



League of Extraordinary High Schools

Chicago's charter schools show that a team of reform-minded schools can turn the tide

Two recent events have people thinking hard about school reform in Chicago. The first is the release of the new documentary “Waiting for Superman,” which has been heralded by Oprah and is drawing national attention to inner city education politics in America. The other is Mayor Richard Daley’s decision to retire.

Both developments have people talking in particular about charter schools. These schools star as heroes of the “Superman” documentary and have been a centerpiece of Mayor Daley’s education policy platform over the past decade.

The film is lining up new supporters squarely behind charter schools, which are a relatively new breed of public school, open to any child who applies (within current space restraints). The schools are both willing and able to break with the old customs of inner city education in order to create innovative new choices for parents. And while critics of “Waiting for Superman” claim that it uses data misleadingly, a review of new data from Chicago suggest the city’s charter schools, and Mayor Daley, deserve even more credit than they’re getting.

Every Chicago Public School (CPS) high school requires eleventh graders to take the ACT, the widely-known college readiness exam. The district publishes the average score for each school. Predictably, the highest scores belong to schools that admit most of their students based on previous test scores, entrance exams and behavior in middle school. The selective Whitney Young and Walter Payton schools are household names across the city, with stellar test scores and graduation rates.

But the larger concern in Chicago has always been with the hundred-plus high schools that must take all comers, regardless of academic background. It is these “open enrollment” schools that have struggled for decades. It is these schools that reform efforts have focused upon and often failed. So it is with some encouragement that parents in Chicago should view 2010’s ACT results. In 2008, the highest average ACT score for an open enrollment high school was 19.1 (at Chicago Agricultural High School). By 2010, six open enrollment high schools scored at 19.1 or higher—and five of those six were charter schools.

Table 1. Top Ten Average ACT Scores at CPS Open Enrollment High Schools

School	ACT Score	Low Income %
Noble Network - Pritzker	19.9	94%
Noble Network - Noble St.	19.8	85%
Chicago Agricultural	19.6	50%
Noble Network Rauner	19.5	88%
Chicago Virtual Charter School	19.3	53%
CICS Northtown	19.1	68%
Noble Network - Rowe Clark	19	90%
Taft High	18.9	56%
Noble Network Golder	18.8	86%
Kenwood	18.7	76%
Morgan Park	18.7	71%

 7 of the top 10 scores belong to charter schools.

Charter schools are open to any student who applies, and they must admit students by lottery if they have more applicants than seats. Four years ago, CPS took a bold step to expand the number of charter high schools in Chicago (from 11 to its current number of 38). It was reasonable to expect this experiment to fail. Charter high schools take in students whom they've had little or no chance to impact in the middle school years, most of whom are performing below grade level, and yet they are expected to produce noteworthy results.

The naysayers, it turns out, were wrong. Charter high schools in Chicago now crowd the ranks of the top-performing open enrollment schools in the city. Seven of the top-performing 10 open enrollment high schools (and 11 of the top 25) are charter schools—a notable accomplishment since fewer than 3 in 10 public high schools across the city are charters.

The dominance of charter schools in test score rankings is a relatively new development. Previous studies of CPS data from earlier in the decade had demonstrated that charter schools were boosting graduation and college attendance rates for their predominantly low-income and minority student bodies. But charter schools were typically enrolling large numbers of students who were behind in terms of academic progress—so while the schools' students were making considerable improvement, they had limited success cracking the top ten in test scores. As of 2008, only 3 of the top 10 and 7 of the top 25 ACT scores in open enrollment high schools belonged to charter schools—still higher than charter schools' proportional share of city high schools, but nowhere near the stunning 2010 standings.

Historically, when ranking open enrollment schools (which, again, do not have entrance restrictions), the top test scores have belonged to schools with relatively modest enrollments of low-income students. No longer: 5 of the top 10 ranked open enrollment high schools have low-income enrollments near or above district averages—and all five of those schools are charter schools.¹

The Best Yet to Come?

The 2010 numbers are not a fluke. It appears that even more charter schools could crowd into the top rankings in coming years.

New developments in high school testing show how ninth and tenth graders are scoring. We can now see which schools have upward test score trends over time, making it safer to predict who will perform well on the ACT in the future. Charter schools stand out in these data.

