

# Private Management of Chicago Schools Is a Long Way from Mecca

Mr. Ayers and Mr. Klonsky still have questions for Mr. Duncan and take issue with Mr. Cohen's focus.

**BY WILLIAM AYERS AND MICHAEL KLONSKY**

**A**RNE DUNCAN is the brightest and most dedicated schools leader Chicago has had in memory, and he comes to this post from a long and deep experience in neighborhood community development and education. Perhaps most important, he knows the value of community engagement; in-

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deed, his first public act as CEO was to meet with the hunger-strikers and activists from Little Village/Lawn-dale to reverse the backward decision of his predecessor and help create a magnificent campus of four autonomous small schools at the new Little Village High School. All of this makes his response to our article a bit bewildering.

Duncan begins by admonishing us for failing to "embrace" the board's Renaissance 2010 policy and instructs us on our responsibility to be "impartial." People in power desire nothing more than obedience and easy agreement, but this is not the proper role for either reformers or scholars, and CPS policies in the

past have not warranted even a tepid hug. The small schools movement in Chicago has worked through four different administrations to support teachers and make schools smaller and better. We have never been *embracers*, even though each regime has urged us in exactly that direction. Nor have we ever been impartial. Our role is to be skeptics, critics, and agnostics,

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people who can take a stand and still work with educators to transform failing schools into vital communities of learning. We've done our best to dodge the orthodoxy, dogma, and new fads that cling to school reform like barnacles, sharp and ugly, to a ship; we support innovation, initiative, and improvement.

One of our important current projects is to support the creation of a new high school on the west side of Chicago. To say that Klonsky is "bidding to open a new school under Renaissance 2010," as Duncan does, shows that he misunderstands our role and our efforts. But the language of "bidding" is revealing and pretty much confirms our main point regarding the selling off of public space. The forces driving Ren 10, including privatizers and business-oriented foundations, create a market metaphor for school change and insert a half-language of business into the conversation: economies of scale, standardization, stakeholders, best practices, inputs and outputs, skill sets.

And bids. It's true — Ren 10 will have "bidders," mostly private educational management companies (EMOs), that will tender offers to run the overwhelming majority (despite Duncan's denials) of the district's 100 new schools. Two-thirds of the new schools will be non-union, and most will have no elected Local School Councils. When Duncan claimed that 14 of the first 22 new schools used union teachers, he was telling only a part of the story. In the next wave of selections from new school "bidders," 16 out of 16 bids went to non-union EMOs, including one to discredited former Secretary of Education Bill Bennett's K12 Inc.

The assumption driving Ren 10 in this direction is that the main obstacles to school improvement are poor teachers, their union, and the community. As Eden

Martin, head of the powerful business lobby, the Civic Committee, wrote to Arne Duncan a year ago: "The school unions will not like creation of a significant number of new schools that operate outside the union agreement, but operating outside the agreement is a key element of this strategy." CEO Duncan responded that he's not an ideological person, but that "I like the competition and choice this will provide. I want Chicago to be a Mecca where entrepreneurship can flourish."<sup>1</sup>

The EMOs use the language of *autonomy* to evade community engagement and collective bargaining with teachers. That's why we also take some issue with Lewis Cohen's one-sided emphasis on autonomous schools. While we support the main thrust of Cohen's position and appreciate the need for new small schools to have as much local control as possible over their own budgets, teacher hiring, and other administrative matters, we don't regard autonomy as the be-all and end-all in "what it's all about." For us, it's more about the visibility of kids, trust, equity, and the professional community of teachers. We worry that "autonomy" can become another business code word signaling management's freedom to do whatever it chooses at the expense of teachers and communities.

Schools cannot just be enterprises that come into a neighborhood and hang out a shingle, where education consumers can buy or not buy. Schools are part of the fabric of community life, and community members need to have real choice about their schools — not just consumer choice — chunky versus smooth — but *real* choices about their children's futures. We know that Cohen agrees, and the long history of practice of the Coalition of Essential Schools, of which we are a part, affirms its commitment to the primacy of public space and teacher empowerment.

The small schools movement, which has created a host of high-caliber, successful Chicago Public Schools, has been powered from the start by a vision of democratic education. Neither an administrative convenience nor a management scheme, the small schools approach coheres around the school and the classroom: How can every student become known well by a caring and thoughtful teacher? How can parents become invested in and integral to their children's learning? How can every teacher be encouraged to become an engaged professional?

These are neither idle nor random questions. Chicago has a sky-high dropout rate, and youngsters leaving school often say that a major factor in their decision is that "no adult cared if I stayed." Teachers, who

come to teaching with an aspiration to use their hearts and their minds in the service of student learning, feel trapped in a system heavy on mindless regulation and layers of heartless bureaucratic supervision, but light on real support. It is in response to this contradiction that Lewis Cohen places so much weight on school autonomy.

There is no evidence or educational research whatsoever to show that privately run charters can produce better results, but, never mind, the bandwagon is rolling, and the district — with its \$4.6-billion budget — is climbing aboard.

This is fact-free, faith-based reform at its worst.

In this way, Ren 10 represents a Wal-Mart strategy for school change, where stores are easily replicable,

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employees interchangeable, and the work force turns over rapidly and continually. Nearly all of the new Renaissance 2010 schools are being run by first-year principals with staffs of new teachers. This is one of the business economies pushed by the EMOs.

Chris Whittle, former publisher of *Esquire* and founder of the Edison Schools — one of the companies brought in to manage CPS schools — found that it can be just as profitable to manage public space as to own it. The way Whittle sees it, “If profits cannot be made in education, then here is a partial list of things that should be removed from schools immediately: textbooks, computers, desks, milk, pencils, paper, and all athletic supplies and uniforms. And let’s not forget to tear all school buildings down.”<sup>2</sup>

Like many of the new education entrepreneurs moving into the public school management business, Whittle sees schools as purchasing centers, bases for vertical economic integration. The public pays the steep start-up costs and building renovation expenses while the manager integrates other for-profit enterprises like textbooks, video, food, and maintenance, all the while driving down teacher compensation and eliminating collective bargaining. Is this the “renaissance” Duncan wants? Is this his *Mecca*?

Arne Duncan’s response is long on the buzz words and rhetoric of reform — cutting-edge schools, impatience with failure, performance, and accountability — but short on answers to the criticism of this policy. Duncan fails to inform us how the leadership and teaching corps for 100 new schools are being trained and put in place. What’s going to sustain the new schools once the grant money runs out? How are the replication schools to succeed on a fraction of the operating budgets of the original school, not to mention that they’re often being housed in decrepit facilities and with little if any community support?

We are urging a renaissance in schools based on expanding and not selling off the public space. This involves mobilizing communities and engaging and unleashing the talent and wisdom of teachers. At his best, Arne Duncan has upheld this direction. In this contested space, this conflict over principles and fundamentals, it’s our hope that he finds a way to bring the resources and support of his business partners into play while preserving and transforming public schools and respecting the rights and the power of engagement of teachers and communities.

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1. Quoted in Sam Dillon, “Chicago Has a Nonunion Plan for Poor Schools,” *New York Times*, 28 July 2004.

2. Chris Whittle, *Crash Course* (New York: Riverside Books, 2005), p. 235. 

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