

Eight Cities

A project of Bellwether Education Partners



Chicago, Illinois

[DOWNLOAD PDF](#)

11 MINUTE READ

State law transfers control of Chicago Public Schools to a mayorally appointed school board, which appoints a CEO. State law also mandates a school performance framework and increased control for local school councils based on school performance, and it limits collective bargaining rights.

CPS begins "Renaissance 2010" initiative to close low-performing schools and open/rebuild 100 new schools by 2010.

Office of New Schools created.

School-level autonomies increased for three types of schools: contract, performance, and charter.

Unified enrollment for high school students begins under "GoCPS."

Chicago Principal Partnership created.

1995

2004

2017

2001

Chicago Teacher Residency Program begins, administered by the Academy for Urban School Leadership.

Arne Duncan appointed CEO of CPS. During his tenure (2001-2009), 82 low-performing or low-attendance schools close; 116 schools open.

2014

Revised School Quality Rating Policy (SQRP) rolls out, heavily weighing student growth in grades 3-8.

Summary (2001-Present):

- Diverse school types see progress despite revolving-door leadership
- Regional ecosystem of research organizations and foundations support reforms
- Focus on strong principals and pipeline of able educators
- Gradual rollout of accountability system leads to more buy-in
- Big reform agenda adds momentum but rarely succeeds on all fronts
- [2020 Chicago Updates](#)

Student Achievement Highlights

- The average four-year graduation rate in Chicago Public Schools (CPS) increased by more than 30 points from 2002 to 2018, and by 20 points over 6 years, from 54.2% in 2011 to 75.6% in 2018.
- From 2009 to 2014, the average CPS student achieved six grade levels of academic growth in just five years of school from third grade to eighth grade, improving at a faster rate than 96% of U.S. school districts. This was true for students from all racial/ethnic subgroups.
- From 2003 to 2017, progress in average math performance among CPS fourth- and eighth-grade students was second in the nation among urban districts.

The third-largest district in the country, Chicago Public Schools (CPS) is rarely noted for its quality. Its successes are buried under stories it shares with other large districts: depopulation, school closures, violence, corruption, strikes, and political uncertainty. Amid the tumult, Chicago's tireless commitment to public education has resulted in one of the fastest improvements of any large urban school district in the country. By 2017, the overall district graduation rate was up over 30 points from 2002, with increases reflected in all school types. Sixty percent of its students scored higher than the national testing average in reading.

These outcomes were powered by committed leaders making data-driven choices. Former CPS Chief Executive Officer Jean-Claude Brizard credits "really smart educators who put their heads down and get the work done ... teams of people who really care." These educators benefited from Chicago's methodical use of data to drive educators' professional development and instruction. Other important elements of CPS' strategy included a diversification of school types, necessary but painful school closures dictated by shifting demographics, and the creation of a rigorous school performance management system employing a broad range of indicators. The groundwork for improvements was laid in the late 1990s, but the achievement gains began around 2003. While not all endeavors hit their targets, foundational pieces set the stage for continued gains, even during years of revolving system leadership.

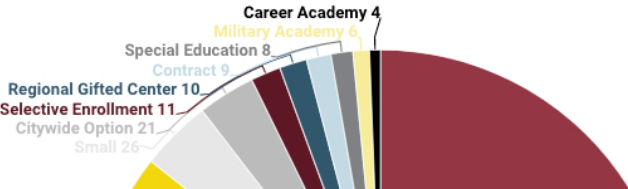
Throughout these changes, Chicago tapped an incredible ecosystem for research and philanthropic support. By adding data, talent, and financial capacity, this rich ecosystem, according to a Stanford study, has helped "Chicago Public Schools students [make] the fastest academic progress of the 100 largest school districts in the country, with all racial groups making similar improvements."

