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IN PERSPECTIVE

High School / Reform

Coming of Age

Second in an occasional series



Jasmine Reed, a 9th grader at John Hope College Preparatory High School, writes a word problem on the board in Nicolette Norris' Algebra 1 class.

Getting Down To the Core

The Chicago school district takes an 'intentional approach' to high school courses.

By Catherine Gewertz

Nicolette Norris says her Algebra 1 students are talking and moving around in class a lot this year. And she's happy about it.

The freshmen at John Hope College Preparatory High School are up on their feet, explaining problems to their classmates. They're sitting in groups, figuring how to attack equations. They're solving other problems on a brand-new set of laptop computers.

To Ms. Norris, all the activity shows a more engaged kind of learning, which she attributes to a new mathematics curriculum, Cognitive Tutor, that emphasizes applying problems to real-world situations.

"These problems are more interesting to the kids," the 10-year teaching veteran said during a recent class

break. "They present more to the class now. They get up and explain things. I stand up in front a lot less."

What's unfolding at John Hope is part of a larger move in Chicago to standardize high school courses. This fall, 9th graders at 14 of the city's 117 high schools began using several common curricula in English, math, and science. By the fall of 2008, the initiative is slated to include freshmen, sophomores, and juniors at 49 schools.

Though the initiative has its skeptics and critics, more than a few people here are giving it a warm welcome, particularly its pairing of strong curriculum with in-depth, ongoing teacher training.

"I'm beyond relieved to see this focus on the curriculum," said Barbara Radner, the director of DePaul University's Center for

Urban Education, which advises Chicago high schools on curriculum, instruction, and assessment.

"We have focused on instructional activities, team building, small learning communities, student advisories. Those are indeed part of learning," she said. "But high school is about learning *something*. The something needs to be the core, and activities need to be the delivery of the core."

In taking a more centrally managed approach to high school curricula, Chicago joins a small but growing cadre of school districts nationwide, including Boston, Philadelphia, Pittsburgh, and Portland, Ore. The switch represents a distinct culture change in a world where teachers and schools have been accustomed to choosing or writing

Porsha Pope types on her laptop computer during an algebra lesson. The Cognitive Tutor program stresses applying problems to real-world situations.



Photos by Aynsley Floyd

Schools get a choice of several programs, along with support for their teachers.

their own material. But advocates of a more managed approach say such latitude has produced inequities because courses vary so much in content and rigor.

Experts attribute the increasing popularity of closer management to several influences, including a decade of experience showing that high-poverty elementary schools get better results with a more tightly controlled curriculum. More attention to boosting rigor and lowering the dropout rate in high school—and a growing conviction that keeping school size small doesn't, by itself, produce consistently better academic achievement—have led districts to try a hands-on role, observers say.

Six Levers For Transforming Chicago's High Schools

High School Transformation is a set of strategies designed to improve educational achievement for the city's teenagers. District leaders see the work as falling into six areas. The new curriculum, instruction, and training approach being used in 14 schools this fall is a cornerstone of the initiative.

1 RAISE EXPECTATIONS

Define excellence, measure what matters

- Use of new high school score card with expanded achievement data
- High school students surveyed about their education experiences
- Raise expectations by instituting rigorous instructional supports

"All of this has made it clear that schools and teachers lack the resources to get more kids to higher levels, so they are seeking new tools," said Judy Wurtzel, a senior fellow at the Washington-based Aspen Institute's Program on Education and Society, who wrote a paper earlier this year examining the roles districts play in high school improvement.

The delicate balance for districts, she said, lies in how to take a stronger hand in shaping curriculum and instruction without being so prescriptive that there is no place for teachers' expertise and growth. She advises districts to focus on specifying outcomes and providing guidelines, but encourage teachers, within that framework, to try strategies, consult on what works, and adjust accordingly.

Schools participating in the Chicago initiative this year chose curriculum from a total of seven sets in English, math, and science. In a request for proposals issued last year, the 426,000-student Chicago district asked outside providers to design "instructional development systems," including course materials, training and coaching, and student assessments. Fourteen responded, and from that group, seven were chosen. (*See Education Week, Oct. 5, 2005.*)

Other urban districts are taking similar paths. Pittsburgh has hired the New York City-based Kaplan K12 Learning Services for \$8.4 million over three years to develop 27 courses in four core subjects for 6th

through 11th graders, and to provide training for teachers and administrators. Portland this year began requiring a three-course math sequence purchased from an outside provider, and similar sequences for social studies and science are around the corner, said Marcia Arganbright, its director of secondary curriculum and instruction. Last year, the 47,000-student district began requiring all students in grades 6-12 to complete three "anchor assignments" per year—one written project each, tailored by grade level, in English, science, and social studies.

