

Turnarounds can work: Here's Howe

Fresh start, fresh attitudes have made all the difference

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February 25, 2010

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To an outsider, Howe School of Excellence rises from the landscape like a decaying fortress.

But to the people who work there every day -- the principal, administrators, teachers and students -- Howe is a haven in a sea of chaos.

Two years ago, Howe was one of the feeder elementary schools completely shut down under the controversial "turnaround" movement that continues to draw heated protests.

On Wednesday, for instance, teachers and the Chicago Teachers Union were out in full force at Phillips High School to protest the Chicago Board of Education's plan to close that school.

This is a complex issue, and some would argue that because CPS can't fire all the parents, it has decided to fire all the teachers.

But if Howe, on the city's West Side, is an example of what a fresh start can do, then the "turnaround" process is worth the pain.

Howe reopened with a new principal and a new staff. It is now managed by **AUSL**, a not-for-profit group that trains teachers to work in urban, high-poverty communities.

On Wednesday, I was a guest for the school's "African-American Positive Images Day."

The school itself looks foreboding and cold, although administrators have tried to brighten its facade with colorful signage.

Howe serves a predominantly poor and minority population of children who live in an area that is plagued by drug-dealing and the violence that goes along with it.

Frankly, too often people have lower expectations for children who are dealing with these obstacles.

But Howe's principal, Keisha Campbell, believes that children succeed when you set "high and clear expectations."

"It takes adults of like-mindedness with a shared belief about urban education to bring about true change," she told me in a telephone interview.

More than 85 percent of the students' parents participate in school activities, something that was unheard of at the old Howe.

"We went to the parents. We introduced ourselves and engaged in several community walks," Campbell said.

"We also used the local churches to connect with parents."

Before letting us go to classrooms, Campbell spoke to us about the progress students have made.

As proof of Howe's success, she pointed to the improved student attendance -- up from 89 percent in the '07-'08 school year to 93 percent in '08-'09.

Teacher attendance also showed a gain of 2.54 percent.

She acknowledged that too many students are still not meeting educational standards on the ISAT test. Still, 18.6 percent more students at Howe are meeting that standard in math and reading.

"I am proud of how the school culture and climate has completely turned around," Campbell told me.

I've been to a lot of Chicago Public Schools where students couldn't care less about adults who show up to talk about their careers.

The behavior of students in the seventh-grade math and science class was a pleasant exception.

Only a handful of students said they were interested in journalism, but the entire class listened to me and to each other.

These students answered questions, were animated when discussing the books they were reading, and were well-versed on current events, particularly the Haiti disaster.

In describing Howe's renewal, Campbell said people in the community had to learn how to "do" school again.

That's absolutely true.

The loudest and most consistent complaint against CPS' closing process is that the "community was left in the dark."

Sometimes I wonder just who are we talking about when we say "community."

Where is the community when students are getting into fights inside and outside of the school?

Where is the community when volunteers are needed to help in the classroom or for after- or before-school activities?

And where is the community when students require that special boost -- something that they may or may not be getting at home -- that could lift their morale when they face standardized testing?

It took a lot of hard work to get Howe where it is today.

But too often, people who control our education system are more concerned about jobs and politics than they are about students.

Without a doubt, the turnaround process is a giant step.

But CPS students can't wait any longer.

At this point, a quality education must be had by any means necessary.