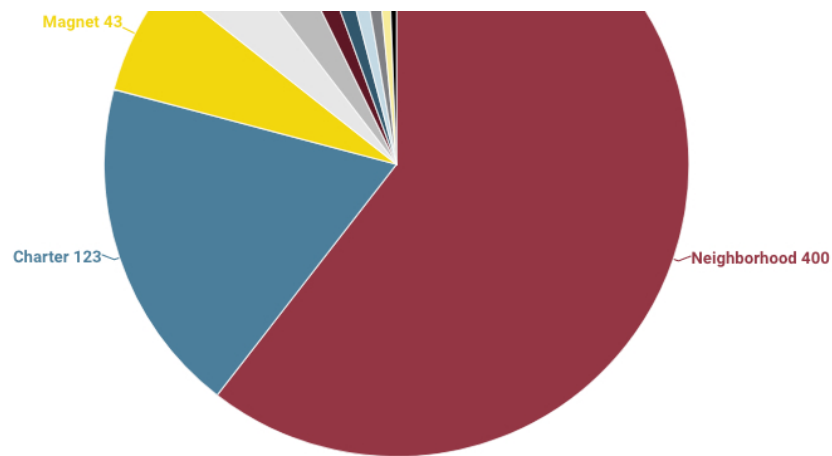
Many longtime Chicago residents and educators recall the low point of Chicago schools when, in 1987, then-U.S. Secretary of Education William Bennett said, "I'm not sure there's a system of education as bad as the Chicago system." Under state control at the time, the Illinois legislature would hand CPS control over to the mayor's office in 1995 and pass the Chicago School Reform Amendatory Act. This legislation allowed Mayor Richard Daley to replace the Board of Education with a five-person reform board of trustees. Daley used his mayoral control to appoint Paul Vallas as the first CEO for CPS, and together they balanced the budget, got a new teacher contract signed, closed underperforming schools, and worked to open new schools, which included recruiting and authorizing some charter schools.

Following Vallas' departure in 2001, Daley appointed Arne Duncan as his successor, who would remain in the role until 2009. His unusually long-term tenure and effective working partnership with Mayor Daley helped catalyze further improvements.

In 2004, encouraged by improving student achievement at some of the new schools started during the Vallas years, Daley and Duncan launched Renaissance 2010, an ambitious initiative to close low-performing schools and rebuild 100 new schools of different types by 2010. The new plan focused largely on high schools, often the biggest challenge for large urban districts. The district's Office of New Schools was tasked with transforming schools or opening new ones that were given more autonomy and accountability than traditional district schools. These included schools operating under three different governance types: contract schools (essentially in-district charter schools), performance schools, and charter schools. All three governance structures provided schools the freedom to choose their curricula and use their budgets in ways that best supported their students, and some schools received additional autonomies. The diversity of school models was a strategic piece of what the Chicago Tribune called the "most ambitious effort in a decade."

Number of Schools by Type in Chicago Public Schools





- **Neighborhood:** Each neighborhood school has an attendance boundary. Generally, all students who live within this area may attend the school.
- **Charter:** These schools are independently operated and not subject to the same state laws, district initiatives, and board policies that traditional public schools are.
- **Magnet:** Specializes in a specific subject area such as Montessori, International Baccalaureate, math and science, humanities, or dual language immersion.
- **Small School:** With no more than 350 students in an elementary school and 500 in a high school, small schools foster environments in which parents, teachers, and students get to know one another well.
- **Citywide Option:** These schools provide interventions and transitional education pathways for at-risk students.
- **Selective Enrollment:** All Selective Enrollment Programs have minimum eligibility requirements in order for students to apply.
- **Regional Gifted Center:** Provides an accelerated instructional program that emphasizes thinking, reasoning, problem solving and creativity. Admission testing is required.
- **Contract:** Contract schools are public schools open to all CPS students. These schools are operated by private entities under contract with CPS to provide an additional education option for students.
- **Special Education:** Schools offer programs and services designed to meet the needs of the child and the family. Enrollment is based on students' Individualized Education Program.
- **Military Academy:** For students who wish to develop leadership and team-building skills as well as receive military training.
- **Career Academy:** Students receive a college-preparatory curriculum and a career-focused education in different fields.

Source: [Chicago Data Portal](#) and [Chicago Public Schools](#)

By 2010, Renaissance 2010 had resulted in the creation of 92 of the proposed 100 schools, but the results of those schools were mixed. The [Chicago Tribune](#) reported that “one-third of the new schools are outperforming their neighborhood counterparts; one-third are identical in performance; the rest do worse.” Critics of the program focused on the failure to achieve district-wide improvement and lamented that many lower-performing schools faced closure. Proponents focused on the success stories, many within the charter sector, where gains for low-income students were particularly impressive.

While much of the debate focused on the performance of individual schools, Renaissance 2010 also resulted in lasting shifts in families' expectations and the culture around education in Chicago. The idea that families should be able to choose the school that best fits their children, regardless of type or location, continues to shape CPS today. In 2017, [three-quarters of Chicago's incoming 9th graders](#) selected a school outside their neighborhood. And choice is now easier, with universal enrollment for high school students implemented with [GoCPS](#) in the 2018-2019 school year.

