



Charting the Course

Illinois charter schools offer a proven solution to the state's dropout problem

For years, the quality of public schools in Illinois's inner cities and beleaguered rural communities has stood in stark contrast to that of schools in wealthier, safer, newer towns—and this is most evident when looking at high school graduation rates.

Statewide, on average, only 74 percent of public school students graduate from high school. The combined graduation rate of the bottom fifteen performers, among districts with 900 freshmen, is less than 51 percent. A young man who fails to earn a high school degree will, throughout his life, have a similar chance of doing prison time as he will of ever holding down a regular job that pays \$30,000 a year. The Center for Labor Market Studies estimates that each Illinois dropout costs taxpayers \$221,000 over the course of his lifetime. The disparity in graduation rates in Illinois, in other words, is not just a matter of statistics—it has a sizeable human impact.

There is a proven solution for Illinois's struggling schools, however. Charter schools can lead the effort to close the gap between rich and poor in Illinois's schools. Charter schools are public schools without entrance exams, open to any student. These schools are given the freedom to innovate with curriculum, length of school day, teacher compensation and student discipline. No two are alike. Urban Prep

Academy in Chicago, for example, is an all-boys college prep high school, while Chicago Virtual Charter School is a K-12 school where learning mainly takes place either online or through home-based study. These are just two of thirty-nine charter schools spread across Illinois.

As a whole, Chicago's charter schools significantly boost their students' chances of graduating high school and attending college, as demonstrated most recently in a report by the RAND Corporation. The state's largest charter school, Chicago International Charter School, has a dozen campuses across Chicago and a high school graduation rate of 90.4 percent, far higher than Chicago Public Schools' district-wide rate, which is often reported to be below fifty percent.

Neighborhoods in Chicago and communities throughout the rest of the state desperately need the innovation and improvement that charter schools provide. Communities such as Peoria, Springfield and Waukegan could use new charter schools of their own. This paper outlines steps that state and local policymakers should take to grow the number of charter schools throughout Illinois.

Specifically, local school districts should adopt a charter school request-for-proposal process. This an important first step toward vetting ideas from innovative educators who are eager to open new schools that can tackle challenges faced by area students.

For varied reasons, not all districts desire to act as a charter school authorizer. Therefore, it is also recommended that state

lawmakers follow the lead of neighboring states like Missouri and Indiana and create an independent authority to vet and, when appropriate, approve charter school applications.

State law caps the number of charter schools permitted to open. Though legislation was recently passed that increased the cap – which had previously stymied growth in Chicago – caps and restrictions on the number of charter schools in Illinois remain.

Closing the gap between Illinois’s lowest-performing districts and rest of the state would place Illinois at the top of national rankings in high school graduation rates. This is a goal worth pursuing. Achieving national prominence in high school graduation would be a windfall for taxpayers, who would enjoy a larger workforce and fewer jails. More importantly, it would represent a new opportunity for the tens of thousands of families whose children would be graduating from high school—and for the students themselves, facing better opportunities in their lives ahead.

Illinois’s charter schools have been shown to significantly improve their students’ chances of graduating high school.

Creating more charter schools is a logical first step in making Illinois a national leader in education reform. Graduating more students from high school is the best way to brighten the future of Illinois students, far too many of whom are currently on track to leave high school without a diploma.

Overview

Illinois has 870 school districts. This report focuses on fifteen districts badly in need of school reform, and on closing the performance gap between them and the rest of the state.

Altogether, Illinois has a statewide graduation rate of 74.1 percent, according to *Education Week*.¹ The bottom fifteen Illinois school districts of significant size (min. 900 freshmen) had a combined graduation rate of just 50.7 percent. Closing the gap between these districts and the rest of the state would place Illinois comfortably atop the national rankings with an 85.4 percent graduation rate.

Graduation Rates

A young man who fails to earn a high school degree will, throughout his life, have a similar chance of doing prison time as he will of ever holding down a regular job that pays \$30,000 a year. A high school diploma is a prerequisite for college, to be

Closing the gap between Illinois’s lowest-performing districts and rest of the state would place Illinois at the top of national rankings in high school graduation rates.

Table I: Fifteen Illinois Districts (min. 900 Freshmen) with the lowest graduation rates, according to Education Week

District Name	2005-06 Freshmen	Graduation Rate
BLOOM TWP HIGH SCH DIST 206	1,273	29.0
DECATUR SCHOOL DISTRICT 61	957	45.8
ROCKFORD SCHOOL DIST 205	3,274	47.1
CITY OF CHICAGO SCHOOL DIST 299	36,904	49.6
EAST ST LOUIS SCHOOL DIST 189	1,117	51.4
J S MORTON H S DISTRICT 201	2,237	51.5
JOLIET TWP HS DIST 204	1,825	52.2
AURORA WEST UNIT SCHOOL DIST 129	1,116	52.9
VALLEY VIEW CUSD #365U	1,364	56.7
SPRINGFIELD SCHOOL DISTRICT 186	1,262	57.4
THORNTON TWP H S DIST 205	1,832	59.9
AURORA EAST UNIT SCHOOL DIST 131	998	61.0
WAUKEGAN C U SCHOOL DIST 60	1,408	62.2
PEORIA SCHOOL DISTRICT 150	1,179	63.6
PROVISO TWP H S DIST 209	1,822	66.4

sure, but more importantly it is a necessary achievement for anyone hoping to live comfortably above the poverty level – an aspiration, it's safe to say, that all parents have for their children.

Yet thirty percent of the nation's public school students fail to earn a high school degree, according to *Education Week*, which publishes the nation's most widely-read ranking of graduation rates. Illinois ranks twentieth in the country, with an estimated 74.1 percent graduation rate. Wisconsin and New Jersey sit atop the national rankings with an 82 percent graduation rate.² This policy brief outlines a strategy to move Illinois toward the top of the national rankings.