Chicago high schools now not only offer the ACT, but students also now sit for the ninth grade EXPLORE test and the tenth grade PLAN exam. These tests are developed by the same company as ACT, and they reliably measure whether students are on track for college level coursework.² 2010 was the first school year in which all high schools offered all three tests, though most schools have been offering all three since 2008.

Eleventh graders who sat for the ACT in the spring of 2010 would have taken the EXPLORE test during their freshman year in 2008. At that time, only 3 of the top 10 (and 7 of the top 25) scores on the ninth grade test belonged to charter schools. Had charter school students simply maintained their status amongst other schools—had their students progressed predictably—the 2010 ACT rankings would have looked much the same as the 2008 EXPLORE rankings. As shown in Table 2, charter schools had a much stronger showing when 2010 came around.

Chicago's top charter schools appear to have excelled where most other high schools struggle. Not only did they keep students in school, but they posted some of the strongest gains on the ACT-track tests.

And another factor has added to the sudden emergence of top-performing charter schools: Many of the 2010 top-ranking charter high schools were schools that didn't exist three years prior. Several new charter high schools opened in 2007 or later and instantly posted top scores on tenth and eleventh grade tests, a noteworthy accomplishment considering that new schools of any kind often take a couple of years before hitting their stride.

The 2010 numbers from CPS sophomores give an indication of next year's results on the ACT. Tenth-grade scores on the 2010 PLAN test show that charter schools make up 7 of the top 10 and 15 of the top 25 high schools—compared to 5 of 10 and 12 of 25 in the 2009 tenth grade rankings.

Seven of the top-performing 10 open enrollment high schools (and 11 of the top 25) are charter schools.

Table 2. Top 25 Average ACT Scores at CPS Open Enrollment High Schools, 2008-2010

2010			2009			2008		
Rank	School	ACT Score	Rank	School	ACT Score	Rank	School	ACT Score
1	Noble Network - Pritzker	19.9	1	Noble Network - Pritzker	20.0	1	Chicago Agricultural	19.1
2	Noble Network - Noble St.	19.8	2	Chicago Agricultural	19.5	T-2	CICS Northtown	19.0
3	Chicago Agricultural	19.6	3	Noble Network - Noble St.	19.3	T-2	Chicago Math & Science Acad.	19.0
4	Noble Network Rauner	19.5	4	Noble Network Rauner	19.2	4	Kenwood	18.8
5	Chicago Virtual Charter School	19.3	5	CICS Northtown	19.1	5	Noble Network - Noble St.	18.4
6	CICS Northtown	19.1	6	Chicago Math & Science Acad.	18.7	6	Taft	18.3
7	Noble Network - Rowe Clark	19	T-7	Taft	18.6	7	Morgan Park	18.0
8	Taft	18.9	T-7	Kenwood	18.6	8	Curie	17.8
9	Noble Network - Golder	18.8	9	CICS - Ellison	18.3	9	Lake View	17.7
10	Kenwood	18.7	10	Morgan Park	18.1	9	Prosser	17.7
10	Morgan Park	18.7	11	Lake View	18.0	T-11	Chicago Academy	17.6
12	Chicago Academy	18.4	12	CICS - Longwood	17.9	T-11	ASPIRA - M. Ramirez	17.6
13	Williams	18.3	T-13	Prosser	17.4	13	Hubbard	17.5
14	Lake View	18.2	T-13	Curie	17.4	14	CICS - Longwood	17.3
15	Hubbard	17.7	15	Chicago Agricultural	17.1	T-15	Spry	17.0
16	Prosser	17.5	T-16	Hubbard	16.9	T-15	Simeon	17.0
17	Perspectives - Joslin	17.4	T-16	Perspectives - Joslin	16.9	17	Amundsen	16.9
T-18	Curie	17.3	T-16	Kelly	16.9	T-18	Kelly	16.8
T-18	Kelly	17.3	T-19	Mather	16.5	T-18	Kennedy	16.8
20	Chicago Math & Science Acad.	17	T-19	U of C - Woodlawn	16.5	20	Mather	16.7
T-21	Spry	16.9	T-19	Simeon	16.5	21	Greater Lawndale	16.4
T-21	Infinity	16.9	T-22	Kennedy	16.3	T-22	Perspectives - Joslin	16.3
23	CICS - Ellison	16.8	T-22	Amundsen	16.3	T-22	Clark	16.3
T-24	Mather	16.7	T-23	Perspectives - Calumet Tech	16.2	T-22	Steinmetz	16.3
T-24	U of C - Woodlawn	16.7	T-23	Infinity	16.2	25	North Lawndale - Christiana	16.2
			T-23	Clark	16.2			

In 2010, 7 of the top 10 and 11 of the top 25 scores belong to charter schools.

