

# Ride or Get Rode On

## Battling for the Soul of Public Education

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In 1995 the governing arrangements of the Chicago Public Schools centralized authority to the top of the system and shifted power into the hands of the mayor (Wong & Sunderman, 2001). The Chicago School Reform Amendatory Act gave the mayor control over the school board and instituted a corporate management model in CPS. This centralized authority gave the mayor the power to appoint a five-member school board and choose a chief executive officer (CEO), to oversee all of the decisions for Chicago's children. This reform focused on academic achievement and accountability and gave the CEO, the board, and school principals the authority to enforce higher academic standards by any means necessary while allowing those in power to operate without accountability and transparency. Arne Duncan, secretary of Education under the Obama administration, served an eight-year term as CEO from 2001-2009 and left the greatest impact on Chicago's schools by expanding education markets and injecting market principles into the public school system.

Following Chicago's 1995 reform policies that established and normalized labeling, sorting, and classifying schools, Renaissance 2010 was proposed in 2003 as a part of Chicago Metropolis 2020, sponsored by the Commercial Club of Chicago to enhance Chicago's productivity as a global city. Under Renaissance 2010, Arne Duncan argued four strategies to 'turnaround' the nation's lowest performing 5 percent of schools. Chicago was the laboratory for the following strategies:

- Turnaround school- under a new principal who can recruit at least half of the teachers from the outside;
- Transformation school that strengthens professional support, teacher evaluation and capacity building;
- Restart school that reopens as either a charter school or under management by organizations outside of the district; and
- School closure that results in moving all the students to other higher-performing schools.

The goal of Renaissance 2010 was to close down failing schools and reconstruct new schools but it serves as a better example of what David Harvey would call “the creative destruction and reinvestment” in Chicago (2005). In theory, the turnaround initiatives aimed at providing better educational opportunities, yet school closings have displaced children all over the city and transitioned them into schools that did not necessarily perform better (Lipman & Haines, 2007).

For instance, studies show that charter schools are more segregated by race and poverty than public schools (Frankenberg, Siegel-Hawley, & Wang, 2010 cited in Lipman, 2011) and in the aggregate, only 17% of charter schools perform better than public schools while 37% perform significantly worse and 46% show no significant difference (Center for Research on Education Outcomes [CREDO], 2009 cited in Lipman, 2011). Neoliberal initiatives like Ren2010 were damaging because they created a false idea of opportunity yet continued to perpetuate social inequality and injustice against people of color (Lipman & Haines, 2007).

African American students compose the majority of Chicago Public Schools enrollment and historically have had lowest test scores, were more likely than any other racial/ethnic group to be retained under CPS accountability policies, and of the 147 elementary schools put on probation from 1996 to 2001, 75% were African American (Lipman & Haines, 2007). Low-income African American sections of Chicago are intertwined with the lack of jobs, lack of decent affordable housing, decayed physical infrastructure, and a history of racial segregation and disinvestment in communities of color (Anyon, 2005). Standardized test results make the argument for closing neighborhood schools and at the same time, a racialized discourse of failure, probation, and lack of effort constructs African American and Latino schools and communities as deficient (Lipman & Haines, 2007).

The Chicago Board of Education’s most recent decision to close 49 public schools was not based on academic standing. Instead CPS worked under the guise of cutting and consolidating schools by using an “underutilization” formula that determined the fate of the schools. Although hearing officers, consisting of retired state and federal judges, cited concerns ranging from student safety to the potential harm to students with special-needs, the board neglected their recommendations against closing 11 other schools and voted to shut them all down. This vote displaced roughly 40,000 school children in predominantly African American and Latino communities on Chicago’s west and south sides and 2000 teachers will be without a job (Lutton, 2013).

### **Teaching in Chicago: Rising up from the Grassroots**

In Chicago we are in the midst of a “global assault on teaching, teachers, and their unions and on public education (Lipman, 2011, p. 32-33). Centralized accountability and education markets have produced deep changes in teachers’ work (Apple, 2006; Gewirtz et al., 2009; Hursh, 2007 cited in Lipman, 2011) including increased regulation and surveillance, narrowed curricula, and performance-based pay. It is a shift from teacher professionalism and intellectually, socially, and emotionally complex notions of learning and teaching to a neoliberal emphases on instrumental efficiency, effectiveness, productivity, and measurable performance (Clarke & Newman, 1997 cited in Lipman, 2011). The effects of this shift change what is measured, and thus taught, as teaching is driven by the idea that the only things worth teaching

are those that are measured or easily tested. Teaching has been undermined as a profession of human development and has changed “what it means to be a teacher” (Ball, 2003, p. 217).