Closing the gap between Illinois and top-ranking states would represent a dramatic change of fortune for thousands of Illinois students and add billions of dollars to the state's economy. There were 180,000 freshmen in Illinois's public schools in 2007. The eight percentage point difference between Illinois's graduation rate and that of first-place Wisconsin represents more than 14,000 diploma earners. The Center for Labor Market Studies estimates that each Illinois dropout costs taxpayers \$221,000 over the course of his lifetime – meaning that the annual legacy cost of coming in 20th in graduation rates as opposed to 1st is \$3.2 billion.

Virtually everyone in the state – taxpayers, parents, educators, and employers – has an interest in making Illinois a national leader in high school graduation rates. With proper reforms in place, this is an achievable goal.

Calculating Graduation Rates

Much to the consternation of school reformers, the Illinois State Board of Education uses a graduation rate method that consistently inflates graduation rate estimates. For example, in 2006 ISBE reported that Illinois's graduation rate was 87.8 percent. Other sources, including *Education Week*, estimated a much lower figure. Using a method called the

Cumulative Promotion Index, Education Week estimated that Illinois's graduation rate for 2007 was actually 74.1 percent.

The federal Department of Education, using a method called the Average Freshman Graduation Rate, put Illinois's graduation rate for 2006 at 79.7 percent – still 8 points lower than the official state figure. An eight-point difference may not seem controversial at first glance. But considering that Illinois had an estimated 169,000 first-time freshmen in 2002-2003, the single-year discrepancy between state and federal estimates represents more than 13,500 high school graduates.

The lack of consistency in government-reported graduation rates is frustrating for anyone hoping to accurately assess Illinois's schools. Monitoring a student's progress through high school does not require a sophisticated battery of standardized tests. It simply requires a student-level data system – a virtual checklist - that records whether a student has yet to earn a high school diploma, something that could and should have been assembled decades ago.

During the 2007-08 school year, school officials in Illinois finally put such a system in place, which will eventually create reliable estimates. This follows a trend already begun in other states – one that led to more accurate and modest reporting of state graduation rates. According to an Illinois state task force on re-enrolling dropouts:

Some states have instituted a data system to track individual students with a specific tracking number. States using a tracking number have found marked differences in their graduation rates from the rate calculated by systems they previously used. For instance, the statewide Massachusetts graduation rate dropped to 80% after student identification numbers were used, and the Boston graduation rate, in particular, dropped from 83% to 59%. After instituting a system that tracks individual students with a specific identification number, Indiana's official state graduation rate declined from 90% to 76%, and the rate for Indianapolis dropped from

Closing the gap between Illinois and top-ranking states would represent a dramatic change of fortune for thousands of Illinois students and add billions of dollars to the state's economy.

91% to 52%.

In Illinois, the Student Information System (SIS), implemented in the 2007-08 school year, assigns each student an identification number. By 2011, when the first group of students assigned an identification number are set to graduate, Illinois should have a clearer picture of its graduation rate, and the graduation rates of individual school districts. It is very likely that statewide and individual school district graduation rates will fall, perhaps significantly in some school districts that are more urban, in the same way that Indianapolis' and Boston's graduation rates fell when tracking systems were employed.³

Because the method of calculating graduation rates using the new state information system cannot be applied for another two years, it will still be necessary in the meantime to rely upon tried methods of estimating graduation rates at the state and district level.

Education Week employs a popular method developed by resident researcher Chris Swanson, called the Cumulative Promotion Index (CPI). Simply put, the CPI calculates the probability that a high school student will progress from one year to the next; the product of these rates becomes the projected graduation rate. The method is not without its critics. Chicago resident and Nobel Laureate James Heckman, for one, believes that *Education Week* consistently underestimates the nation's public high graduation rate. However, neither Heckman nor any other serious researcher has attempted to defend the official figures compiled by the Illinois State Board of Education, which are implausibly high.⁴

IPI Ten-Year Average

When calculating the figures on a yearly basis, graduation rates can appear volatile. At the district level, an unusually high number of students transferring in or out during a given school year can throw off estimates. If a freshman class has an unusually high number of students graduate in five years as opposed to four, it will depress that class's graduation rate

while inflating that of the following year's class. Therefore, calculating a ten-year graduation rate is simpler and somewhat more reliable when looking at the bigger picture.

The U.S. Department of Education reports the number of diplomas issued at the state and local level. The 2005-06 school year is the most recent for which data is available. The Department of Education's Common Core of Data (CCD) reports that 1,169,155 students earned a diploma from one of Illinois's public schools during the ten-year period between 1996-97 and 2005-06. Between 1993-94 and 2002-2003 – the ten-year period during which those graduates likely would have begun school – an estimated 1,488,541 first-time freshmen enrolled in Illinois high schools. Anyone with a calculator can do the math: 1,169,155 divided by 1,488,541 comes out to a 78.5 percent graduation rate.

Fifteen Key School Districts

Reform is needed most in districts that have struggled keep kids in school and prepare them for life beyond high school. Table 1 lists districts that make up the bottom fifteen in *Education Week's* graduation rate estimates of Illinois districts with at least 900 freshmen. The combined graduation rate for these districts is 50.7 percent, and their freshman enrollments represent 32.6 percent of the state's total student body.

The combined graduation rate for the rest of the state is 85.4 percent, which means that Illinois would comfortably lead the country in high school graduation rates if these fifteen Illinois school districts could catch up to the rest of the state. And so, implementing meaningful reforms in these districts becomes the logical first step towards making Illinois a national leader in graduating students from high school, saving taxpayers billions of dollars and, more importantly, changing thousands upon thousands of lives.

Many school district officials would likely object to being called a member of any "bottom fifteen" club, which is

Reform is needed most in districts that have struggled keep kids in school and prepare them for life beyond high school.

understandable. Most districts want to believe that their schools are doing a better job than *Education Week's* rankings suggest.