Today, the vast majority of CPS students attend either a district-run school of their choice or a charter school, often with special features aligned to student interests or needs. Less than a quarter of high school students and just under 60 percent of elementary students attend their [neighborhood school](#). It's no surprise that there's a range of school models within the district's 121 charter schools, but CPS'

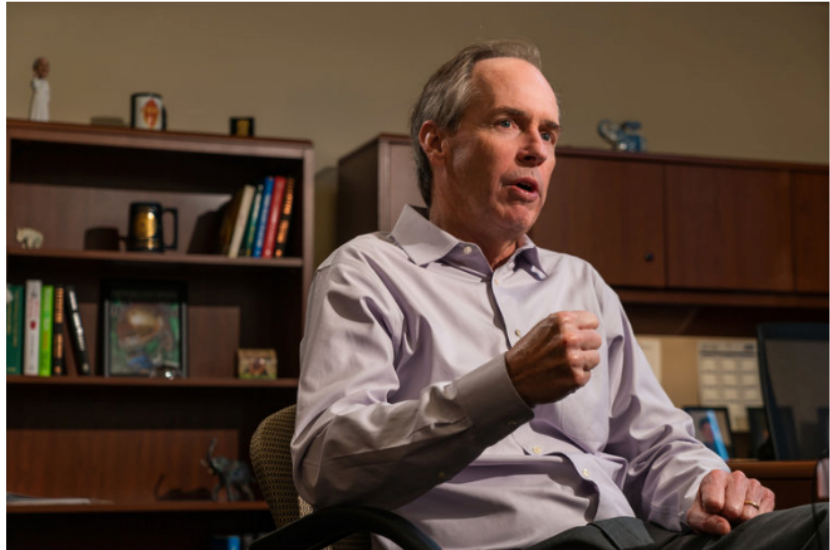
district schools also offer an impressive selection of choice programs ranging from classical schools that provide a liberal arts education to military academies.

With this diversity of school models and operators, CPS needed to provide transparency around their outcomes. CPS first used a standardized performance contract for all types of schools. They built it out slowly and in a staggered fashion, allowing teachers and schools to get used to the metrics and data supporting accountability. Once school-based leaders got more comfortable, CPS designed a public-facing school scorecard to make school selection easier for parents and students. Eventually, this process led to the School Quality Rating Policy (SQRP), which merged the two previous functions into one centralized performance framework.

The SQRP is primarily driven by student achievement outcomes and growth within a school, based on the previous year. The five-tiered performance system relies on a broad range of indicators of success. Other than test results and student achievement, the well-rounded tool includes growth and culture to better reflect each school. The SQRP improved the rigor of school-by-school comparisons. To be in good standing today, a school must be at a minimum of the 50th attainment percentile compared to national scores, and the 1 and 1+ ratings require 70th and 90th attainment percentiles, respectively.

The lesson Chicago learned was that introducing accountability metrics through a series of conversations with school leaders and teachers increases buy-in and support for those measures when they are formalized. According to former CPS Chief Administrative Officer Tim Cawley, the SQRP was important to parents too: “It mattered to communities. They would be upset if [their student’s school] got a low grade.”

Meanwhile, a robust nonprofit and philanthropic community was crucial in supporting Chicago’s data-centric focus. Marin Gjaja, a longtime Chicago resident and senior partner at Boston Consulting Group, notes Chicago’s “human intellectual capital,” which provides “real expertise and capability that sits outside and supports” the district. The Boston Consulting Group (BCG) in Chicago donated \$8 to \$10 million over five years in pro-bono consulting services, providing data analysis and strategic planning support for school improvement efforts. At the same time, the University of Chicago Consortium on School Research, a nationally renowned academic research-based group, served as an ongoing partner, driving ideas for the district and conducting ongoing evaluation of progress and results, in what Brizard described as a “research body locked arm in arm with a school body.”



Tim Cawley

Nonprofit partners also bolstered CPS’ efforts to raise the quality of school staff through a comprehensive talent strategy and series of trainings. Former Chicago Board of Education member and longtime school supporter David Vitale notes that everyone in the Duncan administration agreed that principals were a crucial “lever” for improving school and student performance, and they enlisted partners to accelerate this work. New principals received “chief of school” training from the nonprofit Center for Urban Education Leadership, increasing the supply of qualified school leaders. Another vital ecosystem partner was the nonprofit Chicago Public Education Fund, which invested more than \$74 million over nearly 20 years, working with partners across the city, to “sustain a culture of strong leadership.”

