

STILL LEFT BEHIND

STUDENT LEARNING IN CHICAGO'S PUBLIC SCHOOLS

Civic Committee of The Commercial Club of Chicago
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The Commercial Club of Chicago



KEY FINDINGS

- Most of Chicago's students drop out or fail. The vast majority of Chicago's elementary and high schools do not prepare their students for success in college and beyond.
 - There is a general perception that Chicago's public schools have been gradually improving over time. However, recent dramatic gains in the reported number of CPS elementary students who meet standards on State assessments appear to be due to changes in the tests made by the Illinois State Board of Education, rather than real improvements in student learning.
 - At the elementary level, State assessment standards have been so weakened that most of the 8th graders who "meet" these standards have little chance to succeed in high school or to be ready for college. While there has been modest improvement in real student learning in Chicago's elementary schools, these gains dissipate in high school.
 - The performance of Chicago's high schools is abysmal – with about half the students dropping out of the non-selective-enrollment schools, and more than 70% of 11th grade students failing to meet State standards. The trend has remained essentially flat over the past several years. The relatively high-performing students are concentrated in a few magnet/selective enrollment high schools. In the regular neighborhood high schools, which serve the vast preponderance of students, almost no students are prepared to succeed in college.
 - In order to drive real improvement in CPS and fairly report performance to the public, a credible source of information on student achievement is essential. Within CPS today, no such source exists. CPS and the State should use rigorous national standardized tests. Also, the Board of Education should designate an independent auditor with responsibility for ensuring that published reports regarding student achievement in CPS are accurate, timely and distributed to families and stakeholders in an easily understood format.
 - Efforts to provide meaningful school choices to Chicago's families must be aggressively pursued – including expanding the number of charter and contract schools in Chicago. Most of these schools outperform the traditional schools that their students would otherwise have attended; and the choices that they offer parents will help spur all schools in CPS to improve.
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Background

No function of local government is more important than providing excellent education opportunities for young people, from grades K through 12.¹ Without good schools, “equal opportunity” is only a slogan – not a reality.

The quality of education provided by the Chicago Public Schools (CPS) has historically been a key area of focus for the Civic Committee. Over the last 20 years, we have strongly supported various Chicago school reform efforts.² In addition, we have devoted significant resources to improving Chicago’s schools through our affiliates, including the Civic Consulting Alliance and, previously, Leadership for Quality Education (which have provided *pro bono* consulting services in such areas as teacher recruitment, principal training, evaluation and central office restructuring) and The Renaissance Schools Fund (which has vetted new school proposals and helped raise over \$70 million to support new schools).

About 408,000 students are enrolled in Chicago’s public schools. Most are minority children from poor families. Chicago’s school children are taught by almost 24,000 teachers. CPS’s annual operating budget is approximately \$4.8 billion.

Since the inauguration of the Illinois Standards Achievement Test (ISAT) for elementary school students in 1999 and the Prairie State Achievement Exam (PSAE) for 11th graders in

2001, the staff of the Civic Committee has reported on these test results – and trends – to the Civic Committee and others interested in the performance of Chicago’s schools. This is the report based on the most recent test data – for 2008.³

The 2008 test data show that most students in the Chicago Public Schools continue to fail. Roughly half of CPS students drop out before graduation or fail to graduate with their class. Of those who are left to take the PSAE test in the second semester of 11th grade, over 70% fail to meet State standards. The ACT test results show the percentages of 11th graders who meet “college readiness” benchmarks (as established by ACT) in math and science are tiny: 16% in math, and 9% in science; and most of these are in Chicago’s few “selective enrollment” high schools. When one looks at the non-selective enrollment high schools – those which serve the neighborhoods of Chicago – the percentages of 11th graders ready for college are even lower: 6.4% in math, and 2.3% in science. In many high schools, not one 11th grader is on track to succeed in a college-level math or science course.

CPS has suggested that the schools have dramatically improved. It reached this conclusion by largely ignoring the high schools and focusing on the elementary grades, where it is true that ISAT scores have jumped remarkably

¹ Chicago’s public schools have long been the subject of criticism because of the high drop-out rates and low test scores of their students. In 1987 U.S. Secretary of Education William Bennett took specific aim at the quality of public education in Chicago, proclaiming that Chicago’s schools were the “worst in the nation.” In 1995 governance reforms placed responsibility for the schools with the Mayor; and in 1996 statewide standards-based reforms, including the development of the ISAT, were enacted.

In 2003 the Civic Committee released its report – *Left Behind: Student Achievement in Chicago’s Public Schools*. Based on a detailed analysis of the newly-available Illinois Standards Achievement Test (ISAT) and Prairie State Achievement Exam (PSAE) scores, this report showed that Chicago’s public schools were failing badly: that drop-out rates were unacceptably high, and that students who did not drop out were failing to make sufficient progress to prepare them for success in college or university – or for life in an increasingly complex, technology-driven world. Our report drew this key conclusion: “Chicago’s system of public schools is radically dysfunctional. The problems lie in the system, and the system must be changed.” (*Left Behind*, p. 51.)

The Civic Committee report called for (1) better information about student and teacher performance, (2) more competition and choice, in the form of more charter and contract schools, (3) more attention to early childhood and primary education, (4) improving and retaining highly qualified educators, and (5) increasing school funding – but only if the reforms and priorities identified earlier were carried out. “More money by itself, channeled into our system of public education as it is now structured, would be money largely wasted.” (*Left Behind*, p. 58.)

One result of our report and recommendations was the Renaissance 2010 program, launched by Mayor Daley in June of 2004 to create 100 new schools (mostly charter and contract schools) largely for inner-city communities in Chicago. The Civic Committee created The Renaissance Schools Fund to support the start-up of these new schools.

² These include: 1988 Chicago School Reform Law, 1995 Chicago School Reform Law (putting the Mayor in charge of the schools), 1996 Quality First (standards and criterion-based assessment) and Charter Schools, 1997 School Reform and Funding, and 2004 CPS’s Renaissance 2010.

³ This report to the Civic Committee was prepared by Eden Martin, President of the Civic Committee, with analytical support from Paul Zavitkovsky of the College of Education, University of Illinois at Chicago, who serves as a consultant to the Civic Committee, and Kirsten Carroll, Public Policy Consultant at the Civic Committee.

over the past seven years. As recently as January 2009, CPS distributed brochures showing that 8th grade reading scores improved from 55% of students meeting/exceeding standards in 2004 – to 76% in 2008. And 8th grade math scores improved from 33% in 2004 to 70% in 2008. But these huge increases reflect changes in the tests and testing procedures – not real student improvement.

The reality is that most of Chicago’s students are still left far behind. Real student performance appears to have gone up a little in Chicago elementary schools during the past few years – and even those gains then dissipate in high school.

CPS leaders established a new goal in 2007 – that their high school juniors reach a score of 20 on the ACT.⁴ CPS’s January 2009 brochure says that 23% of 11th graders score 20 or higher on the ACT, and that such a score is “a good indicator of college and workforce readiness.” In fact, a “20” is not a good indicator of college “readiness.” CPS adopted the “20” yardstick not because it showed “readiness” for college, but rather because it seemed to CPS that a student with a score of “20” or higher – and good grades – had a chance to be admitted to an Illinois State university. (*From High School to the Future: The Pathway to 20*, Consortium on Chicago School Research, October 2008, p. 4.) Most of the “college readiness” benchmarks as defined by ACT are in fact higher, and are set forth in our report below. Based on these benchmarks, only small percentages of CPS 11th graders are “ready” for college-level courses in math, reading, and science.

The reality is bad enough. What makes it worse is that many families of school children only learn the truth when their children advance to 11th grade – or later, when they struggle to survive in freshman college-level classes.

Why has this happened? The usual tendency of people and organizations to magnify their own accomplishments is amplified in the environment of big city politics. The people in charge of self-evaluation within CPS have not wanted to be messengers bringing bad news. And there is no independent public evaluator – either at the State or local level.