Indeed, many districts look to the state-calculated graduation rates published by the Illinois State Board of Education (ISBE). But ISBE's official graduation rates are largely unreliable. Though not wholly consistent, *Education Week's* rankings emerge as far more credible than official figures from the state board.

Districts with low rankings from *Education Week* are indeed districts in need of reform. Discussed below is the most promising and successful reform to have appeared in Illinois in decades: charter schools.

Illinois Charter Schools

Charter schools are public schools that receive public money. Unlike traditional public schools, they are not run by a central district office, but by independent organizations with innovative approaches to public education. Every charter school is unique.

Each school must compete for every student who walks through its doors, because no parent can be forced to send their child to a charter school. Charter schools must accept every child who applies, unless they have reached seating capacity, after which point a random lottery decides who is admitted.

Performance standards laid out in their founding agreements make charter schools accountable to state and local officials for their results. If a charter school fails to meet its academic goals, state or local officials can close it down.

Independent research has consistently shown that Illinois's charter schools improve academic achievement, especially for low-income students. Over the last five years, no education program in Illinois has been subject to deeper scholarly scrutiny than the state's charter schools. Since 2004, five studies have been conducted by independent researchers using sophisticated research designs. Each study attempts

to control for all factors affecting school performance, like family income or learning disabilities. Every study has shown that charter school students are making significant gains, compared to their peers in traditional public schools.

The research is conclusive: Illinois's charter school policy has been a success. It may in fact be the state's most successful policy experiment of the last 20 years—it's certainly the best researched. The time has come for state and local policymakers to move charter schools in Illinois from a small-scale initiative largely concentrated in Chicago to a widespread reform of public schooling in the toughest communities throughout the state.

Moving Illinois to the Top

To date, most of the state's charter schools have been located in Chicago, despite the fact that state law unnecessarily slowed the growth of charter schools in the city by capping the number permitted to be opened within CPS boundaries. State law has now been changed to double the number of charter schools allowed to operate in Chicago, and Windy City officials appear ready to take advantage of this long overdue freedom, opening several new charter schools as soon as fall 2010.

Local leaders in Chicago quickly seized the opportunity to open charter schools when Illinois's charter law was passed in 1996. However, to date, leaders in most other Illinois cities have been hesitant to open charter schools. Throughout the rest of Illinois, only a half dozen charter schools are open and serving students in grades K through 12. Though often overlooked, Illinois's downstate and suburban charter schools are consistently making headway, much like their counterparts in Chicago. A recent Illinois Policy Institute report showed that these schools are meeting state standards at higher rates than their surrounding district-run public schools.

Upon the success of charter schools throughout Illinois, community leaders have begun to rally around the idea of opening

Independent research has consistently shown that Illinois's charter schools improve academic achievement, especially for low-income students.

more charter schools. This has certainly been the case in many of the fifteen districts with the lowest graduation rates in the state. (These are the communities that, if they can match the performance of the rest of the state, will elevate Illinois to the top of the national rankings in graduating students from high school.) Discussed below are the recent experiences of five of those districts: Chicago, Rockford, Peoria, Springfield and Waukegan.

Chicago

A decade ago, Chicago opened its doors to charter schools. The experiment has been a success by all measures. The schools typically are safer, better attended and more efficient than district-run public schools. Several consecutive studies have shown that the city's charter schools are producing better academic results. Indeed, the RAND Corporation recently demonstrated that Chicago charter schools significantly boost students' chances of graduating high school.

In turn, Chicago is preparing to vastly expand the number of charter high schools within the city, and other Illinois school districts are following suit. Recently, the Illinois General Assembly passed legislation that would increase the number of charter schools allowed to open in the city. State law had previously capped that number at 30, which Chicago charter schools had reached in 2008. Newly signed legislation

increases that limit to 75, and innovative educators have responded enthusiastically. Fifteen applicants have already applied for one of the newly available charters (Figure 1).

This is great news for kids in struggling schools and their families, not to mention taxpayers who are hoping to make Illinois a national leader in education. As the gap narrows between Chicago and the state's top-performing districts, Illinois will climb the national rankings in every measure of academic success.

Closing the gap between Chicago and the rest of the state is an achievable goal. But, of course, Chicago isn't the only Illinois city in need of better schools. As Chicago expands the number of charter schools within city limits, other districts should take notice and consider doing the same.

Rockford

Rockford's public schools have struggled for years; its 2006 graduation rate was 47.1 percent, according to Education Week. Last year, community members finally faced the music, realizing that area schools could not improve without making significant changes. The district has since approved three new charter schools – two of them high schools – to open over the next 18 months (Figure 2).

The first such school to be approved was the Legacy Academy of Excellence,

Chicago charter schools typically are safer, better attended and more efficient than district-run public schools.

Figure 1: Chicago 299 graduation rate estimates from Education Week, Illinois Policy Institute and District officials, 1997-2006.

