BUSINESS VIEWS EDUCATION:
PROBLEMS IN THE CHICAGO PUBLIC SCHOOLS
AND SEVEN RECOMMENDATIONS

Herbert J. Walberg
Research Professor
of Urban Education
University of Illinois
at Chicago Circle

Jeanne Sigler
Research Consultant
Chicago United

CHICAGO UNITED

May 8, 1974

Robert T. Stark
Chicago United is a consortium of business and community leaders dedicated to using business resources to solve social problems in the City of Chicago.

Members of its Education Task Force are:

Warren Bacon, Assistant Director of Manpower Administration
James Brice, Vice Chairman
Charles Brown, President
James Compton, Executive Director
Robert Guiness, Vice Chairman
Charles Hurst, Jr., President
Louis Martin, Vice President & Editor
Warren Saunders, Executive Director
Anderson Schweich, President

Arthur Wood, Chairman

Members of Educational Advisory Panel are:

James S. Coleman, Professor of Sociology
James A. Davis, Director
Raymond Mack, Vice President
Herberg J. Walberg, Professor of Urban Education

Inland Steel Company
Arthur Andersen & Company
Illinois Bell Telephone Co.
Chicago Urban League
Standard Oil Company
Malcolm X Educational Foundation
Chicago Daily Defender
Better Boys Foundation
Chicago Metropolitan Mutual Assurance Company
Sears, Roebuck & Company

University of Chicago
National Opinion Research Center
Northwestern University
University of Illinois at Chicago Circle

Robert W. MacGregor
President
INTRODUCTION

The state of the Chicago Public Schools is often discussed and debated by parents, teachers, college admissions officers and politicians. The one group not frequently heard from, but directly affected by the deficiencies of the school system, is the business community. Business depends on the public schools to produce graduates having the basic skills and work attitudes necessary to fill entry level positions. When the schools fail in this endeavor, business must either reject many applicants or provide new employees with special remedial courses, individual counseling, and closely supervised on-the-job training. These remedies are time consuming, costly and often ineffective, resulting in high turnover rates which tend to increase business disenchanted with the city's labor force.

The problem of poor schools is not confined to the personnel offices of business, however. The economic health of the city is linked to the schools; for when questions of corporate location and expansion arise, schools are an important consideration: Will there be a sufficient supply of readily trainable workers?, Will management level employees want to locate their families in the city and place their children in the public schools?, and Can the company be assured of a skilled work force in the future? If the answers to these questions are negative, expansion is more likely to be directed away from the city, costing it dearly in terms of lost tax monies and job opportunities. Already the president of one of Chicago's largest corporations has said that a 1,000 person operation was moved out of state because of the low quality of the city's labor force.

Business, as well as government, is vitally interested in improving the City through new developments such as the New-Town-in Town component of the
Chicago 21 Plan.* The success of these plans depends on the willingness of people to live in them, however. Since schools are a foremost concern of the average citizen, families are unlikely to locate where the quality of the schools is thought poor. For this reason, city schools must remain competitive with suburban schools despite the extra burdens of an urban environment. Without substantial improvements in the school system, much of the effort which has gone into the Chicago 21 and other plans will have been wasted. The people, like business, desire top quality schools.

Finally, poor schools lead to wasted human potential. High school graduates without adequate skills and attitudes will have correspondingly meager opportunities to acquire employment which is challenging and financially rewarding.

The purpose of this report is to present research findings on the effectiveness of the Chicago Public Schools together with results of a survey of 20 personnel managers of 17 Chicago United companies on the quality of the public schools and their graduates. References are given to the research findings, and the survey results reported here were obtained through self-administered questionnaires and personal interviews with these personnel officers of Chicago United companies.

**RESEARCH FINDINGS**

The facts gathered in this report speak for themselves, and little interpretation is given below. Nevertheless, it may be stated at the outset that

* The Chicago 21 New Town-in Town is a proposed development to revitalize vacant land adjacent to the downtown district. The first phase of this plan includes the construction of housing for approximately 120,000 persons.
the public schools appear to be ineffective at preparing an increasingly large portion of students for careers, and that the administrative and teaching staffs are not held accountable for the quality of their product, the students. The first four points which follow present information on the Chicago public schools gathered from published research.