Teaching is not just a matter of measuring achievement- it’s a matter of ride or die, meaning someone must be willing to do what needs to be done no matter what the cost. My students say that one of the bylaws of the hood is ‘ride or get rode on’ and in the current state of Chicago’s schools, if teachers do not stand up for what they know their students need, the future of our humanity is at stake. The CTU strike represents a force of people who were willing to take a stand and fight for quality schools that function under dignified working conditions. Chicago represents a workforce of educators who believed in the power of the people.



March down Michigan Ave to in front of the Hyatt. Photo courtesy of Sarah Jane Rhee

In a discussion with Chicago Public School teacher and Caucus of Rank and File Educator (CORE) member Xian Barrett and I talked about what it’s like to be a teacher in Chicago and the necessity of the grassroots organizing work that led to the CTU strike.

Kay: How did your involvement with CORE begin?

Xian: I was trained to teach in Japan and I had social justice educators as my mentors so I was bringing in a pretty considerable skill set that other first-year Chicago teachers didn’t have. There is a moment where you shift from watching the courage of someone else to actually having to live it. I’m pretty good at systems and when I started teaching, I could see that CPS was a system that was not going to serve my students or me at all. I

got involved with CYIC (Chicago Youth Initiating Change) and I brought all these crazy freshmen to the Social Justice Expo<sup>1</sup> and they came back to school the following September and said, “Our school is in shambles, it’s stupid to plan for conferences when we don’t know if our school is going to be open in May, so we want to meet constantly throughout the year.” At that point, Jackson Potter and I had introduced our students together so they met social justice battle veterans from Englewood, who had lost their school. With the innocence that freshmen have they asked, “What would you have done different?” And it’s weird- you can ask a heartbroken person that question and they’ll give you a decent answer, so the student from Englewood said, “We did it the right way, we just wish we had started earlier.” The Julian kid said, “We’re going to prepare for the day that they are going to try to close our school,” and started three strong years of activism going down to the board almost every month.

About a year in, Jackson approached me and said, “I’m trying to put together something to take over the Union and change the way the Union works with members,” and I said, “I had bad experience with unions. I think it’s a terrible idea,” and he said, “Well, if we’re actually doing this social justice movement, wouldn’t it be kind of dumb to ignore a pre-arranged gathering of 30,000 educators?” It was a pretty good argument, so I got roped into it.

Kay: And that was CORE?

Xian: Yeah. Jackson was very wise in that. He brought in complete uniformity in that everyone was devoted to organizing. Later on you found out some people truly were at different places on the spectrum. As I’ve been going around the country talking to other groups that want to do similar things, I stress the point really that Karen Lewis was democratically elected in CORE through a contested election and then took the unenviable task of being the lead for what was a democratic organizing driven model. That’s a hard thing for a lot of local presidents because they want to stay radical and win, but do it through a very traditional model. I don’t believe that’s feasible and possible.

Kay: What were the necessary conditions for CORE’s success?

Xian: When CORE won the CTU election, there were several key components. Nationally, it’s recognized that the groundwork proved absolutely vital with communications and training. The AFT teachers’ workshops use the CORE model for how you can build grassroots communication campaigns. That’s a testament to the work. We hit 650 school buildings, which was probably the largest component. There were increasingly dire teaching conditions in the schools and a leadership that was not only top down and losing, but visibly incompetent.

There is always a lot to be gained from organizing at a grassroots level within your union or community but you have to temper your expectations to the conditions and most people don’t have as favorable conditions as we did in Chicago. There is some irony in saying that because the favorable conditions are actually really bad conditions. Another piece is the long-term educational justice movements that have existed in Chicago and we

don't talk about that enough when we reflect on the development of CORE. Having that foundation of groups in Chicago that came together and won things in the past changes the dynamic. It's harder to say let's do a community organization based model and there aren't any strong community organizations or a history of organizations getting together and winning. That made a big difference. Parts of our group think our ideology won it for us because the CORE ideology was a model of lots of leftist ideologies. In Chicago we never had this type of success and so I'm very opposed to secretariat divisive leftist politics and I think it's more of the opposite. The fact that we finally unified those groups under one umbrella is what helped. CORE had to come first and I think it shows that if your movement is around organizing and making people comfortable in a movement then you also can expose them to different concepts.

