

Chicago Hopes Renewed Accountability Brings Success to Schools

By Edward Walsh
Washington Post Staff Writer

CHICAGO—Not a single student test score has risen, the dropout rate remains among the highest in the country, and last week one high school here was so close to anarchy that it was taken over by the central school administration.

So the question arises: Why have the Chicago public schools, once described by former education secretary William J. Bennett as "the worst in the nation," suddenly become the focus of so much hope in a city that has grown accustomed to educational failure?

The answer is in the whirlwind of activity by a new school board and administration that in two months has accomplished what many thought impossible: balancing the budget by closing a projected four-year revenue shortfall of \$1.4 billion; reaching four-year contract agreements with teachers' and other unions; and opening the schools on time.

In many school districts, such feats are taken for granted. But not here, where chronic budget deficits and frequent strikes have meant that the first day of school for more than 400,000 students often was late and chaotic.

There are still plenty of skeptics who point out that the real test will come in the classroom, and that many of the social problems afflicting urban school systems and their students are beyond the reach of even the most talented and dedicated teachers. Nonetheless, the initial reaction was best summed up by an editorial in the *Chicago Tribune*:



BY JOHN H. WHITE—CHICAGO SUN-TIMES

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their power was stripped away by Republican lawmakers in Springfield. But the unions also have been mollified by the willingness of Chico and other board members to adopt employee protections that were wiped out by the new school law.

That law greatly enhanced Vallas's ability to cut through a Byzantine system of school finance, making it easier to balance the budget. But Vallas argued that past failures were also due to factors other than the constraints of state law and the power of the unions.

"There wasn't the political will," he said. "The mayor really didn't have control. Everyone says keep the public education system separate. You don't want to mix politics and public education. I'm sorry. It's through politics, through the electoral process, that you have accountability."

The new school administration is modeled on a corporate board, with experts in finance, operations, procurement and the other tasks. In theory, this will free the professional educators, led by St. James, to concentrate on shaping the curriculum and teaching the students.

Too often in the past, Vallas said, big cities like Chicago have turned to a prominent educator from the outside to save their schools.

"They come in by themselves and it takes them two years to figure out what the hell is going on," he said. "After two or three years, they've accomplished very little, they're deemed failures and the system jettisons them. It's almost a prescription for failure."

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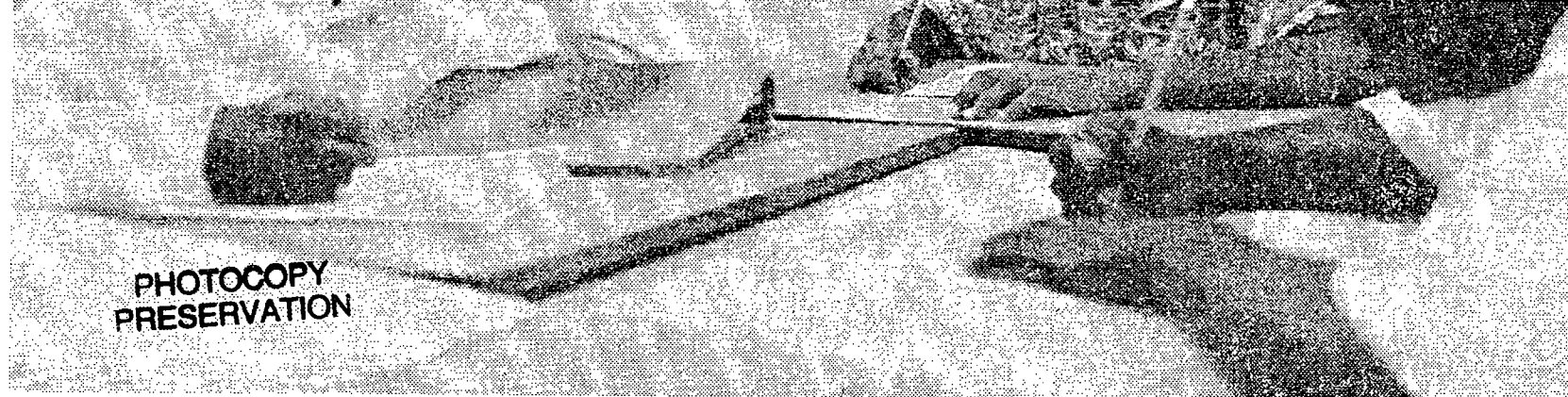
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Behind this flurry of activity and the hopes it has generated is an old-fashioned idea: the reestablishment of a clear-cut line of political responsibility and accountability that leads directly to the fifth floor City Hall office of Mayor Richard M. Daley (D).

