

Chicago's Renaissance 2010: Building on School Reform in the Age Of Accountability

In response to Mr. Ayers and Mr. Klonsky, Mr. Duncan argues that Chicago's Renaissance 2010 initiative is holding adults accountable by closing low-performing schools rather than trapping children in a failing educational environment.

BY ARNE DUNCAN

RATHER than embrace Chicago's ambitious Renaissance 2010 program as a vehicle to advance school reform and the small schools movement while integrating greater accountability into the system, William Ayers and Michael Klonsky, pioneers in small school development, attack the initiative with inaccurate, misleading statements. Academics are sup-

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posed to stick to the facts and remain impartial, but Ayers and Klonsky have clearly failed the test. It's especially surprising coming from Klonsky, because he is currently bidding to open a new school under Renaissance 2010.

First, the Chicago Public Schools (CPS) opened 22 new schools this fall, and 14 of them use union teachers, so accusing us of "focusing on privately managed, non-union charter schools" is fundamentally inaccurate. We evaluate proposals on the merits and do our best

to be as responsive as possible to the community.

It's misleading to say that Renaissance 2010 is "turning over . . . new schools to private owners." Charter or contract schools do not "own" their schools any more than principals and elected local school councils "own" a school. Outside operators — including many teacher groups — run Renaissance 2010 schools under five-year performance contracts that include annual reviews. CPS can cancel these contracts at any time for lack of performance. In eight years of managing the most successful charter school program in the country, Chicago has closed down two charter schools that failed to measure up — the ultimate form of accountability.

It's also wrong to say that this initiative is "punishing certain schools while rewarding others." Describing the closure of a low-performing school as "punishing" reflects indifference on the part of the authors to the welfare of the children trapped in a failing educational environment. There is nothing "capricious" about the process, as they claim. The closing criteria are public information, listed on the CPS website.

As for "rewarding" others, all schools in Chicago — small, charter, contract, performance, or traditional CPS — are funded under a consistent per-pupil funding formula, although we provide extra dollars to small schools because the fixed costs — administration, maintenance — are spread over a smaller student body. There are no winners and losers.

Closing and reopening schools is both educationally sound and morally warranted. We are hired to fight for kids — not for bureaucrats, reform groups, teachers, principals, or local schools councils. We close schools when kids are getting hurt. Under Renaissance 2010, the adults involved are held accountable because the school ceases to exist.

And what replaces them? Consider the first two Renaissance schools, Dodge and Williams. Back in the spring of 2002, when they closed down, the percentage of kids meeting national reading norms was in the teens. Some students were gaining as little as 1½ months of learning during the entire school year, so they were falling further and further behind.

Today, the percentage meeting national reading norms in both schools is two to three times higher, and the rate of gains for the exact same students is roughly 1½ years of learning for each year in school. Parents at the new Dodge and Williams are overjoyed, the staffs are more motivated, and the students are learning. Both Dodge and Williams, by the way, use union teachers.

The authors also assert that Renaissance 2010 will

offer teachers lower compensation packages, a lack of job security, and the toughest workloads. But it's simply not true.

Finally, to say that we have "all but given up on improving or restructuring the city's large traditional schools" is shockingly out of touch with the facts. We just announced a massive, 10-year districtwide effort to improve all of our high schools. This builds upon things like the Reading Initiative, as well as a host of other programs aimed at lowering the dropout rate, raising teacher and principal quality, and offering more learning opportunities through preschool, after-school, and summer-school programs.

Closing and reopening a failing school is an absolute last resort, intended only for the small handful of schools that have consistently underperformed while the rest of the system has made steady and dramatic gains. We have many turnaround strategies aside from Renaissance 2010, ranging from replacing the principal and adjusting the curriculum to the recently announced "Fresh Start" program with the Chicago Teachers Union, under which the union will "run" seven schools for the next five years, using added funding provided by CPS to offer booster programs for the kids.

School reform is not about creating winners and losers, but represents an effort to make every child in every school a winner. A losing system would perpetuate existing policies that trap students in failing schools. That is the very opposite of accountability and the very opposite of the goals and vision of school reform as it has been practiced by Ayers and Klonsky.

Like every other movement, the school reform movement in Chicago has evolved, from the early push toward decentralization to the current trend toward more diversity in terms of educational approaches: charters, small schools, and other models being developed under Renaissance 2010. At the same time, CPS has advanced school reform's earliest goals of "more local control" by offering more autonomy to high-performing, rapidly improving schools. We want to stay out of the way of schools that are making progress.

All of us in Chicago are grateful to Ayers and Klonsky for their work with small schools in our city and their continuing commitment to education, but they need to get their facts straight. A lot has changed since 1988; we now know that reducing school size alone will not raise performance systemwide. For students trapped in chronically struggling schools, stronger accountability measures in cutting-edge new schools under Renaissance 2010 hold out the most promise. ■

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