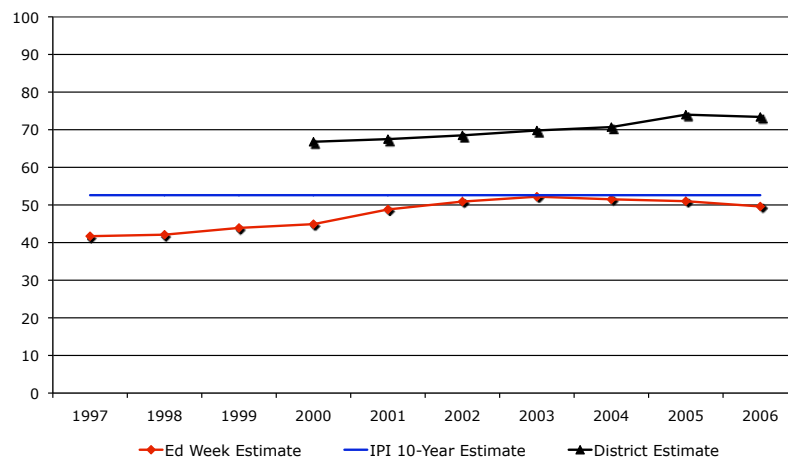
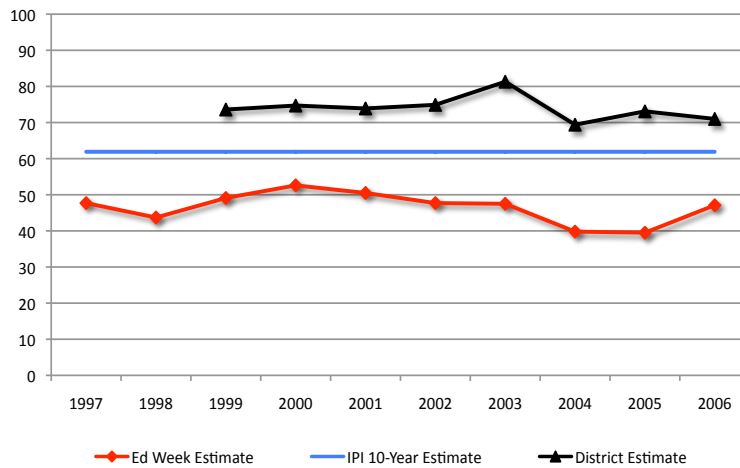


Figure 2: Rockford 205 graduation rate estimates from Education Week, Illinois Policy Institute and District officials, 1997-2006.



proposed by the upstart CompEd charter school network. The school will open in August 2009, eventually serving students in grades K through 12. An ambitious curriculum will incorporate “Core Knowledge, Direct Instruction and International Baccalaureate reform models,” according to the new school’s website.⁵

Shortly after approving the Legacy application, the Rockford school board authorized Chicago’s Galapagos Charter School to open a new elementary school in Rockford. The school opened September, 2009. Unique to charter schools in Illinois, Galapagos staff from the Chicago campus and the Rockford campus will attend a month-long teacher preparation session in Chicago. School founders are optimistic that this intense preparation period will help Galapagos Rockford to avoid the confusion that tends to plague newly-opened public schools.

Also opening in Rockford will be the newest campus of Chicago International Charter School, Illinois’s largest and perhaps most successful charter school. Experienced in starting new schools, CICS administrators believe that their new K through 12 charter school will allow them to finally expand upon their past successes in Chicago, where their 13 campuses serve a diverse number and grade range of students. CICS Rockford will open in 2010.

There is considerable local interest in opening two additional charters, an academy focused on single-gender education and the other a program focused on re-enrolling dropouts. Together these schools, if successful, would measurably impact Rockford’s high school graduation rate.

In a matter of months, Rockford has gone from an average Illinois city, typical in its struggles to graduate students from high school, to a community willing to embrace reform. If Rockford continues to expand its charter school sector, and if those charter schools match the success of charters in Chicago, the city could become the first district to convert itself from a failing school district into a model for towns such as Peoria, Springfield or Waukegan.

Peoria

Peoria has several large high schools known for their athletic achievement. Academic excellence has proven more elusive; *Education Week* reports that Peoria’s graduation rate is 63.6 percent and the IPI ten-year average suggests that no more than three quarters of Peoria public high school students have graduated over the last decade. This pattern has for years troubled local employers and manufacturers who depend on young talent to staff their offices and plants (Figure 3).

In a matter of months, Rockford has gone from an average Illinois city, typical in its struggles to graduate students from high school, to a community willing to embrace reform.

The progress of Chicago charter schools and the developments in Rockford did not escape the attention of Peoria’s leaders. In June 2009, Peoria district officials created a formal vetting process for charter school proposals by adopting official request-for-proposal (RFP) guidelines. This was a very important signal that ideas are welcome from inventive educators and community members interested in starting a charter school. Local business leaders immediately responded with an outline for a new math and science high school. A charter high school dedicated to vocational training is rumored to be in the works as well.

The development of the RFP process in Peoria came at little or no cost. It was not a commitment to open a charter school, but merely an assurance that new ideas would be vetted using public, objective guidelines.

Developing a charter proposal is expensive, time consuming, and often emotionally draining. Passionate educators and community backers are much less likely to proceed with planning a charter school if they are unable to gauge the district’s expectations or the school’s chances of approval. Indeed, to date, the pattern in Illinois has been this: the districts that ask for proposals are the districts that receive the most proposals; districts who remain mum on, or hostile to, the idea of charter schools are unlikely to inspire innovative educators to try new ideas in their communities. Districts who are hostile

or silent on the issue all but guarantee that charter school applications will be few or non-existent. The simplest and most efficient way for district officials to begin a dialogue about charter schools is to develop an RFP process, as Peoria has demonstrated.

Springfield

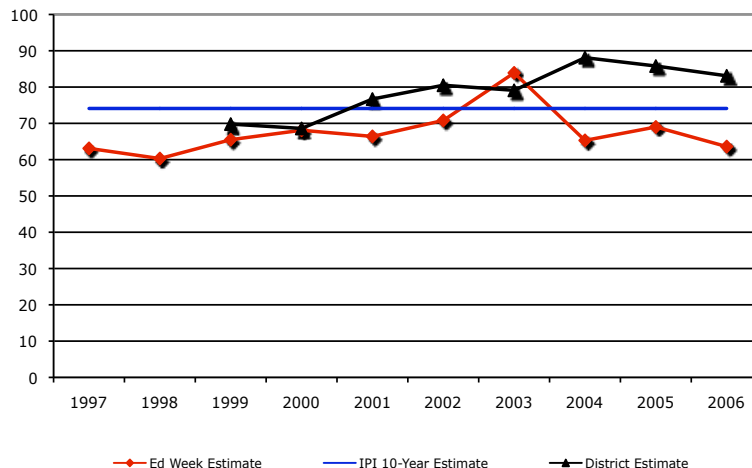
Far too many of Springfield’s youth are failing to graduate high school. The state board of education reports that District 186 has a graduation rate of nearly 90 percent—but according to other measures, the district’s graduation rate is much lower. *Education Week* reported that the 2006 graduation rate for District 186 was 57.4 percent, thirty points lower than the state’s 87.1 percent estimate for that same year.

