

Your readers may appreciate hearing from someone who knows something firsthand about the Annenberg Challenge, now a campaign headline. This is the six-year project that John McCain and Sarah Palin are calling a radical education organization when it was involved in school reform in Chicago in the '90's, one of eighteen such sites in the nation. Barack Obama, then an attorney and lecturer at the University of Chicago law school, was asked to serve on the founding board, and later as its chair -- a board that included the President of the University of Illinois and the President of the Civic Committee of the Commercial Club, Chicago's most prestigious business organization. Later, the board included the President, CEO and Publisher of the Chicago Tribune and the President of the Field Museum. This board determined which proposals were good candidates for funding. Professor Bill Ayers from the University of Illinois at Chicago, as an expert on small learning environments, was helpful in developing the proposal that made Chicago a winning Annenberg city.

As someone who had pioneered the concept of reconnecting a network of urban schools to their local community and to outside resources as part of my job for Continental Bank, I was invited to the very first Annenberg meetings in Chicago, to describe my program. Attending were professional educators from Brown University and a Who's Who of school reform advocates in the city. Public education in Chicago was trying to reinvent itself, and the entire civic community was helping. We were grateful for outside support from Walter Annenberg, a Republican philanthropist, publisher, and former ambassador to the United Kingdom. The Annenberg Challenge funded winning external partners like DePaul University, Continental Bank's educational partner for the school network we had created. Applicants were required to show how they planned to address three areas of school improvement: creating smaller learning environments so that children get more personalized teaching; setting aside more planning time for teachers; and collaborating with outside organizations to combat isolation.

Education was a hot topic in Chicago in those days. There were numerous panels on models of school reform that we all attended, and Professor Bill Ayers was a frequent panelist. The most radical thing that I ever heard Professor Ayers say, and the most radical thought that the Annenberg Challenge or any of the other school reform efforts in Chicago ever promoted was this: all children can learn if we adults create the right conditions. Dangerous stuff perhaps to those who do not want to believe it.