

# Parents Engaged in Big Picture Reform

## LINKING RESEARCH, EXPERIENCE & POLICY

**THERE IS HOPE** when we take the time to become informed spokespersons **FOR POSITIVE CHANGE** in our schools—not from the outside throwing bricks, but on the inside guiding and informing the conversation, speaking with public officials, moving policy, building relationships across community organizations, churches, and other institutions with the goal of lifting our children out of the quagmire.

Patricia Watkins, Executive Director, TARGET Area Development Corporation

*“When I was coming through school my parents were involved. They were a major key to the success of our being in school and making sure the curriculum was what it was supposed to be.”*

West Side Parent

**HIGH SCHOOL DROPOUTS ARE 3 TIMES MORE LIKELY TO BE ARRESTED THAN THOSE WHO GRADUATE, 72% MORE LIKELY TO BE UNEMPLOYED, AND 3 TIMES MORE LIKELY TO LIVE IN POVERTY IN THE SPAN OF ANY GIVEN YEAR.**

United Way of Metropolitan Chicago

**IN CHICAGO, IN EVERY MONTH OF THE SCHOOL YEAR, OVER 1000 YOUTH DROP OUT OR GET PUSHED OUT OF OUR HIGH SCHOOLS.**

Arne Duncan, Chief Executive Officer,  
Chicago Public Schools

*“We say that parents aren’t involved and that they don’t care and that’s not necessarily the case...I don’t think it’s because they don’t care. I think it’s because they don’t understand how to get involved. They don’t expect certain things from schools because they don’t know what to expect or how to hold the schools accountable.”*

West Side Parent

*“I think that we need to work together—the administrators and the teachers and the parents.”*

West Side Parent

**ILLINOIS IS NOW THE HOME OF OVER 1.7 MILLION HIGH SCHOOL DROPOUTS.**

Community Informatics Initiative, University of Illinois, October 2007

# PRISE Reform Findings & Recommendations

## PARENT IMPRESSIONS

In focus groups, site visits, trainings and at a Summit meeting, parents and residents echoed the following perceptions of their local schools:

1. The school system does not recognize the role of parents and students as partners, but rather as clients—and that is a mistake.
2. The education system is failing all of us because the system is not preparing our children to compete with their peers. Teaching quality, curriculum, support and access to quality opportunities are all lacking in our schools and this predicts failure.
3. The environment is not conducive for learning in many of our schools. Concerns about student and teacher safety, physical structure, school discipline regulations, the quality of the meals served, and the overall atmosphere are not addressed.
4. Education is supposed to equalize opportunity for all, yet this is not our children's reality.
5. The educational system has continually declined so that rather than demonstrating consistent improvement by providing children with greater access to high levels of learning and greater opportunities than preceding generations it has produced children who are increasingly further behind.

## PRISE PRIORITIES

The concerns and priorities voiced by parents and residents culminated in the PRISE Reform coalition formulating the following recommendations to improve the school system:

- Parents should be at the decision-making table, having a prominent role in any school reform effort.
- Students presently enrolled in a school slated for reform should not be displaced in the process.
- New or reconstituted schools should develop a community-school partnership prior to opening, with the community voice informing the process and all social supports identified and utilized.
- Schools slated for reform that require renovation should include a mandated local labor set-aside.
- The school system should provide professional development and supports to ensure that all teachers are certified and qualified to teach the appropriate grade level.
- Schools should develop differentiated teaching strategies based on ambitious curricula that are aligned from pre-K to college.
- The classroom should be a safe haven for students and teachers, with an environment conducive to learning.
- All schools should receive adequate funding and other resources necessary to meet the needs of students, including providing a well-balanced student-teacher ratio and additional teacher assistants where needed.

**Are you aware** that under the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001, the majority of schools in this neighborhood could be shut down in less than two years?

Yes 41%

No 59%

**Do you want to be kept informed** about the new changes coming to schools in this community?

Yes 96%

No 4%

**Do you believe** parents should be included or consulted about changes in the local schools?

Yes 99%

No 1%

**Are you interested** in sharing your ideas about our schools in a discussion with other parents from this community?

Yes 84%

No 14%

No Response 2%

**How important** is it to have first-class high schools in this neighborhood?

Very Important 92%

Important 7%

Not Important 1%

# 1. Introduction

Chicago Public Schools launched its current, \$80 million high school transformation plan to bring better teachers and a more focused curriculum to poorly performing schools in 2006. While the plan intends to improve secondary schools without the disruptions experienced in previous attempts at reform, the role of parent and student engagement remains unclear.

