

Daley school plan fails to make grade

Renaissance 2010 officials defend efforts to upgrade education for Chicago students over last 6 years

By Stephanie Banchemo Tribune Reporter

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Six years after Mayor Richard Daley launched a bold initiative to close down and remake failing schools, Renaissance 2010 has done little to improve the educational performance of the city's school system, according to a Tribune analysis of 2009 state test data.

Scores from the elementary schools created under Renaissance 2010 are nearly identical to the city average, and scores at the remade high schools are below the already abysmal city average, the analysis found.

The moribund test scores follow other less than enthusiastic findings about Renaissance 2010 -- that displaced students ended up mostly in other low-performing schools and that mass closings led to youth violence as rival gang members ended up in the same classrooms. Together, they suggest the initiative hasn't lived up to its promise by this, its target year.

"There has been some good and some bad in Renaissance 2010, but overall it wasn't the game changer that people thought it would be," said Barbara Radner, who heads the Center for Urban Education at [DePaul University](#). "In some ways it has been more harmful than good because all the attention, all the funding, all the hope was directed at Ren10 to the detriment of other effective strategies CPS was developing."

Turning around public schools is the core of Daley's efforts to keep the city vibrant. But the outcome of his ambitious education experiment is as important to the nation as it is to Chicago. The architect of Renaissance 2010, former schools CEO [Arne Duncan](#), is now the U.S. Secretary of Education -- and he's taking the Daley-Duncan model national as part of his Race to the Top reform plan.

Duncan is using an unprecedented \$4.35 billion pot of money to lure states into building education systems that replicate key Ren10 strategies. The grant money will go to states that allow [charter schools](#) to flourish and to those that experiment with turning around failing schools -- all part of the Chicago reform.

Illinois education officials hope to get a piece of the pie and are preparing an application for Tuesday's deadline.

Renaissance 2010 was launched in 2004 after decades of school reforms failed to fix chronically underperforming schools. City leaders promised to close the worst schools and open 100 innovative

ones that would rely heavily on the private sector for ideas, funding and management. Central to the plan was an increase in charter schools, which receive tax dollars but are run by private groups free from many bureaucratic constraints.

Daley and Duncan credit the program with injecting competition and invigorating a stagnant system and say it has laid a foundation the district can build on.

"We haven't looked at all the data, but our belief is that Renaissance 2010 dramatically improved the educational options in communities across Chicago," said Peter Cunningham, Duncan's spokesman, who followed him from Chicago to [Washington](#). "We believe that it is contributing to Chicago's overall success. Renaissance 2010 and Race to the Top both reflect a willingness to be bold, hold yourself to higher standards and push for dramatic change, not incremental change."

Cunningham and other supporters argue that many new schools, mainly in low-income and high-crime neighborhoods, are outperforming nearby traditional schools. They say attendance rates, parent satisfaction and student engagement are higher. And they point out that expecting significant gains from startup schools is unrealistic.

On Saturday, Daley said the program will yield measurable results, but that it will take time.

"I'll accept any criticism, and any adjustment of it, we'll look at it," Daley said.

There have been some bright spots.

Most of the elementary schools overhauled by the Academy for Urban School Leadership, which changes the school staff but leaves the students in place, are outperforming their previous selves. The Noble Street charter schools, which operate in some of the toughest neighborhoods, have college-going rates that even suburban schools would envy. And innovation has flourished, as the city's first all-boys public high school, Urban Prep, opened in [Englewood](#), and the Chicago Virtual Charter School went online.

The business community embraced the reform agenda and has ponied up \$50 million to the Renaissance Schools Fund, a nonprofit created by the Civic Committee of the Commercial Club of Chicago. The group has awarded about \$30 million to 63 new schools.

Currently, 92 Renaissance 2010 schools enroll 34,000 children -- about 8 percent of the district total. Seven new schools will open in the fall, and the city plans to announce new school closings within the next few weeks.

The new schools mirror the district demographically, except they enroll fewer special education students and those who speak English as a second language.

Chicago school officials don't publicly track the performance of the Renaissance 2010 schools. But [Ron Huberman](#), who took the helm of the city schools when Duncan left, said he has crunched the numbers and about one-third of the new schools are outperforming their neighborhood counterparts; one-third are identical in performance; the rest do worse.