1. **Comparative Test Achievement**

Comparison of later with earlier grade scores on nationally standardized reading and mathematics achievement tests shows that Chicago Public Schools students, both white and minority, make the least gains compared to similar groups in several large cities in the United States—Baltimore, Detroit, Los Angeles, New York and Philadelphia. Chicago students fall behind nine percentile points in the early elementary grades.¹

2. **Inequality of Results & Resources**

Scores on intelligence, reading, and mathematics tests are directly related to geographical distance from the center of Chicago: in general, the farther out the school, the higher the average test scores. Moreover, the least experienced, less well educated teachers are concentrated in inner-city schools where students are poorly prepared and motivated for school. (Exhibit 1)²

3. **Scholarly Competitiveness**

The rate of winning National Merit Scholarships on competitive tests is as much as 125 times higher in suburban districts than in Chicago. In addition, nearly all the winners in Chicago attend independent or parochial schools, whereas nearly all the suburban winners attend public schools.³
4. **Teacher & Administration Quality**

Although there are many sincere, competent educators in the Chicago Public Schools, visits to schools by experienced researchers reveal laxity in teaching and a lack of probity in administrative reporting. One school reporting 90 percent daily attendance has as few as 20 percent of the students on class lists actually in their classes. State and federal aid to education and principal salaries are based in part on the inflated figures. In the course of the school visits, a number of teachers were observed who had low expectations for student performance and who had not prepared organized lessons.\(^4\)

5. **Receptiveness to Innovation**

Scattered evidence has come to the first author’s attention indicating the central office of the Board of Education, with exceptions, closes itself off to financial and university resources for educational innovation. Despite the large staff, some important opportunities for submitting proposals to carry out innovative projects with federal and state funds are missed. University staff within Chicago who want to carry out research or train teachers usually get far better cooperation from schools staffs in Gary and the Chicago suburbs.\(^5\)

---

**QUALITY OF THE SCHOOLS AND THEIR GRADUATES**

The responses to the survey of twenty chief personnel managers of seventeen Chicago United corporations reveal a number of findings which should seriously concern civic leaders and citizens of Chicago and the metropolitan area. The results are tabulated below.
6. **Quality of Education**

All of the managers interviewed feel that the quality of education is fair or poor. The question and responses are as follows:

**Question:** "Overall, how would you describe the quality of Education received in the Chicago Public Schools?"

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Excellent</th>
<th>Good</th>
<th>Fair</th>
<th>Poor</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>0</td>
<td></td>
<td>15</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Unfortunately, even some of the "fair" responses must be qualified by explaining that they come from the personnel offices of corporate headquarters which hire only a handful of high school graduates a year, and then only those who appear highly motivated.

7. **Employment Readiness**

When asked to estimate the proportion of high school graduates interviewed who are ready for employment with their present educational background, only three respondents felt more than 40% were ready for employment. Six respondents felt less than 20% of the graduates were ready for employment, nine felt that 20 to 40% were ready, and two gave no response to the question. The question and array of responses follow:
Question: Please estimate the proportion of Chicago Public High School graduates interviewed by your company who are ready for employment with their present educational background.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>0%-20%</th>
<th>20%-40%</th>
<th>40%-50%</th>
<th>60%-80%</th>
<th>Over 80%</th>
<th>No Response</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

On a follow-up question asking those who responded whether the indicated percentages represented reasonable levels of readiness for their companies, thirteen of eighteen indicated they did not. All thirteen felt they should be higher, with the percentage of readiness varying by the difficulty of the task.

In comparing readiness in basic skills of today’s graduates with those of five years ago, nine respondents said it was lower and eight said it was the same. Three were unable to give such a comparison. Several of those who stated it was the same said that the greatest decline occurred more than five years ago, so their “same” responses are not meant to be encouraging. No respondents felt that actual readiness was higher now than five years ago.

8. Verbal Communication

The one skill most needed in business employees is communication, for clear oral and written communication are essential to any business transaction. Yet it is in this area that most public high school graduates falter according to 19 of the 20 personnel directors and managers who cooperated in this survey. They repeatedly stated that graduates are lacking in the fundamentals of communications. The list below indicates the areas listed by the 19 respondents as needing the school’s highest priority for improvement:
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>AREA</th>
<th>NUMBER OF MENTIONS</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>a. Verbal Communication</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>b. Writing</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>c. Reading</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>d. Spelling</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>e. Grammar</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>f. Punctuation</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>g. Speech</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>h. Vocabulary</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

9. Mathematical Skills
Fourteen of 20 respondents thought the public schools should improve the level of mathematical skills of their students. Banks and major retail concerns have greatest need for these skills, to the extent that some are forced to give remedial training to make new employees job-ready.