The last and most important piece besides the conditions was the communications work, hitting all the schools which allowed us to win in the short term. I think something that really helped in the election was the unnoticed strategic planning element. We were all part of our normal professional gatherings and it's really powerful for a very strong member of a group to say, "Here is a great way to teach biology in terms of this concept and here are materials to take back to your classroom. And by the way, a lot of what motivates my practice is I'm part of CORE and this is what we're fighting. With service learning, Parks and Rivers, the Environmental Project, Chicago History Fair and a lot of different professional organizations had one or multiple CORE members involved and were leaders in some way, and so all these other teachers who were completely uninterested in the internal politics of the Union saw CORE as a group of strong educators who were in the classroom and knew a lot about teaching and learning who now were promising a change in the union. That's very powerful. That's a piece that gets underrated and I think it's a good lesson in that it's not just about grabbing power but it's demonstrating that you're going to disseminate that power among the community and that you actually know what to do with it.

Kay: How did that evolve into the strike this past September?

Xian: We evolved as a fighting caucus but there were people who decided as we were elected that we would be striking and others who said we needed to look at how we're negotiated with and make decisions based on that. We needed a really strong balance because we were attacked in the media by people saying, we were going to strike no matter what which is a pretty damning assessment. But I think having that balance within the caucus where there were elements pushing and saying we needed to assess the contract and the negotiations, really forced us to look at the individual details and say, is this good for our community? Is this good for kids? Is this good for our members? Rather than saying we have to strike no matter what and devoting all of the energy to the logistics of the strike we were able to find a balance to focus on the public discourse over what's good education.

Kay: How would you describe the success of the strike?

Xian: From the direct negotiating dynamic, in terms of that first goal of getting a better contract, it was a tremendous victory. When you look at the final contract there are all these almost negligible but tiny victories in areas that we could make them negotiate now. The fact that we go into negotiations and they say, “We’ll never talk about class size, we’ll never talk about assessing assignments as far as Special Ed. We’ll never talk about building spaces for psychologists and service providers to get a private space where a kid’s dreadful life experiences aren’t broadcast through a whole roomful of cubicles.” I mean that’s a tremendous victory. It’s showing that through striking you can get things that the board says, by state law we don’t have to talk about. From a policy side it cuts both ways. It’s why the union needs to do a better job. They’ve pointed out that Senate Bill 7 in large part caused this, that’s what made people so angry. This piece of policy was designed to prevent teacher strikes. Instead it set off a rash of teacher strikes across the state and that’s bad policy. But even the internal, meta dynamic of that empowered the people on the leadership team who always wanted to strike because it gave us this tiny window where if the law passes, and we don’t strike, it empowers the argument that you can shut down movements, and workers’ ability to strike by legislating it and so we had to refute that.

We worked our 30,000 members through the practice of striking and I think the group definitely would be willing to support a member led wildcat strike in the future. Once you’ve done it and know you can do it the law is similar to classroom management. If the kids actually believe that the rules mean something then you can add more rules and it may work and it may not. But if the kids don’t have any respectful discourse in the classroom around the rules and there’s a pre-existing chaos, adding more rules is going to add to the chaos. People have to believe that this is doable; human beings always have the ability to strike whether they have the legal right to do so or not.



Thousands of CTU members and supporters gathered in front of CPS headquarters on the first day of the strike. Photo courtesy of Sarah Jane Rhee.

## Reflection

When some serious and honorable people devote themselves, with courage and conviction, to a struggle for ideals that one knows to be just and deeply important, the possibilities of changing the world are limitless. As Noam Chomsky once said, “the impulse to contribute to it may intensify, growing both from moral pressure and the desire for self-fulfillment in a decent and humane society” (1971). Change is possible, but it requires the most advanced intellectual and technical achievements within the movement. It is time to gather the knowledge, creativity, and skill of people from all walks of life to build a vision for society that we can all work towards together. Noam Chomsky says, “If you act like there is no possibility to change for the better, you guarantee that there will be no change for the better. The choice is ours, the choice is yours” (1999). The force of organized people, fighting for a better world can only lead to a more democratic and humane resolution through how we, the people, organize, respond, and act.



This photo was taken at the Marshall HS rally as local residents looked out of their windows and cheered. Photo courtesy of Sarah Jane Rhee.