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Charter schools are crowding into the top ranks of tenth grade scores as their students make stronger-than-average gains. CPS releases not only raw test scores, but also the percentage of students who actually improve on college readiness exams from year to year. The 2009-10 results are not fully available as of this paper's publishing, but we can see how well CPS freshmen from 2008-09 progressed into 2009-10. These are the students who will be taking the ACT during the spring of 2011.

Between 2008 and 2009, the list of open enrollment schools with the highest percentage of students making gains from the EXPLORE test to the PLAN exam consists mostly of charter schools. Leading the pack were four charter school campuses, with between 75 and 80 percent of their students showing significant learning gains. Overall, 8 of the top 10 and 14 of the top 25 high schools, in terms of learning gains between freshman and sophomore year, were charter schools (See Table 4).

Judging by the sophomore PLAN scores and the upward trajectory of charter high school students, charter schools are poised to dominate the ACT rankings again in 2011. The schools have produced these results through innovation, long hours, and strict discipline. But it should be noted that Chicago's charter schools have had the opportunity to do so thanks to the policies of the Daley administration. At a vital time, charter schools in Chicago were encouraged to "replicate," creating new schools using their existing models. That decision has created more and better choices for parents. And more specifically, it has given rise to a remarkably successful high school operator: the Noble Network of Charter Schools.

Noble Street

A closer look at the rankings shows that the Noble Network of Charter Schools makes up a large, even majority, share of those charter schools that dominate the rankings. The network of ten schools began in 1999 on a lone campus on Noble Street, from which the network now gets its name. The dream of former CPS teachers Michael and Tonya Milkie, Noble Network runs relatively small high schools that focus intensely on giving at-risk kids the math and reading foundations they need to succeed in college.

Noble schools have a strong culture of discipline, like many charter schools. Student

uniforms are required. The schools offer attractive pay to teachers, but do away with tenure and other outworn personnel rules like step salary scales. If a high-caliber science teacher is needed and available, the schools are willing to offer that person more money than most of its teachers—a simple response to the economic fact that a highly-trained mathematician commands a higher salary on the job market than does a highly-trained historian.

Between 1999 and 2005, the network's founding campus, Noble Street Charter School, existed by itself, amassing a record of academic success. In 2006, two new Noble campuses

Overall, 8 of the top 10 and 14 of the top 25 high schools, in terms of learning gains between freshman and sophomore year, were charter schools

Table 3. Top 25 Average PLAN (Grade 10) Scores at CPS Open Enrollment High Schools

Rank	School Name	PLAN Score
1	Noble Network - UIC	18.0
2	Noble Network - Noble St.	17.6
T-3	Noble Network - Pritzker	17.2
T-3	Chicago Agricultural	17.2
T-5	Chicago Virtual Charter School	17.1
T-5	Noble Network - Rauner	17.1
7	Kenwood	17
8	Noble Network - Golder	16.7
9	Chicago Academy	16.4
T-10	Noble Network - Comer	16.3
T-10	Prosser	16.3
12	Noble Network - Rowe Clark	16.2
T-13	Lake View	16.1
T-13	Perspectives - Joslin	16.1
T-13	UNO - Garcia	16.1
T-16	CICS - Northtown	15.9
T-16	Taft	15.9
18	Williams	15.7
T-19	Morgan Park	15.6
T-19	Hubbard	15.6
T-19	Young Women's Leadership	15.6
22	Spry	15.5
T-23	Perspectives - Calumet Tech	15.4
T-23	CICS - Longwood	15.4
T-23	North Lawndale - Christiana	15.4
T-23	Curie	15.4
T-23	Kennedy	15.4

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were opened as part of an expansion plan, marked most recently by the 2010 opening of the network's tenth campus, the Noble - Johnson College Prep. The explosive growth for Noble Network has in many ways driven the explosive growth in top-scoring charter schools in Chicago.

