Social Support, Academic Press, and Student Achievement:
A View from the Middle Grades in Chicago

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Executive Summary

This report of the Chicago Annenberg Research Project focuses on the relationships of student social support and school academic press to gains in student academic achievement. Social support refers to personal relations that students have with people in and out of school, including teachers, parents, and other students, who may help them do well in school. Academic press refers to the extent to which school members, including students and teachers, experience a strong emphasis on academic success and conformity to specific standards of achievement.

Analyses of citywide survey data and achievement test scores of sixth and eighth grade students in Chicago reveal that levels of both student social support and school academic press are positively related to gains in student achievement in reading and mathematics. These analyses demonstrate that students learn most when they experience both strong academic press in their schools and strong social support from people in and out of their schools. Regardless of the background characteristics of students and the demographic characteristics of their schools, when either support or press is strong and the other is weak, students learn less. The report pairs these findings with examples from fieldwork that illustrate steps schools can take to strengthen both social support and academic press to promote student learning.

This report challenges "either-or" proposals for school reform that view academic focus and rigor and social support for students as contradictory strategies. It argues that to succeed in schools that press them hard to learn, students need strong social support. Conversely, even in the presence of strong social support, students will not learn much unless schools press them to achieve academically.

Foreword

In 1993 Ambassador Walter Annenberg announced a $500 million challenge grant to improve public education in the United States. Cities wishing to receive a portion of that grant were invited to submit proposals describing how the funds would be used to stimulate educational innovation and collaboration in their public school systems. A group of Chicago school reform activists and education stakeholders, including parents, teachers, principals, community leaders, and foundation officers, organized to write a proposal to include Chicago among the sites receiving a grant. They were successful. In January 1995, the Annenberg Foundation awarded a five-year grant of $49.2 million to establish the Chicago Annenberg Challenge. An additional $100 million in matching funds was pledged by local donors.

The Chicago Annenberg Challenge was organized to distribute and manage these monies among networks of schools and external partners throughout the city. Its mission is to improve student learning by supporting intensive efforts to reconnect schools to their communities, restructure education, and improve classroom teaching. The Chicago Challenge funds networks and external partners that seek to develop successful, community-based schools that address three critical education issues through whole-school change: school and teacher isolation, school size and personalism, and time for learning and improvement. More than half of Chicago's public schools will have participated at one time or another in an Annenberg-supported improvement effort by the end of the grant period in 2001.

This report is part of a series of special topic reports developed by the Chicago Annenberg Research Project. This series focuses on key issues and problems of relevance to the Chicago Annenberg Challenge and to the improvement of Chicago public schools generally. It complements a series of technical reports that focus specifically on the work and accomplishments of the Chicago Annenberg Challenge. Among

the topics examined to date in the special topics report series are the quality of intellectual work in Chicago elementary schools, teacher professional development, school program coherence, school size, and, in this report, social support, academic press, and student achievement.

The work of the Chicago Annenberg Research Project is intended to provide feedback and useful information to the Chicago Challenge and the schools and external partners who participate in its efforts to improve educational opportunities for Chicago's children and youth. This work is also intended to expand public discussion about the conditions of education in the Chicago Public Schools and the kinds of efforts needed to advance meaningful improvements. This effort to stimulate new avenues of discussion about urban school improvement is an important aspect of Ambassador Annenberg's challenge to engage the public more fully in school reform.

Acknowledgments

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I. Introduction

Improving student academic achievement has long been an extremely complicated and vexing problem for school systems and education policy makers. Among the many efforts aimed to improve student achievement are two quite different approaches, each with deep historical roots. One emphasizes the importance of "social support" in improving student learning. This approach focuses on strengthening social relationships among students and adults in and out of school. Its logic suggests that students will learn more in settings in which they are well known and cared for and in which their social and emotional development is supported. A second approach focuses on what has come to be called "academic press." This approach emphasizes rigor and accountability. Its logic holds that students will achieve more when what they are supposed to learn is made clear, when expectations for academic learning are high, and when they are held accountable for their performance.

Historically, these two approaches to improving academic achievement have been viewed as if they were competing ideologies.[1] In the 1840s, Horace Mann based his call for common schools on an argument for the need to raise and make more consistent academic rigor in schools. At the turn of the century, Progressive philosophers and educators began to argue that schools were failing to address the social and economic problems of a rapidly growing industrialized nation.[2] They charged that the classical curriculum prevalent in schools at the time failed to interest and motivate students. This curriculum was inadequate to prepare them to work and function in modern democratic society. As an alternative, Progressives began to emphasize varied curricula based on the needs and interests of students, education of the "whole child," guidance and vocational education, and the creation of caring and supportive environments to promote student learning.