The vested interests have no incentive to publicize the reality. If the real state of affairs were widely known, perhaps the pressures would grow for fundamental reform – including a tough-minded system for evaluating teachers and principals, and dismissing those who do not perform, getting rid of the entire tenure system, taking results into account in setting teacher compensation and bonuses, and the broad outsourcing of the management of failing schools to independent organizations through charters and contracts.

Chicago’s school children are still left behind; and they will stay that way until Chicago’s political leaders and citizens – especially those who live in the inner-city neighborhoods served by the worst schools – decide that school quality and the best interests of students should come first.

⁴ In October of 2008, the Consortium on Chicago School Research released a report, *From High School to the Future: The Pathway to 20*, which looked closely into the CPS goal of having more students score 20 or better on the ACT. The aim of the report was to “help CPS, its schools and its students see what the pathway to 20 looks like and how the district can successfully guide many more students down this path.” (*From High School to the Future: The Pathway to 20*, Consortium on Chicago School Research, October 2008, p. 4.)

The 2008 ISAT and PSAE Test Scores

The 2008 ISAT and PSAE scores are the most recent results available for Illinois and Chicago – school-by-school. In the five years since our *Left Behind* report was issued, two trends in student test scores have been readily apparent:

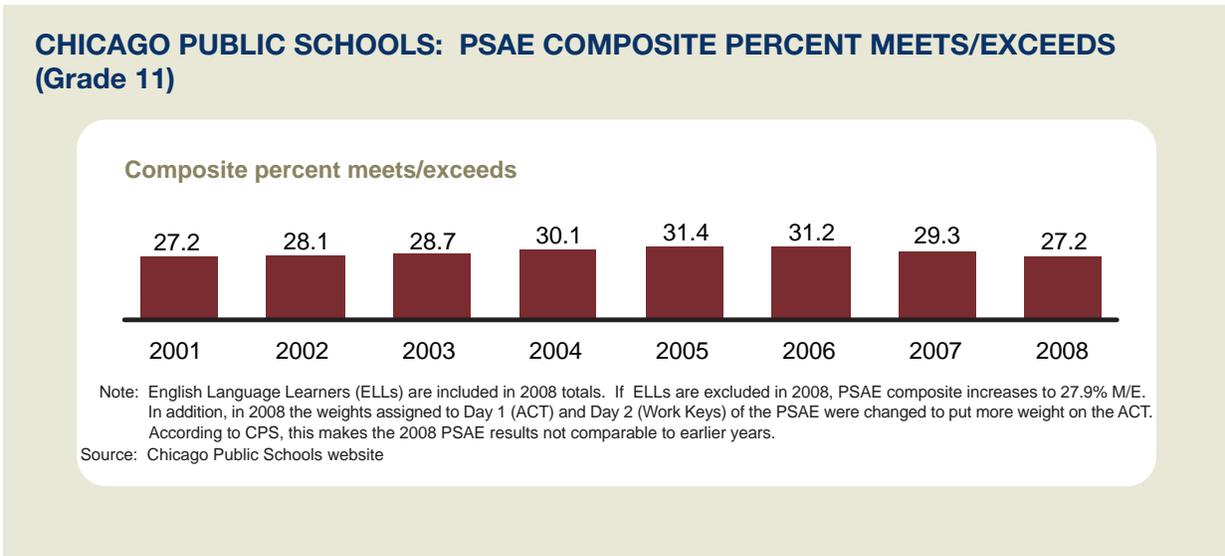
First, high school student performance trends as reflected in the 11th grade PSAE test results are essentially flat—showing little or no improvement. (This 11th grade test is the last such exam given in the high schools, and by the spring of 11th grade when the test is given, many students have already dropped out of school.) The PSAE composite in 2001 showed that only 27.2 percent of CPS students in 11th grade were “meeting” or “exceeding” State academic standards.

These scores rose slightly during the first few years of the new decade, but then fell in 2006, 2007 and 2008 – and now stand at 27.2 percent, the same as in 2001.

Thus, over 70 percent of Chicago’s 11th graders fail to meet State standards in math, reading and science on a composite basis. Figure 1 below shows the trend of the composite PSAE scores for Chicago from 2001 to 2008.

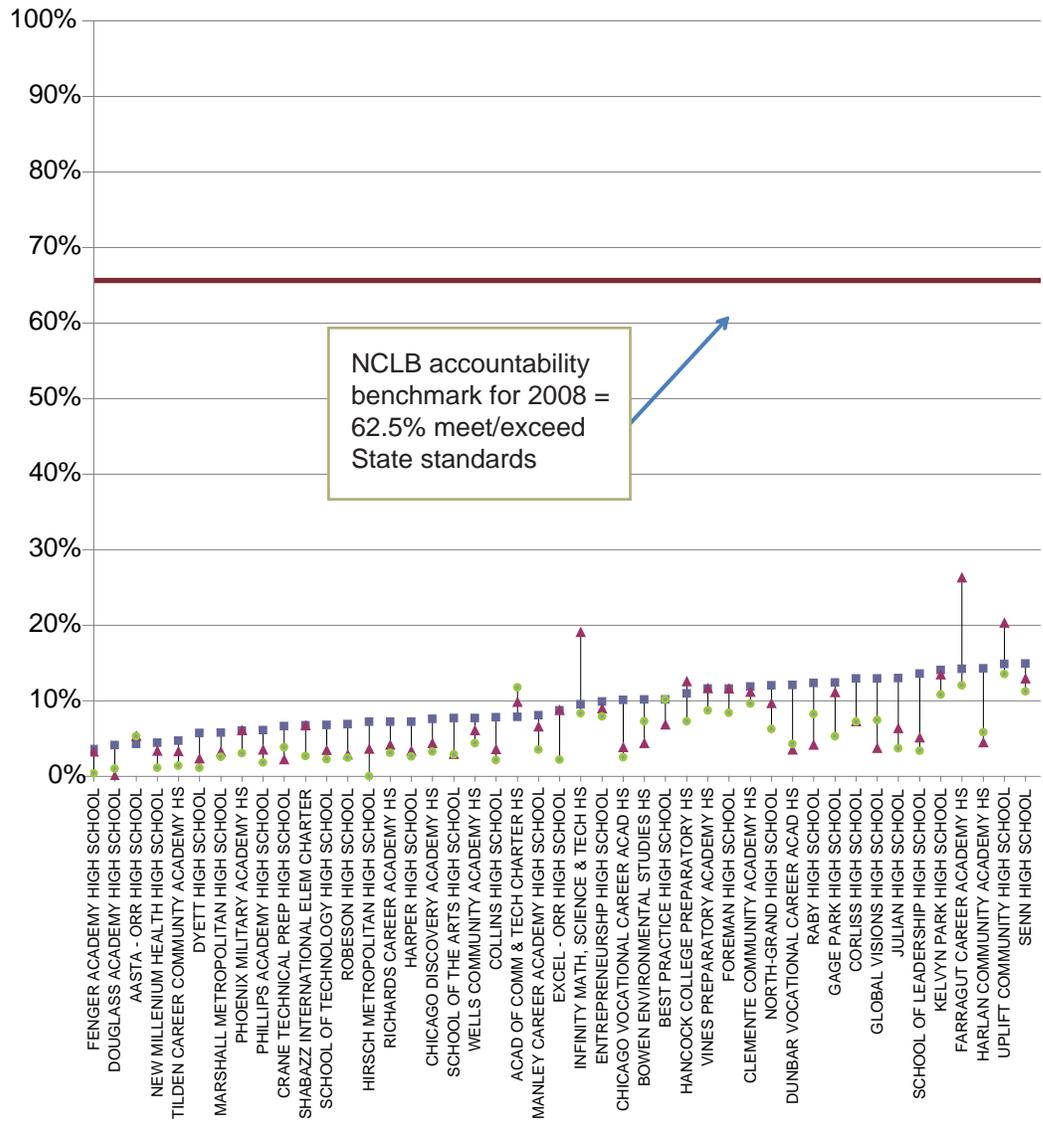
While these results are disappointing at the aggregate level, they are even more disturbing when one examines the performance of individual high schools (see Figure 2, next page).

