

# While Chicago Burns?

by

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The depiction of Rouen Cathedral was one of the highlights of the Monet exhibition recently held at the Chicago Institute of Art. A large canvas, it was nevertheless painted at arm's length - yet to appreciate it you had to stand back some 20 or more feet. How, I asked myself, did this artist manage to retain the bigger picture in his head whilst remaining so close to it? It is a question that could equally be applied to the Chicago Public School (CPS) system that continues to live down to its reputation despite two major pieces of state legislation since 1988. Dubbed the "Worst Schools In America" by William Bennett in 1987, and the subject of many adverse reports by the Chicago Tribune (later published as a book of the same title), responsibility for the CPS system has recently been transferred to the Mayor by the 1995 Amendatory Act to the Illinois School Code presumably as a result of the lack of progress following the 1988 School Reform Act (PA 85-1418). It is a strange fact that neither piece of legislation has anything to say about children's learning or the purposes of education although both are long on issues of structure, finance and accountability. Given that the findings of the Heartland Institute study (Polsby, 1994) demonstrates a *worsening* of school performance since the Reform Act we have to assume that the legislative changes have contributed nothing to academic achievement. An analysis of the 1995 Act does nothing to change the conclusion of much activity at the margins with little activity addressing the central issues of defining the purposes and expectations of the schooling process. It looks as if, in the manner of Nero before them, the legislators continues to fiddle whilst the city burns.

The School Reform Act of 1988 set out to address the issues of poor schooling through the introduction of the first fully school-based management system in the country. The underlying assumption beneath the main thread of the legislation, the introduction of Local School Councils (LSCs), was that the inclusion of parents, community members and teachers into the formal decision making process of the school would inevitably lead to an improvement in outputs. It is a philosophy based largely on the issue of accountability and one that has its roots in the market forces approach to systemic school reform. Despite a comprehensive list suggesting more the transference of power to the LSC from the School Board was really confined to the appointment of the principal on a four year contract. There had been no corresponding delegation of resources to LSCs who consequently were only concerned with very small amounts of expenditure that came from sources external to the city such as state funds or educational foundations.

After five years of reform a Heartland Institute Policy Report showed the public school systems as doing worse than it was before the programme started (Polsby, 1994). Apart from providing evidence to suggest that student academic performance on standardised test scores has actually declined in 10 of 14 indices since the introduction of the reform five years ago when measured against the IGAP and the Test of Achievement and Proficiency (TAP) taken by CPS 11th grade students, Polsby also introduces new and alarming indicators of poor performance by Chicago public Schools that illustrate high levels of school violence, low levels of attendance and only a tiny increase in the proportion of high school graduates that still trails the national and state average. His analysis of those four key factors in schooling has led him to conclude:

*It is apparent that school reform has not yet improved the quality of public education in Chicago. If we had an educational emergency before school reform, it appears we still have one.*

Amid increasing concern for the lack of progress the state legislators have now transferred responsibility for control of the CPS to the Mayor who has appointed a five-member Chicago School Reform Board of Trustees that will serve through to June 30, 1999. The Trustees will create their own educational management structure to replace subdistrict councils and subdistrict superintendents which (in their words) "are eliminated". Schools, educational professionals and community representatives have been briefed on the new changes by means of a 4 page summary issued by Argie Johnson, the General Superintendent for Chicago Public Schools. Closer analysis of the rhetoric contained within the summary tends to show, however, that the changes are mainly structural, focusing on issues of financial control, personnel and accountability. Measures to enhance learning processes or identify the purposes of the school system remain hidden behind blandishments or new job titles whilst more draconian measures for dealing with fraudsters and employees intent on exercising their employment rights are outlined in detail. From a distance it looks like an exercise in politics rather than a serious attempt to address the educational needs of a city population. It is governance by oppression rather than empowerment; an approach that once again is heavy on the consequences of failure and light on enabling procedures.

At no point in the debates surrounding both pieces of legislation is space given to a discussion on the purposes of schooling. Indeed there is only an implicit assumption that outputs are to be judged against state and national norms, a specious argument given both the student population of the city and the lack of supporting evidence for the central tenet of improved academic achievement in comparison to other countries as the rationale for schooling.

