

Chicago Schooling: A Crisis Met

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Chicago Public Schools has proven to be one of the most effective educational organizations in the United States and continues to surprise sociologists. According to a 2015 study, CPS successfully deters 82% of its students from graduating from a four-year college within ten years of starting high school.⁵ It is this fact and CPS's consistent placement 8% above the national average in students that do not start college immediately after graduating that truly separate CPS and bring light to its achievements despite its humble nature. The philosophy behind these statistics is honed into CPS's value for tradition and the Chicago Teachers Union's dedication to upholding it. Verily so, CPS has hardly changed the way the institution is run throughout the past century. Progressive approaches, in contrast, have shown a more intentional approach toward teachers' quality and have consequently had different results. These approaches, as seen by private and charter schools in Chicago, may in fact be more effective in many ways if an intent of secondary education is to produce college graduates.

Chicago's public high school education system has suffered a serious lack of consistency in policy and direction for the past forty years. In the past twenty years, Chicago Public Schools has changed their budgeting methods numerous times, the high school acceptance process has been complicated a number of years, and the school day has been lengthened twice.⁸ The selectivity of schools has led to a greatly polarized group of schools: neighborhood schools and selective enrollment schools. The neighborhood schools, whose scores, programs, and resources are significantly lower quality than those of the selective enrollment, suffer perpetually because of achievement-based grants being allocated to selective enrollment schools. These grants encourage more qualified teachers to choose the selective enrollment schools for higher pay.

This makes the situation much direr than it appears to be on the outside. If this process is left alone, the achievement gap between schools will only grow, as less qualified teachers are

essentially relegated to the schools with the most disobedience and dropouts—issues that need to be dealt with by teachers that have much more training and ability to do so. This seems to be a completely counter-intuitive approach. If two people are doing the same job except one does it in a more difficult environment, you would expect that person to receive *at least* the same pay or more than the one working in an easier environment. This is not the case, however. Instead of financial incentives, teachers receive insecurity. Many teachers in at-risk schools must worry about whether they will have a job solely based on the students' achievement.

School choice and the enrollment process has been especially chaotic recently. Middle school students file applications through CPS who chooses the students' high schools based on their grades, income, district, and a single test score—a bureaucratic system that places incredible stress on the students and their families. Intuitively, one would expect something this corporate to relegate its employees to the locations they will work and not its clientele, but that is simply not the case. Teachers get to choose which schools they apply to and which they don't and can back out without consequence. This is hardly fair to the students, whose school choice is left out of their locus of control altogether. Shouldn't the teachers be the ones to apply to CPS and get distributed among the schools where *they* are needed as opposed to the students? In other words, American higher education is by and large the highest quality in the world. In terms of elementary and secondary education, however, America is near the bottom. The key variable therein is choice. As economist Milton Friedman put it, "[In] [t]he elementary and secondary education, the school picks the child; it picks its customer. In higher education, the customer picks its school—you have choice. That makes all the difference in the world".¹

Friedman proposed the introduction of a voucher system to public schooling, instead of taxation going solely into public schools. On the contrary, with vouchers all parents will be taxed

the flat average cost of a child's education in the state (or a similar figure that would make the schools competitive) in exchange for a school voucher. From there, the parents will choose the school to enroll their child in—they could hypothetically go over or under the value of the voucher so long as the state's standards for education are met. A school could be very low cost and much more dependent on the students outside of school, or even more expensive than the voucher allows—adding exclusivity and supplemental coursework at the cost of more investment out of the parents' pocket.

This would not only make private schools—religious or not—much more accessible to less-fortunate households, but force publicly-owned schools to be competitive with those that are privately-run. This would force public schools to be marketable enough to be chosen by these families—meaning the quality of teachers and education would be much more scrutinized as they would be inevitably connected to whether the said school stays open or not. Subsidizing only certain schools cannot ensure continued improvement in the education system. As it is, these “imperfections in the capital market...make such individuals a ‘non-competing’ group sheltered from competition...The result is to perpetuate inequalities in wealth and status” (107).² This makes equality of opportunity nigh impossible, as public schools in poor areas are typically less funded and lower-scoring. The solution is incentivizing progress by encouraging a competitive schooling system, where teacher salaries and quality of education may be a bit more logical and visible. Under the current system, “poor teachers are overpaid and good teachers are underpaid” (97) due to a largely seniority-based salary track in public schools.² Competition would lead to a much greater scrutiny toward the quality of the teacher in addition to the qualification they are already paid while considering.