Other organizations in Chicago stepped up to provide teacher training and development. The Chicago Teacher Residency (CTR) is the nation’s “first and largest teacher residency program,” run by the Academy for Urban School Leadership (AUSL). It features a yearlong program where residents train under the direction of mentor teachers while earning a master’s degree. According to a Bridgespan analysis, between 2013 and 2016, AUSL schools with teachers from CRT helped students in grades 2 through 8 advance annually in math and reading. Reading proficiency increased from 29 percent to 44 percent, and math grew from 30 percent to 43 percent proficient. Additionally, that report noted “in 2016, 99 percent of AUSL’s graduating classes applied to college and 97 percent gained acceptance.”

Beginning in 2004, The Renaissance Schools Fund, a private fundraising and strategic partner formed by the Civic Committee of the Commercial Club of Chicago, was created to provide support for Chicago’s schools. It raised funds to invest \$100 million to support 81 new schools. Over the years, its role would evolve, becoming New Schools for Chicago in 2011, focusing on new school development and supporting school turnarounds. Most recently, it became Kids First Chicago, with a goal of helping communities and families identify, navigate, and advocate for high-quality public schools.

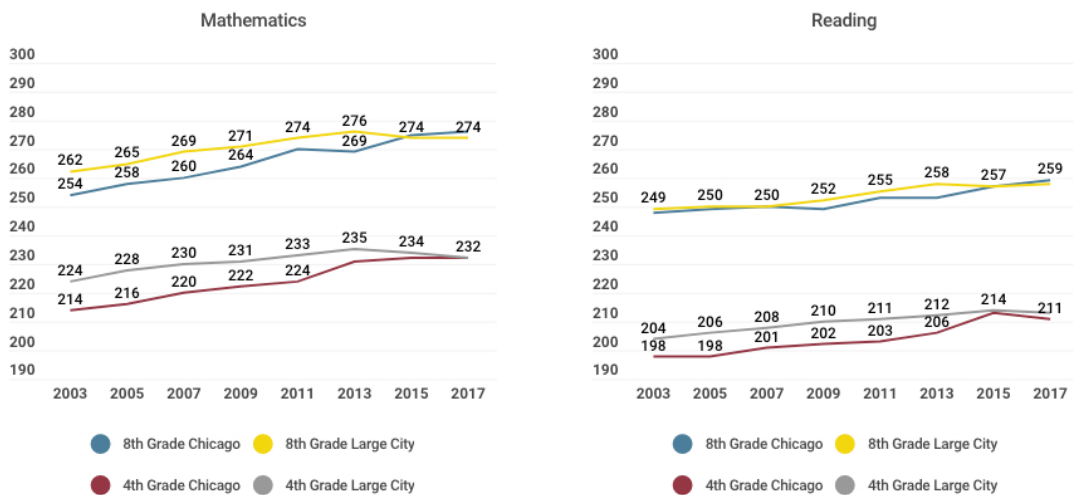
The district’s adoption of universal enrollment for high school students was heavily supported and influenced by Kids First Chicago, channeling parents’ wishes into advocacy and, eventually, district-level policy. Chief Executive Officer Daniel Anello works to turn community and parental input into action for better education outcomes. “[We] don’t make a recommendation from our parents [to CPS] without being ready to roll up our sleeves and dive in,” he says. The specific role of Kids First Chicago and the city’s support network overall demonstrate how cities can accelerate their education reform progress if they tap into intellectual energy and capacity in local universities and other motivated partners.



Daniel Anello

Chicago’s strong educational ecosystem brought stability and continuity to CPS during years of leadership volatility. Between 2009 — when Duncan left to join the Obama administration as Secretary of Education — and 2017, four “permanent” and two interim CEOs led CPS. Despite this revolving door in the CEO office, structures developed under Renaissance 2010 have remained in place, and students throughout the city have continued to make gains. A 2017 Stanford Center for Education Policy Analysis [compared](#) CPS students’ standardized test scores between 2009 and 2014 to those of public school students across the United States. It revealed two striking facts. First, across all racial and ethnic groups, Chicago students’ scores improved more, on average, than those of the average U.S. student. Second, scores of CPS students at each grade level improved more than the average scores of all U.S. students across all racial and ethnic groups. Chicago students’ scores rose by approximately two-thirds of a grade level compared to a national increase of one-sixth of a grade level.

Chicago Progress on National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) vs. Large City Average 2003-2017



Source: [National Assessment of Educational Progress](#)

While Chicago has a strong ecosystem and a portfolio of multiple school options, and has shown progress in improving student achievement, the district has also experienced significant challenges over the past several years, including teacher strikes, declining enrollment, financial troubles, and, most notably, a raft of high-profile school closures. A University of Chicago Consortium on School Research report studied the impact of the largest closures in 2013, when Chicago closed 49 schools and one high school program.