A Tribune analysis shows that in Renaissance 2010 elementary schools, an average of 66.7 percent of students passed the 2009 Illinois Standards Achievement Test, identical to the district

rate. The Ren10 high school passing rate was slightly lower on state tests than the district as a whole -- 20.5 percent compared with 22.8 percent. But it's identical at 17.6 percent when selective enrollment schools, where students test to get in, are removed from the equation.

Only a quarter of Renaissance 2010 schools had test scores high enough to meet the federal goals set by No Child Left Behind, the signature education policy of the George W. Bush administration. Chicago students as a whole still post some of the lowest test scores on national math and reading exams.

A series of studies released last year paints an unimpressive picture of Renaissance 2010.

One report, commissioned by the Renaissance Schools Fund, found that children in the fund-supported schools had low academic performance and posted test score gains identical to students in the nearby neighborhood schools.

"The Renaissance Schools Fund-supported schools will need to rapidly accelerate the academic performance of their students if they are to realize their own expectations," researchers wrote.

Phyllis Lockett, president of the fund, said their most recent analysis was more encouraging. Using test data not yet publicly available, the study found that pass rates in their schools are now 4 percentage points higher than those in comparable neighborhood schools.

"It's not like we are ready to cheer and scream success," Lockett said. "Our schools are doing very well but we've got to raise the bar. It's not good enough to 'just be better than the neighborhood schools.' But with the complexity of opening a new school, that's a good early goal."

Opening new innovative schools was only half of the Renaissance 2010 strategy. Closing the lowest performers was the other component -- and nothing created more disruption to the city's educational landscape.

Even in schools with single-digit pass rates, violence-filled hallways and embarrassing absentee patterns, parents picketed the streets and filled the school board chambers, begging that their schools be left alone.

But Duncan stood his ground and closed schools. The migration of teenagers across racial, cultural and gang boundaries burdened a high school system already struggling to educate students. Violence escalated.

Some point to the 2005 closing of Carver High School as the flash point for the September death of [Derrion Albert](#), the 16-year-old [Fenger High School](#) student who was beaten, kicked and smashed with large planks of wood about a half-mile from school. District officials converted Carver into a military academy, sending teenagers to other schools, including Fenger. The two groups never got along and tempers flared inside and outside the school, culminating with the beating caught on videotape.

The academic outcomes of the displaced students wasn't any better. A report, issued in October by the Chicago Consortium on School Research at the [University of Chicago](#), found that students from closed schools landed, for the most part, at campuses that were just as bad and then progressed at the same predictably low levels.

One positive outcome: students who ended up in higher-performing schools made more academic progress.

Duncan, pained by the increased violence, embraced a new strategy in 2006. Known as the "turnaround," it replaces the school principal and teachers with more effective educators, but leaves the children in place.

The Academy for Urban School Leadership has transformed eight schools under this model. Three of the four elementary schools that have at least two years of test scores have seen an uptick in results.

At Harvard School for Excellence in Englewood, for example, pass rates increased from 32 percent to 56 percent since the private, nonprofit group took over two years ago. Principal Andre Cowling, a former Army captain who served in the first Gulf War, attributes the progress to a razor-sharp focus on data, parent outreach, teacher training and a culture of safety and learning.

"Before they took over it was like World War III inside the school, fights everywhere," said Wanda Wilburn, who has three children at Harvard. "But they came in and stretched their hands out to us. Our kids are learning now."

Despite the program's mixed reviews, Daley promised this month to push forward and expand Renaissance 2010.

Huberman cautions against tossing out the entire strategy, a reflex typical in education reform. Instead, he plans to promote the components that work and get rid of the ones that don't -- even if that means closing down underperforming Renaissance 2010 charter schools, he said.

Huberman has promised that students displaced by school closings will be guaranteed spots in higher performing schools and will be assigned staff members to help them adjust to their new schools. He told the Tribune on Friday that he also will set aside coveted spots in magnet schools to accommodate them. Huberman also promised to devise safe passage plans to make sure children can get to their new schools safely.

"The first phase of Renaissance 2010 was the organic part of a brand-new reform," he said. "In the second phase, we need to put our energy behind the proven factors that work and drive them hard. If we had not gone through stage one -- as painful as it might have been -- we could not get to stage two."

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