In the 1940s and 1950s, critics attacked the post-World War I excesses of Progressivism, charging that schools had "failed miserably in

teaching the most elementary skills, and education itself had been systematically divested of its moral and intellectual content."[3] They argued that schools placed too much emphasis on social support and non-academic outcomes. As parodied in the play and popular film "Auntie Mame," they claimed that the curriculum had become too "soft"; it lacked rigor and purpose. What was needed, they said, were higher academic standards, more specification of academic content, and increased accountability for student achievement.[4]

Such swings between these approaches to school reform continued with the emphasis on improving math and science achievement following the launch of Sputnik in 1957; the introduction of experiential, child-centered, and open curricula and learning environments in the 1960s and 1970s;[5] and the recommendations for higher standards and increased academic work contained in the 1983 report *A Nation at Risk* and the spate of other school reform reports that followed in the mid-1980s. Currently, school reformers are promoting more rigorous standards and systems of accountability for academic achievement. At the same time they acknowledge the imperative of social support represented by the African proverb and the now popular aphorism, "It takes a village to raise a child."

Historically, some scholars and reformers have argued that these two approaches to improving academic achievement are not competitive and should be viewed as complementary. William Du Bois and John Dewey saw a need for both rigorous academic curriculum and strong social support to promote student academic success. The combined positive effects of press and support were documented as early as 1918 by Abraham Flexner and Frank Bachman in their seminal study of the Gary, Indiana school system.[6] Over the years, the success of historically black colleges and universities in educating African-American students has been attributed in large part to the ability of these institutions to provide both strong academic programs and strong systems of social support to help students succeed academically.[7]

Today, these approaches to improving student achievement are illustrated by two major reform initiatives in Chicago: (a) the Chicago Public Schools' (CPS) learning goals and standards, testing, and promotion policies, and (b) the Chicago Annenberg Challenge. A major emphasis of the CPS central administration is to improve student achievement by increasing academic press. Among its many initiatives, the school system has developed new centralized goals and standards for student learning in each subject area and grade level. It has established specific benchmarks for individual student performance on standardized tests and has tied summer school attendance, grade-level promotion, and retention primarily to student test scores. Indeed, student scores on standardized tests are a primary criterion for placing schools on academic probation and reconstituting them.

Historically, some scholars and reformers have argued that these two approaches [social support and academic press] to improving academic achievement are not competitive and should be viewed as complementary.