Chicago appears to be far off from a voucher system despite four years under a Republican governor. However, Gov. Rauner has been actively pursuing a voucher-like system. Unlike states that do use vouchers (Arkansas, Georgia, Indiana, etc.) Illinois has one of the largest cities in the US and arguably the most aggressive teachers union of them all.³ This stands in the way of any reform that would add difficulty to the Chicago Public Schools teachers, since the Chicago Teachers Union has organized massive strikes for small reasons in recent decades. Passing legislation for vouchers would cause a large amount of dissatisfaction, despite its necessity.

In spite of the monolithic entity that is the Chicago Public Schools, private and charter schools in Chicago remain a force to be reckoned with. Chicago has a large amount of Polish, Mexican, and Irish Catholic communities that continue to fill the classrooms of highly regarded schools as St. Ignatius, St. Rita, and Mt. Carmel. Non-religious private schools typically provide some of the best educations available as well. However, these come at a great cost to students' families and can be largely unavailable to poor families.

The free market provides, however. One private K-12 school in Chicago, Providence St. Mel, where "sixty percent of families made less than \$30,000 a year" sends its students to high schools and college, where "72% of PSM graduates go on to graduate from" (217).⁴ Providence St. Mel successfully prepares poor students for college better than the vast majority of public schools. This is done with little to no tuition payments from the families that struggle from paycheck to paycheck as it is. This is done through "more than \$3,000,000 in external support a year...permitting annual per-pupil expenditures approximately equal to the per-pupil expenditures in the Chicago public school system while allowing for the lowest private school tuition in the greater Chicago area" (223).⁴ The students (and parents to a great extent) are asked

for their continued discipline and focus toward college in order to continue such a committed investment from the school.

Providence St. Mel keeps its doors open sheerly through its marketability to investors. Public schools do the same, just through coercion. The quality of the school does not matter—solely if it is in your vicinity you will be asked to pay property taxes for it. It is not difficult to imagine how many public schools would close if they were forced to use this business model. It takes the private school concept to another level, with many non-profit traits and philanthropic vision.

Chicago's growing amount of Charter schools are another approach to the voucher-intolerant system in place. By definition, "[a] charter school is an independently run public school granted greater flexibility in its operations, in return for greater accountability for performance".⁶ While still funded by the government, they are *chosen* by the parents and have much freedom from the regulations that district public schools have to work under. All the charter schools are obligated to is academic results and whatever promises were made in their charter. This means charter schools offer free tuition to students just as public schools do. The system allows more scrutiny toward teachers and freedom in the enrollment process, and yield results.

A study of Chicago students that attended charter schooling from k-12 found that these charter students have an advantage of "half a point in composite ACT score... 7 percentage points in the probability of graduating from HS...[and] 11 percentage points in the probability of enrolling in college" (x) over students that were not charter-educated.⁷ These schools have greater accountability, more choice for the families of the students, and more freedom for the

administration. This is exactly what large schooling needs, instead of painting over the expansive CPS with a broad brush of bureaucracy.

Despite the academic benefits that charter schools seem to widely embody, there are variables that cause their growth to stagnate. Despite being “the most substantial venue for new-school creation over the last decade...they typically face more constraints than private schools when it comes to...state and federal mandates, their uses of funds, and accountability and reporting” (189).⁸ Charter schools are basically scraping the barrel of public school funding and competing to stay in that community. There is much more attention to detail in spending and allocation that is not present in non-charter public schools. Therefore, large educational management organizations have to take on many expenses that is not funded before they can open their doors like “principals...teachers...books and bookshelves, desks and desktop computers,” and most costly, facilities.⁸ These are enough to make any decision to plant a charter school important enough to consult a business adviser to make sure the prospect is a good one. The sheer amount of thought and effort put into the process is unrivaled in the sphere of public education and has definitely proved itself in recent years.

What charter schools offer is a substitute for the voucher system: freedom of choice and individuality while still being government-subsidized. At the end of the day, a contented taxpayer (if any one exists) should be satisfied with what he/she is paying for. Instead of feeling obligated toward public schooling because one is already paying for it, parents should be able to pick a school that they want their child to go to. If we learned anything from Providence St. Mel, it is that poor, dedicated children can succeed in an environment that encourages them to do so, with parents that make the choice to do the hard work with their children. Education has to be

taken seriously by all parties involves for true development as students and teachers to occur.

However, all parties have to make the *choice* to take the institution seriously.

Sources

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