One of the key objectives of PA 85-1418 was that all schools should reach national norms within five years, but the problem with this objective is that like is not being judged against like. The Chicago Public School system is not representative of the population of Chicago as illustrated by the Tribune (page 40) who report the parents of tens of thousands of white children, fearful of busing proposals, transferring their children to private schools or moving to the suburbs. A similar exodus of middle-class black children has also taken place which, together with a drop in birth rate, resulted in a public school enrollment decline of nearly 28% over the 18 years up to 1987. By 1988 blacks made up 60% of enrollment, Hispanics 24% and whites 12.9%. (The other 3.1% are mostly Asian and American Indians). This they describe as "out of whack" with the overall city population of about 42% black, 41% white and 17% Hispanic. Setting out to achieve a national average has to be a flawed concept given the starting point of the local population; judging achievement on standardised test scores that are inevitably culturally biased toward the dominant economic group similarly so. Critics of the CPS performance would do well to remember those basic tenets when comparing it to say, the Chicago Catholic Schools or to small town rural communities across the state.

Which brings us to the basic assumption which appears to underly the education systems of most Western democracies - that educational achievement is linked to economic growth. At federal level in the USA and the UK national goals for education have been established that are based on economic concerns. If, the argument goes, Japan or South Korea are outperforming Western economies and they have a higher level of student academic achievement then this is the causal factor. Ergo - get our students to a higher level of achievement and our economy will automatically improve! True or not, it is an attractively simple equation. The major flaw, of course, is that it changes nothing in terms of strategy or approach and plays in someone else's game. It represents a reinforcement

of the status quo, an aspirational framework that has more to do with Corporate America than it has for society at large, and looks to squeeze more success out of an already successful group. Neither approach guarantees success and does little to improve access to achievement for those groups that are disadvantaged nor does it allow for a societal change of direction.

Any attempt a reform of a city school system that leads to sustained improvement has to start, therefore, from a premise of making learning fit for purpose, as yet an undefined concept in most school systems across the world. What is that we are trying to achieve through our education system? Is it an economic or social function? This is a particularly difficult question to answer for Chicago given the way in which the city is divided on grounds of social class and ethnicity (which bear a depressingly close correlation). To observers from cities elsewhere in the world where multi-cultural and multi-ethnic communities and schools are the norm it comes as a shock to see the concentration of ethnicities into communities and schools that is the norm for Chicago. Territories and enclaves have clear geographic delineation and those populations are correspondingly represented in schools. It is possible to find an overcrowded Mexican-American school and an almost empty African-American school within a few blocks of each other on the West side. Whilst it is difficult to argue with the evidence that supports the growth in early years learning that is generated by mother tongue teaching and contextualised approaches one must question the long term efficacy of such an approach for producing adults that can operate across a range of societies, a pre-requisite for success in a world market.

So on two levels the Chicago school reforms have not addressed the major issues and for that reason can be seen to be 'fiddling' at the edges whilst their school outputs continue

largely unchanged or even worse than they were in 1988. Firstly the assessment measures applied to students are inappropriate to their circumstances and experiences and, secondly, the central purpose of the education system remains undefined and therefore open to interpretation. The underlying premise of PA 85-1418 was that the transference of power would ensure "that enhanced participation at the school community level will leverage the systemic restructuring needed to sustain improvements in teaching and learning" (Bryk, A., Easton, J., Kerbrow, D., Rollow, S. & Sebring, P. , 1993). Such an approach, described as a 'market forces approach', has not proved effective in bringing about substantive improvement to either academic achievement or to enhanced learning outcomes (Ball, 1994, Male, 1995) in the UK where there has been significantly higher levels of delegated funding. Instead schools have worked hard to change their population, thus further reinforcing the inequalities. It is an outcome that all too easily leads to the type of schooling processes so chillingly and graphically portrayed by Kozol (1992).