10. Business skills--Typing and Shorthand
Eleven of 20 survey respondents listed typing as a high priority for improvement; nine listed shorthand, seven indicated "business skills," and three, "business machines." Similarly, a frequently voiced complaint in the personal interviews was that although graduates' records showed they had spent the requisite time in typing classes, proficiency tests administered personnel showed a distressing lack of competency. Bank where the demand for typists is great, they
who a few years ago would not even have been considered. Nearly all must be put through an intensive two week typing program set up by the bank—in effect teaching what should have been taught by the schools.

One favorable sign is that business generally sees the vocational schools as producing well-prepared employees; especially in the clerical areas. In addition, they seem pleased with work-study students who spend part of the day in school and the other part in on-the-job training for the business. It appears these students receive more personalized attention from their teachers and counselors, and this extra interest may motivate them to higher levels of performance.

11. **Work Attitudes**

The issue of work attitudes is a sensitive one, for the responsibility of developing this aspect of a student does not lie squarely with the schools. Nonetheless, six respondents felt the schools should place high priority on improving work attitude. Five others mentioned the need for improving the sense of work responsibility and discipline. While not fixing the whole blame for frequently poor work attitudes on the schools, personnel managers felt the schools should play some role in the development of promptness, respect for a task or job, and a sense of responsibility.

12. **Counseling**

One problem of considerable concern to personnel staffs is counseling in the schools. In the personal interviews there was
discussion of far too few counselors reaching far too few students, resulting in graduates having little knowledge of the "world of work." They are in many cases totally unprepared to move into careers suited to them, for they really have little idea of what careers they might like, what careers they are suited for, or what their chosen career will demand of them in terms of education, interpersonal relations, appearance, and work attitude. Business' personnel staffs must then function as school counselors, telling students their capabilities and teaching them the ins and outs of job responsible behavior. Even so, they cannot reach the many graduates who never get beyond the personnel office door because of such basics as poor appearance and inability to fill out an interview application.

**CONCLUSION**

Business is directly affected by the quality of the Chicago Public Schools both as a taxpayer and a user of its product. The schools are unsatisfactory, and they are growing worse. Other large city school systems beset with the same urban problems are doing a better job in imparting basic skills than the Chicago system. Even though results are disappointing, there has been no shake-up in the public schools. The following points express what business wants from the school system.

1. The schools must provide children with basic skills necessary to any and all life choices. These skills include reading, writing, spelling, arithmetic, and the ability to communicate orally.
2. The schools can do much better in introducing children to the world of work, so they have reasonable exposure to a variety of career options and know the amount and kind of training and education needed to reach a career goal. Many businesses are already participating in some form of career education (See Appendix) and are willing to do more.

3. Business joins others in holding the schools accountable for their product. Results should be measurable and where students performance is not up to par corrective steps should be taken. No new programs should be instituted without means to measure outcome and assess results. Further, evaluation processess should be implemented for all existing programs and should be used to decide whether continued funding is warranted.

4. Much research is currently available which could be profitably applied to the schools, and it behooves the Board to resist the "band-aid" approach to solving schools problems by regularly studying its directions and long-term goals in light of such research.

5. Business feels that present resources can be more efficiently used.
RECOMMENDATIONS

The Board of Education should, on:

1. **Existing Management Studies**

   Review, update and implement recommendations from the Booz, Allen, Hamilton Study on the structure of the school system and the Governor's Commission on Schools - Business Management Task Force Study on administrative matters.

