

A PURE Approach to School Improvement

1. **How do we improve struggling schools?** Studies by the Consortium on Chicago School Research¹ show that the most effective reform efforts are wholistic — and that reforms that fail to address all key areas will generally fail. In the 1990's, principals and local school councils were creating and monitoring school improvement plans (SIPs) that addressed all key areas. Under Paul Vallas and NCLB, SIPs turned into plans to raise reading and math test scores. We think it's time to go back to comprehensive plans that work.
2. **Who should be running schools?** We believe in balanced governance — local decision making with centralized support and, where appropriate, collaborative intervention. Designs for Change has done key research² on the difference in results between top-down and local decision making, finding that schools that kept local control saw remarkable achievement gains from 1990 to 2005 while schools at similar starting points which were subject to CPS interventions essentially flat-lined during the same period.
3. **What can be done about unmotivated students and parents?** At the very least, students need curriculum and instruction that goes beyond test preparation, which has offers them few rewards and lots of punishment. Unfortunately, CPS and now NCLB under Arne Duncan are ratcheting up the stakes on standardized tests. We support a balance of limited testing combined with performance and portfolio assessment which give students more control over their own progress and help them relate their work to their own lives. There are ways that this kind of assessment can be monitored and reported for accountability purposes.³ Regarding parents: briefly, we believe parents need to be welcomed in the school, given specific, meaningful ways to be involved, and offered a real voice in decision making. This position is shared by national parent involvement guru Joyce Epstein,⁴ and is reflected in PURE's 2006 report on parent involvement in CPS.⁵
4. **What's the best way to develop a strong teaching force?** Here's an excellent local example, a program by Strategic Learning Initiatives which uses shared leadership, professional development, ongoing support for teachers to change instructional practices based on frequent assessments of student learning, and parent engagement. The program also organizes the schools into networks, so that teachers can collaborate and swap ideas for improvement with their colleagues at other campuses. Results have been impressive, as reported recently by the independent American Institutes for Research,⁶ which suggests that programs like SLI's should be considered before drastic interventions are attempted. We agree.

1. http://pureparents.org/index.php?blog/show/What_works_and_what_doesnt_coming_soon_fro_m_the_Consortium
2. http://www.designsforchange.org/pdfs/BP_rpt_092105.pdf
3. <http://www.edaccountability.org/>
4. <http://www.csos.jhu.edu/P2000/center.htm>
5. <http://pureparents.org/data/files/Pure%20Report%20OL.pdf>.

6. <http://www.strategiclearninginitiatives.org/news/pdf/FIP%20AIR%20Validation%20Report%207-29-09%20doc.pdf>

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