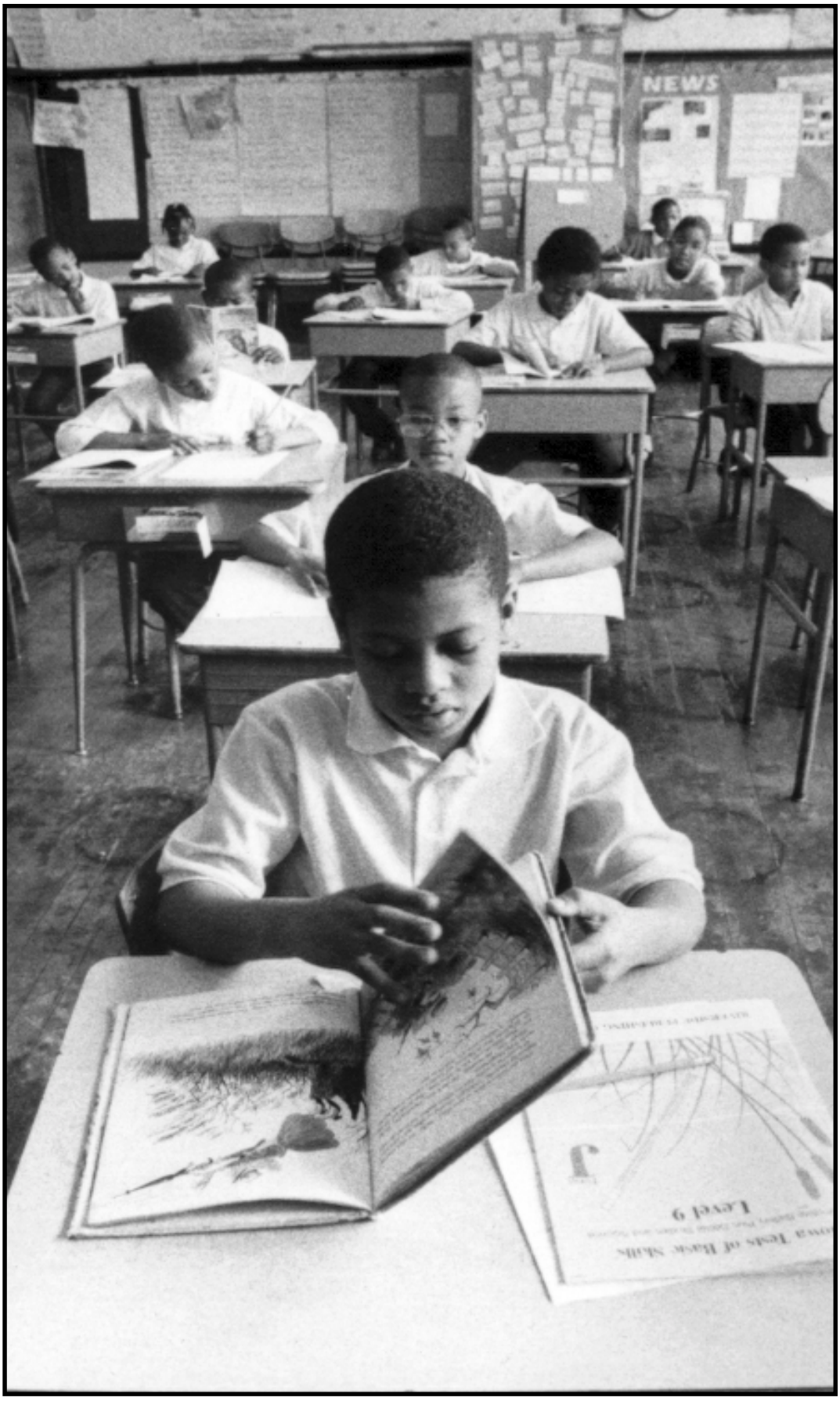
A major emphasis of the Chicago Annenberg Challenge is on developing social support for students in and out of school. Consistent with the guiding principles of the national Annenberg Challenge, Chicago's Challenge calls for forging more personalized relationships between students and adults both in and out of school.[8] In its requests for proposals, the Chi-

cago Challenge has stressed the need for schools to develop more supportive student learning environments and stronger relations between students and teachers and between schools and families.[9] These relations are considered to be valuable resources for student learning. They are thought to make instruction more responsive to individual students' needs and interests, promote affiliation and engagement in school, and promote a stronger sense of self-worth among students.

It would be wrong to conclude from the CPS's recent efforts to increase academic press that the system is not also interested in developing social support for students. It would also be wrong to conclude that the Chicago Annenberg Challenge does not consider academic achievement important in its work with schools because of its focus on social support. In its 1996 draft proposal for its high school redesign project, for example, CPS specifically noted that academic press and social support—the latter referred to as personalism—were both "essential" to improving student achievement. In the proposal, CPS argued, "Good schools engage students in learning and teachers in teaching through rigorous, consistent academic expectations and caring, personalized experiences and environments."[10] Indeed, along with its efforts to increase academic rigor and accountability, CPS has implemented such programs as social centers and freshman academies and advisories in the high schools to strengthen sources of social support available to students.

At the same time, the Chicago Annenberg Challenge encourages schools and their external partners to concentrate on improving classroom instruction and student academic achievement. The Challenge has focused most of its professional development activity on increasing the academic challenge of classroom instruction and the intellectual quality of student work. Although CPS and the Chicago Annenberg Challenge consider both academic press and social support important means to improve student learning and although CPS policies and the Chicago Challenge are not necessarily in competition or contradiction, the difference in relative emphasis each has recently placed on press and support provides a clear example of how these approaches to school reform manifest themselves in Chicago.

Since 1994, the Consortium on Chicago School Research has sought to develop new understanding about the quality of academic press and social support for student learning.[11] The conditions of education in Chicago in these two areas were detailed in a 1996 report, *Charting Reform in Chicago: The Students Speak*. As detailed in a sidebar appearing later in this report, substantially higher levels of student engagement were found in schools that combined strong social support and academic press. This report takes the next step—it examines the direct links of social support and academic press to student academic achievement.[12]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II. What Are Social Support and Academic Press?

