



**Chicago
Annenberg
Challenge**

Key Findings

September 2000

Introduction

By the end of our initiative in 2001, over half of all public schools in the city will have participated in Challenge-inspired school improvement efforts. The results we're seeing? Schools where teaching and learning are improving, and where test scores are rising. A community more knowledgeable about what it takes to improve schools, and better equipped to do so.

The recommendations in this booklet are drawn from the experiences of 250 schools working together with community partners in nearly 50 networks, their work supported by \$45 million in grants from the Chicago Annenberg Challenge. Our grants also supported intensive school-based research by the University of Chicago's Consortium on Chicago School Research.

We made important discoveries about the practices and factors that are most significant in improving schools. And we laid the groundwork to put those practices into place in hundreds of schools.

The resources provided by the Challenge enabled important programs to take root. The Challenge improved professional development for teachers, increased parental involvement in local schools, and expanded and strengthened the community of external partners working with public schools to promote school improvement.

In addition to its own \$50 million investment, the Chicago Annenberg Challenge developed and launched the Chicago Public Education Fund, and met its goal to insure that another \$100 million from matching funders was channeled to school improvement efforts.

In short, the Challenge strengthened the capacity of the community to improve its own schools. More than 4,000 parents and 50 different agencies, from museums to neighborhood associations, have become engaged in school improvement efforts through Annenberg programs. These external partners have helped schools focus on critical improvement activities and provided important support and resources.

Thanks to the Challenge, we all know a great deal more about what it takes to improve schools. The following pages outline our key findings and offer recommendations for next steps in continuing the important work of improving Chicago's public schools.

What has the Challenge learned that is applicable to any school improvement effort?

The Consortium on Chicago School Research has conducted research in hundreds of schools on behalf of the Annenberg Challenge over a period of four years. A summary of key findings follows.

What kind of instructional practice leads to increased student achievement?

The Challenge has learned that the following six factors working in combination are the most significant factors in increasing student achievement.

1. Challenging intellectual work:

- When teachers challenge students with rigorous assignments and high quality intellectual work, students rise to the challenge. Intellectually challenging tasks produce high quality intellectual work by students. For example, 56% of students who received the least challenging writing assignments produced low levels of intellectual work, as compared to only 15% of students who received challenging assignments. Another way of looking at it: 60% of students receiving the most challenging writing assignments produced "extensive or moderate" intellectual work— but only 14% of students who received the least challenging writing assignments that were not challenging were able to produce high levels of work.
- Students assigned high quality tasks during the school year do 22% better than average on standardized reading tests than students assigned low quality tasks, and 12% better than average in math. Students assigned the lowest quality tasks fall 22% *below* the average.

2. Interactive instructional practices:

- Intellectually challenging interactive instruction produces greater gains in student achievement on standardized tests (ITBS) than does "skill and drill" didactic instruction, or "teaching to the test." Interactive instruction refers to teachers' use of problem-oriented, differentiated strategies to promote the analysis and application of knowledge. "Didactic" instruction refers to recitation, repetition and review designed to transmit specific information.
- Students learn more when they experience frequent interactive instruction, as measured by gains in the ITBS. In reading, for example, students with high exposure to interactive instruction end the school year 12% ahead of average gains of other students in reading, and 8% ahead in math. The cumulative result of these trends over 10 years of schooling means more than a whole year's additional gain in reading achievement, and almost a full year gain in math.

- Teachers who participate frequently in high quality professional development report 10% higher use of interactive instruction, and greater openness to innovation and collaboration with other teachers.
- According to a recent study of academic practices, however, teaching which integrates authentic intellectual instruction (rather than "skill and drill") is the exception rather than the rule in Chicago's public schools.

3. *Social supports combined with academic press:*

- A combination of strong academic press and strong social supports for the student are most conducive to promoting student academic achievement. Students who attend schools that place a strong emphasis on academic success and who also receive strong support from teachers, parents, peers and community members had one-year achievement gains that were three to four times greater than students in schools where these circumstances were not in place.