In Chicago, some staff members at John Hope, a neighborhood high school of 1,000 students on the city's South Side, grumbled to think they would be handed highly scripted curricula, said Principal Michael W. Durr. But they were relieved to find the lesson plans "loose" enough to allow use of their own expertise, he said. Teachers use pacing guides in all three subjects covered by the initiative, and students who score low in English or math take double periods so they can catch up. District officials are watching closely this year to see whether the pacing guides allow sufficiently deep coverage and mastery of the subject matter, said Allan Alson, who is overseeing the initiative for the school district.

Mr. Durr believes the new approach is going well so far. As he walks from classroom to classroom, he notes more evidence of higher-order thinking in

2 GREAT LEADERS

Attract and develop great leaders

- Attract and help place a new cadre of strong high school leaders, including external hires
- Augment the pipeline of aspiring leaders, support new principals
- Support for sitting principals
- Improved evaluation

3 EMPOWERED SCHOOLS

Autonomy in exchange for accountability

- Core belief that the school is the unit of change
- More freedom granted to schools in exchange for good performance under Autonomous Management and Performance program
- Schools opt in to instructional supports and choose among options

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the questions teachers are asking, and in the ways students are responding. In one English class, freshmen were deconstructing the complex messages in advertisements, using the discussion to practice skills such as decoding, synthesizing, and making inferences.

For that, Mr. Durr praises both the curriculum materials and the training his teachers are receiving, through daily common planning time, weekly in-class work with the curriculum providers' coaches, and intermittent large-group training sessions throughout the year. District leaders, in fact, see the training—not the curriculum—as the heart of the initiative.

"We're not just purchasing materials. We're looking at a system of support," said Barbara Eason-Watkins, the district's chief education officer. That support is a cornerstone of High School Transformation, a set of strategies the district is using to improve secondary education, including the new curriculum-and-training approach. The overall vision involves six "change levers," or areas that district leaders see as key places to apply pressure for change. (*See chart, below.*)

In that vision, the best-performing high schools get more autonomy, and the lowest-performing could face closure and reopening as smaller schools under a plan known as Renaissance 2010. For those in the vast middle range, district leaders envision the more centrally managed approach to curriculum and instruction. They hope such schools will sign on volun-

tarily, but they reserve the right to make it mandatory.

High School Transformation is costing \$20 million this year, and is projected to cost \$54 million by its third year. Chicago is using some money from its own \$4 billion budget, and some from \$28 million in grants provided by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation for this and related initiatives.

The foundation also supports *Education Week's* annual report on high school graduation.

Chicago has long been a laboratory for the incubation of smaller schools that make it possible for educators to build strong personal connections with students. But the perceived limitations of that model led the district to zero in on instruction more closely, said Donald R. Pittman, who directs the district's office of high schools.

"The data were showing that small schools produced more personal attention for students, and a better climate, but they weren't producing academic gains," he said. "We needed to try a more intentional approach to curriculum."

Arne Duncan, the district's chief executive officer, said the curricular initiative represents an attempt to ensure equity by delivering coursework of consistently good quality, while also giving schools enough choice—in curriculum

and in whether to participate—to ensure staff support.

"We could have picked one common curriculum. We discussed it," he said. "We could have picked 10. We chose a [smaller] menu of world-class curriculum and provided choice to get a certain level of buy-in."

That level of choice could account for the virtual lack of opposition—at least so far—to the initiative. A few teachers have complained in online blogs about the content of some of the new curricula, or the idea of having outside providers supply them. But the Chicago Teachers Union does not oppose the project, and many educators and activists either know little about it or are taking a wait-and-see attitude.

Some longtime Chicago educators see the built-in-choice design as a savvy bid to avoid a repeat of the unpleasant past. In 1999, the district required teachers to administer common end-of-course high school tests. It abandoned them in late 2002, after sustained teacher resistance.

A tenet of the new initiative is to have staff support before using the new curricula. Participating schools also must commit \$250 for each 9th grader from their discretionary money to defray the costs of teacher training.

But several educators, who asked not to be named for fear of appearing uncooperative, said some schools participated, over the objections of their teachers, as a way to stay in the district's good graces and avoid probation. Some principals simply decided without consulting teachers.

GREAT TEACHERS

Attract and develop great teachers

- Holistic instructional support
- Teacher induction and career path

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OPTIONS AND OPPORTUNITIES

One size does not fit all students

- Expand and improve ways to help students with too few credits
- Broader alternative pathways to graduation
- Equitable high school enrollment process
- Ensure a varied "portfolio" of school choices
- Close underperforming, underutilized schools and reopen them as smaller schools under Renaissance 2010 strategy

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9TH GRADE SUCCESS

Ensure smooth transition to 9th grade

- From rigor in the middle years to the transition to 9th grade to a focus on the freshman year itself
- Rigorous instructional supports start with 9th grade
- Use of new high school score card that includes data showing the number of students on track to graduate