In the English lexicon, "support" refers to aid or assistance or the addition of strength to that which cannot stand on its own. "Social support" describes the sources of such aid—assistance from individuals, one's social group, or one's community or society. We use the term "social support for academic learning" to designate the personal relationships that students have with people who may help them do well in school.

Students may draw such support from several sources. Support may come from parents encouraging their children to work hard in school; teachers providing individual care, attention, and help to students; students encouraging each other to do well in school; and even neighbors and community leaders offering support and assistance to students. When children are young, most social support is likely to come from parents and family. As children grow older, their networks of social contacts expand. The relationships that children develop in and around school, with teachers, peers, and other adults, take on increasing importance as children reach adolescence.

The importance of social support for academic learning rests on an argument that students who have more support will learn more as a result. This argument stems from a growing recognition of the difficulties that most people—children and adults—face while learning as individuals and the value of social interaction in the learning process.[13] Social support creates motivation for students to achieve.[14] It builds confidence and a sense of self that make academic success seem attainable.[15] Those who provide social support serve as role models who can convey the importance of academic learning and show students how academic success is achieved.[16] Social support also provides a sense of trust, confidence, and psychological safety that allows students to take risks, admit errors, ask for help, and experience failure along the way to higher levels of learning.[17]

Of course, the support students receive may not always be conducive to academic achievement. For example, student peer groups may create a social stigma around academic achievement. Similarly, parents may purposely or inadvertently discount the importance of academic achievement to their children by the way they view the school as an institution or by the manner in which they supervise their children's homework and progress in school. It is conceivable that teachers' efforts to develop warm and caring relationships with students could foster emotional dependency that does little to promote academic learning.

A useful perspective on social support comes from recent research on social capital and how it relates to children's learning and development. Social capital refers to those qualities of social relationships that may enhance or hinder individual growth and the effectiveness of individual and group activity.[18] The idea is that benefits can accrue to people who engage in relations with high levels of trust, strong values and expectations, and access to useful information they do not possess. Recent studies find, for example, that parents' knowledge, skills, and dispositions make less difference in the learning and development of children if the parents and children do not have meaningful social relations.[19] This research shows that parent presence, support, and involvement in the family is key to children's academic success in school, overall educational attainment, and occupational aspirations.

In contrast, academic press focuses on the extent to which school members, including teachers and students, experience a normative emphasis on academic success and conformity to specific standards of achievement.[20] Press affects student achievement in at least two ways. First, it can provide specific direction for student work and academic attainment. It points students and teachers to what they need to accomplish. Second, academic press creates incentives that motivate students and teachers to achieve at higher levels.

