



CHICAGO SUN-TIMES

Neighborhood schools need the most help

May 17, 2009

A new list is out and it should be required reading for anyone who cares about the Chicago Public Schools.

It tells us where the real problems are.

The need for quality neighborhood elementary schools, it turns out, is concentrated in just 25 of Chicago's 77 community areas clustered on the South and West Sides, according to a study by **IFF**, a local community development financial institution and research organization.

Drilling deeper, **IFF** unearthed the eight community areas in the worst shape of all.

These neighborhoods don't have any high-quality, "performing" neighborhood schools. That means that nearly 23,000 kids in these neighborhoods have no chance of finding a spot in a quality neighborhood elementary school. The neighborhoods are Avalon Park, Douglas, Fuller Park, Greater Grand Crossing, Pullman, South Chicago, South Shore and Washington Park.

IFF's definition of a "performing" school mirrors state standards, which last year required 62.5 percent of kids to perform at grade level in reading and math. Though not a perfect measure, it remains a meaningful one.

In its analysis, **IFF** focused on neighborhood schools—a wise choice because that's where most Chicago kids go.

CPS has other schools that don't draw exclusively from a neighborhood, including public charters and others created under Renaissance 2010, a reform plan to replace failing or under-enrolled schools with 100 new schools. A few high-performing Renaissance 2010 schools are open in these eight communities, though not enough to make a measurable difference.

Citywide, **IFF** found that since 2004, Renaissance 2010 schools have boosted the number of performing schools, though not all are cutting it and many are too new to have test score results.

In the end, **IFF**'s study shows clearly that sweeping change will come only when Chicago's neighborhood schools improve. They make up the bulk of CPS' stock and, though there's been progress since 2004, tremendous needs remain, as evidenced by this Top 25 list. Greater Grand Crossing, for example, has eight neighborhood schools. None are performing. Adding a few quality Renaissance 2010 schools could help, and CPS is targeting these eight needy areas, but new schools can't do it all.

Chicago school officials worked with **IFF** on this study and commissioned **IFF**'s first study in 2004, which is good news. CPS, rightly, has been criticized over the years for failing to clearly prioritize its highest need areas and throwing all its resources behind efforts to fix those schools.

We know where the problems lie.
Let the work begin.