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THE WALL STREET JOURNAL.

Currents: Transforming Inner-City Schools To Train Tomorrow's Work Force

Joe Barrett. *Wall Street Journal*. (Eastern edition). New York, N.Y.: Jun 5, 2008. pg. A.14

Abstract (Summary)

The goal is to create attractive options for students of every background across the city "and let them choose a program that works for them," says Arne<TH>Duncan, chief executive of the city's schools. By 2005, when he entered Mr. Duncan's office, Mr. Swinney had launched the Chicago Manufacturing Renaissance Council, which brought together the Illinois Manufacturers Association, the state AFL-CIO branch and city officials.

Full Text (875 words)

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CHICAGO -- One day in August 2005, Dan Swinney went to the Chicago public schools for help in his crusade to revive manufacturing here. Instead, Mr. Swinney left his meeting with some homework: design a new high school to train the workers needed to make that revival happen.

This past fall, the school, Austin Polytechnical Academy, opened inside a building that had once housed a mammoth, violence-prone high school on the city's struggling West Side. Now, Mr. Swinney, chairman of the Chicago Manufacturing Renaissance Council, has plans to open two more high schools and an elementary school in other areas of the city.

Mr. Swinney says American manufacturing is adapting to globalization by shifting to higher-value products. But with the baby boomers' looming retirement, the education system isn't producing the workers and managers needed to take over the highly skilled jobs that are most in demand.

"There's a window that's open that will allow us to sustain and expand our competitive advantage, but it's only open for a few years," Mr. Swinney says. Training poor students to fill these positions can "address deep social problems," while giving industry the work force it needs.

Inner-city school systems throughout the country are moving fast to open legions of small, experimental schools, in many cases replacing bigger institutions that were becoming unmanageable. The new schools take a variety of approaches, from literature-focused, to character-based to vocational.

New York City has opened 241 such schools since 2002 and has plans for 53 more this fall. Cleveland, Oakland, Calif., and Boston have also opened similar schools. Much of the proliferation is fueled by private groups, most notably the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, which has spent more than \$1 billion since 2001 to back the small-school movement.

The drive has been criticized at times for forcing some students to travel far from home for a general education or crowding them into facilities that then take on some of the problems associated with the schools that were closed down.

So far, Chicago has opened 55 schools under Mayor Richard M. Daley's Renaissance 2010 plan, with an additional 21 slated for the fall. Some, such as Austin, focus on job skills. Others admit only girls, concentrate on the Great Books or take an African-centered approach to learning. Eventually, Chicago will have more than 100 new schools, serving about 20% of the roughly 415,000 students in the district.

The goal is to create attractive options for students of every background across the city "and let them choose a program that works for them," says Arne<TH>Duncan, chief executive of the city's schools. "The large, one-size-fits-all high school doesn't fit anybody."

At Austin Polytech, the mostly poor, predominately black freshman class of 129 takes up less than half of the second floor of the former Austin High School -- a neighborhood giant with three gyms and a swimming pool. That school was closed a year ago. Two more schools will eventually occupy the third and fourth floors.

The Polytech students take double periods of English and math -- designed to quickly bring up the many students with

below-grade-level skills -- and heavy doses of science and computer training. Before graduating, the students will complete four years of pre-engineering and have the chance to be certified in metalworking skills and complete internships at the school's dozens of manufacturing-firm partners. Austin graduates would be expected to find jobs paying as much as \$35,000 including overtime, with the chance of doubling that in three or four years, Mr. Swinney says.

Robert Hayes, 15 years old, looks up from his wireless laptop during English class and says he has had a pretty good first year. "I like some of the jobs they are talking about," he says.

Researchers have generally found that the smaller schools bolster test scores and graduation rates. One reason, says Tracy Huebner, a senior researcher at WestEd, a nonprofit educational-research firm, is personal connections between students and staff members. "Somebody will be knowing if Mark is having a good day or a bad day," she says.

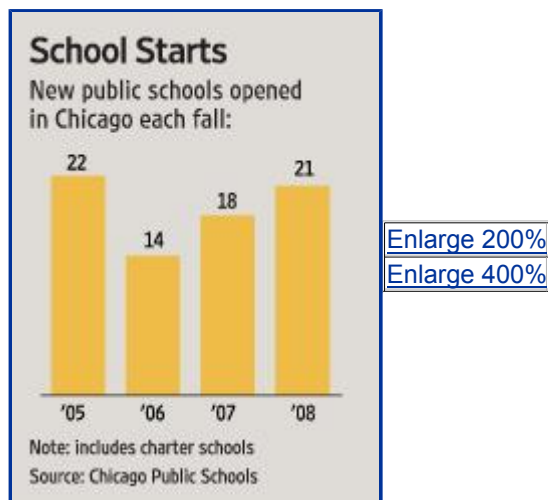
Mr. Swinney, 63, a former metalworker, set up the Center for Labor and Community Research in 1982 to study why manufacturing jobs were in decline and explore approaches to fighting against the tide. In one study, the group found that Chicago-area manufacturers have 10,500 openings each year, but the educational system is providing only about 5,000 people qualified to fill them.

By 2005, when he entered Mr. Duncan's office, Mr. Swinney had launched the Chicago Manufacturing Renaissance Council, which brought together the Illinois Manufacturers Association, the state AFL-CIO branch and city officials.

Mr. Duncan, the schools chief, was happy to join the group, but he also thought Mr. Swinney could help him improve the school system.

One recent day, engineering teacher Anthony Speller stood on top of a table. An electrical engineer who used to work for General Electric Co., he instructed two groups of students to hold hands in a circle, then gradually tie themselves in knots by changing whom they held hands with. One group quickly disentangled themselves. The other struggled.

Mr. Speller told the latter group: "You all started talking instead of listening to the problem -- like American manufacturers back in the day."



Indexing (document details)

Subjects:	Skills, Workforce, Inner city, Urban schools
Locations:	Chicago Illinois
Author(s):	Joe Barrett
Document types:	Feature
Publication title:	Wall Street Journal. (Eastern edition). New York, N.Y.: Jun 5, 2008. pg. A.14
Source type:	Newspaper
ISSN:	00999660
ProQuest document ID:	1489954811
Text Word Count	875

Document URL:

http://proquest.umi.com/pqdweb?did=1489954811&sid=1&Fmt=4&cl
ientId=31822&RQT=309&VName=PQD

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