On one side are advocates of dramatic shake-ups and tough accountability, and on the other are teachers unions and some educators who want more flexibility, support and money.

Chicago Teachers Union President Marilyn Stewart said that the union clashed with Duncan when he closed failing schools and replaced staff but that school and union leaders teamed up on performance pay. "He had my home phone number," Stewart said. "He always returned my calls, and I returned his. You can't not talk when you need something done."

Consensus-building will prove critical as Congress considers an overhaul of the 2002 education law, which spotlighted the failings of schools as well as deep rifts among unions, civil rights groups and education advocates. From his on-the-ground perspective, Duncan has praised the law's "high expectations and accountability" but pushed to give credit to schools that make gains even if they fall short of state academic standards. He also has called on Congress to double federal funding over five years.

The next challenge is reaching agreement on a new blueprint for school reform. Obama has said he wants to add \$18 billion in annual federal education funding (equal to nearly a third of the

Education Department's \$59 billion discretionary budget), reduce high school dropout rates and improve math and science education. He also has vowed to double federal funding for successful charter schools to \$400 million a year and promote alternative teacher training.

"There will be disagreements, but Duncan's personality is going to minimize the negativity," said [Jack Jennings](#), president and chief executive of the Center on Education Policy in the District. "You get a feeling of somebody who is willing to listen and be open to ideas."