The ten-year IPI method suggests that Springfield’s graduation rate is higher than *Education Week*’s estimates, but still far lower than the official ISBE figure. The federal Department of Education reports that 8,090 students graduated from Springfield public high schools between 1997 and 2006. Between 1994 and 2003, the ten-year period in which those graduates would have begun school, Springfield freshman enrollments totaled 12,478.

The math is simple: 8,090 divided by 12,478 comes out to a 64.8 percent graduation rate. Even if we adjust the freshman enrollments to eliminate the potential double counting of freshmen who are held back, the

In June 2009, Peoria district officials created a formal vetting process for charter school proposals by adopting official request-for-proposal (RFP) guidelines.

Figure 3: Peoria 150 graduation rate estimates from Education Week, Illinois Policy Institute and District officials, 1997-2006.



district's ten-year graduation rate is still only 71.7 percent.

A 71.7 percent graduation rate is far lower than many Springfield families, business owners and even district officials would presume. Leaders in Springfield should look carefully at opening charter schools that can reverse this trend (Figure 4).

Springfield has a charter school, and a successful one at that. Ball Charter School is an elementary school that enrolls students from all across the district. A performance report published by Illinois Policy Institute shows that during the 2007-08 school year, Ball students outperformed the district average in 80 percent of comparable measures of student performance; notably, low-income students outperformed district peers in 9 of 14 matchups.

There are nearly 300 Springfield students on a waiting list to get into Ball Charter, due to limited seating and the school's excellent reputation. Perhaps it's time to think about a second campus for Ball Charter.

Perhaps it's also time to start thinking about a new charter high school for Springfield as well. A recent story in the Springfield's State Journal Register showed that every year hundreds of parents are seeking to transfer their children from Lanphier and

Southeast to Springfield High, perceived by many to be the best high school in the district. These families are eager for a better choice – just like the families on the waiting list at Ball Charter.

Charter schools create that choice. And in many of Illinois's toughest communities, they've been shown to dramatically improve results – especially when it comes to graduation rates. With innovative new schools in place, more of the state's children will be graduating, and more of them heading to college.

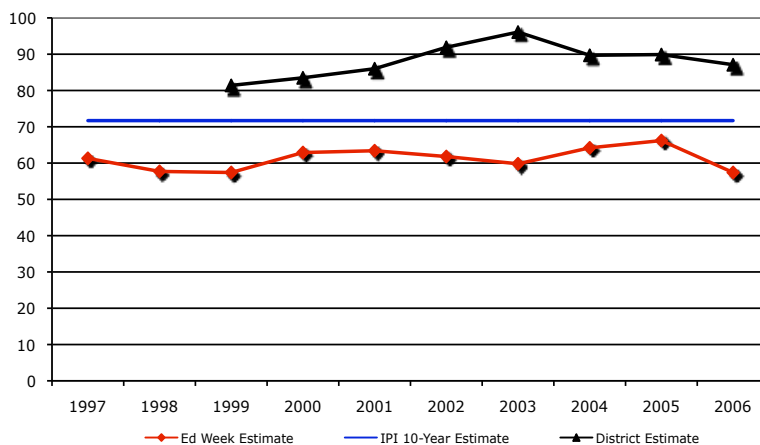
Waukegan

Earlier this year, the Rockford School Board approved an application from the Chicago International Charter School to open a new charter school in town. Many Waukegan families should recognize that name, Chicago International Charter School (CICS). Last November, the Waukegan school board denied an application from CICS to open a new, rigorous college prep high school in town, despite overwhelming support from hundreds of families and community organizations.

Charter schools have strong track records in many of Illinois's toughest communities, and CICS is certainly one of the most impressive of the lot. CICS is Illinois's largest charter school, with thirteen campuses open across Chicago. Last year,

There are nearly 300 Springfield students on a waiting list to get into Ball Charter, due to limited seating and the school's excellent reputation.

Figure 4: Springfield graduation rate estimates from Education Week, Illinois Policy Institute and District officials, 1997-2006.



officials from CICS were invited by the Waukegan community group Lake County United to propose a new high school, which the charter school would have built on a blighted lot, using privately raised funds. Together, Lake County United and CICS were hoping to spread the charter school's successes to Waukegan, whose lone 4,000 student high school has for years struggled to graduate students from high school.

CICS was the focus of one of the most robust studies ever conducted of charter school performance. In 2004, economists Carolyn Hoxby and Jonah Rockoff found that, in inner-city Chicago, CICS students experience gains typically reserved for students in wealthier communities. More recent data has also been impressive. According to the school's annual report, at the end of elementary school, "seventh grade has closed the achievement gap in both reading and math, and grade eight has closed the gap in reading." High school students at CICS graduate with a diploma nearly 90 percent of the time – a rate far higher than in Rockford or Waukegan. CICS seemed a perfect fit for Waukegan.

Education Week reports that the 2006 graduation rate for Waukegan was 60.6 percent, while the official ISBE estimate was 66.4, twenty points lower than the official estimate from the year prior, and

thirty-three points lower than the official 2002 graduation rate of 100 percent. This precipitous decline does not represent a fast-deteriorating situation in Waukegan. Rather, it speaks to the unreliability of ISBE's method. The IPI ten-year average suggests that Waukegan's high school graduation has, at best, been 66 percent (Figure 5).

