

# Chicago's Renaissance 2010: The Small Schools Movement Meets The Ownership Society

Would-be reformers need to beware of those who would co-opt the language of reform to undermine its ideals. Mr. Ayers and Mr. Klonsky examine how Chicago's Renaissance 2010 initiative has used the terms of the small schools movement to promote privatization and the erosion of public space.

The fundamental goal of Renaissance 2010 is to turn around Chicago's most troubled elementary and high schools by creating 100 new schools in neighborhoods across the city over the next six years, providing new educational options to underserved communities and relieving school overcrowding in communities experiencing rapid growth.

— Mayor Richard M. Daley, 24 June 2004

**BY WILLIAM AYERS AND MICHAEL KLONSKY**

**W**E started the Small Schools Workshop in 1991, with the goal of supporting Chicago's reform-minded teachers as they tried to create new, smaller learning communities in an environment that was historically toxic. While the small schools movement at that time represented a wide range of political and educational philosophies, our vision of small schools was closely connected with issues of social justice, equity, and community. For us, small schools were not some new efficiency or simply a technical

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change. Neither were they an innovative, sophisticated way to sort and track kids. Rather, the small schools movement offered a strategy for engaging teachers, students, parents, and whole communities, the people with the problem, in a movement for democratic education.

Since then, the movement has grown nationally and has many victories under its belt. In Chicago, dozens of small schools have been created from the ground up, and several large high schools have been restructured. According to many studies, the results have been positive.<sup>1</sup> But many of the movement's early participants now feel great anxiety and concern over its current direction. Some have recently expressed to us their discomfort with Chicago's new initiative, Renaissance 2010, which seems to have more in common with the erosion of public space, with the "ownership society," than it does with democratic education. While the Renaissance 2010 plan is specific to Chicago, similar reform strategies are emerging in school districts nationwide. A critical look at these strategies is imperative.

It's no secret that the language of social movements can be co-opted or reduced to empty clichés. In the world of Chicago school reform, the simple word "choice" has become a two-edged sword. It can mean both a widening of options for the city's underserved students and a replication of our traditional, two-tiered education system.

Another word commonly used around the small-schools movement, "autonomy," was supposed to signal greater freedom for educators from bureaucratic constraints and stupid rules, more local decision making, and increased teacher discretion. Instead, "autonomy" has been twisted to mean the absence of accountability or the "freedom" of charter operators to implement business efficiencies and run schools without due process or necessary regulations.

This kind of educational doublespeak is embedded in Chicago's latest public school reform strategy, Renaissance 2010. Ostensibly, it's a plan to create 100 new small public schools in six years in minority and low-income neighborhoods. One would think that such a plan would be a perfect match for the program of the Small Schools Workshop. But neither we nor many others from Chicago's small schools movement were consulted or brought to the planning table when "Ren 10" was being hatched — and for good reason. From its inception, Ren 10's focus, its underlying agenda, and many of its strategies for change ran counter to those

deeply rooted in the small schools movement, none more so than the turning over of at least two-thirds of the new schools to private owners.

Even before it got off the ground, Ren 10 was being hailed as a "reform model" for other large urban districts. It looms as part of a new national wave of fierce market fundamentalism, now being touted as the ownership society, with ownership supposedly the common national goal shared by Enron executives, factory workers, and public housing residents alike. It's apparent everywhere these days, penetrating our schools, homes, families, places of worship — even our private lives. The "ownership society," in matters of public policy, is a narrowly reimagined and redefined public space, cannibalizing everything from health care to retirement benefits, criminal justice, waste management, elections, public safety, and water rights. Any area that has traditionally been part of the common good and publicly administered is now up for grabs, and public schools are no exception. Public space is being divided into sectors to be sold off or privately managed.

Open-sector advocates originally argued to allow protected status or special space for new schools started from scratch by teachers, parents, community organizations, and multi-school networks. An example might be the first Minnesota charter schools or the pilot schools in Boston. Now, however, the term "open sector" is being used to turn over large chunks of public school districts to private school-operating companies and education management organizations (EMOs).<sup>2</sup> What used to be considered public space is now imagined by groups like the Chicago Civic Committee and the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation (the main patrons of Ren 10) to be part of a new marketing space for dozens of private companies, complete with mergers, large-scale replication, sell-offs, the closing of unprofitable enterprises, direct borrowing in the private market, sale or lease of public school facilities, self-insurance, and the ability to enforce workplace efficiencies and teacher pay rates without the hindrance of union contracts or work rules.