FIGURE 1



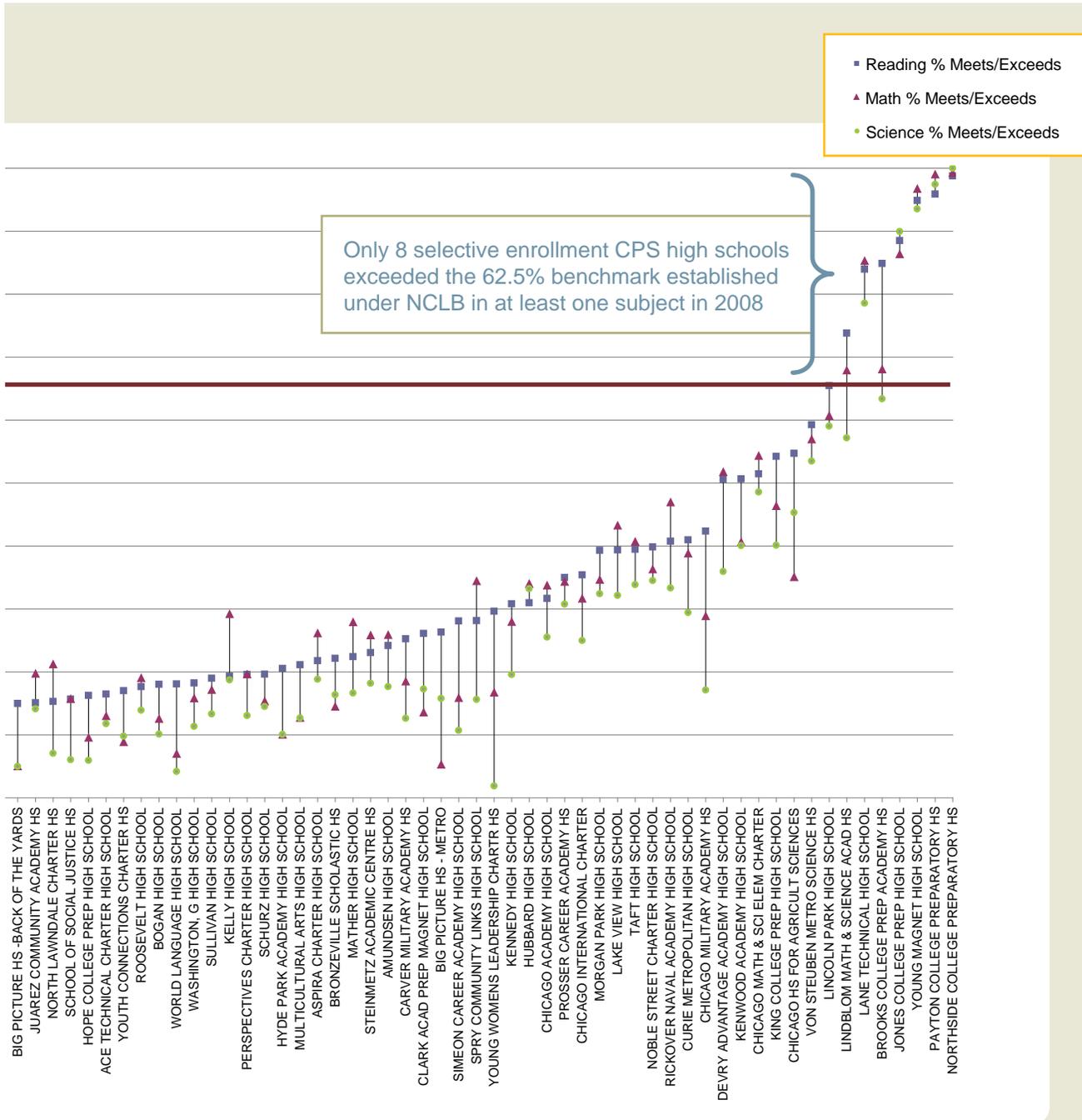
2008 PSAE RESULTS: 99 REPORTING CPS HIGH SCHOOLS

Percent
meets/
exceeds



High school

FIGURE 2



Of the 99 reporting CPS high schools in 2008, only eight “selective enrollment” high schools exceeded the 62.5% benchmark (established under “No Child Left Behind,” or NCLB) for the percentage of students meeting or exceeding State standards in at least one subject in 2008. The remaining 91 Chicago high schools (some of which are also “selective enrollment”) did not reach this benchmark; more than half of these schools – those arrayed on the left side of the graph – have less than 20% of their students meeting State standards on the PSAE, and many have fewer than 10% of their students meeting State standards.⁵

Second, despite the flat trend in 11th grade scores since the publication of our *Left Behind* report, elementary student test scores on the ISAT (grades 3-8) have moved sharply upward – reflecting enormous apparent improvement in student learning.

As an example, in 2003 only 31 percent of Chicago 8th graders were meeting or exceeding State standards in math. In 2008, 69 percent of 8th graders were meeting or exceeding State math standards – or more than double the percentage in 2003, only five years before. This result is even more extraordinary given that CPS was required to include English Language Learners in its ISAT results for 2008.

As another example, in 2003 only 50 percent of 8th graders were meeting or exceeding State standards in reading. In 2008, 75 percent of 8th graders were meeting or exceeding State reading standards – an increase of 25 percentage points in just five years, even with the inclusion of English Language Learners in 2008. CPS has issued press releases and distributed brochures pointing to these increases in ISAT scores as evidence that CPS schools are making great progress. For example, on July 20, 2006, the *Chicago Tribune* published a Letter to the Editor from CPS’s CEO claiming that the unprecedented one-year

increase of 15 points in the percentage of CPS students meeting or exceeding State standards was proof that the district’s educational strategies were working. In May of 2007, CPS published a brochure, entitled “On the Same Page: Celebrating Progress, Moving Forward,” which pointed to soaring ISAT scores between 2001 and 2006. This past winter, CPS published a brochure, entitled “On the Same Page: Strategies for Success,” which continued to show ISAT trends over time without referring to the changes in the test in 2006.

However, most of the improvement in Chicago’s elementary school scores over the past decade appears not to be due to real improvement in student performance. It appears to be due to changes in the tests, most notably those made in 2006 when a new testing company was brought in and a new State test was implemented, with new formats and test substance, and lower cut scores (most notably in 8th grade math), along with new testing procedures. These changes, which made it easier for Illinois school districts to comply with federal “No Child Left Behind” requirements, were made at the State level – not Chicago. They were made by the State Board of Education – not CPS. State and local school officials knew that the new tests and procedures made it easier for students throughout the State – and throughout Chicago – to obtain higher marks. The results were summarized not in terms of average scores, but rather in terms of the percentages of students “meeting” or “exceeding” State standards as has been the practice since the implementation of the ISAT.⁶ As a result of these changes in elementary schools tests in 2006, there is no longer comparability between test results – or in the percentages of students meeting/exceeding State standards – for the years before and after 2006.

⁵ There is also a stark disparity between magnet/selective enrollment high schools and other CPS high schools in terms of the highest performing 11th graders – those who exceed State standards on all 3 parts of the PSAE. In 2008, out of more than 20,000 CPS 11th graders tested, only 325 exceeded State standards on all 3 parts of the PSAE; and 310 of these students were enrolled in magnet or selective enrollment high schools. Only 15 were in traditional neighborhood schools.