Numerous efforts have already been made to improve low-performing high schools, some more successful than others. One example is the transformation of the Austin Community Academy High School into three smaller charter and contract high schools, a process that met with both praise and critique from educators and the community. Significant support from Chicago Public Schools, private foundations and the local community has been targeted to provide quality educational opportunities for neighborhood students. Yet turnover among administrators, concerns that one of the schools may lack sufficient academic rigor for college-bound students, the continual phasing-in at the freshman level of new schools, and a selective enrollment process have made for a complicated transition.

Some students who expected to attend Austin but were blocked by the selective enrollment process were sent to Clemente High School. Parents reported that the Local School Council was not notified, and no process was put in place to welcome or transition the incoming population. Parents and students who witnessed the impact on Clemente reported that classrooms were increased to 30 and even 40 students. In many classrooms there were insufficient desks and chairs. Lunchroom access was inadequate. **But the escalated violence was the greatest concern: random fire drills, purportedly set by students, would end with fights and students singled out and beaten. There were eight false alarms the first year.**

**PRISE, Parents & Residents Invested in School & Education Reform**, was created in 2007 by TARGET Area Development Corporation to reduce the adverse impacts in this and future waves of school reform in a new way: changing the “big picture” by carving out a

IF WE ARE NOT EDUCATED CONSUMERS, we won't be good advocates. Our arguments would be fraught with deficiencies, informed only by what we learned from the past or from the word on the street, or whatever the media is pushing or by the overwhelming anxiety about what is happening to us today.

more powerful role in before-the-fact decision-making for parents and community residents.

Inner-City Muslim Action Network, People's Community Development Association of Chicago, Westside Health Authority, and West Town Leadership United joined the PRISE Reform partnership, sharing the belief that increased parental and student leadership can change the existing dynamic in school reform. Its members are demonstrating the potential of parents taking leadership in their schools by doing research with and providing training for parents in several targeted West Side communities: Humboldt Park, Garfield Park and Austin. These neighborhoods are served by several schools, including Orr High School.

Public Schools CEO Arne Duncan announced in January 2008 that Orr would be reconstituted in partnership with Academy for Urban School Leadership. This timing lent further point and urgency to PRISE Reform's efforts to engage parents and students in the school reform dialogue.

Through the process of surveying hundreds of community residents, visiting schools operated by the Academy for Urban School Leadership, hosting focus group discussions and convening large-scale summits, PRISE Reform has produced solid, insightful information on the role of parents in reforming public education.

The goal of this briefing paper is to contribute to and help shape the growing debate around public education reform and to suggest focusing significant resources and effort on the crucial role that parents can play in endemic educational crises.

## 2. The Problem As We See It

Poor achievement data are driving increasingly radical attempts to change the way education is delivered in lower-income communities of color. The West Side neighborhoods of Humboldt Park, West Garfield Park and Austin are predominantly African American and Latino as well as low-income. While overall gaps in educational achievement throughout Illinois lessened between 1990 and 2000, significant racial and economic disparity in education performance and success remains.

According to a study by the Consortium on Chicago School Research, only 54 percent of the students who entered CPS schools as freshmen in 2000 graduated four years later. The gap between African-American students and others was substantial. Among boys, only 39 percent of African-Americans and 51 percent of Latinos graduated by age 19, compared to 58 percent of whites and 76 percent of Asians.<sup>1</sup>

Overall, only about 8 percent of freshman in the Chicago Public School system ended up with a four-year college degree 12 years later. Although the Consortium has not yet published this statistic, John Q. Easton reports that only 3 to 4 percent of African-American male students ended up with a four-year college degree by age 25.

In addition to well-documented student achievement gaps, PRISE Reform leaders are addressing three often-unarticulated “assumptions” about parents that appear to be prevalent in the education community:

1. Lower-income parents in communities of color are unable or unwilling to invest the requisite time and effort compared to more affluent parents in preparing their children for school and providing an outstanding school culture,
2. Parents and community residents may lack the sophistication they need to sit at the table with elite decision-makers and policy experts, and
3. Conflict is the only outcome when parents organize and participate in education debates.