Chicago's Ren 10, which was originally promoted as a new-school initiative, is now being pushed primarily as a school-closing strategy. The plan creates new layers of educational winners and losers, with an elaborate (but ill-defined) taxonomy including charters, contract schools, performance schools, and regular or neighborhood schools, each with its own spending constraints and levels of autonomy. This system of reward and punishment diminishes the value of teachers and treats school change as more of a mechanical replication process than

a community engagement strategy. While small-scale replication of successful, teacher-started, small schools and charters, such as Perspectives and Noble Street charter high schools, should be supported, competition from national chains is pushing some of the original small schools to replicate 20 to 50 times in order to “scale up.”

The Ren 10 plan privileges charter schools run by companies like Edison over the many mission-driven small schools designed by Chicago teachers over the past 15 years. This, even though there is no research evidence to show that privately run charters do any better than regular neighborhood schools. On the contrary, there is some evidence to show that privately managed schools have above-average enrollments and are usually larger than their mission-driven predecessors.<sup>3</sup>

Ren 10 also favors politically connected school operators, private firms that have received charters to operate Ren 10 schools in exchange for private investment and high-powered management and efficiency plans. One example is the powerhouse Washington lobbying firm Sonnenschein, Nath & Rosenthal, whose client list includes such corporate giants as Mediacom and which enjoys direct ties to both the White House and the Democratic National Committee. This firm will reportedly invest a million dollars for the right to run the Legacy Charter School in the North Lawndale community. Another is K12 Inc., the virtual learning company founded by former Secretary of Education William Bennett. Bennett’s name had to be taken off the company stationery after his embarrassing, racist comments linking crime prevention with the abortion of African American babies.

At the same time, existing schools are being closed in a manner that appears almost capricious, with little public explanation as to why some neighborhoods are targeted for school closings while similar schools remain open. Many of these schools were never supported in their own improvement efforts even though there is plenty of evidence to show that local public schools could make greater gains, with the right kinds of support and leadership, than any of the managed charters. Substantial gains over 15 years at 144 Chicago public schools were made through external partnerships maintaining essentially the same teachers, children, parents, and community members despite little support from the central office.<sup>4</sup> This shows the potential for change without abandoning systemic reform for the lure of privatization.

On top of that, more than 200 Chicago schools have now been placed on academic probation, which, under

No Child Left Behind, allows, encourages, or forces students to transfer to the new start-ups. In our opinion, all of this has little to do with fixing, helping, or restructuring low-performing schools. But it does increase instability and uncertainty for struggling schools.

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With its focus on privately managed, nonunion charter/contract schools, Ren 10 replicates and compounds the huge inequities in the system in many ways. For one, it pushes a predominantly inexperienced, untrained, and uncertified group of teachers into minority and low-income communities. With lower compensation packages, a lack of job security, and the toughest workloads, the teacher attrition rates are bound to be high. Many of the 100 new starts will receive a fixed operating budget with none of the traditional flexibility allowed for hiring more experienced and certified teachers. This tension overrides many of the advantages of small-scale schooling and counters the potential for building a professional community within the new schools. That will make it more difficult for new schools to sustain their culture over long periods of time. While many of the early, mission-driven charters, which were started by teachers and community groups, focused on teacher engagement and empowerment, most of the 100 new schools will have to focus on bottom-line issues, with principals or school directors functioning more as fund raisers than as instructional leaders. Conflicts of interest abound as charter school operators sit on board-appointed Evaluation Teams that approve or disapprove new start-up applications.

The mayor calls openly for a majority of the 100 schools to be union-free, while others in the Civic Committee are pushing for 80%. All of this has deepened divisions and fostered distrust in a system in which a climate of collaboration in the reform effort had prevailed for the past decade.

The duly elected LSCs (Local School Councils), centerpieces of Chicago’s historic school decentralization, have been replaced under Ren 10 by appointed Transitional Advisory Councils (TACs), which have

no legal authority and operate only in an advisory role. The once-heralded experiment in school decentralization seems headed for the scrap heap.

Resistance to Ren 10 is growing. As the weaknesses in Ren 10 are becoming evident and are increasingly opposed by teachers and community groups, the district leadership has already backed away from some of its most offensive moves. In several cases, the TACs have organized against the decisions of the central office, and the TACs have won out. In other cases, however, the community's will has been trampled.

The school district has also dropped, at least temporarily, a plan called "Mid-South" to use Ren 10 as a tool for gentrifying certain Chicago neighborhoods. The plan originally called for closing a whopping 20 of 22 schools in the Mid-South area, but not a single school in that neighborhood is closing this year, thanks to the community-organizing initiatives of groups like ACORN (Association of Community Organizations for Reform Now).