4. *Personalized environment:*

- Parent involvement in the classroom not only enables teachers to give special attention to individual students; their presence in the classroom helps to create a more personalized environment, where more students are known better.
- In schools where there is a higher adult-to-student ratio in classrooms, the resulting more personalized learning environments are contributing to increased student achievement.
- When parents make a commitment to and become more involved with their children's education, their children are more likely to succeed academically.

5. *Smaller schools:*

- Small schools (or schools-within-schools) are three times more likely than large schools to reflect the combination of high academic press and high social support found most conducive to student achievement gains.
- The highest use of interactive instruction and the lowest use of repetitive review are found in small schools.
- The quality of professional development experienced by teachers in small schools is 10-15% higher than the quality experienced by teachers in large schools.

6. *Program coherence:*

- “Instructional program coherence”— defined as a set of interrelated programs for students and staff that are guided by a common framework for curriculum, instruction, assessment and learning, and are pursued over a sustained period of time— is significantly related to gains in student academic achievement. In schools with high levels of program coherence, students learn the equivalent of one month of a school year more than students in schools where coherence is low.

What have we learned about how school change happens?

- In order to improve student learning, instructional practices and settings must be improved. However, for instructional practices and settings to improve, the organizational capacities of schools (i.e. school leadership, teachers/professional team, parents/community involvement) must first be developed. The “logic” of school improvement is that student outcomes follow changes in professional practice, which follow changes in the school’s professional community (i.e. improving teacher professional development, better involving parents and community members, and strengthening principals’ leadership skills).
- There are multiple mechanisms prompting school change:
 - Improvements usually begin with an inducement from inside or outside the school, such as an incentive, a new idea, and a threat of sanction;
 - To establish a direction and an imperative for change, leadership for change must be housed within many people— principal, teachers, external partners, parent volunteers;
 - Adequate human, financial and material resources need to be available and their levels stable;
 - Use of multiple change strategies makes improvement more likely. Combinations of incentives, accountability mechanisms and opportunities to learn new knowledge and skills are more effective than the single use of any of these strategies alone.
- School change is most likely to happen when principals are a strong part of advocating for it. School improvement depends on the *active work* of an “internal agent,” usually the principal or a group of committed teachers, working with an “external agent,” i.e. an outside partner or support provider.
- In partnership with strong principals, external partners who bring new ideas, new resources and impetus for improvement to schools can be significant forces in helping schools to change. Without the internal agent, however, the impact of an external partner will be limited. The effectiveness of external partners depends on several internal school-related factors, including the base of human resources and

internal commitment to change, as well as the coordination of improvement initiatives and support providers.

- External partners who focus on developing the internal capacity of schools to improve, concentrating in particular on building school leadership and teacher professional community, have the best chance of sustaining and building upon the improvements they initiate over time.
- External partners help schools focus on their unifying missions and, in many cases, deepen the connection between schools and the larger community. External partners provide essential support and resources and help schools deal with needs and roadblocks. Too many external partners in one school may become counter-productive, however, distracting from a cohesive school mission.

How prepared are teachers and principals for the challenges they face?

- The quality of professional development in Chicago public schools has risen over the past two years, especially in Annenberg schools, but additional high-quality professional development is needed.
- High-quality professional development— that is, *the most effective* professional development— is professional development that is sustained, focused and followed-up; related to student needs; connected to school improvement plans; provides enough time for teachers to think about, try and evaluate new ideas; provides opportunities for teachers to learn from and work with teachers from their schools and from other schools; and includes emphasis on classroom teaching practices rather than academic subject areas.
- The impact of professional development relates less to its frequency and more to the kind of professional development a teacher is receiving. For example, interactive instructional practices net the highest gains in terms of student learning, but most teachers need professional development training to make use of interactive instructional techniques.
- Teachers who are engaged in quality, on-site, sustained professional development activities report higher job satisfaction and stay in the profession longer. Professional development is a first step critical to improving teaching, and therefore improving learning, in Chicago's public schools.
- When teachers can make decisions regarding the kind of professional development activities they take part in, they feel more ownership of and commitment to activities. When teachers collaborate with colleagues, their morale increases.