2. **Evaluation Research**

   Establish a Department of Evaluation Research as a resource within the Board of Education, having a staff recruited from outside the Chicago Public Schools. It should have free access to all financial, personnel, tests, and administrative data in the central office and schools and collect other data as well (with appropriate confidentiality of sensitive individual information). A number of important broad evaluation studies should be completed and reported by this group within one year and at regular intervals thereafter. It should report directly to the Board in public meetings, not through the General Superintendent or subordinate administrators. The reports should hold all staff accountable for improving educational opportunity, equality and performance. An advisory panel of experts in evaluation research and techniques should be appointed to insure that this Department produces effective and cost-efficient evaluations. Some methods for evaluation have already been discussed by Chicago United's Educational Advisory Panel.

3. **Managerial Effectiveness**

   Appoint a panel of distinguished school superintendents and university professors, as well as prominent business and com-
munity leaders from Chicago, to examine managerial effectiveness and decision making efficiency of the central area and district offices of the Chicago Public Schools. The panel should answer the following questions: How can public school education in Chicago be made accountable to the Board and the public? Can administrative expenses of the central office be reduced and spent in ways more directly beneficial to students? If principals and other administrators and teachers are to be made more accountable, how can decision-making authority be delegated to these levels and how can responsibility for financial resources be assigned to those directly engaged in the educational process? The panel and its staff should complete a report addressing these issues within a year, at the same time the first annual evaluation report is submitted by the Department of Evaluation Research as outlined in the first recommendation.

4. Long-Range Planning

Develop an overall long-range plan of action for the school system in curriculum and related areas. It is the Board's duty to the people of Chicago to deal not only with day to day problems in the system, but to think in broad terms of the ultimate goals of the system and how they can be achieved.

5. Career Education

Work with the business community in developing aspects of career education, including:

a. introduction of students to the world of work;

b. counseling based on the realities of the labor market; and

c. vocational training relevant to the needs of business.
A council should be appointed, composed of businessmen and representatives of the schools who are functionally responsible for career education. Its task would be to facilitate dialogue between all partners so that practical steps could be taken for the mutual benefit of business - the employers, and students - the future employees. The business community is vitally interested in such a project and could be expected to devote considerable energy to it.

Business leaders realize the problems of setting up effective work study programs; but, the effort is worthwhile because it is in the best interest of students, schools, business and the general welfare of the Chicago metropolitan community.

6. Accountability

Adopt a system of accountability in the schools through the use of indicators which assess school and student progress. The Educational Advisory Panel of Chicago United has done some preliminary work in this area, and could provide assistance in the further development of specific indicators and a system for implementing them.

7. Conference of Experts

Support a Mayor's Conference on Public Education in the central cities, similar to the well known White House conferences, where experts are brought together to discuss issues and solutions. The purpose would be to create a sense of urgency and commitment to upgrading the city's public schools; the goal would be to ultimately give Chicago one of the best systems in the nation.
THE CONTRIBUTION OF BUSINESS TO EDUCATION

1. Management Services
Business stands ready to aid and cooperate with the Chicago Public Schools. The resources of the business community are available for upgrading of vocational education and such administrative areas as management and personnel services; purchasing; distribution and maintenance of equipment and supplies; information systems; and evaluation of operations.

2. Membership on Board
Business sees a need for representation on the Board of persons with broad administrative skills. While it may have been difficult to find such members in the past, business will supply names of resourceful and interested business leaders for membership on the Board.

3. Leadership to Implement Recommendations
Significant improvements can be made even within the limits of present resources. Among the most important are: helping to set up a system to assign authority, responsibility and accountability to appropriate levels within the school system so that the Board of Education, parents, and the general public can assess performance; preparing students for higher education and the world of work; and, upgrading administrative procedures to insure a productive and cost-efficient operation. Business is prepared to participate in efforts toward these improvements.


3Tabulated data from National Merit Scholarships.


APPENDIX A

Aside from extensive in-house training and tuition reimbursement plans offered by individual companies, Chicago business is involved in a number of outside programs directed towards career education. They are:

1. Work study programs with the schools such as D.E. (Distributive Education) and O. O. (Office Occupations).

2. The Youth Motivation Program of the Chicago Association of Commerce and Industry.

3. The Junior Achievement Program.

4. Individual programs with Scout groups and others to introduce students to the business world.

5. Individual programs with teachers and counselors to acquaint them with the skill and personnel needs of business.
Figure 19-1A. Percent ready for school (first grade): Raw data

Figure 19-2A. Teacher experience (years): Raw data

Figure 19-3A. Residual gains in reading achievement (grades 1–4): Raw data