So the question that still needs to be asked is "what it is we are trying to achieve through the schooling process?" If it is to improve scores on existing measurement scales we already know there are no guarantees that these automatically lead to improved economic performance and, indeed, that it is asking more of the existing cohort of successful students. On an economic front one alternative is to widen the base of education. Is it not significant that Japan has not only the highest achievers, but also has the highest results of the lowest quartile? (Beare & Lowe Boyd, 1993). Why not investigate alternative scenarios for the future? Take, for example, the aspirations we have in the UK to be at the hub of the information revolution due to come about because of the Super Highway. Well placed geographically, we are also well suited as a nation to profit from this development because of our history of major technological innovations and because the language of the highway will be English. That is *providing* we can produce a working

population that is proficient in information handling and computer skills. In order to achieve that it is argued that we need to broaden the base of education, if necessary by diverting funds from further and higher education. In other words we probably have enough technological innovators and what we need will be more skilled operatives if we are truly to capitalise on all of our advantages. There may be similar questions to be posed for Chicago.

On a social front it may be possible to determine learning outcomes that have less to do with the economic aspirations of the country (or large corporations) and more to do with enhancing the abilities of students to build a portfolio of learning strategies and give them the skills to take advantage of modern technology in the information age. Admittedly there is little evidence to suggest that this motive will be adopted by any Western democracy, but where is the debate within Chicago?

Both proposals outlined above would place a completely different imperative on the desired educational outcomes and takes the city away from a model of higher and higher standards and into one that affects a much broader spread of the population and begins to ask questions that are more fundamental than improved test scores. Worldwide we have all been chasing the notion of effective schools for a long time without ever seeming to answer the basic questions of effective for who and for what? Those issues need to be resolved if the city is serious in its intent to improve its educational outcomes and in the case of Chicago there is a need to agree that in partnership with the federal and state authorities and with the schools if they are to achieve truly meaningful results

In truth, however, the financial means to bring about change that is contextualised at the school level has not been addressed. Even with the most recent legislation schools in

Chicago are denied direct access to the bulk of resources designated for the education system. Powers granted to the LSC under the 1995 Act refer only to internal accounts and the right to rent their building for out of hours use for public lectures, concerts and other community events. Systemic reform in England & Wales has been much more powerful, however, in extending democracy and establishing the sort of market place environment envisaged by the Chicago reform. LSCs are closely matched in intent to school governing bodies in England & Wales<sup>1</sup>, although that would appear to be the closest the Chicago system comes to matching the extent of delegation. In addition to legislation that has guaranteed parental representation in the UK at least equal to appointments made by local political groups, the 1988 Education Act also introduced the Local Management of Schools, a process of financial delegation that by now requires the delegation of at least 85% of the Potential Schools Budget to the governing body of each maintained school. My investigations of Chicago shows that the LSC are really only concerned with the determination of very small amounts of expenditure in relation to their compatriots in England & Wales. Consequently the Chicago School Reform Board of Trustees still holds responsibility for the allocation of the vast bulk of resources in a budget that totals close to \$3bn annually. Claims that they have introduced a simplified financial structure which gives Trustees flexibility to make cost-saving changes that refocus resources on students tend to overlook the basic fact that schools are not free to make independent resource decisions that are relevant to their needs. Elementary schools in Chicago, for example, can only call upon funds from outside sources, such as the MacArthur Foundations, to assist with the presentation of their learning programme. For a school in the inner city, formerly eligible for State Chapter 1 and foundation funds, this could amount to over \$1m for a school of about 600 pupils, whilst schools in the more affluent suburbs got no discretionary funds in addition to centrally allocated resources.

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<sup>1</sup> Schools in England & Wales operate under separate regulations to those in Scotland & Northern Ireland, the other component countries of the United Kingdom.



Even before 1995 the extent of this financial self-determination pales into insignificance in comparison to a similar size school in England & Wales which may get somewhere around \$3-5m of delegated funds. Now with State Chapter 1 funds going into the CPS as a block grant the likelihood is of even less financial freedom at the school level.

Changes to teaching styles and classroom organisation that will enhance children's learning opportunities will only be achieved through the empowerment of teachers. There are beacons of light all over the city where energetic principals are finding ways through the political circumstances created by the establishment of LSCs and the administrative overlay required of them by the bureaucracy of the system. But these beacons are there despite the system and not because of it. Given the flexibility of financial delegation 'enjoyed' (no-one really enjoys it) by their counterparts in England & Wales these principals and LSCs could establish the teaching force and align the resources to support their role as instructional leaders, their preferred sphere of operation. Whilst the Trustees retains control over the resources to the extent that Chicago has it is difficult to see how this can be presented as a de-centralised system. Schools need to establish learning environments that suit the needs of their local circumstances and they are best placed to ascertain just what those needs are. The introduction of LSCs into Chicago schools has not so far produced the leverage necessary to force changes to classroom practice - something more needs to be done. If we in England & Wales have not yet got the reforms down to a level where they affect each child we are, at least, a lot closer because we have managed to remove one aspect of the competing factions from the process of education through a system of financial delegation which empowers rather than inhibits those charged with the delivery of the service.

