

U.S. effort to reshape schools faces challenges

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Sally Ryan for The New York Times

Jennifer Harned, a history teacher at Orr, quizzed students during a lesson on the Industrial Revolution.

As chief executive of the Chicago public schools, Arne Duncan closed more than a dozen of the city's worst schools, reopening them with new principals and teachers. People who worked with him, and some who fought him, say those school turnarounds were worth the effort, but all aroused intense opposition.

"It's always painful," said David Pickens, who was Mr. Duncan's top lieutenant in the school makeover efforts here. "It's like a root canal every year."

Now Mr. Duncan, President Obama's education secretary, wants to take school turnaround efforts nationwide on a scale never tried before. In speeches and interviews, he said he would press local authorities to close thousands of the country's worst schools, the dropout factories where only a tiny fraction of students are reading at grade level, and reopen them with new staff members.

Mr. Duncan appears to have the money to drive the effort. Experts estimate the cost of overhauling a failing school at \$3 million to \$6 million. Mr. Duncan controls \$3 billion in the economic stimulus law that could go to school turnarounds, and the administration's 2010 budget requests \$1.5 billion more.

Still, he faces many obstacles, experts said.

"Closing a school is the most difficult task any superintendent or school board can attempt, and not many succeed," said Terry Mazany, who watched Mr. Duncan's school makeovers as chief executive at the Chicago Community Trust. "But it's not impossible, and it's the right thing to do."

Mr. Duncan wants to see 250 schools closed and reconstituted next year. That would mean dismissing thousands of teachers next spring, hiring replacements and opening newly reconstituted schools in fall 2010.

Formal closure is necessary for chronically failing schools, Mr. Duncan said, to reset the learning environment more dramatically than simply tweaking the curriculum and retraining the old staff.

Eventually, he said, he hopes to see 1,000 failing schools turned around each year.

The federal government lacks the authority to close schools, so Mr. Duncan's first challenge is to persuade scores of local districts to begin school turnarounds that, judging from Chicago's experience, will anger teachers, administrators, parents and local politicians. Another challenge will be recruiting the high-quality educators crucial to helping reconstituted schools succeed.

Teachers union contracts could be another major hurdle.

The Chicago contract gives tenured teachers in schools shut down for low performance 10 months to be rehired by their reconstituted school's new leader or by another Chicago principal, after which they lose their job. (About 8 in 10 find jobs at other Chicago schools, Mr. Pickens said.) Contracts in many other cities give teachers who lose positions more extensive rights, which could make school makeovers harder, experts said.

Mr. Duncan said he had already discussed his plans with the presidents of the two national teachers unions.

"I've told them we all have to play by a different set of rules and figure out how we're going to take this on together," Mr. Duncan said.

Randi Weingarten, president of one of the unions, the American Federation of Teachers, said Mr. Duncan's focus on the worst schools was "the right strategy," but added, "What I've raised with Arne is, wholesale firing of staffs, pretending that if you just close a school and open a new one it will solve all the problems — that's the wrong way."

Mr. Duncan's initiative would seek to correct a troubling legacy of the No Child Left Behind law. The law has identified 6,000 failing schools, yet state and local authorities have left most of them to languish, neither holding their educators accountable nor helping to improve instruction.

"It's a rare thing for a state or even for districts to go so far as to close down a low-performing school," said Jack Jennings, president of the Center on Education Policy.

In Chicago, Mr. Duncan worked on eight turnarounds with the Academy for Urban School Leadership, a nonprofit group whose largest project has been remaking troubled Orr Academy High School on Chicago's West Side. Many of its 1,200 students have been incarcerated or kicked out of other schools, and its in-house day care center minds 35 babies each day while their mothers, some of them students and others teachers, are in class.

An earlier overhaul at Orr that divided it into three small high schools achieved little; Illinois's 2008 test scores showed that 9 percent of students were proficient in reading and math. So Chicago's announcement last year that the school would be overhauled again set off protests.

One opponent was the Rev. Charlie Walker, minister of a nearby Baptist church, who said he and the neighborhood had not been properly consulted.

"I became an attacker," Mr. Walker said. "I went at them like a lawn mower goes after grass."

The turnaround went ahead anyway.

Research has shown that teacher quality and a principal's leadership are key factors in raising student achievement, said Don Feinstein, executive director of the Academy for Urban School Leadership. So his group sorted through scores of résumés before picking Jammie Poole, a Memphis educator, as Orr's new principal.

Mr. Poole recruited a new instructional staff that included some strong teachers at Orr who had reapplied for their jobs.

After the three small schools at Orr closed last June, it got new science laboratories, and Mr. Poole organized teachers to work in teams and scheduled regular quizzes to help identify concepts that students had not yet mastered. Instructional coaches help teachers use the data.

Orr's school culture got an overhaul, too. Students wear black and gold uniforms. Parents participate in hallway patrols. Every adult, including cooks, meets regularly with 12 students to track academic progress.

Orr's turnaround will cost about \$6 million over five years. Nine months after it reopened, there has been a sea change in neighborhood attitudes. After Mr. Poole invited him to tour the school, Mr. Walker became a convert.

"They're the best leadership team that's been in the school in the last 12 to 15 years," Mr. Walker said.

Still, it remains unclear whether the changes will sharply raise student achievement. Eighteen months ago, Bryan Hassel, a Harvard-trained education consultant, reviewed conditions in half a dozen Chicago schools that had been turned around.

"I was favorably impressed with some of the schools, and not with others," Mr. Hassel said. "It was a mixed picture."

In the corporate world, Mr. Hassel said, turnaround efforts transform failing businesses only about 25 percent to 30 percent of the time.

"A lot of these school turnarounds are going to fail because the work is so difficult," Mr. Hassel said. "But as a nation, we'll never have the capacity to do this work successfully until we make the commitment."

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