



**Chicago Public Schools
Office of Federal Legislative Affairs**

**Testimony of Arne Duncan
House Education and Labor Committee
Thursday, July 17, 2008**

Hearing Title: "Mayor and Superintendent Partnerships in Education: Closing the Achievement Gap"

- Chairman George Miller
- Members of the House Education and Labor Committee

Thank you for the opportunity to testify today on behalf of the Chicago Public Schools.

Let me also thank Representative Danny Davis for his longstanding leadership on a myriad of policy issues from this committee that have benefited the Chicago Public Schools.

I would further like to thank committee members Judy Biggert and Phil Hare for their bipartisan support and good commonsense approaches to education policy. Their work on this committee and devotion to promoting high standards, quality teachers, and viable school options too has benefited Chicago.

Chicago Public Schools serve over 400,000 children. 85% percent of our children live below the poverty line. 90% are minorities. All of them have potential.

Tapping the potential of underprivileged, inner-city children represents the greatest educational challenges facing our country.

In many ways we are meeting this challenge. In many other ways we are still falling short.

In Chicago, virtually every important indicator of progress is moving in the right direction: test scores, attendance, and graduation rates. We're on a winning streak.

In 2001, less than 40 percent of our kids met state standards. Today, almost two thirds do and more than two-thirds of our 8th graders are at or above state standards.

Our high school students are out-gaining the State of Illinois and the nation on the ACT test that is needed for admission to college.

More and more of our high school students are taking college-level courses and more and more of them are testing well enough to earn college credits.

On the national test comparing Chicago to other cities (NAEP) and to the nation – we’ve gone up 11 point since 2002 while the nation has gone up just 3, so we’re closing the gap.

Hispanic students scored the highest of any other big city school district on this test so gains are being made among key subgroups as well.

We began tracking college acceptance rates three years ago and the numbers have risen every year. Today, over half of our graduates go to college.

This progress can be attributed to a few simple strategies that we have relentlessly pursued since the City of Chicago – under the leadership of Mayor Richard Daley – assumed full control of the school system in 1995.

The first thing we did was end social promotions – which is the shameless practice of passing children each year even though they are not ready – and ultimately graduating them without the skills they need to succeed.

Before the accountability and intervention measures of NCLB, Chicago took the initiative to hold students accountable to annual state assessments, to identify students in the most chronically failing schools, and to provide intervention services including mandatory summer school, after school programs, alternative schools w/ smaller class sizes and extended day programs.

We got back to basics with our curriculum, aligning it to the state academic standards all the way down to optional daily lesson plans. We put great emphasis on literacy with reading coaches in schools and a daily requirement of two hours of reading time – every school, every student, every grade, every day.

We have since expanded this approach to math and physical science and now we are looking at the social sciences.

We began opening new schools to offer more educational options including five citywide high school military academies ranging from the Army, Navy, and Marine Corps. This past year the military academies had some of the highest attendance rates in the city. We are looking at an Air force Academy for the fall of 2009 for students.

This fall, Chicago will also have about 75 charter schools operating among the 625 schools in our system. Some of them are single-sex high schools-- many others have specialized areas of focus while others are simply traditional public schools operating outside of conventional restrictions.

Almost all of them are succeeding – and they all have waiting lists with parents eager to enroll their children in our system.

More recently, we have become even more aggressive about opening new schools – and closing down schools that are failing.

We are one of the few districts in the country that has shut down underperforming schools and replaced the entire school staff.

This turnaround school strategy has taken some of our lowest-performing schools and doubled or tripled test scores within a few years.

Same kids – different teachers – new leadership and a new educational approach – and the results are dramatic.

This is the kind of bold reform that would not be possible without the strong support of the Mayor and local elected officials.

Superintendents all across the country envy Chicago's governance structure because the buck stops with the Mayor and he stands with us in challenging the status quo, pushing the envelope and driving change.

The fourth thing that we have done is to greatly expand learning opportunities by investing heavily in pre-school, after school, and summer school.

The outmoded notion that schools should only operate for 6 hours a day and 180 days per year makes no sense in an information society where success is a function of knowledge.

In an ideal world, every one of our children should be constructively engaged from birth to age 18 – for as many hours as possible.

The last major strategy involves raising the quality of principals and teachers and this effort includes several important dimensions.

We boosted the standards for principal selection – cutting the eligibility list in half and challenging a new generation of school leaders to meet these higher standards.

At the same time, we are much more aggressively recruiting teachers – attracting more than 10 resumes for every opening. A decade ago, we would get maybe two or three.

As a recent independent report from the Illinois Education Research Council confirms, the quality of teaching – even in hard-to-staff schools is dramatically better today than a decade ago.

Over six years, CPS has dramatically improved the quality of its teaching force.

- We have gone from just 11 national-board certified teachers to more than 860 – with hundreds more in the pipeline.
- The percentage of teachers leaving CPS after just three years dropped from 36 percent in 2003 to 15 percent in 2007.

We recognize that need to do a better job retaining quality teachers in our lowest performing schools.

- All new teachers get a mentor, and in particularly tough neighborhoods about 300 teachers this year worked more intensely with coaches from the Chicago New Teachers Center, with plans to expand the two-year-old program to another 30 schools this fall.
- CPS has narrowed (by 27 percent) the quality gap between CPS teachers and the area with the highest caliber teachers, near Urbana-Champaign between 2001 and 2006.

Thanks to the federal Teacher Incentive Fund grant, we worked with our teacher's union to introduce a pay for performance program that offers bonuses for great teachers. In fact, the very first payouts are happening this month.

Performance-based pay for teachers will also be expanded from 10 to 20 high-need schools this fall.

Our biggest challenges today are reforming high schools and increasing funding.

Chicago has a comprehensive high school reform effort underway that includes intensive coaching and mentoring as well as an overhaul of the curriculum. It started in 14 schools two years ago and expands to 45 by this fall and we expect it will yield positive results.

We have also developed a host of programs aimed at transitioning students into high school, increasing college enrollment, raising college entrance exam scores, and providing more coaching and counseling for high school students.

For all our progress, however, we still have a long way to go to close the achievement gap -- and getting there requires more support from every level of government.

Our state ranks among the worst states in the country for education funding, providing barely a third of the overall cost. Today, Chicago spends \$2000 less per student than Boston. We spend about half of what some of our suburbs spend.

We are certainly grateful for every dollar we get from Washington -- and we welcome even more money to expand Head Start, tutoring and after-school programs.

We also appreciate the core goals of the No Child Left Behind law, including performance transparency among subgroups and higher standards for all, but we think the law can be improved in other ways that will advance the same goals.

Should you take up the issue of reauthorizing or reforming NCLB, we will gladly provide more detailed comments.

I just want to thank you again for the opportunity to be here.