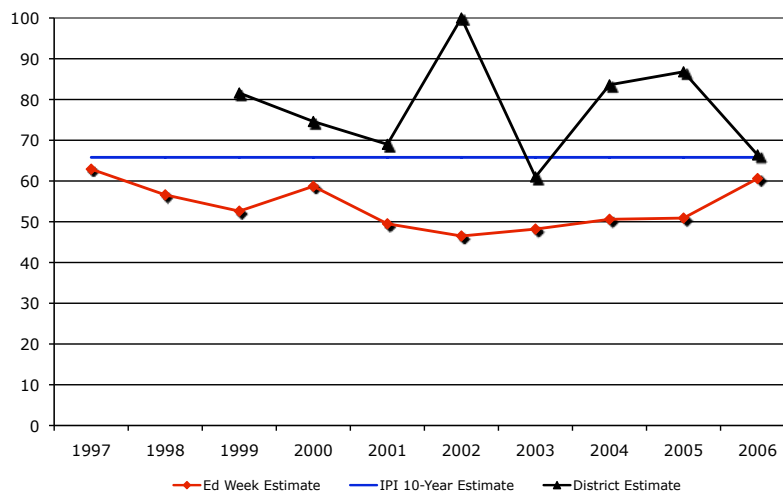
It is little wonder why local organizations such as Lake County United were ready to welcome CICS to town. However, when a public hearing was held by the school district in order to gauge public support for the proposed "Waukegan College Prep," the response from officials was unusually contentious.

It was clear upon the conclusion of the public hearing, and made official by a board vote shortly thereafter, that the Waukegan school board would not allow the school to open—denying area students the option of attending a new public high school.

And thus Waukegan's loss became Rockford's gain. After the defeat in Waukegan, CICS officials turned their energies to Rockford, another beleaguered Illinois city. In February 2009, the Rockford school board approved a new K-12 charter school to be operated by Chicago International. "We are delighted to have CICS focused on accelerating

High school students at Chicago International Charter School graduate with a diploma nearly 90 percent of the time – a rate far higher than in Rockford or Waukegan.

Figure 5: Waukegan graduation rate estimates from *Education Week*, Illinois Policy Institute and District officials, 1997-2006.



student achievement with students in Rockford,” said Laurie Preece, executive director of the Rockford Charter Schools Initiative, a community advocacy organization.⁶

To lose such an opportunity was an extraordinarily tough break for Waukegan students. That said, CICS is not the only organization with a strong record of educating students through charter schools. Others, such as the Noble Street Network or the United Neighborhood Organization, appear poised to expand upon past successes in Illinois and build new charter schools. In them, or organizations like them, community members in Waukegan can find another potential partner, ready to meet the challenge of public schooling in Waukegan.

However, any application would again risk running into stiff opposition from the school board. In Illinois, school districts have near-total control over whether a charter school is allowed to open. This is contrary to most other states, where authorities have been established to vet – and, if merited, approve – applications to open charter schools. Illinois, and especially families in Waukegan, would benefit from the creation of a new charter school authority in Illinois. The Illinois Network of Charter Schools has authored one such proposal.

Community members in Waukegan along with charter school operators should be able to present their plans to a panel of experienced, unbiased officials. Parents in Waukegan deserve the opportunity to choose a school that meets the unique needs of their children.

One such opportunity has come and gone, now being enjoyed by a different community hoping to attract new businesses and close old jails. Waukegan community members can regroup, and again show the ingenuity to find a partner willing to open a charter school. And if they do so, they should also rally in support of legislation that will allow their voices to

be heard by a public body that is open to change.

A winning school in Waukegan is a winning school for Illinois. If schools can open in Waukegan to match the success of charter schools in Chicago, Waukegan will become a better community and Illinois a better state to raise children.

Conclusion

Charter schools in Illinois have been more thoroughly researched than any other program or reform initiative within the state. The research shows that they have succeeded in narrowing the gap between students in beleaguered neighborhoods and those from well-to-do communities. The next step should be to open more charter schools in more neighborhoods and more cities. This will require the efforts of state and local policymakers alike, as well as the work of innovative educators and community groups who will seek to start their own schools.

To date, the rule in Illinois has been this: districts that voice an interest in charter schools become the districts that receive high numbers of high-quality charter school applications. Therefore, local policymakers can take a simple but important step towards exploring the possibility of new charter schools. It is recommended that:

- Local school boards should adopt a charter school request-for-proposal process. This is a formal gesture to innovative educators and would-be charter school operators that a district is open to hearing ideas for new schools that can improve education for area students.

School districts in Illinois currently have near total control over whether charter schools are permitted to open. In the past, not every Illinois school district that has received a high-quality charter school application has approved it. Charter schools, at their best, shake up the status quo. They provide parents with new options, and as a result they compete with

The research shows that charter schools have succeeded in narrowing the gap between students in beleaguered neighborhoods and those from well-to-do communities.

district-run schools for resources. Charter schools are given the freedom to find innovative new ways to manage classrooms and pay teachers, in stark contrast to the decades-old paradigm of running public schools. This break from tradition has led some districts to be completely closed to the concept of charter schools, despite the fact that Illinois's charter schools have repeatedly been demonstrated to have improved academic outcomes. Furthermore, the limited ability of small districts to oversee charter schools has also contributed to the slow growth of charter schools in downstate and suburban communities.

Policymakers in many other states have agreed that school districts should not be the sole authority to vet applications from charter schools. A previous Illinois Policy Institute report called on Illinois lawmakers to make similar changes to state law. Specifically, it recommended that lawmakers:

- Create a new, independent entity to approve and monitor charter schools. This would give would-be charter school operators the choice of applying through school districts or an entity created specifically to monitor and work with charter schools.
- Investigate whether existing agencies (such as state universities and city halls) can also be empowered to serve as charter school authorizers.