These schools were not Renaissance 2010 schools but rather low-performing traditional schools experiencing low enrollment. The report detailed how 36 of these schools had the lowest CPS rating at the time (“on probation”) and the rest were in “good standing,” with none “excellent.” In an effort to ease student transitions, CPS designated 48 “welcoming schools” for the nearly 12,000 displaced students. These schools received additional resources for materials and staff to make them more welcoming in the first year. Unfortunately, the study found leaders were unsure of how to be successful. While students and staff “appreciated the extra resources, technology, (and) programs,” they felt the added supports should have been extended because “it took a long period of time to build new school cultures and feel like a cohesive community.”

In that report, Eve Ewing, a postdoctoral scholar at the University of Chicago, highlights that “future proposed school [closures should consider] ... the ecological reality of the context within which such decisions are made.” The report found that, in particular, school leaders and staff wanted “more training and support in integrating school communities.” As seen in other systems, closing schools is fraught with challenges; receiving schools need to be better prepared for an influx of displaced and often disappointed students.



Janice Jackson (photo courtesy Chicago Public Schools)

Mayor Rahm Emanuel’s selection of Dr. Janice Jackson as new CEO of CPS in December 2017 gave a big nod to the Chicago ecosystem. Homegrown and educated on the South Side, Jackson received her bachelor’s degree from Chicago State University and a master’s and doctorate from the University of Chicago. She wrote “on her (graduate program) admissions essay that her goal was to eventually run the system.” Local education advocates hope Jackson will continue to build on the strategies that have fueled CPS’ improvements to date.

Jackson’s move to hire a chief portfolio officer signals to many that the current strategy of building and improving a dynamic, varied system of schools will continue and possibly even accelerate.

Chicago’s schools have rebounded dramatically from Bennett’s pronouncement and that low point in 1987. It remains to be seen, however, if CPS’ new leader, strong nonprofit partners, array of diverse schools, and sophisticated choice infrastructure get the attention they deserve.

The following organizations are or were clients or funders of Bellwether: Renaissance Schools Fund and Academy for Urban School Leadership. Bellwether authors maintained editorial control of these stories.

March 2020 Update

When we left off in Chicago, Dr. Janice Jackson had just begun her tenure as CEO of Chicago Public Schools. Jackson has persisted in that role through the election of Mayor Lori Lightfoot in spring 2019. This consistency is good news for a district that went through five permanent and interim CEOs between 2009 and 2017.

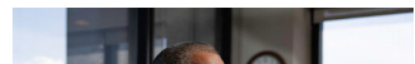
One of the biggest events in Jackson’s tenure was the contentious 11-day CPS teacher strike in October 2019. In comparison, the last teacher strike in 2012 only lasted four days. Contract negotiations between CPS and the Chicago Teachers Union reached an impasse around several talent strategy issues including class sizes, staffing requirements for support roles such as nurses and counselors, and teacher salary. Although the district’s overall strategy was not a top-line complaint in the strike, leaked documents from the negotiations revealed union opposition to aspects of teacher evaluation, student-based budgeting practices, and the school performance framework, as well as the district’s approach to school openings and closures, all of which feature prominently in our story of Chicago’s recent reforms.

In the meantime, outcomes for students and schools continue to improve across many metrics. But, as in other cities, deep challenges with achievement gaps and segregation remain, especially for black, Hispanic, and low-income students who make up a large share of CPS’ student body. In 2018-19, scores from the Measures of Academic Progress (MAP) tests showed 62% of students met or exceeded the national average in reading and 57% met or exceeded the national averages in math, with continued higher-than-national-average student growth rates. CPS has continued its focus on graduation rates and postsecondary paths for students, and now collects data on students’ paths to college and career after graduation.

Leadership development also continues to be central to Chicago’s talent strategies, and principal satisfaction in 2018 reached 76%, the highest point since surveys began in 2014. In line with national trends drawing attention to the importance of family and community engagement, CPS has made some internal changes to work toward greater parent inclusion, such as livestreamed public meetings and translation services for non-English-speaking families.



More Cities





How do you build a continuously improving system of schools?

Hear from leaders of eight cities that got more students into better schools faster.



Camden, New Jersey

"Urban Hope" Shapes a Small City



Chicago, Illinois

A Fast-Improving Urban District



Sign Up for News

Email Address

SIGN UP