What kind of progress has been made in Annenberg Schools?

In addition to developing increased resources for school improvement and contributing important new research to the field, the Chicago Annenberg Challenge has successfully promoted school improvement in a set of specific schools.

- Survey data from the Chicago Annenberg Research Project (CARP) show that reflective dialog among teachers about teaching and learning increased at a significantly greater rate in Annenberg schools than in schools citywide. In 1994, levels of reflective dialog in Annenberg and non-Annenberg schools were equivalent. By 1999, the growth of reflective dialog in Annenberg schools had outpaced growth in non-Annenberg schools so that it was almost 15 percentile points greater in Annenberg than non-Annenberg schools.
- Evidence from CARP fieldwork shows that teacher professional community improved substantially in 36% of elementary schools studied. Examples of these improvements include increasing the number of groups of teachers working more closely together to analyze and improve their teaching and developing teachers' ability to talk more productively about teaching and learning.
- Teacher influence in school decision making in Annenberg schools has increased at a significantly higher rate than teacher influence in schools citywide and in similar non-Annenberg schools. In 1994, teacher influence in Annenberg and similar non-Annenberg schools was equivalent. By 1999, growth of teacher influence in Annenberg schools had outpaced growth in non-Annenberg schools so that it was almost 10 percentile points higher in Annenberg than non-Annenberg schools.
- The quality of professional development in Annenberg elementary schools increased between 1997 and 1999 while the quality of professional development in demographically similar non-Annenberg elementary schools remained unchanged. As a result, the difference in the quality of professional development between Annenberg and non-Annenberg elementary schools has widened, giving teachers in Annenberg schools a greater advantage.
- In addition to experiencing higher quality professional development, teachers in Annenberg schools also participate more frequently in professional development than teachers in schools that do not participate in the Challenge. In 1999, for example, the rate at which Annenberg elementary teachers participated in professional development was about 12 percent greater than non-Annenberg teachers.
- Evidence from CARP fieldwork shows that leadership has improved in nearly 30% of Annenberg elementary schools studied. Examples of improvement include growing numbers of groups of teachers participating in school or grade-level decision making and program development; principals involving teachers more often in school-level decision making; and principals and teachers focusing their work

more on goals aimed at improving student literacy or higher order learning.

- In Annenberg schools, teacher and parent involvement in school decision-making rose 3 percent and joint efforts between teachers and principals in school problem solving rose about 2 percent. These increases reflect citywide trends.
- Isolation between teachers in Annenberg schools is breaking down. Teachers are working better together and getting more support. In 1995, only about 55% of our teachers reported working with colleagues to design instruction. Now, nearly 80% of teachers report designing instructional programs together.
- The overall intellectual quality of classroom tasks collected in a set of Annenberg elementary schools increased between 1997 and 1999 in 3rd, 6th and 8th grades. Increases came in both writing and math but were greatest among the writing tasks teachers typically assign students. Among these tasks across grade levels quality increased between 21 percent and 42 percent.
- CARP has found that across Annenberg schools parent support of student learning at home increased between 1997 and 1999 by 1.4 percent, a small but statistically significant increase. This gain is consistent with citywide trends.
- Research from CARP has shown increases in the use of community resources in Annenberg schools that are over and above citywide increases. These resources include adults from a school's community, cultural institutions, and human service agencies. In 1999, Annenberg schools were almost 12 percentile points higher than similar non-Annenberg schools in their use of such community resources.
- Annenberg external partners have engaged more than 200 schools in activities addressing important areas of school development, including school leadership, teacher professional community, parent and community involvement, student-centered learning climate, and quality instruction. They have helped schools focus on improvement activity and provide important support and resources for schools to improve.

WHAT WORKS -----

THIS IS WHAT A HIGH-PERFORMING SCHOOL LOOKS LIKE.