In 2010, the network's Pritzker College Prep and Noble Street campuses posted the top two ACT scores for open enrollment high schools in the city. Of the seven charter schools that rank in the top ten, five are Noble Network campuses.

Test scores from the 2010 PLAN show an

even brighter future for Noble Network Charter Schools. Seven of Noble Network's high schools were enrolling sophomores and offering the PLAN test during the 2009-10 school year. All seven of those campuses ranked twelfth or higher in overall rankings of district open enrollment high schools.

In fact, the Noble Network is doing a better job in improving student test scores from year to year than almost every other open enrollment school in the city. Of the schools to show the highest percentage of freshmen making significant progress between 2008 and 2009, Noble's seven campuses that enrolled sophomores that year ranked in the top eight spots citywide.

The network is poised to grow further. The federal Department of Education recently announced that Noble Network would be awarded a multi-year \$10 million grant to build additions at five of its existing campuses and to open six new high schools—offering a new choice to 5,000 more students across the city.

Moving Forward in Chicago

The Noble Network is a Chicago original, conceived and operating solely within the city. So are the Urban Prep Academies, a group of all-boys charter schools whose pilot campus recently received national acclaim for sending 100 percent its first graduating class to college. Chicago International Charter School (CICS) operates more charter school campuses than any other group in the district; the CICS Northtown campus has for several years returned top-ten ACT scores. These schools were given unprecedented opportunities to expand in recent years.

In 2006, a minor share of charter schools in Chicago served high school students. This mirrored a nationwide trend where charter schools were showing progress at the elementary and middle school levels, particularly in inner cities, but were less prevalent at the high school level. The trend prompted a study by the RAND Corporation, the results of which were summarized in a journal article titled "The Unknown World of Charter High Schools." The authors looked at Chicago's relatively small number of charter high schools and found that they were improving high school graduation rates and college attendance. This was welcome news to those in the city, given that the University of Chicago first reported in 2006 that fewer

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Table 4. Top 25 Open Enrollment CPS High Schools, Percentage of Students Making Gains from 9th Grade EXPLORE Test to 10th Grade PLAN Exam

Rank	School	Percent
1	Noble Network - UIC	80.0%
2	Noble Network - Noble St.	79.2%
3	Noble Network - Golder	78.1%
4	Noble Network - Pritzker	76.8%
5	Spry	72.5%
6	Noble Network - Rauner	70.0%
7	Noble Network - Rowe Clark	68.6%
8	Noble Network - Comer	67.6%
9	Perspectives - Joslin	65.8%
10	Chicago Academy	63.9%
11	Chi. Math & Science Academy	63.5%
12	ACT Charter	62.9%
13	Kelly	61.8%
14	Young Women's Leadership	61.7%
15	Perspectives - Calumet Tech	61.4%
16	Kenwood	61.0%
17	Lake View	60.6%
18	Crane Tech	60.3%
19	Austin Bus. & Entrepreneurship	59.9%
20	North Lawndale - Christiana	59.6%
21	ACE Tech	59.1%
22	Wells	58.6%
23	World Language High	57.8%
T-24	U of C - Woodlawn	57.3%
T-24	Farragut	57.3%

Eight of the top 10 ranked schools, and 15 of the top 25, are charter schools

than one in ten CPS freshmen were earning college degrees within ten years of starting high school.³

Serendipitously, while the RAND researchers were preparing the study that would eventually broadcast Chicago's early charter high school successes, CPS was launching a high school project of its own—one that would greatly expand the number of charter schools in Chicago. It proved to be a wise decision, as the data in this policy brief demonstrate.

The tripling of the number of charter high schools in Chicago was, by in large, part of the larger school reform initiative launched by CPS called Renaissance 2010. Launched in 2004, the effort pledged to close underperforming public schools and replace them with one hundred new schools by 2010. While the district's efforts to close underperforming schools have occasionally stalled, it did meet the objective of opening one hundred new schools, among them the twenty-seven new charter high schools opened since 2006.

