

CHICAGO ANNENBERG CHALLENGE

HIGHLIGHT SUMMARY

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Founded

Bill Ayers, an associate professor in the Department of Curriculum, Instruction and Evaluation, at the University of Illinois at Chicago (UIC), conceived the idea for the CAC in late 1993.

Ayers led the formation of a group called the Chicago School Reform Collaborative to prepare and submit the grant application.

Ayers and Anne Hallett of the Cross City Campaign for Urban Reform submitted a full grant proposal in November 1994.

The purpose of the grant proposal was “to concentrate the energy” of Chicago’s “radical school reform effort” into an “educational renaissance in the classroom.” The result of this renaissance, according to the grant application would be “to increase student learning and achievement in Chicago schools.”

(The reform referenced by Ayers and Hallett was the establishment in Chicago of Local School Councils (LSC’s) set up in 1988, in the wake of an unpopular teachers’ strike to monitor teachers and principals. The LSC’s had the power to terminate principals who were stripped of tenure by the state legislature.)

The national Annenberg Challenge awarded a \$49.2 million grant to the Collaborative in January 1995. The CAC’s offices were housed at the University of Illinois at Chicago, rent-free.

Early Organizational Life

The Collaborative recruited a board of directors in the spring of 1995 and the board incorporated the Chicago Annenberg Challenge as an Illinois non-profit corporation in April of 1995.

The Collaborative itself consisted of approximately two dozen representatives of non-profit organization, universities and the Chicago educational system. It was co-chaired by Bill Ayers for the entire life of the CAC.

The Collaborative would live on as the sister arm of the board of directors. Its purpose was to be the “heart of the operational work” of the Challenge.

The first Chairman of the Board and President of the Challenge was Barack Obama, then an associate in the law firm of Davis, Miner, Barnhill & Galland in Chicago. The President was an officer position with certain executive authority and the board chair convened and led board meetings.

Obama remained in those positions until the fall of 1999 when he stepped down as President and Chairman and was replaced in those positions by Edward Bottum. Obama remained a member of the board until the dissolution of the CAC in January 2002.

Other board members included Arnold Weber, former president of Northwestern University, Susan Crown of Henry Crown and Company, and Stanley Ikenberry, former President of the University of Illinois. Ikenberry was recently quoted in The New York Times expressing surprise at the Obama appointment as Board Chairman. “It was unusual” that a young lawyer would be appointed to lead an education reform project. Obama had to earn the board members’ “respect,” Ikenberry stated.

The board hired Ken Rolling, from the Woods Fund, to be the CAC’s first, and only, executive director.

The Challenge’s Life from 1995-2002

The Challenge was obligated to match the initial grant from the national Annenberg program on a 2 to 1 basis over a five-year period. The CAC received an extension of two years to raise that money and was successful in raising an additional \$110 million from public and private sources.

A certain percentage of this matching money was not new money but re-branded monies already committed in general to education by Chicago area foundations and corporations and funneled to CAC projects.

The Collaborative and board of directors jointly prepared a Request for Proposals and began awarding grant money in 1995.

External Partners

A key feature of the CAC process was to fund third party entities which would then “partner” with an individual school or groups of schools in order to implement the stated purpose of the grant.

Among the first of these “external partners” to receive a grant from the CAC (for \$175,000 and later for hundreds of thousands more) was the Small Schools Workshop (SSW) that was founded in 1992 by Bill Ayers and directed then, and now, by Mike Klonsky. It was housed in the same building as the CAC at UIC.

Klonsky, a former member of SDS and the founder of a maoist sect in the 1970s, had been hired away from his job driving a Chicago cab by Ayers to lead the SSW. (Klonsky had earned a Ph.D. in education.)

The SSW promised “dramatic improvements in student achievement, teacher morale and professionalism, and in the relationships between various stakeholders within school communities.”

George Schmidt, a prominent teachers union activist, described external partners like the SSW as follows: "At best, they are irrelevant wanderers. At worst, they are teacher bashers and ideologues pushing a political line while collecting political patronage."

Schmidt's direct experience with an SSW program in the mid-1990s led to the following assessment:

Bowen High School, where I taught (and was union delegate, security coordinator, and other things) from 1993 until my suspension without pay in early 1999, was typical of the kinds of schools that got put on "academic probation." The school is located in the South Chicago neighborhood, which was the victim of disinvestment from the steel industry. The area was in an economic recession for the better part of two decades, as steel mills from Wisconsin Steel to the USS South Works plants were closed.

By the early 1990s, Bowen has about 1,400 students, half of whom were African-American and half of whom were Mexican American (often, by the way, third or fourth generation). Nearly 90 percent of the kids came from poverty level homes, often working poor (very little welfare poor).

Our "external partner" [required for schools on probation for low test scores] at Bowen High School was from the famous "Small Schools Network" at the University of Illinois at Chicago. The people they sent (several different ones during the time I was there) had little or no classroom experience. Their activities ranged from irrelevant to intrusive when it came to discussing things like classroom instruction with people. On a couple of occasions, they sent out their heavyweights (Mike Klonsky and Bill Ayers), who were equally irrelevant, albeit more arrogant (and a bit more polished).

