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Education

Red ties and boys' pride

CHICAGO

Sowing the seeds of good schools in the Mid-west

EVERY weekday, 300 boys gather in a gym on Chicago's South Side. They are all black. More than 80% are poor. Over the past few weeks Chicago has seen a surge in gang violence. But here boys stand in straight lines. Each wears a blazer and a red tie. And in unison they begin to shout their creed: "We believe. We are the young men of Urban Prep. We are college-bound."

Urban Prep Charter Academy opened in 2006, part of an effort to bring 100 new schools to Chicago's bleakest areas by 2010. Richard Daley, the city's mayor, announced Renaissance 2010 ("Ren 10") in 2004; Chicago's business leaders created the Renaissance Schools Fund (RSF) to help support it. Backers of this ambitious scheme hope it will spur competition across the school district. On May 6th RSF held a conference to discuss the "new market of public education".

At the core of Ren 10 is the desire to welcome "education entrepreneurs", as RSF calls them. Ren 10 lets them start schools and run them mostly as they choose (for example, with longer days and, in some cases, their own salary structure); it also sets the standards they must meet. Schools receive money on a per pupil basis, and may raise private funds as well.

Chicago is not the only city to pair autonomy with accountability. New York's school chief, for example, wants to "charterise" the whole city system. In

Chicago, Ren 10 is opening charter schools and trying to bring their flexibility to two new models: "performance" schools, where teachers are unionised, and "contract" schools, which may hire non-union teachers but must still abide by some district rules.

The first step is to identify the seeds of a good school. Leaders in Chicago's Office of New Schools (ONS) and in RSF recommend Ren 10's method for doing so, which includes reviews by local parents, educators and national experts. Ren 10 offers many kinds of schools (ONS even hopes to open boarding schools), but good ones share common traits. The most important, argues Josh Edelman, the head of ONS, are strong leaders, neighbourhood outreach and a rigorous curriculum based on a clear mission. Urban Prep is structured around the goal of helping local boys, admitted by lottery, to get to college. (It is Chicago's first and only public charter school just for boys; there is another just for girls, and ONS would like to open more single-sex schools.) Longer school days give teachers more time to help boys catch up. Being a pupil is each boy's "job."

RSF chooses schools that seem most likely to succeed, then gives them up to \$500,000 over 30 months. So far the group has raised \$44m. Increasingly, RSF looks for those with sound management and plans to use data to improve performance (Urban Prep tests students every six weeks). After five years ONS will assess each new school to judge whether to renew its contract.

So far 55 schools have opened: 32 charter campuses, 19 performance schools and four contract schools. As Ren 10 moves towards its goal of 100 (and perhaps beyond), it will be a continuing challenge to replicate good schools and open new ones. Chicago has reached its legal limit on the number of new charters it may award. The Illinois Senate has passed a bill to raise the cap, but the teachers' union may try to block the measure.

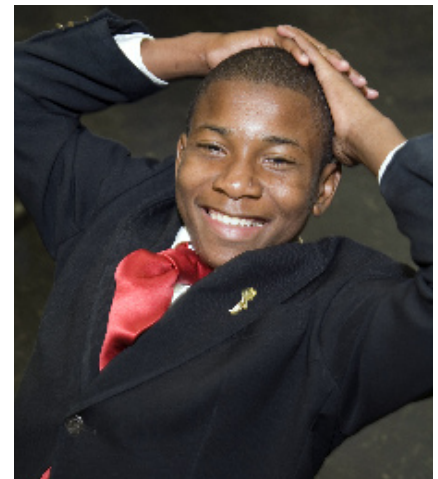
The future of performance and contract schools, meanwhile, is unclear. Not only do these models face the threat of litigation (unlike charter schools, they are not protected by state law), but they must grapple with district and union rules. In one hopeful sign, a performance school, due to open in September, won a waiver from the teachers' union to

extend the school day.

Though the older charter schools have made gains, it is too soon to judge Ren 10's success. Its high schools had a 93% attendance rate in their first year, compared with 86% in high schools across the district, but there no broad data exist about drop-outs or teenagers' performance on tests. Equally unclear is whether Ren 10 will drive broader change. Rosemaria Genova, speaking for the teachers' union, says that Ren 10 is creating a "two-tiered system" within the district, and scoffs at its attempts to "apply business models to students." But a market is being built, and Ren 10 is stirring up demand. Urban Prep has 150 pupils in each grade. Some 600 have already entered the lottery for next year's beginner-class.

Ironically, growing demand may make it harder for schools to serve their intended market. Ren 10 parents are already engaged in their children's education—they shop for schools and submit lottery applications. As a school becomes well known, it may lure parents who are even more ambitious and, perhaps, slightly better off. In 2007 83% of Urban Prep's freshmen were poor, compared with 87% in 2006. Eleven percent of new students began school reading at or above grade level, compared with only 4% the year before.

Kim Davis-Ambrose, whose son attends a Ren 10 charter school, may help to stem this trend. Her group, launched by RSF, visits local neighbourhoods to teach parents about new schools and how to send their children there. When it comes to schools, she says, all parents should know that they now have a choice.



Clarence Williams, Urban Prep Student