The Renaissance 2010 effort has been controversial at times. Such is reform. Some have considered it too ambitious. Others—namely, ambitious reformers—think the effort must be expanded to reach more families. Most of the Renaissance 2010 schools are much smaller than the average urban school, meaning that the large number of new schools are still only able to enroll a small percentage of city students.

Over the coming months, the future of Chicago schools will be debated between candidates vying to be the next mayor. The Daley administration deserves a large amount of credit for using charter schools to rapidly increase the number of high-performing high schools in Chicago. Backtracking on this decision cannot be an option for any would-be successor who claims to be committed to school reform.

Yet, as discussed, while today's charter schools are providing better high school choices in greater numbers than was the case even three years ago, they remain relatively few in number. Chicago families still need more choices than are currently available. The Noble Network has ambitious expansion plans and has received outside funding to support that work. State and city lawmakers should stand behind that plan.

But other steps must also be taken to deliver new and better choices to Chicago families.

- **Other successful Chicago schools should also be invited to expand.**

Chicago charter schools such as UNO and Amandla have shown a talent at operating middle schools. The top-ten performing (and one-of-a-kind) Chicago Virtual Charter School operates a single campus serving just under 700 students grades K through 12. These schools or others could be encouraged to create several new high schools.

- **New charter school proposals from within Chicago should be strongly welcomed.** Keep in mind that the Noble Network and others didn't exist at all fifteen years ago. Innovative ideas for new schools exist in the minds of educators and social entrepreneurs throughout Chicago, and those ideas should be tried out as new charter schools.

- **Successful organizations from across the country should be invited to the Windy City.** New York schools chancellor Joel Klein has earned a reputation for wooing successful charter school operators from across the United States to try their hand in the Big Apple. Chicago should do the same. It has become commonplace in Chicago for City Hall to court conventions, retailers and corporations in an effort to create jobs and economic opportunity for citizens. CPS should take the same approach to creating opportunities for kids.

Charter schools in Chicago are beginning to raise the bar in a way few thought possible. But it is going to take dozens of additional new school choices before all of Chicago's families enjoy the educational opportunities that they deserve.

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Appendix

All data in this report were acquired from the website of the Chicago Public Schools' Department of Research and Evaluation. Determinations of whether individual high schools should be considered "selective" or "open enrollment" were made using information from CPS's website and interviews conducted by the Illinois Network of Charter Schools.

Schools labeled as "Selective Enrollment" schools by CPS were Gwendolyn Brooks, Lane Tech, Jones College Prep, Lindblom Math and Science Academy, Martin Luther King, Northside Prep, Walter Payton, Whitney Young and Westinghouse. By definition, these were not considered open enrollment schools.

The city's Military Academies, like selective enrollment schools, use test scores to determine admissions. Past school attendance and behavior are considered as well. The Chicago Military Academy, Rickover, Phoenix Military, Bronzeville High, Carver Military, Marine High and Air Force High are not open enrollment high schools, but provide valuable choices to families. They were excluded from the rankings in the previous brief.

Several other labels for schools exist but do not necessarily connote selective approach to admitting students. An analysis of individual school admissions policies by the Illinois Network of Charter Schools identified three additional high schools who admit at least fifty percent of their students through a selective enrollment process: the "magnet schools" DeVry High and Von Steuben High, and the "neighborhood school" Lincoln Park High. All are high-scoring schools, and DeVry High in particular offers a unique choice to students in Chicago seeking to begin college coursework while still in high school. These schools too were excluded from the rankings in the previous pages, because of the selective natures of their admissions policies.

Endnotes

1 *In 2010, low income students made up more than 86 percent of Chicago Public School's overall enrollment. Kenwood High School, with low income student enrollments ten points below the district average, had the highest per capita enrollment of low income students of any non-charter high school in the top ten rankings.*

2 *According to CPS, freshman take the EXPLORE test the fall they enter high school, sophomores take the PLAN test in the fall as well, while juniors take the ACT during spring near the end of the school year.*

3 *Kevin Booker, Tim R. Sass, Brian Gill and Ron Zimmer, 2009. "The Unknown World of Charter High Schools," Education Next, Volume 10 No. 2.*