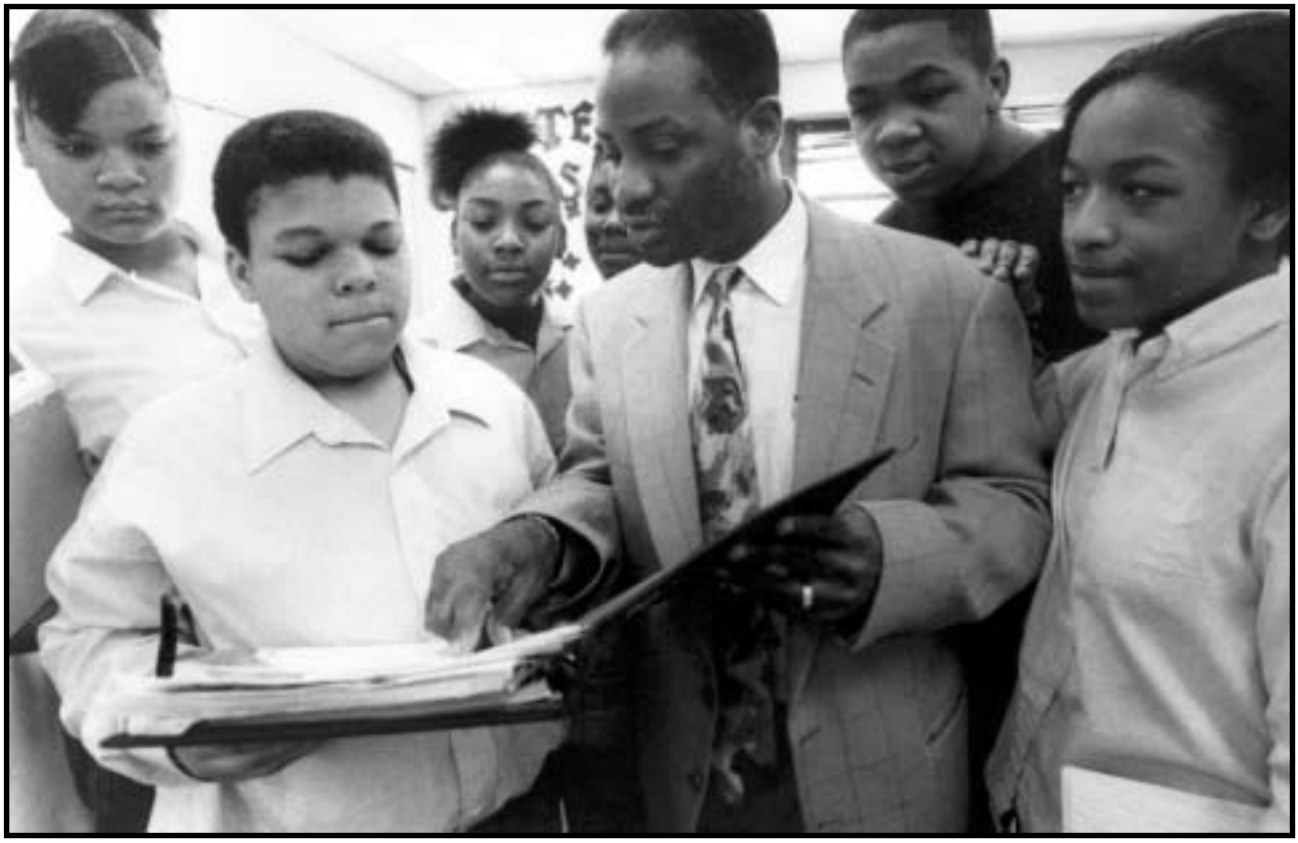
Like social support, academic press can come from many sources. It can come from principals' expectations for teachers to move through the curriculum and work to promote particular student outcomes. It can come from teachers' expectations for students to learn. Press may be exerted through the amount of homework teachers assign; the numbers, types, and difficulty of courses students are required to take; the amount of class time devoted to instruction; the challenge of academic work; the presence of specific standards for student achievement; and assessment programs used to judge students' achievement and hold teachers and students accountable for their performance.

In general, a strong academic focus and press for achievement have been noted repeatedly as an important feature of effective schools.[21] Research links strong press for academic success with greater student effort, more time spent on academic tasks, and ultimately higher student performance.[22] Academic success can also enhance student self-concept, a valued psycho-emotional outcome of schooling.[23] Recent evidence indicates that strong academic press is particularly important to student achievement in low-income schools.[24]

Press can be enhanced by the stakes attached to academic success and failure. An excellent illustration of this is represented by standards and high-stakes student assessment systems, such as Chicago's, that tie grade-level promotion and retention to student performance on standardized tests. The hope is that students who confront these stakes will respond by working harder and learning more. On the other hand, when confronted with higher expectations and high stakes for performance, students who do not perform well may lose motivation, become alienated and disengaged, and eventually drop out of school. Some observers are concerned that such potentially negative outcomes of academic press may be most prevalent in schools that enroll substantial proportions of low-achieving students—those who find it difficult to meet higher academic standards.[25]

This discussion suggests that both strong academic press and social support may be needed to achieve high levels of student academic achievement. Developing press and support together may be especially important for low-income students. Anthony Bryk,

Valerie Lee, and Peter Holland demonstrated that strong academic press coupled with intense social relationships were key components of the distinctive effectiveness of Catholic high schools for disadvantaged urban youth.[26] Roger Shouse found this more generally as a characteristic of effective secondary schools for urban youth.[27] A prior Consortium study reported that this combination was a key link to high levels of student engagement in schooling.[28]



How Student Social Support Was Measured

Our measure of social support was developed as a weighted average of four composite measures drawn from student surveys. Each composite measure describes support each student receives from one of four different sources—teachers, parents, peers, and students' communities.[31]

Some of the items used to measure students' support from teachers asked students about the frequency with which their English and mathematics teachers:

- Relate the subject to their personal interests.
- Really listen to what they say.
- Know them very well.
- Believe they can do well in school.