ONE

THE ORGANIZATIONAL CAPACITY OF THE SCHOOL:

- 1. Strong School Leadership** is facilitative, inclusive; primary leadership focus is on instruction; principal is responsive to parents, actively engages community partners, supports professional development for staff; creates teacher-principal trust.
- 2. Effective Teachers** have shared/clear vision, trust, engage in collaboration, shared understanding of practice and goals, have growing influence on school decision-making; benefit from higher quality focused teacher professional development focusing on improving teaching practice as well as on subject area content.
- 3. Engaged Parents and Community** make a difference in schools where the principal actively draws on community resources, provides active outreach and training programs for parents; adults provide multiple social supports for students

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TWO

PRACTICE AT THE SCHOOL

- 4. Positive Climate for Learning** involves order as opposed to chaos, classroom personalism, high student-teacher trust, high student-adult ratio, high academic expectations, physical and psychological safety, staff stability.
- 5. High Quality Instruction** is interactive instruction which teaches students to analyze and apply information, rather than just memorize, which offers a better integrated curriculum, a focus on challenging intellectual work, focus on student interests and lives, coherent curriculum with joint teacher planning

INCREASED STUDENT ACHIEVEMENT

WHAT DOESN'T WORK -----

THIS IS WHAT A LOW-PERFORMING SCHOOL LOOKS LIKE.

ONE

ORGANIZATIONAL CAPACITY OF THE SCHOOL:

1. School Leadership is authoritarian, exclusive, primary leadership focus noninstructional, cynical, unresponsive to parents, turns back on internal and external resources, high level of teacher-principal distrust, unsupportive of professional development, etc.

2. Teachers Division/ambiguity, distrust, isolation, varying levels of practice, little participation in school decision-making, weak links to external learning opportunities, little incentive to collaborate, scattershot low quality professional development focusing primarily on teaching core subject

3. Parents and Community are not very involved; principal fails to draw on community resources, little outreach to parents, inadequate communications

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TWO

PRACTICE AT THE SCHOOL

4. Climate for Learning Disorder, impersonality, alienation in teacher-student relations, low student-adult ratio, low academic expectations, physical-psychological risk, high staff mobility

5. Instruction Didactic, repetitive, skill-and-drill, focus on control and procedural work, lack of focus on student interests and lives, fragmented curriculum without joint teacher planning

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**LOW PERCENTAGE OF STUDENTS AT
NATIONAL NORMS, LOW LEVELS
OF STUDENT ACHIEVEMENT**

Summary

We've said that if you demand and invest in quality public education, you'll get it. For philanthropy as well as for parents, teachers, principals and civic leaders, that's the lesson of the Annenberg Challenge.

The greatest progress comes when multiple mechanisms for change are at work simultaneously. However, if we were to choose the top three most important steps you could take, we'd say:

1. Demand and invest in the "right kind" or professional development for teachers, that is, professional development that is sustained, followed-up, and includes emphasis on classroom teaching practices and techniques, not just academic subject areas, in particular professional development that teaches teachers how to make use of interactive instructional practices.
2. Demand and invest in furthering interactive instructional practice at your school. It's been shown to significantly improve student learning, and net greater gains on standardized tests.
3. Demand and invest in continuing to support and build relationships with external partners for your schools, that is, with support providers and community agencies committed to helping your school improve literacy, leadership and learning.

All of these steps strengthen the capacity of the community to improve its own schools, and that's what's ultimately going to bring about the greatest change

Addendum to Annenberg report:

From a press release that Chicago Annenberg Challenge plans to distribute soon:

"Students with high exposure to what educators call 'interactive instruction' end the school year 12% ahead of average gains in reading and 8% ahead in math, the study found. Students who experience frequent 'didactic' instruction – review, repetition, recitation – fall 12% below average gains in reading and 8% below in math, resulting in a gap as much as 24% between the two approaches."

Note: The term 'didactic' is often associated with "teaching to the test."