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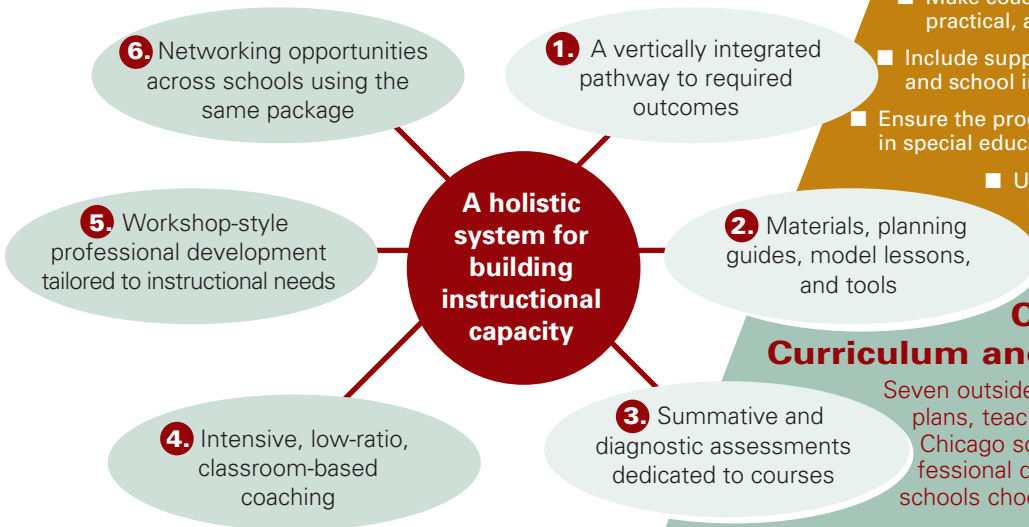
Glenn Brooks, a freshman, tackles his algebra. Behind him is a cart stacked with the laptop computers that accompany Cognitive Tutor.

High School Reform Chicago Style

District leaders view the “instructional development system” being used in 14 schools this fall as the heart of their strategy to improve high school education. They call it a “holistic” approach because it includes new curriculum materials, aligned to district standards, as well as assessments and ongoing teacher coaching and training that are designed for the curriculum.

The design reflects the district’s attempt to:

- Provide the right balance of course structure and support for teachers.
- Give teachers all the tools they need to do their jobs well using proven approaches, designed by experts to meet district standards.
- Make coaching and professional development concrete, practical, and flexible to meet teachers’ needs.
- Include support for principals to handle implementation and school improvement.
- Ensure the program is compatible with the needs of students in special education and English-language learners.
- Use proven approaches, designed by experts, to meet district standards.



Universities, Private Companies Provide Curriculum and Training

Seven outside providers designed comprehensive course plans, teacher guides, and assessments for the Chicago schools. They also supply coaching and professional development. In each of three subject areas, schools choose one provider’s package.

Mathematics

- **Agile Mind Enhanced**, by Agile Mind, a San Francisco company whose products are based on research conducted with the Charles A. Dana Center, University of Texas at Austin
- **Cognitive Tutor**, by Carnegie Learning, a Pittsburgh company founded by cognitive-science researchers from Carnegie Mellon University and veteran math teachers

English

- **Language, Literature, and Inquiry**, by Kaplan K12 Learning Services, a New York City-based company
- **Readers and Writers Workshop**, by America’s Choice, a Washington-based company that offers math and literacy instructional systems

Science

- **Inquiry to Build Content**, by Loyola University and University of Illinois, Chicago
- **Content Foundation to Build Inquiry**, Illinois Institute of Technology with the Field Museum of Natural History, both in Chicago, and Glencoe/McGraw-Hill in New York City
- **Meaningful Science Through Inquiry**, Northwestern University, in Evanston, Ill., with Biological Sciences Curriculum Study, a Colorado Springs, Colo.-based nonprofit organization; University of Illinois at Chicago; and It’s About Time, an Armonk, N.Y., company that crafts math and science programs

Assessment Design

- Under development by American Institutes for Research, based in Washington

“We were pretty much just told, ‘It’s coming,’” said one teacher at a participating school. “It wasn’t presented as an option.”

A few other things haven’t gone quite as the district had planned. A scheduled full day of training for teachers in all three subjects in October proved too much for the district’s substitute-teacher bank. Teachers instead spent the morning in their classrooms, then attended the training for the afternoon and early evening, a change that proved trying for some because of the long hours and interference with personal and parental obligations.

In some schools, not all the supplies promised under the program materialized on time. At John Hope, algebra teachers had to photocopy lessons from

the new textbooks for a while because too few sets were delivered. But most schools have received one of the most coveted features of the program: several carts of 28 laptops each, or a roomful of desktop computers.

Some education activists are concerned, though, that by focusing solely on curriculum and instruction, the new approach neglects the importance of finding effective ways to engage students in learning.

“If you don’t have a situation where kids want to come to school, and stay in school,” said Michael Klonsky, the director of the Small Schools Workshop, a Chicago-based nonprofit that assists in the startup of smaller learning communities, “then all the rest is a waste of time.” ■

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