⁶ If the tests are made easier in a particular year, average scores go up everywhere. But the percentage of students meeting standards goes up relatively more in low-performing districts – and relatively less in high-performing districts – since in the latter most students were already performing above the “meets” line before the changes were made. Because in 2005 and earlier years more CPS students had failed to “meet” standards than in the State generally, the changes in the test and test procedures in 2006 (along with other changes) caused a larger percentage of CPS students to cross the “meeting standards” line in 2006 than was the case Statewide.

The NAEP Exam – The “Nation’s Report Card”

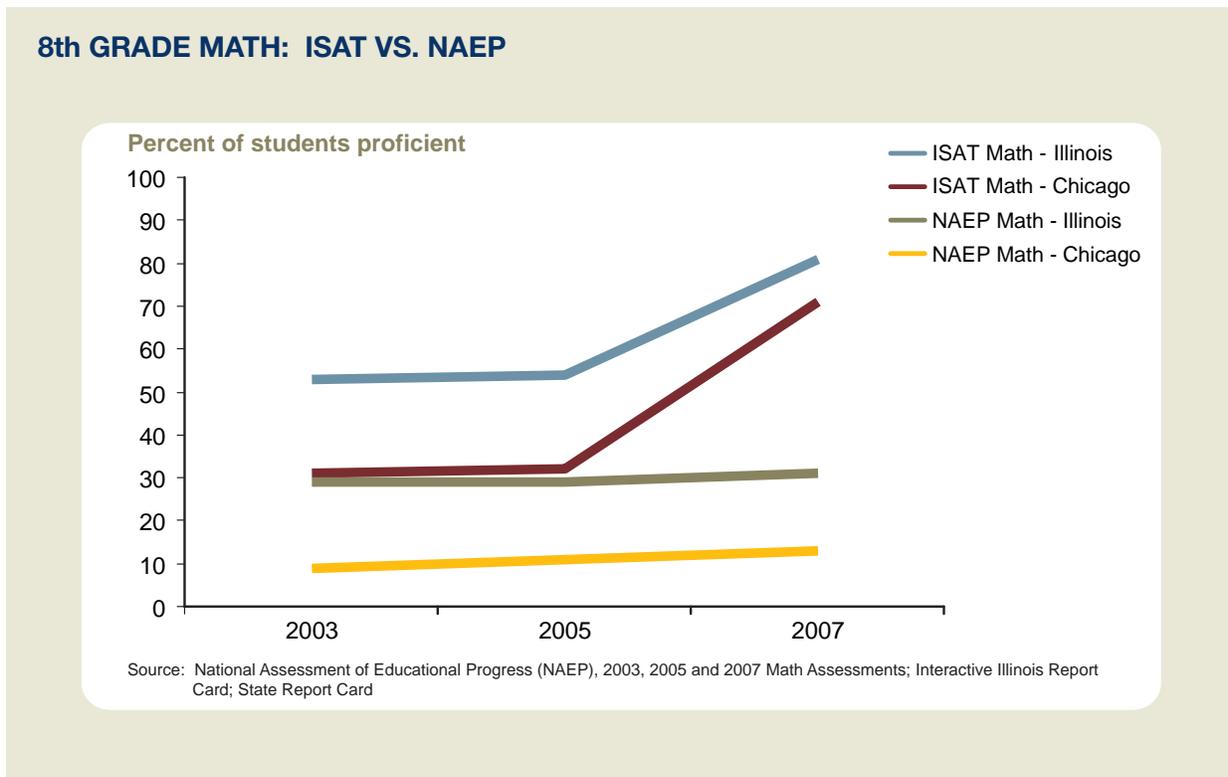
Other tests administered to CPS elementary school students do not reflect the same enormous improvements in elementary student scores as shown by the ISAT tests. One such test is the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), often called the “Nation’s Report Card.” This test is sponsored by the U.S. Department of Education and is the only measure of student achievement in the U.S. that allows student performance to be compared across states. These assessments are administered every two years to students in grades 4 and 8, and test reading and math (as well as other subjects at different intervals). In addition to reports at the national and state level, the NAEP is reported with respect to several large urban districts – including Chicago.

The NAEP results for Chicago are not geared to Illinois assessment standards and show elementary scores that are

strikingly lower than the ISAT results – and also reflect far smaller upward trends. Figure 3 below compares the NAEP and ISAT results for 8th grade math. Whereas the ISATs for 8th grade math showed in 2007 that 71 percent of Chicago 8th graders were meeting/exceeding State standards, the NAEP for that year and that class showed only 13 percent of Chicago’s 8th graders to be proficient in math.

The trend lines are also strikingly different. The ISAT scores for Chicago 8th graders in math improved from 32 percent to 71 percent meeting State standards from 2005-2007. Over that same period, the NAEP scores for Chicago’s 8th graders in math went up from 11 to only 13 percent.

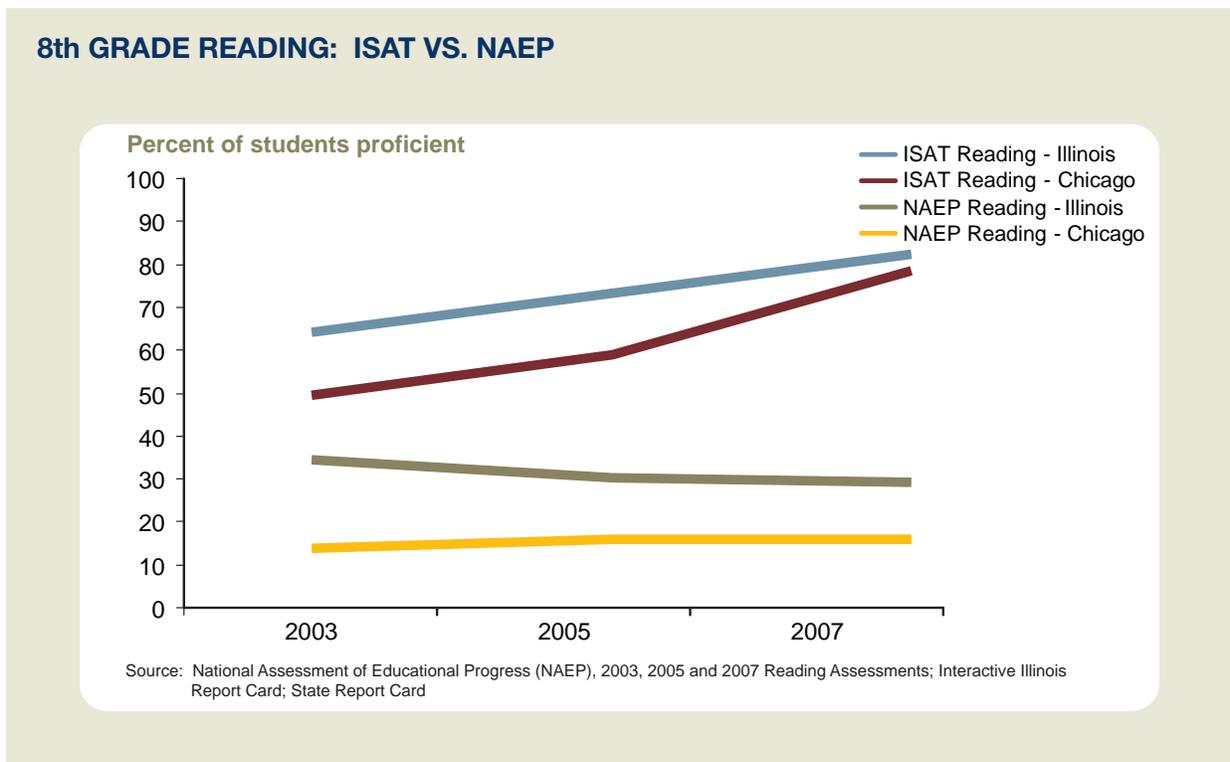
FIGURE 3



A comparison of NAEP and ISAT results for reading in Figure 4 provides much the same picture.

Thus, on the NAEP test, over 80% of Chicago 8th graders in the sample were evaluated as not proficient in math or in reading.