In contrast to the political ideology evident in the UK, the move to reform in Chicago appears to have been in response to the publication of a damning report on schools by the staff of the Chicago Tribune which they described as "Worst in America" (Chicago Tribune, 1988). Defenders of the system are quick to draw attention to the shortcomings and sensationalism of the Tribune reports, particularly to its narrow focus on one elementary school, although they have to concede that the whole system was in trouble. Bryk et al (1993) describe the system thus, even borrowing the final sentence from the Tribune reports:

*Nearly half of the students who entered the city's eighteen economically disadvantaged high schools dropped out before graduation. And over half of those who did manage to graduate from these high schools were still reading below the ninth-grade level. Whether the focus was on the system statistics or media accounts, the same message was clear: the Chicago Public Schools were "failing miserably the dual mission of preparing young people to realise the dreams that are their birthright and of providing for the city's future a qualified and productive citizenry. 1)*

Obviously it is easier to ask questions than it is to provide working solutions and we must bear in mind that those posing the difficult questions may be operating on a separate agenda. Certainly there is a huge political overlay to the CPS system and it is clear that many of the protagonists in the debate have vested interests and are engaged in a very inelegant war where the only real casualties continue to be from the student population. Evidence is produced by protagonists to show the inefficiency of Pershing Road in that it employs 3100 administrators for a student population of 411,000 where the Catholic schools employ 33 administrators for 95, 000 students and score much better on the Illinois Goals Assessment Program (IGAP). As a result calls have alternatively been made for the dissolution of the district into smaller units, and for the issuing of a voucher system in order to encourage the market driven approach. Meanwhile the Mayor has suggested that the system should either be privatised, as in Hartford, Miami Beach and Baltimore, or given over to the Archdiocese to run on the city's behalf. Whichever way you cut it, however, pressure has been mounting on the city to justify its programme of school reform

and that concern has now become endemic following the publication of the first annual evaluation of school reform by Daniel Polsby, a law professor at Chicago's Northwestern University, that shows that after five years of reform the public school system is now doing worse than it was before the programme started (Polsby, 1994). Apart from providing evidence to suggest that student academic performance on standardised test scores has actually declined in 10 of 14 indices since the introduction of the reform five years ago when measured against the IGAP and the Test of Achievement and Proficiency (TAP) taken by CPS 11th grade students, Polsby also introduces new and alarming indicators of poor performance by Chicago public Schools that illustrate high levels of school violence, low levels of attendance and only a tiny increase in the proportion of high school graduates that still trails the national and state average. His analysis of those four key factors in schooling has led him to conclude:

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**Key findings of  
Polsby's study**

**Safety:** Chicago accounts for about a quarter of the state's enrollment, but over 70% of all criminal offenses committed against school personnel. In 1992, Chicago reported 21.2 attacks on school personnel per 10,000 pupils; by contrast, the Illinois public schools outside of Chicago reported just 3.

**Attendance:** In 1992-93, average daily attendance in the Chicago Public Schools stood at 89.1% of the enrolled student body, a 2% improvement over 1989-90 (the year school reform went into effect). CPS attendance remains well below the statewide average, however, which was 93.4% in 1992-93.

**Graduation rates:** Between 1989-90 and 1992-93, CPS graduation rates improved 6%. But the CPS' 1992-93 graduation rate - a dismal 50.3% - remained far below the state average which was 81.4% in 1992-93.

**Standardised test scores:** Student achievement in the CPS since 1989-90 has fallen in 10 of 14 measures of student achievement, and is unchanged on one. CPS students' test scores have fallen by as much as 22% since the effective date of school reform, and student performance relative to the state mean has fallen by as much as 25%.