In order to engage, **WE NEED TO TAKE THE TIME TO LEARN**, becoming students first—thinking about and understanding the education needs of our children and the options available to them, and then developing into informed leaders.

#### BYSTANDERS NO MORE

PRISE Reform leaders start with the understanding that everyone wants good schools for their children. Further, parents could play a significant role to achieve that vision if they had access to community-based opportunities to gain knowledge about how to assess school gains, how to identify and use unbiased research data, which programs and models are effective and available, and how to develop an action plan for reform that includes a broad-based partnership of parents, students, CPS administrators, educators, and other stakeholders with a shared vision for positive change.

<sup>1</sup>Allensworth, Elaine, *Graduation and Dropout Trends in Chicago: A Look at Cohorts of Students from 1991 to 2004*, Consortium on Chicago School Research, University of Chicago, January 2005.

We have a responsibility as community members, parents, clergy, and leaders to take the time to become informed and then be proactive spokespersons and advocates for quality education reform. Through summits and learning sessions, **WE CAN BUILD OUR KNOWLEDGE** so we can take leadership roles in the school reform dialogues.

## 3. Goals and methods

The goals of the PRISE Reform coalition are to:

1. Develop a core of well-informed parent and youth leaders;
2. Create strong, accountable partnerships and nurturing relationships between school district leaders, educators, informed parents and youth, and other partners to develop a vision for quality school reform and sustain a long-term advocacy effort around superior education at the high school level, and
3. Gain state and city support for a replicable quality education reform model for academically challenged

schools that incorporates the well-developed vision and ideas of parents, students, district leaders, educators and other stakeholders.

To achieve those goals and demonstrate the power of bringing informed and committed parents and students to the table, the coalition member groups’ staff and volunteer leadership began reaching out into West Side communities in late 2007. The process began with data collection through surveys and focus groups, then transitioned to learning and leadership opportunities for the newly identified parent leaders, and culminated in a series of community dialogues.

Key steps included:

- *“Gains” School Assessment Trainings* to help parents differentiate school achievement outcomes.

- *Spokesperson training* for parents to crystallize and express their views concerning education and school reform in the public arena.

- *Site visits* at schools that have implemented the Academy of Urban School Leadership school reform model.

- *Parent & Student Summit*, which included representatives from the Illinois State Board of Education, Illinois Department of Corrections, Woods Fund of Chicago, and Chicago Public Schools.

- *Leaders Meeting* provided opportunities for committed parents and students to analyze, assess and validate the research findings, as well as effectively frame the issues and strategize.

- *Parent & Student Luncheon* convened parents, students, teachers, administrators, community leaders and organizers for a dialogue about the Academy for Urban School Leadership school reform strategy, its impact, and influence on school reform policy.

- *Briefings for policymakers and funders* included representatives from the Marguerite Casey Foundation, the Ford Foundation, the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, the Academy of Urban School Leadership and Chicago Public Schools.

Through these activities, staff and volunteers with PRISE Reform partner organizations gained insights and shed further light on local parents’ attitudes, beliefs, and understanding around public education. They also identified about 100 parents ready and willing to exchange ideas with education officials and share their vision and concerns on school reform.

## 4. Parents’ attitudes and PRISE Reform positions

With all of the reforms scheduled to take place in Chicago, **BEING AN INFORMED COMMUNITY ADVOCATE** on issues of education reform is a role that begs to be filled **RIGHT NOW.**

**P**RISE Reform members developed a resident survey that was completed during November 2007. A total of 26 parents and organizers were trained on canvassing and surveying techniques. They went door-to-door in the West Side neighborhoods to identify parents of 6<sup>th</sup>- through 12<sup>th</sup>-grade students who might participate in future dialogues about quality school reform models. They visited some 2000 residences, completing 504 surveys.

Of those surveyed, 432 were parents, grandparents, or caretakers of 6<sup>th</sup>- through 12<sup>th</sup>-grade students on the West Side of Chicago. Roughly half of the respondents had children in lower grades as well. Sixty percent of those surveyed had lived in the community for more than 5 years.