Taking these important steps will have two complimentary effects. First, it will give high-quality charter school applications a realistic shot at approval, even in high-need areas with school boards that are either too small to monitor, or ideologically opposed to, charter schools. Moreover, since charter applicants are likely to opt for a vetting process with clear-cut guidelines, the creation of a professional independent authorizer will give districts an incentive to formalize their local application process, if they want charter school applicants to consider seeking approval at the local level.

As the number of charter schools throughout Illinois continues to grow, another impediment will appear. State law caps the number of charter schools permitted to open in Illinois, despite the fact that the state's charter schools have been shown time and again to improve student performance. State lawmakers should therefore:

- Eliminate the caps on charter schools, thus allowing them to grow at a rate that parents, taxpayers and authorizing entities see fit.

Charter schools in Chicago are changing public education for the better, often dramatically. In suburban and downstate communities, the relatively few charter schools that have managed to open are raising the bar as well: a 2009 report by the Illinois Policy Institute found that charter schools outside of Chicago performed above the district average in 72 percent of available matchups of academic performance.

Charter schools have been shown to – and should be able to continue to – improve public education throughout Illinois. As they do so, Illinois will move closer to becoming a national leader in sending its children into college or the workforce with a diploma in hand.

Charter schools in Chicago are changing public education for the better, often dramatically.

Appendix: Illinois Charter School Performance

What the Research Says

Across Illinois more than 30,000 students are now enrolled in charter schools, and another 13,500 students are on waiting lists to get in. The schools have proven popular with parents, since the state's first charter schools opened in 1996.

There has been consistent pressure on lawmakers by some groups to slow the growth of charter schools. Other groups, including the Illinois Policy Institute, have urged elected officials to grow the number of charter schools in order to meet parental demand. A popular question asked by key decision makers throughout the debate has been, "Is there independent research that shows charter schools improve student learning?"

Indeed there is. Since 2004, five separate analyses have been conducted by outside researchers otherwise unengaged in the policy debate. Each of those studies is reviewed below. And each reaches a similar conclusion: charter schools in Illinois are producing academic results superior to district-run schools with similar student populations.

One of the studies focuses exclusively on the state's largest charter school network. Two focus solely on charter schools in Chicago, where more than 90 percent of the state's charter school campuses are located. And two others focus on charter schools statewide.

Each study takes rigorous steps to account for selection bias, either through random assignment or a quasi-experimental method. This allows researchers to compare "apples to apples" and thus focus on the direct impact that charter schools have on student performance, apart from demographic factors.

The studies below are different in scope and time period studied. Yet all of them reach the same conclusion: Illinois charter

schools outpace traditional public schools.

Consensus is not common in scholarly research. Policymakers who have supported charter schools should be encouraged that every rigorous study of Illinois charter schools has shown positive academic results. Moving forward, it should serve as a mandate to elected officials seeking to improve public education in Illinois – policies should be implemented that allow charter schools to grow all across the state.

Hoxby-Rockoff

In 2004, economists Caroline Hoxby and Jonah Rockoff released an analysis of student performance at Chicago International Charter School (the state's largest charter school). As of 2007, their study was still considered by some to be "the most rigorous random-assignment study of the effects of charter schools yet undertaken."⁷

During the period of the study, Chicago International Charter School had become the largest and most popular charter school in Illinois. Applications for the school outnumbered available seats by the thousands, which meant that students were admitted by lottery.

Our treatment group (those who, in medicine, would receive the pill) comprises charter school applicants who drew a lottery number that earned them a piece at one of the charter school... Our control group (those who would receive the placebo) comprises the applicants who were lotteried out... All that distinguishes the group is their randomly drawn lottery numbers, so we can be confident that the groups are comparable...⁸

The study found that charter school students who enrolled in early grades realized four-year gains of 5 to 6 points in math and reading, compared to the students who had to return to district-run public schools. Annually, the average

Policymakers who have supported charter schools should be encouraged that every rigorous study of Illinois charter schools has shown positive academic results.

benefit for students admitted to CICS was 2.5 to 3 points.

Wong-Shen

In 2007, Brown professor Kenneth Wong and Harvard researcher Francis Shen conducted a pilot analysis of Illinois charter school performance. The authors employed “a modified version” of school performance developed by Standard & Poor’s called an “error band analysis”:

The Error Band approach is designed to identify under- and over-performing districts or schools, relative to state averages and statistical expectations based on variations in economically disadvantaged student populations. While Standard & Poor’s has focused their attention on analysis at the district level, in our evaluation we focus on school level variations. We consider not only achievement in single years, but measure of value-added over different periods of years.⁹

The study found that, over the five-year period between 2001 and 2005, 78 percent of Illinois charter schools made gains significantly above the norm for all public schools on the Illinois Standards Achievement Test. No charter school performed below the norm over that period.

Kenneth Wong, while presenting the paper’s findings during a 2007 national conference in Chicago, placed special emphasis on one significant finding. In the three and four year periods leading up to 2005, one hundred percent of Illinois charter schools were “over-performers” in the vitally important subject of 8th grade reading.

Great Lakes Center for Education Research & Practice

In public schools, demographics is a strong predictor of school performance. This is typically bad news for students from poor households and beleaguered neighborhoods. However, demography is not destiny, as many excellent schools have shown. A June 2007 study by the Great Lakes Center for Education Research & Practice found that a majority of Illinois

charter schools outperformed the expected performance of demographically similar public schools throughout the state. Moreover, the authors concluded that Illinois’s charter schools were the strongest such crop from any Great Lakes state.

The authors used a straightforward analytical framework:¹⁰

...we compared each charter school’s actual test results with its predicted results, which are based on a statistical analysis of results for all demographically similar public schools statewide. Thus, the difference between prediction and performance, or the residual score, indicates the charter school performance in relation to similar public schools: a positive residual score indicates better than predicted performance, and a negative one indicates lower than predicted performance.

