

Small Schools: History

A comprehensive and clear description of the history of small schools until 1999 can be found in the Bank Street study, *Small Schools: Great Strides. A Study of New Small Schools in Chicago*, published in 2000. Below please find excerpts from this publication (full citation at end of excerpts), followed by our own description of the development of small schools from 1999 to the present:

Small Schools: Great Strides. A Study of New Small Schools in Chicago, pg. 5 -

Small schools have existed in Chicago at the elementary level for a long time. These schools, referred to as historically small schools, serve 350 students or fewer, are freestanding and are not alternative or special-education schools....

Before the Chicago small-schools movement began in the 1990s, the historically small elementary schools provided strong evidence that smaller school size can help lead to higher levels of academic achievement. Reformers cited the positive achievements of historically small schools in Chicago to press the idea of creating new small schools as a reform strategy. The questions confronting members of small-school communities were whether they could create new small schools in the existing CPS system and whether these new schools could replicate the success of the historically small schools.

In 1988 the first Chicago School Reform Act became law. Drawing on the energy and opportunity generated by this law, a professor from the University of Illinois at Chicago, along with a community organizer, introduced the small-school concept to Chicago and began to mobilize educators who were interested in starting these schools. Foundation support was secured to launch the Small Schools Workshop at the University of Illinois at Chicago. The goal of the workshop was to assist educators wanting to start small schools by supplying information, sharing technical assistance with teachers and providing advocacy with top-level central-office staffers to promote policy changes. A small-schools conference hosted by the Quest Center (the professional development arm of the Chicago Teachers' Union) brought more educators, particularly principals, into the movement. The early '90s saw the formation of several schools-within-schools (SWS), reflecting a range of instructional approaches and curricula.

Several Chicago-based community and advocacy groups offered their support of small schools. Business and Professional People for the Public Interest (BPI), Leadership for Quality Education (LQE), the Small Schools Workshop, the Quest Center and several other organizations worked to support the small-schools movement. Collectively they formed a coordinating organization, the Small Schools Coalition, to further mobilize support for small schools in Chicago.

The second "wave of reform," the 1995 Chicago School Reform Act, lodged responsibility for Chicago schools' performance in the office of the mayor. The idea of accountability to local communities shifted to an accountability based on "standards" and centralized management. Mayor Richard M. Daley appointed a five-member School Reform Board of Trustees, with a management team led by Chief Executive Officer Paul Vallas, the mayor's former budget chief.

Early in its tenure, the new board, responding to the efforts of the small-schools advocates, issued a resolution stating its commitment to "assisting in the formation and strengthening" of small schools in Chicago. The resolution described small schools as "characterized by (1) a small number of students, usually no more than 100-350 in elementary schools and 500 in secondary schools: (2) a cohesive, self-selected faculty supported by like-minded parents: (3) substantial autonomy as to curriculum, budget, organization, personnel, and other matters:

(4) a coherent curriculum or pedagogical focus that provides a continuous educational experience across a range of grades: and (5) an inclusive admissions policy that gives weight to student and parent commitment to the school mission"(Resolution, 1995).

This resolution was followed by a Request for Proposals (RFP). Twenty-four proposals were approved, with planning, start-up, and support grants awarded. Small schools in existence before the resolution continued to grow, and others have developed since. To date, the board lists more than a hundred small schools on its roster. Between 1997 and 1999, the board's Office of Special Initiatives was charged with providing support to small schools, often in the form of professional-development services and support in meeting board policy, as well as data collection on small-school structure and performance....

A third legislative opportunity provided additional impetus for the small schools movement. Some small schools [took] advantage of the 1996 Illinois charter legislation to create new public schools free of all central office mandates other than accountability in finance and in performance as measured by standardized test scores....

The [relatively] recent creation of charter schools, which are held accountable to the public and CPS through a five-year contract, has significantly increased the number of new freestanding small schools. Between 1997 and 1999, three small elementary schools, one small high school, and two small junior-high/high schools have been opened as new freestanding charter schools.

Wasley, P.A.; Fine, M.; King, S.P.; Powell, L.C.; Holland, N.E.; Gladden, R.M.; and Mosak, E. *Small Schools: Great Strides. A Study of New Small Schools In Chicago*. New York: The Bank Street College of Education, 2002. Available:
<http://www.bankstreet.edu/gems/publications/smallschoollow.pdf>

In 2001, Mayor Richard M. Daley appointed Arne Duncan as Chief Executive Officer of the Chicago Public Schools. As one of the founders of the Ariel Community Academy, a small school started as a part of the 1996 RFP, Mr. Duncan is committed to strongly supporting small schools from the district level. To that end, he created the Office of Small Schools in August 2001. Led by [Jeanne Nowaczewski](#), the Office of Small Schools is charged with supporting and promoting new and existing small schools throughout the Chicago Public Schools.

Since 2001, Chicago Public Schools has been awarded three major grants to support the creation of small high schools: A \$12 million grant from the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation (matched with \$6 million from local foundations) to support the conversion of 5 Chicago Public Schools high schools into 20 autonomous small schools by the year 2006; A \$1.38 million United States Department of Education Smaller Learning Communities grant to create 24 schools-within-schools in five high schools; And a \$7.6 million grant from the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation to create 12 new autonomous small high schools. By the year 2007, there will be more than 32 new autonomous small high schools and at least 22 new school-within-a-school high schools in the Chicago Public Schools. [Click here for more information about these grants.](#)

The future is bright for small schools in the Chicago Public Schools. The exciting new high school initiatives described above, in addition to upcoming elementary initiatives, are setting the stage for a vibrant new generation of small schools.