Bowen High School's improvements on the tests that determined "probation" in Chicago had nothing to do with the costly (more than \$200,000 over the first three years) work of the "Small Schools Network."

In the opinion of most teachers, our "external partners" were pesky and underfoot. At worst, they were pushing for nonsense.

And, at the end of the 1997-98 school year, they tried to push for the elimination of some teachers, but failed. By that time, Ayers was reportedly into proving how serious they could be by forcing principals for [sic] fire some teachers. Not once did they criticize the "standard" that had been set or mention the economic and social problems of the

community (including a terrible gang problem which I was partly responsible for keeping under control).

The Local School Councils

A core mission of the CAC was support for the Local School Councils set up in 1988 by the Illinois State Legislature. This was a form of local control of Chicago schools similar to the controversial Ocean Hill-Brownsville scheme in New York City in 1968. That effort led to the firing of white teachers under pressure from black parents and a controversial strike by the American Federation of Teachers. New Left activists, with a similar outlook to that of Ayers and Klonsky, crossed the picket line to scab on the teachers' union.

The Chicago LSC's could terminate principals who had been stripped of academic tenure by the 1988 reform. The reform had been pushed for by Bill Ayers and Barack Obama and was likely a factor in Ayers' interest in seeing Obama ascend to the CAC Board Chairmanship.

The CAC Collaborative, led by Ayers, proposed the creation of a Leadership Development Initiative, which would spend \$2 million over several years to support the LSC's. The Initiative was intended "to address the Challenge's interest in organizing an informed constituency of parents and community residents who will actively support and participate in educational changes in their local schools."

When the proposal was discussed by the CAC board, it ran into opposition, led by former Northwestern University president Arnold Weber, of the pro-business Civic Committee, who raised a concern the Challenge would be viewed as creating a "political threat" to school principals. Barack Obama coordinated the preparation of the final RFP with the Ayers-led Collaborative. The Board backed the RFP and grants were initiated over several years.

However, the LSC's were increasingly controversial and Chicago Mayor Richard M. Daley, Jr., initiated an effort to diminish their power and recentralize control over Chicago schools in the Mayor's office. The business community supported the Mayor, as they grew frustrated with the failure of the 1988 reforms to improve student achievement. New legislation in 1995 and 1999 went far in that direction.

This put the CAC in a direct battle with the powerful Chicago mayor. In a recent interview, CAC ED Ken Rolling described the level of tension:

"There were two or three attempts from them [Chicago city officials] to just "get the money." Even the mayor got into at one point. The mayor asked the ambassador [Annenberg] to come into Chicago and he wanted to tell him, "You are wasting your money. You should give it to me." The ambassador never responded to him and never agreed to a meeting. But [new School system CEO Paul] Vallas tried it, his staff worked on how to wrest that money away from us."

A Final Assessment

The CAC closed its doors, finally, in January 2002. It handed over its remaining assets along with a substantial grant to a successor entity, the Chicago Public Education Fund. The CPEF recruited several key CAC players to assist in its efforts, including Ken Rolling, Susan Crown, and Scott Smith, CEO of the Chicago Tribune. Also recruited for the CPEF board was Penny Pritzker, now Chair of the Obama Finance Committee, and whose family foundation had provided \$100,000 in matching funds for the CAC.

The CAC also funded the creation the Consortium of Chicago School Research (CCSR), in parallel with the two operational arms, the Board and the Collaborative. This arm was to conduct research on the impact of the CAC's funding on student outcomes. In 2003 the final technical report of the CCSR on the CAC was published.

The “bottom line” according to the report was that the CAC did not achieve its goal of improvement in student academic achievement and nonacademic outcomes. While student test scores improved in the so-called Annenberg Schools that received some of the \$160 million disbursed in the six years from 1995 to 2001,

*“This was similar to improvement across the system.... There were no statistically significant differences in student achievement between Annenberg schools and demographically similar non-Annenberg schools. This indicates that there was **no Annenberg effect** on achievement.”*

The study cited four factors that helped explain the failure. These included:

1. Shortcomings in the design and implementation of the Challenge;
2. Lack of capacity among the External Partners to promote school development;
3. Lack of ability and commitment among schools to engage in the work of the Challenge; and
4. Lack of external support and “countervailing system forces” that detracted from or conflicted with schools' efforts to develop through the Challenge.

The report identified the political conflict between the Local School Council promotion efforts of the CAC – such as the \$2 million Leadership Development Initiative - as a possible factor hindering a positive impact on student achievement.

In fact, what the report called “local self-determinism” undermined the creation of a common direction and “theory of change” for the CAC. This lack of an “overarching strategy for improvement” may have “constrained” the Challenge which was “reluctan[t] to violate” local “assumptions.” The study noted that “tension and conflict” with outside political forces developed it was the work of the CAC “that was compromised.”