Some of the survey items used to measure support from parents asked students how often their parents (or other adults in their household):

- Discuss with them school activities or events of interest to the student.
- Help with homework.
- Discuss with them things they had studied in class.
- Discuss homework with them.

Some of the items used to measure support from peers asked students the extent to which they agree that most students in their classes:

- Treat each other with respect.
- Work together to solve problems.
- Help each other learn.

Items used to measure support from the community were asked only of eighth grade students. Some of these items asked students the extent to which they agree that:

- If there is a problem in the neighborhood, neighbors get together to solve it.
- People in the neighborhood can be trusted.
- Adults in the neighborhood can be counted on to see that children are safe and don't get in trouble.
- There are adults in the neighborhood whom children can look up to.
- Neighborhood adults know who the local children are.

How School Academic Press Was Measured

Our measure of academic press is a school average of teachers' reports about their schools' focus on academic achievement and students' reports about whether their teachers challenge them to reach high levels of academic achievement.[32] Some of the items from the teacher survey used to construct this measure asked teachers whether their schools:

- Set high standards for academic performance.
- Organize the school day to maximize instructional time.
- Focus on what is best for student learning when making important decisions.

Some of the items from the student survey used to construct this measure asked students whether their English and math teachers:

- Expect them to do their best all the time.
- Expect them to complete homework every night.
- Think it is very important that they do well in that class.
- Encourage them to do extra work when they don't understand something.

III. How We Did the Study

This study focused on the relationships of social support and academic press to gains in student academic achievement in reading and mathematics. We wanted to know whether there are differences in student achievement in schools where academic press is high and social support is low, where social support is high and academic press is low, where both academic press and support are low, and where both academic press and support are high.

We focused our inquiry on students in the sixth and eighth grades. This is a particularly important age group for studying social support, academic press, and achievement.[29] Adolescence is a period of both great cognitive and physiological development and tremendous emotional and social ambiguity and change. As children enter adolescence, they move away from their parents as a primary source of social and psychological support. As they become more independent from parents, the support they receive from other sources, including peers, teachers, and other adults, becomes increasingly salient for their learning and development. At the same time that they are encountering developmental changes and experiencing shifting sources of support, adolescents are making the transition from primary to intermediate to secondary grades in school. During this period, the curriculum and organization of schooling become focused more intensely on academic work. Expectations for academic success and accountability for performance increase. Adolescents encounter this transition in schooling at the same time that they are developing from concrete to more abstract thinkers. This makes the clear articulation of expectations and press for academic achievement especially important for this age group, particularly when these students are held administratively accountable for their academic performance.

Data for this study came from several sources. Our primary outcome of concern is student scores on the reading and mathematics

portions of the 1997 Iowa Tests of Basic Skills (ITBS). We used students' 1996 ITBS scores as a point of comparison in order to represent one year's gain in achievement. Data on schools' academic press and students' social support came from the Consortium's 1997 surveys of sixth and eighth grade students and teachers in the Chicago Public Schools. These survey data were available from 28,318 sixth and eighth grade students and over 5,000 teachers in 304 Chicago elementary and middle schools.[30]

We combined both teacher and student survey items to form our measure of school academic press. Teacher survey items included in this measure gauged the extent to which teachers thought their schools' goals were focused on improving student learning and the extent to which they themselves were held to high standards of success. Student survey items used in this measure assessed the extent to which students thought their teachers challenged them to reach high levels of academic performance and expected them to achieve at high levels. We assumed that students could receive support from several sources. So, in order to assess students' overall level of social support, we drew on student survey items that gauged the support they received from their parents, teachers, peers, and community members. These items were combined to create a single composite measure of social support.

In our analysis, we took into account several student background factors such as gender, race and ethnicity, student grade level and age relative to grade level, educational resources of the family, and history of mobility. We also included several school demographic characteristics, including the size of the school, the proportion of low-income students, student mobility rate, racial and ethnic composition, and the school's overall achievement level. Previous research has shown that each of these student and school factors is related to student achievement on standardized tests. Some factors have been found to be associated with the social support that students experience.[33] We included these factors in our analysis to distinguish the relationship of academic press and social support to academic achievement from the relationship of other factors to achievement. Because our data provide information about both individual students and the schools they attend, we used hierarchical linear modeling (HLM) to conduct our analyses.[34]

In addition to our analyses of survey and achievement test score data, we looked to the fieldwork strand of the Chicago Annenberg Research Project to identify specific ways in which schools are trying to improve academic achievement by strengthening social support and academic press. This fieldwork involves observations, interviews, and documentary data collection in 23 elementary and high schools participating in the Chicago Annenberg Challenge.[35] In this report, we present the case of one elementary school that illustrates some of the many approaches schools can use to strengthen press for and support of student learning.