The study examined grade 5, 8 and 11 test data from the five-year period between 2002-2003 and 2006-2007. It concluded that 57 percent of Illinois charter schools performed better than district-run public schools with comparable demographics. Moreover, at Illinois charter schools “the trend in student achievement is improving with the largest gains occurring at Grade 11,” the period in which students for a final push into college or the workforce.¹¹

RAND Corporation

In late 2008, the RAND Corporation released a study of charter school performance in Chicago, where a vast majority of Illinois charter schools are located. The study included two analyses of charter high school performance in the district.

In their primary analysis, the authors examined the performance of students who attended charter schools in the eighth grade. Some of the students in the sample went on to attend charter high schools. The others went on to attend traditional public schools.¹²

The analysis of the attainment effects of Chicago’s charter [high schools] ... breaks new ground and suggests positive effects

In the three and four year periods leading up to 2005, one hundred percent of Illinois charter schools were “over-performers.”

*for the average charter eighth-grader who continues in a charter [high school]. A quasi-experimental analysis that compares graduation rates, college-entry rates, and ACT scores of a group of charter-HS students and a group of CPS-HS students—in which both groups were enrolled in charter schools in eighth grade—estimates positive effects of charters on all three outcomes. For charter eighth-graders in Chicago, continuing into a charter [high school] appears to increase ACT scores, **improve the probability of graduating by 7 percentage points**, and improve the probability of enrolling in college by 11 percentage points.” [Emphasis added].*

These findings are significant not only because they show Chicago’s charter high schools are boosting student learning and raising the city’s graduation rate. They also illustrate that the superior student achievement at charter schools in Chicago is not due to parental self-selection – something commonly alleged by skeptics of charter schools.

In their secondary analysis, the RAND team of researchers examined the performance of charter high school students who had attended a traditional public school in the eighth grade and then compared the performance of those students to demographically similar populations in traditional public high schools. The researchers again found charter high schools had a significant impact on graduation rates: “The matched analysis indicates a statistically significant (at 0.01) charter school **advantage of 10 percentage points in the probability of graduating from HS.**”¹³ [Emphasis added.]

Stanford CREDO

In June 2009, researchers at Stanford University’s Center for Research and Education Outcomes (CREDO) examined the performance of charter schools in a 16 state study. They used an experimental methodology:¹⁴

For each charter school student, a virtual

twin is created based on students who match the charter student’s demographics, English language proficiency and participation in special education or subsidized lunch programs. Virtual twins were developed for 84 percent of all the students in charter schools. The resulting matched longitudinal comparison is used to test whether students who attend charter schools fare better than if they had instead attended traditional public schools in their community.

In Illinois, the researchers followed “a total of 12,373 charter school students...for as many years as data are available.” The study found generally positive results among the Illinois cohort. Looking at test results in grades 3 through 8, CREDO researchers found that “the typical student in an Illinois charter school learns about the same as their virtual counterparts in their feeder pool in reading and more in mathematics.” The study also found that, all other factors held constant, “students in poverty enrolled in charter schools do significantly better in reading and math compared to their counterparts in traditional public schools.” The Stanford CREDO study was the fifth consecutive study in as many years to show that charter schools in Illinois are continually outpacing other public schools in educating children.

Research Conclusions

No educational policy or program in Illinois has undergone the same scholarly scrutiny as the state’s charter schools. Independent research shows unanimously that these innovative public schools have improved student learning.

This consensus, combined with mounting research from the Illinois Policy Institute and others directly involved in the Illinois policy debate, shows that charter schools provide a clear path towards improving public education in Illinois.

Notes

1. *Diplomas Count 2009*, published Education Week: <http://www.edweek.org/ew/toc/2009/06/11/index.html>

Independent research shows unanimously that these charter schools have improved student learning.

2. *Ibid.*

3. *Illinois Task Force on Re-Enrolling Students Who Dropped out of School, "Final Report," published September 2008: <http://www.asnchicago.org/PDFs/2008/Re-enrolledStudentsFinalReport.Sept2008.pdf>*

4. *Readers interested in a fuller discussion of graduation rate methods should consult previous reports by the Illinois Policy Institute or the newly published "Great Graduation Rate Debate," from the Thomas B. Fordham Institute. Rather than debating the relative merits of Heckman's preferred methods versus Education Week's or those of the U.S. DOE or ISBE, the report that follows will present Education Week's estimates alongside official district figures and a ten-year average compiled by the Illinois Policy Institute.*

See: Hitt, Collin. June 2009. "Inner City Kids Can Compete," published by the Illinois Policy Institute: <http://illinoispolicyinstitute.org/news/article.asp?ArticleSource=1027> See also: "The Great Graduation Rate Debate," published by the Thomas B. Fordham Institute: <http://www.edexcellence.net/template/index.cfm>

5. <http://www.comped-csn.org/>

6. *Interview with author, February 25, 2009.*

7. *Walberg, Herb. 2008. School Choice: the Findings. Cato Institute, Washington, D.C.*

8. *Hoxby, Caroline M. and Jonab E. Rockoff. November 2004. "The Impact of Charter Schools on Student Achievement." <http://scholar.google.com/scholar?q=%E2%80%9CThe+Impact+of+Charter+Schools+on+Student+Achievement%E2%80%9D&hl=en&client=firefox-a&rls=org.mozilla:en-US:official&hs=CkN&um=1&ie=UTF-8&oi=scholar>*

9. <http://www.vanderbilt.edu/schoolchoice/downloads/papers/wong-shen2007.pdf>

10. http://greatlakescenter.org/docs/Research/Miron_Charter_Achievement/Miron_Charter%20Achievement.pdf

11. *Ibid.*

12. *Kevin Booker, Brian Gill, Ron Zimmer,*

and Tim R. Sass, 2008. "Achievement and Attainment in Chicago Charter Schools." <http://www.rand.org/pubs/online/education/>

13. *Booker, et. al. See: note 16.*

14. http://credo.stanford.edu/reports/MULTIPLE_CHOICE_CREDO.pdf