

The Struggle in Chicago

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What pushed Chicago's teachers past their breaking point and onto picket lines last week? The strike, which at this writing appears close to resolution, is about the heart and soul of education. While some pundits may disagree, the Chicago public understands that, clearly supporting the teachers in this struggle. What's happening in Chicago is rooted in years of devastating budget cuts, growing student needs in the face of dwindling supports, increased emphasis on testing over teaching, decisions to close schools and charter them rather than fix them, and disrespect for teachers, who have been required to implement policies made without their input and then blamed when they fail.

All this contributes to huge frustrations for educators and the most widespread demoralization—in Chicago or elsewhere—that I have seen in my lifetime. That's why this struggle resonates well beyond the teachers, paraprofessionals and clinicians I spoke with this week on the picket lines.

No one wants to strike. And no one strikes without cause. Teachers told me that their students desperately need support services and that, although 87 percent of students live in poverty, most schools lack even one school nurse or counselor. They said that up to 25 days each year are used for testing, not teaching. One kindergarten teacher reported being assigned 43 students and not even having enough chairs for them. Teachers decried bureaucrats rushing to implement sweeping changes in the schools, seeming more concerned about announcing changes than doing the hard work of implementation. They echoed the concerns of so many parents and civil rights groups that school closures destabilize communities, but do not improve achievement. They lamented the disrespect with which they often are treated, and the disregard of their input.

Chicago Mayor Rahm Emanuel is the latest in a long line of officials who have sought to overhaul the city's schools, which have been under mayoral control for 15 years. Despite being in the vanguard of so-called reforms

like top-down, test-based accountability, charter schools and school closures—the changes favored by corporate reformers—Chicago schools still lag behind other big cities. Teachers are understandably skeptical of yet another shake-up, especially one without evidence of effectiveness to back it up. That's particularly true of teacher evaluation, where the issue is not whether but how to evaluate teachers in a way that promotes teaching and learning rather than test preparation and a narrowed curriculum.

Early this year, the Chicago Teachers Union offered extensive research-based proposals for strengthening elementary and secondary education in city schools. Its proposals call for wraparound services for students, and

160 elementary schools in the district don't even have libraries. Students in Chicago's 684 public schools are served by only 202 school nurses, and there is such a shortage of social workers in the schools that even if the 370 social workers in the district provided services only for homeless students, each would have a caseload of 42.

Chicago's teachers asked the city to work with them to address these and other shortcomings in a great example of what I call "solution-driven unionism." For example, when Mayor Emanuel called for a longer school day with unspecified uses for the extra time, the teachers union proposed specific solutions to make it a *better* school day for Chicago's schoolchildren.

I have walked many picket lines. Walking with the educators in Chicago reminded me of my own mother, who decades ago went on strike with her fellow teachers for six weeks in order to secure the resources and respect they and their students deserved.

Teachers want to teach. They want the tools, conditions and support necessary to help all their students succeed. The issues Chicago's educators have raised are legitimate and need to be resolved as soon as possible in order to get kids back to school with access to the high-quality education to which they're entitled. That's what teachers are fighting for—the heart and soul of education.

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offerings such as physical education and world languages that should be a given but, in Chicago and elsewhere, are not. Only one-quarter of Chicago elementary schools have both art and music instructors, and



Weingarten with Chicago teachers and paraprofessionals outside Fulton Elementary School.

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