Small schools and charters were intended originally to drive innovation and push change-immune public school systems toward improvement. But despite the growth of charters and the relative success of some of them, the majority of students are still stuck in dilapidated, large, overcrowded, poorly staffed buildings and will continue to be as Ren 10 charters cherry-pick the best facilities and as the city runs out of new school construction dollars. Budget cuts may already force the board to renege on \$15 million earmarked for new school projects under Ren 10.<sup>5</sup> Ren 10 leaders have all but given up on improving or restructuring the city's large traditional schools and are closing them instead.

The small schools movement was, from its inception, a collage of educational and political forces. There was an initial group of autonomy-seeking young activist teachers who were trying to carve out some space for innovation and good teaching. Dozens of new schools were started, and new innovative models like the multiplex at Cregier High School emerged. Later, the rug was pulled out from under that movement, and the new schools were all put on a strict test-prep regimen. But it was too late to keep some good things from happening, such as the creation of Telpochcalli Community School of the Arts in the mainly Mexican community of Little Village, the emergence of new teacher-led charter schools like Perspectives and the Young Women's Leadership Academy for Math and Science, and the restructuring of the Chicago Vocational School. In opposition to programs such as Ren 10, some school

communities have rekindled the small schools fire.

On Mothers Day 2001, a group of mothers and grandmothers in Little Village began a hunger strike, demanding that the leadership of the Chicago Public Schools fulfill its commitment to build a new high school in the community. Funds set aside for the new school had been spent on new exclusive-enrollment schools on the north side. The hunger strike drew widespread support from church and community groups and led to a victory when new superintendent Arne Duncan announced that the money had been "found" to build the most expensive high school in Chicago in Little Village.

But the parents and grandparents didn't stop there. After much discussion and research, the community group decided that the new school for 1,450 students should be designed as a campus of four small, themed, autonomous high schools sharing a common space. The group actually met regularly with the board architects over the next year to guide the state-of-the-art design for the school, which opened in the fall of 2005.

As the four new schools prepared to open, they were pushed to become, at least nominally, part of Renaissance 2010. The new Little Village high school opened last fall, and so far, parents and school leaders have been outspoken in their opposition, unwilling to hand over any of their newborn-infant schools to the EMOs. Nor are they willing to have them classified as either "charter" or "contract" schools. As one of the hunger striker mothers reminded the school board at a recent meeting: "When we petitioned the board for years for a decent school, there was no Renaissance 2010. When we had our hunger strike, there was no Renaissance 2010. When we planned the design of the school with the architects, there was no Renaissance 2010. We aren't going to turn over our school to Renaissance 2010 now."

Why would a community so committed to school improvement and small schools want to distance itself from the system's strategic plan? The answers should be evident.

Schools and classrooms have always been contested spaces, sites of hope and struggle — hope for a transformed future or a unique possibility and struggle over everything from what that future might entail to who should participate in shaping our common world. We are not saying that schools should go it alone, without help from the business community and private foundations. The small schools movement has generated hundreds of successful school, business, and university partnerships in which companies and community institutions have provided internships, resources, and ac-

men to help make schools more successful. The business community has a responsibility, as we all do, to support public education. But these partnerships can be built without selling off large chunks of public space.

Small schools are not a panacea, and, while they create wonderful possibilities, the language of small schools can be twisted to become an excuse for inequity and promotion of the ownership culture. Every wave of official "school reform," including small schools and Ren 10, must be met with skepticism, agnosticism, and doubt by those of us who hope and struggle for a more democratic future, a more just social order.

A school renaissance built on the ideals of the ownership society, on privilege for a few, on creating winners and losers among students and among neighborhoods will never sustain itself. On the other hand, small schools and classrooms built on equality and commu-

nity, on shared power, on the right to humane treatment, on full participation, and on access can flourish and nourish a community.

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1. See, for example, Patricia A. Wasley et al., *Small Schools, Great Strides: A Study of New Small Schools in Chicago* (New York: Bank Street College of Education, 2000).

2. For more on the open-sector strategy, see the Education Evolving report "Education Finance," [www.educationevolving.org](http://www.educationevolving.org). Click on the Good Reading link and then on the title.

3. Above-average enrollments are found most frequently in charter primary schools managed by the 14 largest EMOs, according to the study "Profiles of For-Profit Education Management Organizations 2004-2005," released by the Education Policy Studies Laboratory at Arizona State University, Tempe.

4. "The Big Picture: School-Initiated Reforms, Centrally Initiated Reforms, and Elementary School Achievement in Chicago (1990 to 2005)," *Designs for Change*, September 2005, [www.designsforchange.org](http://www.designsforchange.org).

5. Tracy Dell'Angela and Ana Beatriz Cholo, "School Building Projects on Hold," *Chicago Tribune*, 22 January 2005. **■**

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