Earlier this year, for the second time in less than a decade, the Illinois General Assembly enacted legislation designed to transform the schools here. The first effort in the 1980s attempted to circumvent a bloated central school bureaucracy by dispersing power to principals and local councils of parents, teachers and community leaders for each of the city's 553 schools.

That reform effort produced an uneven but generally disappointing record of improvement that depended heavily on the performance of individual principals and local school councils. So this year, while leaving that structure intact, the legislature



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Under the previous system, Chicago's mayors had limited power in appointing the 15-member board and no direct role in the selection of school administrators. The system emphasized grass-roots activism but also insulated the mayor's office from the political fallout from a chronically troubled system, in which fewer than 25 percent of the students passed standardized state tests.

The new law has moved in the opposite direction. When it was enacted, there was considerable speculation that the Republican-controlled legislature had set a trap for Daley, handing him responsibility for a hopeless task. And that still may prove to be the case.

But Daley, who for years has complained that he is blamed for the poor performance of a school system over which he had little direct control, immediately signaled that he understood that accountability for the schools was now his.

He appointed his former chief of staff, Gery Chico, a partner in a prestigious downtown law firm, to



Chicago schools "superboard" president Gery Chico helps Joan Banks comfort a discouraged kindergartner at elementary school as classes start.

be president of the superboard. For chief executive officer, he turned to his budget director, Paul G. Vallas. Four of the top five jobs in the school administration did not go to professional educators but to members of Daley's administration. The lone exception was Lynn St. James, 56, the "chief education officer"—Chicago no longer has a "superintendent"—who was lured out of retirement after 33 years as a teacher and principal here.

Then Daley put other city re-

sources at the disposal of the school system. Just before schools opened this year, for example, work crews and the pale blue trucks of the Streets and Sanitation department were dispatched to the schools for a massive cleanup.

Even skeptics have been somewhat impressed by the results.

"The school system now has political power behind it," said Linda Lenz, editor of "Catalyst," a publication that reports on school issues here. "In the past, school boards and

school superintendents had no political clout. They weren't elected, they didn't have the office of the mayor behind them and they just got buffeted in urban politics. . . . To see a quarter of City Hall walking over to school board headquarters to take it over I think is striking."

Paul Green, a political scientist at Governors State University in University Park, warned that the problems of the schools "have far more to do with the students and the families they come from than with the buildings." But, he added, Daley was able to recruit "two municipal superstars" to take on the seemingly hopeless task.

"They could not have found a Vallas or a Chico without Daley," Green said. "So far, they're playing this perfectly."

The key figure in the day-to-day operations of the schools is Vallas, 42, an intense, bespectacled former teacher best known for his numbers-crunching talents at City Hall. Under the power granted by the new state law, he already has taken effective control of six schools where the principals and local school councils were deemed to have failed, and he has warned there may be other takeovers.

Vallas also has laid off 1,700 school employees, including more than 200 at the central office, with barely a whimper from the unions. They had little choice—much of

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Green remains a skeptic. "There may be cleaner, safer schools in Chicago, but there is no assurance they are going to be better-performing schools," he said.

To this, Vallas replied that the breakdown of families and other societal ills of the inner city should not be an excuse for giving up on the schools. There are, he said, "some basic things that we know, when they exist in the schools, performance is better." These include "a top-flight principal," a safe atmosphere, smaller schools, longer school days and a longer school year. Daley has already said he wants year-round classes in Chicago schools.

"Parents are a constant we don't have control over," Vallas said. "Both liberals and conservatives use that excuse. Conservatives use it as an excuse for no more funding. Liberals use it as an excuse to say we need more social programs. We just have to accept it and stop using parents as an excuse."