FIGURE 4



Sorting Out Real Gains From Apparent Gains on the ISATs

By working with data for the entire State of Illinois, it is possible to sort out real gains in student learning from gains that occurred virtually everywhere and are therefore more likely to have resulted from changes in test content and procedure. Using this approach, gains made by Chicago Public Schools that exceed those made by students statewide are likely to signal

real learning gains, even if tests were made easier throughout all of Illinois. Figure 5 and Figure 6 below show the *unadjusted* trends for CPS students meeting or exceeding State standards on the ISAT and PSAE from 2001 through 2008. These show large improvement in the elementary grades but flat trends in 11th grade.

FIGURE 5

CHICAGO PUBLIC SCHOOLS: ISAT COMPOSITE PERCENT MEETS/EXCEEDS (Grades 3-8)

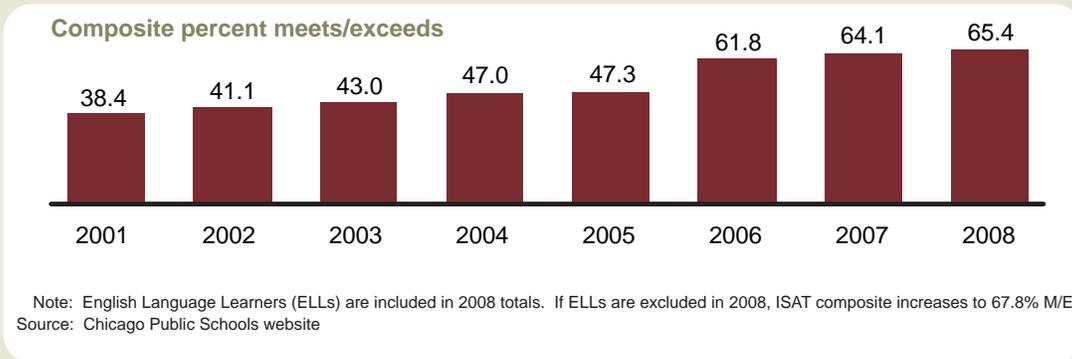
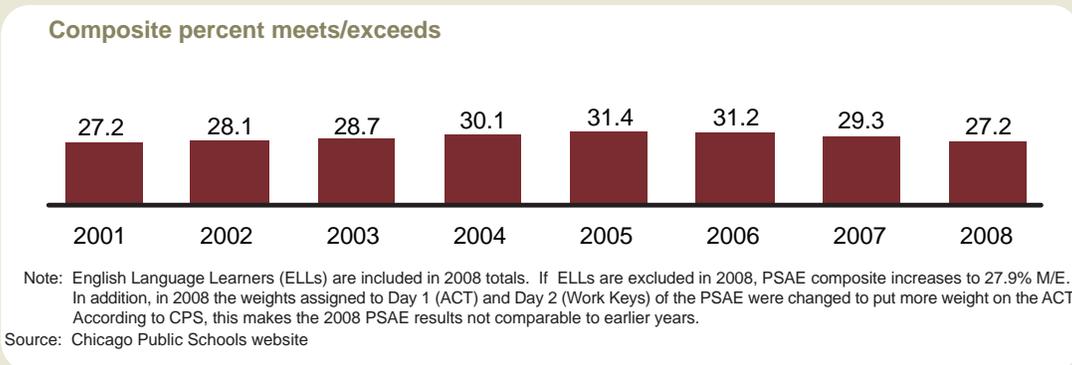


FIGURE 6

CHICAGO PUBLIC SCHOOLS: PSAE COMPOSITE PERCENT MEETS/EXCEEDS (Grade 11)



For comparison, Figure 7 and Figure 8 below show the trends – but neutralizing the effects of changes in the tests and testing procedures – by comparing the percentages of CPS students who score at or above their grade level average

statewide.⁷ These *adjusted* trends show modest improvement in CPS elementary schools, and that this modest improvement tends to dissipate in high school.

FIGURE 7

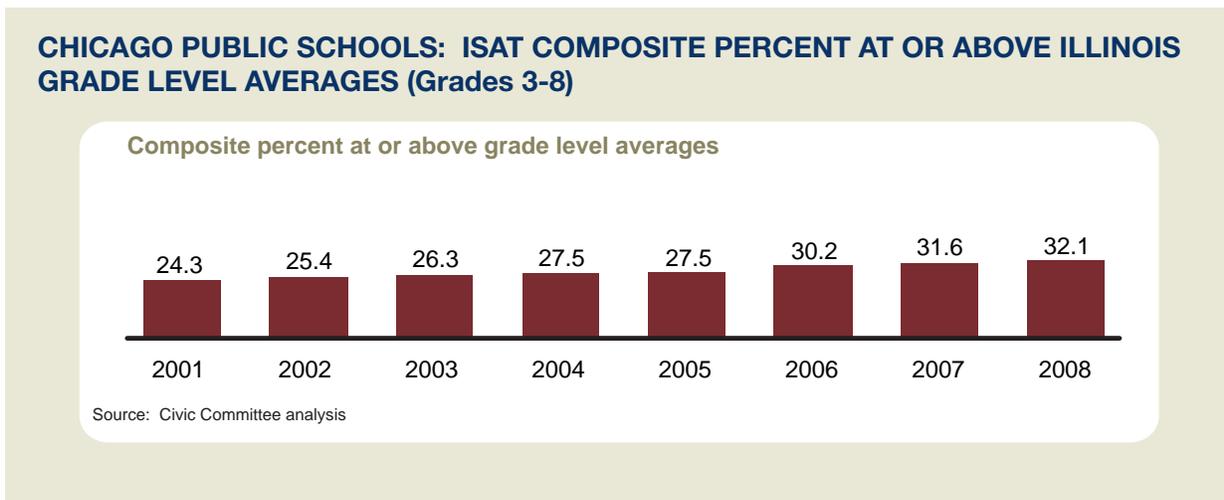
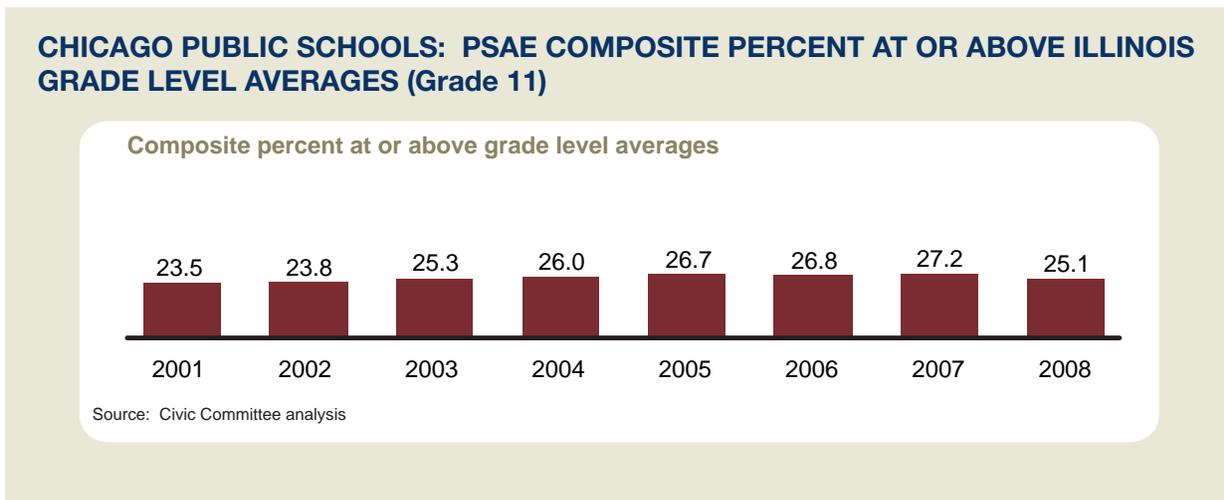


FIGURE 8



⁷ Because NAEP results for all of Illinois remained fairly flat over this time period, it appears that student achievement statewide has remained fairly constant. Therefore, any relative changes in CPS scores compared to State averages over this time period likely reflect real changes in student performance.