At school level, however, there is concern among the principals that real improvements in the performance of children has been achieved, but is not yet at a level where it impacts on the statistical evidence used either by Polsby or the administrators at Pershing Road. This 'street level' feeling is supported by the reports of the Consortium on Chicago School Research (Bryk et al, 1991, 1992, 1993 & 1994) who have produced a battery of indicators that they claim demonstrate reform is working. The validity of their indicators is questionable, being heavily reliant upon subjective factors, and it is a response reminiscent of the British government's repeated sightings of the "green shoots of recovery" during the recession. Clearly beauty is in the eye of the beholder and even the Consortium has to admit that judged against the aims of the Chicago School Reform Act - that all schools should reach national norms within five years - progress has not been sufficient.

Schools in the UK endeavouring to meet the National Targets for Education and Training, for example, are already starting to put pressure on the middle band of students, in other words to become more efficient with those students who are marginally underachieving. Intensive programmes of individual tutorial support are emerging, designed to closely monitor student progress and maximise achievement especially amongst those children previously largely ignored by the schooling process - the ones who did what was expected of them without ever drawing attention to themselves. Little is being done, however, to change the programme for the non achievers for there is no incentive to do so. Schools in the UK are bursting at the seams at the moment so their programme of recruitment is not geared up to attracting more students, but more aligned to changing the profile of the school. Permanent exclusions from school are on the increase and higher scores on the standardised test system are the prime motivating force.

The quality of instructional leadership was identified as the major factor in effecting change in school outputs by the principals I spoke to in Chicago who were concerned with finding or creating assessment tools that allowed them to monitor children's progress and make learning fit for purpose, but there is nothing in the Chicago Reform Act to ensure that classroom practice is reviewed and improved.

That scenario is no closer to being established in England & Wales than it is in Chicago, the main difference being that the fuller delegation of funding is allowing schools to determine the staffing profile and budget approaches that match their local circumstances more fully than the formula allocation. The educational scene is still dominated by achievement on recognised programmes of study with national certification, again in comparison with other countries in the world market place. There are calls, however, for a funding system that is more closely aligned to the educational performance of all children which may bring about the sort changes to teaching and classroom organisation that will result in making learning fit for purpose. To understand this concept of a value-added approach to education in this context you first need to understand the experiences of educational organisations within the 16-19 age group.

Compulsory education ends in England & Wales at the age of 16. A large proportion of the continuing student population is now housed within educational organisations working under Further Education regulations as opposed to School Regulations. The 1992 Further & Higher Education Act changed the funding basis of these institutions, firstly by incorporating them and then by introducing a mechanism for effecting payments for state supported programmes according to three components of student contact with the educational process. Payment was divided between Entry, On-programme and Exit with total state funding determined on a weighted analysis of each course. The Entry

component provides funding not only for administration and student counselling, but also for diagnostic assessment. That assessment provides an indicator for projecting the student's learning outcomes that allows for an assessment of the value added to that student by the institution. In other words if they achieve more than the level expected then the institution has achieved 'value-added'. A portion of the funding is retained by government, therefore, in respect of the institution reaching its output targets. The significance of this to maintained schools is that already one education minister and the Chief Executive of a leading award body are calling for these changes to be introduced to institutions in the compulsory education sector. Such is the history of transferring ideas worked out in the post-compulsory sector that there is every reason to believe schools will be forced into a three part funding mechanism.

The adoption of that mechanism does not automatically lead to the adoption of a value-added approach to schooling, however, until it is coupled with the requirement for schools to publish their results. Currently there is a huge debate in England & Wales over the presentation of results as league tables unweighted for socio-economic or other significant factors that looks like being resolved by the inclusion of information that will contextualise the learning outcomes of each school. In my estimation it will not be long before we see the publication of school results that demonstrate the value added by that institution. That is already possible at 'A' Level where a national base line figure has been established through the work of researchers at Newcastle University called the 'A-Level Information System' (ALIS). This system provides a predictor of student performance that is reliable to plus or minus one grade (on a five grade system) and is based on the evidence of their performance at age 16 in the national General Certificate of Secondary Education. Similar systems are already or will soon be in place for all other nationally identified assessment targets (Key Stages 1, 2 & 3 in schools and a range of qualifications in post-compulsory

education). If we were to extend the notion of value-added to those aspects of the student population which do not or cannot reach recognised national standards we should be able, through a process of diagnostic assessment and subsequent monitoring, to track and report on the progress of each child in the school system.

In the meantime ...

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