**Almost all the respondents said it was important or very important for their child to finish high school.** Only 1 percent of respondents believed it was not important to have first-class high schools in their neighborhood. While more than a third (39 percent) of the respondents volunteered in the schools in some capacity, the vast majority were concerned about school improvements. Almost all of the respondents wanted to be kept informed about school changes in their community. **Fully 98 percent of respondents**

**believed parents should be included or consulted about changes in the local schools.**

About 75 percent of the respondents reported that they were asked to come to the school to discuss their child’s progress; nearly half were told their children were not doing well, but only a third were told that the school itself was not doing well. Most had heard about the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) prior to the survey. Nearly 60 percent reported that they did not know that under NCLB, most schools in the community could be closed.

Only 20 percent knew of any residents in the community who spoke out about what is happening in the schools, but of those who did, most knew their names. The vast majority of respondents were interested in sharing their ideas about local schools in a discussion with other parents from the community.

**Nearly 75 percent of the respondents said public safety in the schools was a problem or a serious problem.** However, only 23 percent said they had received a letter or some other form of notification about the public safety issues at the school.

In addition to surveys, PRISE Reform conducted six focus groups with 92 parents and residents.

# 5. Community Organizing and Education Reform

...And who can best fill that role? The consumers of education should be the best prepared to speak to the quality of education—those spokespersons should be our children and us. **IT'S TIME FOR US TO SPEAK**, and the time to speak is now.

Chicago has a long tradition of community organizing for education reform, as well as much debate on its impact. Still, a growing consensus on the direct contribution of community organizing to improved educational outcomes is beginning to emerge.

The Community Involvement Program, part of the Annenberg Institute for School Reform at Brown University, has been studying the impact of community organizing for school reform on student outcomes. Among the key findings of their study, which looked at community organizing groups in seven cities, including Chicago, was that: "...organizing is contributing to school-level improvements, particularly in the areas of school-community relationships, parent involvement and engagement, sense of school community and trust, teacher collegiality, and teacher morale."<sup>2</sup>

<sup>2</sup> Mediratta, Kavitha, et al, *Organized Communities, Stronger Schools: A Preview of Research Findings* (Providence: Annenberg Institute for School Reform at Brown University; March 2008).

Like the approaches analyzed by the Institute, the PRISE Reform approach is based on the primary premise of community organizing: that parents themselves can and should play a key role in solving local problems.

## BIG PICTURE REFORM

Waves of school reform have come and gone in Chicago for the past 20 years. But most have failed to involve a broad base of parents and students in their grand visions for improved educational outcomes long term. It is time to examine the current trajectory of school reform in Illinois and to establish a premiere role for parents and students within that structure.

Building on its continuing success with bringing parents and policymakers to the same table on school reform issues on the West Side of Chicago, PRISE Reform is growing, adding new partners on the Southwest and South Sides. The group is determined to ensure that parents throughout the city no longer remain outsiders in the school-reform debate; indeed, PRISE seeks to eventually expand statewide. With a process to effectively link academic research with lived experiences, PRISE Reform aims to advocate for measurable improvements that impact not just a single school but the entire system.

### PRISE REFORM PARTNERS

#### TARGET AREA COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT CORP (Lead Organization)

TARGET's work encompasses community organizing, neighborhood and academic research, advocacy for public policy changes and leveraging relationships for powerful, positive change.

[www.targetarea.org](http://www.targetarea.org)



#### ACTION NOW

A direct-action grassroots organization, Action Now addresses issues of concern to its hundreds of low-income members, including school reform, affordable housing and predatory lending.

[www.actionnow.org](http://www.actionnow.org)

#### INNER-CITY MUSLIM ACTION NETWORK

IMAN works for social justice, engages youth as well as elders, delivers a range of direct services, and cultivates the arts in urban communities.

[www.imacentral.org](http://www.imacentral.org)

#### PEOPLES' COMMUNITY DEV ASSOCIATION OF CHICAGO

PeCDAC assists West side economically disenfranchised residents and youth in achieving self-sufficiency through education, employment, and housing.

#### WESTSIDE HEALTH AUTHORITY

WHA mobilizes Austin residents to create a broad community vision, including priorities such as health, education, ex-offender re-entry and employment.

[www.healthauthority.org](http://www.healthauthority.org)

#### WEST TOWN LEADERSHIP UNITED

Leadership development and school improvement are top priorities at WTLU, along with affordable housing, school and community safety and racial justice.

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*Parents Engaged in Big Picture Reform Briefing Paper*

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