The ACT and the “College Readiness” Benchmarks

CPS now can track the test results of students as they move through elementary and high schools, and can use these results to predict later success – or failure – in college. School administrators and teachers know the pathways to success in college, and know with statistically-significant likelihoods the scores that a student needs to achieve on assessment tests in 11th grade – and in 10th grade – and in 9th grade – and moving back into the 8th grade.⁸ If a student is well “off the track” to success in 8th grade, it is statistically unlikely – though not impossible – that the deficiency will be made up in later grades.

A. 11th Grade – College Readiness

All students who take the PSAT in 11th grade also take the ACT as part of that assessment. According to research conducted by ACT, students who attain certain “college readiness” benchmark scores on the four subject areas of the ACT will “have a 50 percent chance of earning a grade of B or better in a freshman college level course and a 75 percent chance of earning a C or better.” (*From High School to the Future: The Pathway to 20*, Consortium on Chicago School Research, October 2008, p. 4.) Those “benchmark scores” are:

	Benchmark
Math.....	22
English.....	18
Reading.....	21
Science.....	24

While ACT does not publish a “college readiness” benchmark composite score, the average of all four subject-area benchmarks is a score of around 21. For CPS juniors in the spring of 2005, 2006, and 2007, the average composite scores were 17.0 in 2005, 17.0 in 2006 and 17.1 in 2007.

These scores are well short of scores that would predict success in college.

The percentages of CPS juniors in 2006, 2007 and 2008 who met or exceeded the “college readiness” benchmark scores on the four subject areas of the ACT are as follows:

Subject/ benchmark	Percentage of CPS juniors who met/exceeded benchmark		
	2006	2007	2008
Math/22	14%	17%	16%
English/18	41%	41%	39%
Reading/21	23%	21%	21%
Science/24	8%	10%	9%

It is thus clear that a large majority of CPS 11th graders (those who have not already dropped out by the spring of their 11th grade year) are not likely to be ready to succeed in college-level courses.⁹

“Readiness” of 11th graders, as reflected on the ACT, may also be evaluated school-by-school. We turn first to the percentages of 11th graders who achieved 22 or higher on the 2008 ACT math test – that is, the percentage of 11th graders who upon graduation will likely be ready for a freshman college math class. In Chicago’s 19 “magnet” and “selective enrollment”¹⁰ high schools, the percentage deemed ready for college math according to the ACT benchmark was 45.5%. In the other 69 neighborhood CPS high schools¹¹ – those which serve about three-quarters (72%) of the high school students in Chicago – the percentage of 11th graders “ready” for college math was 6.4%. In 17 of these neighborhood CPS high schools, no 11th grader was reported to be “ready” for college math.

⁸ The Consortium on Chicago School Research study, *From High School to the Future: The Pathway to 20*, examined the relationship between student scores on the ACT in 11th grade and their previous scores on tests in the 8th, 9th and 10th grades. This analysis draws on the correlations discussed in that report.

⁹ The lack of preparedness of graduates of CPS for college is confirmed by test results of students entering the Chicago City Colleges in the fall of 2006 (the most recent year available). The analysis showed that 69% of CPS graduates entering CCC were not prepared for college level reading, 79% were not prepared for college level writing, and 95% were not prepared for college level math.

¹⁰ Selective enrollment schools require an admissions interview and standardized achievement scores at the 60th percentile or higher. Magnet schools require application to a city-wide lottery and, in some cases, standardized achievement scores at the 60th percentile or higher.

¹¹ Charter high schools are not included in this total.

When one applies the benchmarks of “readiness” for the other three subjects (in addition to math) – English, reading, and science – the following results emerge from the 2008 ACT test:

Subject/ benchmark	Percentage “ready”	
	Selective enrollment and magnet	Neighborhood high schools
Math/22	45.5%	6.4%
English/18	76.0%	27.3%
Reading/21	55.2%	10.7%
Science/24	30.0%	2.3%

In 29 neighborhood CPS high schools, no 11th grader was reported ready for college science.

B. 8th Grade – “On-Track” to Readiness

CPS principals and teachers may now look back before the junior year to see whether students at the earlier grade levels are “on track” to achieve college readiness benchmarks on the ACT tests in the 11th grade. In the 10th grade, the comparable test is the PLAN test given in the fall. In the 9th grade, the comparable test is the EXPLORE test, also given in the fall. These tests are “scored on approximately the same scale to make it easy – and appropriate – to measure improvements from one test to the next.” (*From High School to the Future: The Pathway to 20*, p. 6.)

Scale scores on the ISAT test in the 8th grade and the ACT test in the 11th grade are also “highly correlated.” (*From High School to the Future: The Pathway to 20*, p. 11.) According to the Consortium on Chicago School Research, students who “score low on their eighth grade ISAT have little chance” of reaching the math “readiness” benchmark on the ACT. (*From High School to the Future: The Pathway to 20*, p. 10.)

The Consortium on Chicago School Research has calculated the relationship between CPS results on the ISAT and the

ACT by comparing the scores of students who took the ACT in 2005, 2006 and 2007 to their scores three years earlier – on the 8th grade ISAT. Based on that relationship, one can use students’ scale scores on the 8th grade ISAT to predict their scores on the 11th grade ACT. One can also identify target scores that students must achieve on the 8th grade ISAT in order to have at least a 50/50 probability of reaching college readiness benchmarks on the ACT in 11th grade. Students who achieve these target scores or better are considered herein as “on-track” for college readiness.

Math

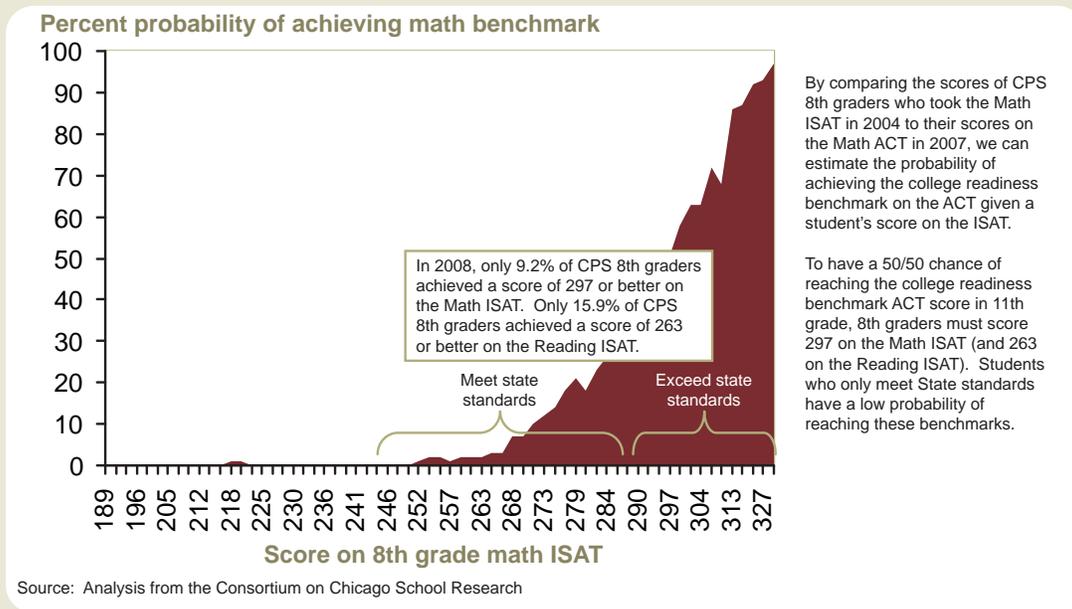
First, take the “college readiness” benchmark of 22 on the ACT math. In order to have at least a 50% chance of scoring 22 or higher on the ACT math, the 8th grader – three years earlier – must score 297 or better on the 8th grade math ISAT (well into the “exceeds standards” category). Only 9.2% of CPS 8th graders achieved a score of 297 or better on the 8th grade math test in 2008. Thus, by the 8th grade over 90% of students in CPS are not on track to meet/exceed the math “readiness” benchmark (as defined by ACT) in 11th grade.