### The Soul of Chicago

To fight for justice and humanity is a difficult but beautiful struggle. In Chicago we must fight, struggle, challenge, take risks, be bold, and speak the truth. Sarah Jane Rhee has a daughter who attends a CPS school and is an active parent involved in her child's education. She is also a photographer and documentarian of social justice and human rights based actions in Chicago. When Karen Lewis was quoted during a rally saying, "Let's be clear — this fight is for the very soul of public education, not just only Chicago but everywhere," as a former CPS student and teacher her words resonated with me (Davey & Yaccino, 2012). Through the following conversation with Sarah she speaks from that soul and gives the strike and the education movement a heart.

Kay: How would you describe what is happening in Chicago to other people? What is the spirit of this movement?

Sarah: Well, I think there are two sides. There is this clear agenda to privatize schools and to basically rob mostly students of color of their rights to a quality public education. And at the same time, I feel like right now, especially in the past year, the community and grassroots organizations have come together in a way to resist that. There is a movement



of resistance, and it's an alliance of parents, teachers, community members and students as well.



Parents For Teachers (P4T) showed their support on picket lines and rallies. Photo courtesy of Sarah Jane Rhee.

And it's been really inspiring to see. I feel like the strike was one of the culminations of that alliance building that the CTU has been doing since the current leadership started and that all the parties involved recognize that the strike was not the end, that this is going to be an ongoing and long struggle.

The upcoming announcements of school closings are very daunting, and it's overwhelming. Sometimes when I think of it, I feel like, "Oh, my gosh, how can we even fight this? How can we even dare to fight this?" But we don't have a choice; I feel like we don't have a choice but to fight and to resist. And I don't think anyone ever dreamed what the union accomplished from the strike. One of the most important things that they accomplished was sending a clear message to the mayor that he did not control the union, and that was a really important message that he needed to learn because he was basically cheating the school system, like he was the Czar. For the union to stand up to that was huge because it set an example. I think the mayor really wanted to set an example to the other unions that he could do whatever he wanted, that he was out to bust the unions, and that he was going to do it- but he failed with the teachers.

And I think that was a lesson to the other unions as well that they don't have to just succumb to whatever the mayor wants. It's hard because it almost seems like he has absolute control over the city; like he actually thinks he can do whatever he wants and get away with it, that he is not beholden to anybody, and that he really does not care about the vast majority of the people in Chicago.

But the teachers' union stood up to that, and the union leadership hasn't been intimidated and I think that sets an example to other unions, and it sets an example to the city, and not just to the unions but to all the people of Chicago. The teacher's strike in that sense gave a glimmer of hope that the mayor is not unbreakable, that there actually is hope.

Kay: And what is the end goal?

Sarah: I keep going back to the CTU report on the schools that Chicago's children deserve, and it seems like a pipe dream. But I feel like you know what, we have to dream; we have to have our dream; we have to believe that the impossible is possible. And to me, that is the end goal, is having a quality school for every child in Chicago regardless of where you live, regardless of what income bracket you fall into or the color of your skin, and regardless of what your abilities are- that every child has to have opportunity, the opportunity that children who go to New Trier or who go to the U of C Lab School have.

Kay: What's at stake in Chicago?

Sarah: The future. When you look at the schools as being integral to the future of our young people, if public schools are where the vast majority of our young people are going to be learning critical thinking skills and how to live in this world, if that's where they are going to be learning how to relate to one another, to other human beings, then it's the future that's at stake. And right now, the people in power are basically saying that they don't care about that; they don't care about the future of the majority of our kids because they are protected; they have the money to be protected in their bubble.

## Conclusion

Chicago is at a time where our public school students face the gravest challenges and blaming teachers, closing schools, and broadening the education market are misguided band-aid solutions that will not heal the deep wounds of systemic racism, disinvestment, and disposability. The goal of education should aim to liberate and advocate for the participation of individuals to transform their realities. Martin Luther King Jr. said, "Human progress is neither automatic nor inevitable... Every step toward the goal of justice requires sacrifice, suffering, and struggle; the tireless exertions and passionate concern of dedicated individuals." The Chicago Teachers Union strike represented a workforce of educators who believed in the struggle for educational justice, the power of the people, and showed the nation that it was time to take a stand. To ensure that all of Chicago's children have the best educational opportunities, there is a long, hard road to walk ahead. But the heart of Chicago is strong and alive and will continue to fight the good fight against the board and the mayor for the educational rights of all children.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> The social justice expo gathered students from across Chicago to exhibit social action projects and present research on a wide range of topics, including immigration, teen pregnancy, the environment, gun violence, tolerance, discrimination, poverty, housing, and education.

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