Some 8th graders, of course, who score below 297 on the ISAT math test will achieve the benchmark three years later, and may go on to succeed in college. But the odds are against it. And the farther below 297 the 8th grade student scores, the lower the chance of achieving 22 as a junior – and the lower the probability of succeeding in college two years later.

Most students who only “meet” State standards in 8th grade math have a very low probability of eventually achieving college readiness. Today, an 8th grader may “meet” State standards by scoring somewhere within the range of 246-287 on the 8th grade math ISAT. But students who score even at the highest end of that range – 287 – have only about a 30% chance of achieving a 22 on the math ACT (see Figure 9). The average CPS 8th grader in 2008 had a math scale score of 261. With this score, the chance of meeting or exceeding the ACT college readiness benchmark in math as a high school junior is only about 2%. Students who score a 246 on the 8th grade math ISAT – just reaching the “meets” cutoff – have less than a 1% probability of achieving a 22 on the math ACT.

FIGURE 9

**PROBABILITY OF REACHING COLLEGE READINESS ON MATH ACT
(Based on score on the 8th grade math ISAT)**



By comparing the scores of CPS 8th graders who took the Math ISAT in 2004 to their scores on the Math ACT in 2007, we can estimate the probability of achieving the college readiness benchmark on the ACT given a student's score on the ISAT.

To have a 50/50 chance of reaching the college readiness benchmark ACT score in 11th grade, 8th graders must score 297 on the Math ISAT (and 263 on the Reading ISAT). Students who only meet State standards have a low probability of reaching these benchmarks.

The ISATs have thus been so weakened, and the “cut scores” so reduced, that “meeting” 8th grade State standards in math is not an achievement upon which one may confidently predict future academic success. Only a tiny fraction of the students who score within the “meets standards” range on the math ISAT will score 22 or more on the ACT math in 11th grade. Thus, very few students in the “meets” category have a good chance of later being “ready” to succeed in college.¹²

Reading

Similarly, one can examine whether 8th graders are “on track” to be college-ready in 11th grade reading. The “college readiness” 11th grade benchmark for ACT reading is 21. In order to have at least a 50% chance of scoring 21 or

higher on the ACT reading in 11th grade, the 8th grader must have scored at least 263 on the 8th grade reading ISAT three years earlier. But only 15.9% of CPS 8th graders achieved a score of 263 or higher on the 8th grade reading ISAT in 2008. Thus, by the 8th grade over 84% of 8th graders are not on track to meet/exceed the reading “readiness” benchmark in 11th grade – or to succeed in a college-level reading course. The average CPS 8th grader in 2008 had a reading scale score of 241. With this score, the chance of meeting or exceeding the ACT college readiness benchmark as a high school junior is about 10%. For students who just make the “meets standard” cutoff with an 8th grade reading ISAT score of 231, the probability drops to only 4%.

¹²When we examine those schools with the highest percentage of poverty/minority students, the data are even more disheartening. In those 145 schools administering the ISAT with >90% low-income and >90% African-American students, only 3% of 8th grade students are on-track for college readiness in math (even though 57% of these students met/exceeded State math standards in 2008).

Chicago's Charter Schools

Every year, CPS's Office of New Schools issues a *Charter School Performance Report* that compares the performance of Chicago's charter schools to the schools that their students would otherwise have attended. These charter schools provide one bright spot in the generally disappointing performance of Chicago's public schools. Charter schools are public schools open to all students, without entrance exams. If there are more applicants than available seats in a charter school, the school must hold a lottery. Charter schools enter into a five-year accountability contract in exchange for freedom from many of the rules and regulations of traditional public schools; many charter schools use this freedom to offer longer school days and school years than traditional schools.

As of 2009, Chicago has 30 charter schools with 67 campuses serving about 30,000 students. There are about

13,000 potential students currently on charter school wait lists because the schools are at capacity. And thousands more do not bother to get on the wait lists.

Figures 10 and 11 below compare the performance of Chicago's charter campuses to their comparison schools on the 2008 ISAT and PSAE.

Out of 38 charter elementary/middle school campuses reporting results, 34 outperformed their comparison schools on the 2008 ISAT on a composite basis.

Figure 11 shows charter high schools also generally outperform their comparison schools. Out of 11 charter high school campuses reporting results, 10 outperformed their comparison schools on the 2008 PSAE on a composite basis.

FIGURE 10

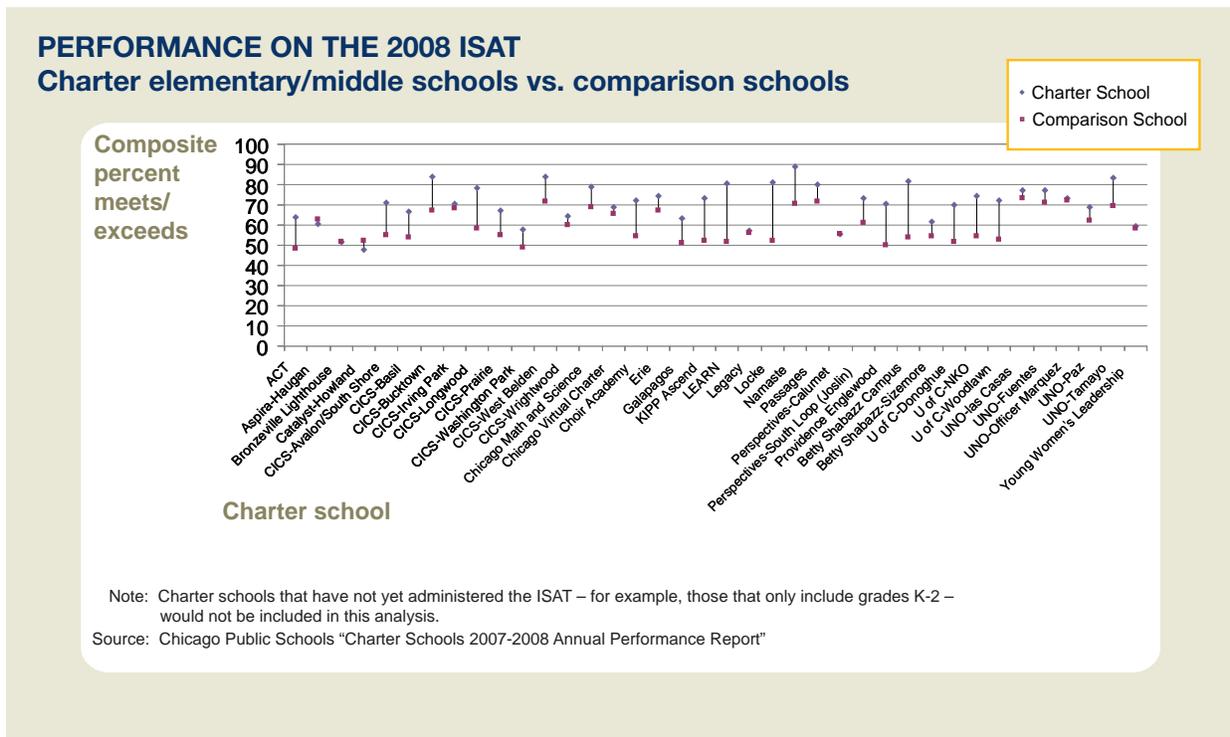
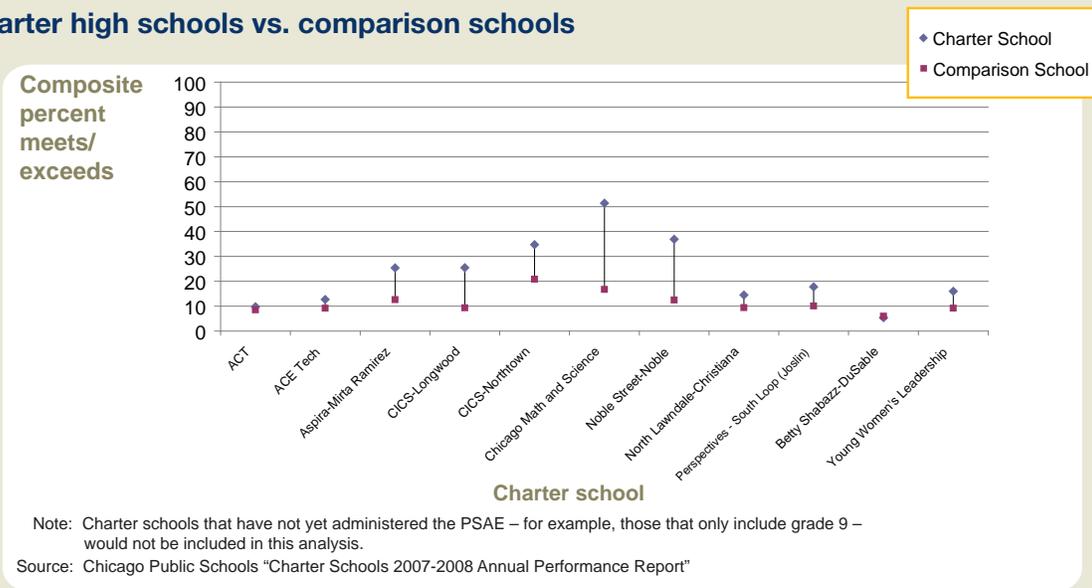


FIGURE 11

PERFORMANCE ON THE 2008 PSAE
Charter high schools vs. comparison schools



In addition, when we look back at the performance of Chicago’s individual high schools on the 2008 PSAE (Figure 2), charter schools are disproportionately represented in the top-performing schools. Of the 99 high schools reporting 2008 PSAE results, 11 (10% of the total) are charter schools (charter schools with multiple campuses report PSAE results in aggregate). Yet, out of the top 10 non-selective, non-magnet high schools, three (30% of the total) are charter schools. Out of the top 20 non-selective, non-magnet high schools, five (25% of the total) are charter schools.

Charter schools, like traditional schools, often experience difficulty during the early “start-up” years; while charters that have been around for several years tend to do much better. New charters usually have students who spent their earlier years in failing neighborhood schools; it often takes several years of consistently good teaching to overcome these disadvantages.

Charter elementary/middle schools that were open 1-4 years by the fall of 2008 averaged 6.9 percentage points higher in terms of meets/exceeds percentages than their comparison schools. Those that were open 5-11 years by the fall of 2008 performed better – averaging 16.5 percentage points higher in terms of meets/exceeds than their comparison schools.

Charter high schools that were open 1-4 years by the fall of 2008 averaged 8.7 percentage points higher in terms of meets/exceeds than their comparison schools. Those that were open 5-11 years by the fall of 2008 averaged 12.9 percentage points higher in terms of meets/exceeds than their comparison schools.¹³

¹³ A recent study by SRI International confirms that the charters, which do not have selective enrollment requirements, serve the same populations (in terms of demographics and poverty) as traditional neighborhood schools, and that claims that the charters attract students from more academically-motivated families are mostly unwarranted.

Conclusion

CPS has reported that Chicago’s elementary schools have made enormous progress in the course of the past decade – achieving double-digit increases in all grades and all subjects. This claim jarringly conflicts with the flat trends reported in the high schools, and is contrary to the NAEP (“Nation’s Report Card”) results. The remarkable apparent progress in the elementary schools appears to be due mostly to changes in the ISAT tests and testing procedures – rather than real improvement in student learning.

The well-reported failure of most CPS high schools continues to be massive – with high drop-out rates and 11th grade PSAT scores that are both low and flat over the past decade. Based on the ACT component of these tests, very few 11th graders are “ready” to succeed in freshman college-level classes. The few 11th graders who are in fact “ready” are concentrated in a handful of selective enrollment high schools. The numbers and percentages of 11th graders who are “ready” for college in Chicago’s conventional neighborhood high schools – those serving close to three-quarters of the high school population – are shockingly low (consistent with the PSAT scores).

Many people have believed that although the high schools were failing, the elementary schools were doing better – and improving. But we now have reason to believe that the failure of CPS’s high schools is based on – and correlates with – the failure of CPS’s elementary schools. Most of CPS’s elementary schools are failing just as badly as its high schools.

Without accurate facts, the public does not know how agencies of government are performing. Without such facts, neither the public nor those managing our government institutions can know how to go about improving their operations – or whether such efforts have been successful.

We recommend that the Board of Education designate an independent auditor – perhaps an independent auditing firm – to review all CPS published data bearing on school performance. These should include student test data and data bearing on the qualifications and evaluations of teachers and principals. Such an entity should have sufficient professional and technical resources to do its job, and should be independent of CPS management. It should have total access to any data in the possession of CPS, or any particular school, or any State

agency. Though it should give appropriate respect to truly confidential information, such as the names or identities of students, it should not be prevented from making any kind of public disclosure it believes would advance the public’s understanding of how well or badly the public schools are performing.

Such an independent auditor would work for the Board, and indirectly the public – not the CPS administration. It should be responsible to the Board, and to the public – for assuring that data releases and pronouncements on such matters are accurate.

Some observers have pointed out that family background and economics explain the school failures in Chicago. Clearly there is a high correlation between poverty and ethnicity, on the one hand, and test scores, on the other. Students from low-income families, and from African-American and Latino families, do less well than others; and Chicago has a far larger concentration of poor families and ethnic minorities than do the suburbs. But, as we concluded in *Left Behind*:

“Poverty and ethnicity are not educational straitjackets...a large body of evidence confirms the capacity of all children – regardless of poverty and ethnicity – to learn in good schools staffed by excellent teachers. Children from poor families and from minority families can and do succeed when they receive the advantage of consistently good teaching. The most important factor of all in determining student performance is the quality of teaching that students receive.” (*Left Behind*, p. 2)

We cannot change the fact that some CPS students start school at a disadvantage. But we can change the fact that Chicago’s schools do too little to overcome that disadvantage. Although there are many superb principals and teachers

working for CPS, too many of Chicago's schools have too few excellent teachers.¹⁴

Chicago should offer school families more and better choices. Established charter schools, according to CPS reviews, consistently perform better than the "comparison" schools their students would otherwise have attended. On May 31, 2009, the Illinois legislature increased the legislative cap on Chicago charter schools from 30 to 70. It also authorized 35 "contract" schools, which likewise operate with greater autonomy and flexibility. All these charter and contract schools – both the established ones and the new ones – need buildings; they also need adequate funding, which should be no less than the per pupil funding received by traditional Chicago public schools.

We end where we began. Until all Chicago's school families have school choices that include more innovative charter or contract schools, "equal opportunity" for them will be only a slogan.

¹⁴ In 2005, the Illinois Education Research Council (IERC) released a study that examined teacher quality in Illinois. The study found a substantial gap between the quality of teachers in CPS schools and schools in the rest of the State. More than three-quarters of schools in CPS fell in the lowest quartile of schools in the State in terms of their teacher quality, and almost half of CPS schools fell in the lowest 10% of schools in the State in terms of teacher quality. That study also found that students in the highest-poverty and highest-minority CPS schools typically face the lowest quality teachers. Despite the fact that, on average, teacher quality in CPS seems to have improved over the last few years, a significant gap still exists between teacher quality in CPS and the rest of the State.