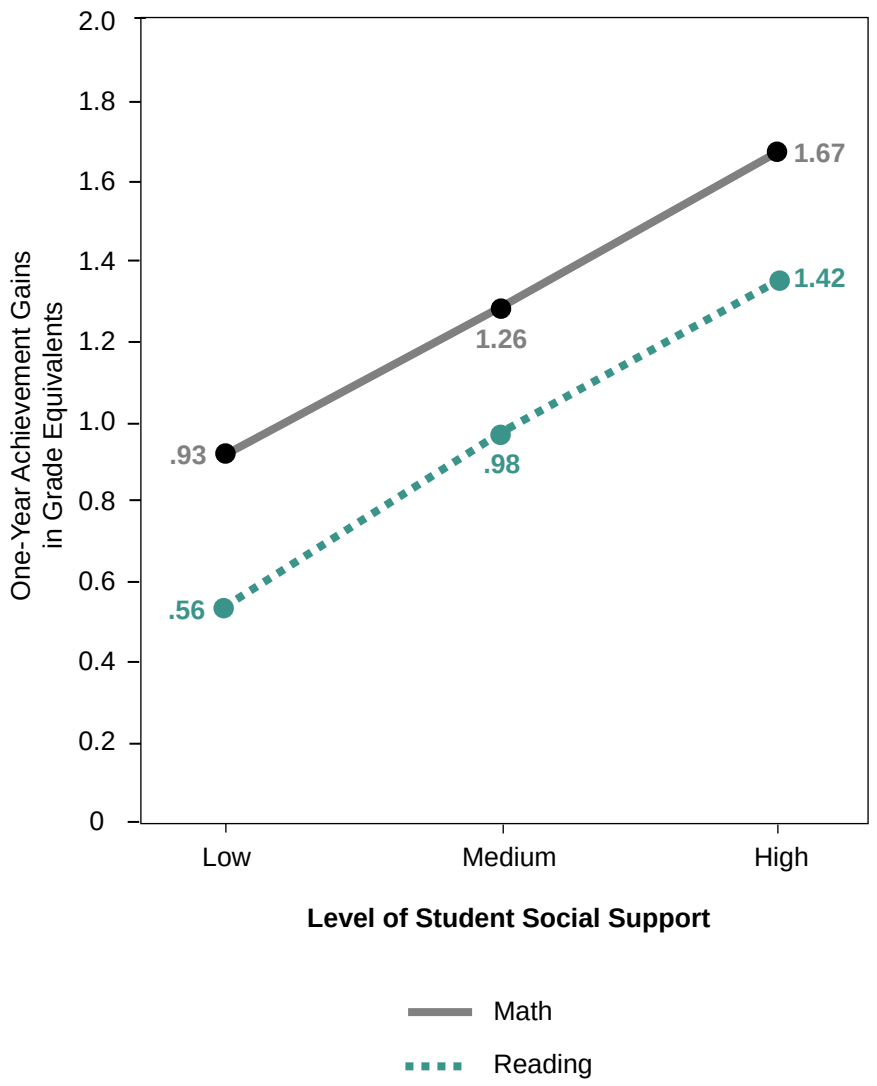
IV. What Is the Relationship of Social Support and Academic Press to Student Academic Achievement?

Even after we took student background characteristics, school demographic characteristics, and prior levels of student achievement into account, we found that the amount of social support that students experienced is strongly related to one-year gains in both reading and math achievement on the ITBS. As shown in Figure 1, among Chicago students who received the lowest levels of social support, reading achievement rose on an average of 0.56 Grade Equivalents (5.6 months). Among these same students, math achievement rose 0.93 GEs (9.3 months). In contrast, among students who experienced high levels of social support, reading achievement increased on an average of 1.42 GEs (1 year, 4.2 months). Among these students, math achievement increased on an average of 1.67 GEs (I year, 6.7 months). Clearly, students who experience strong support from teachers, parents, peers, and members of their communities also learn more, even after taking into account previous levels of achievement and student background and school demographic characteristics.

Similarly, we found a strong relationship between levels of school academic press and school average gains in both reading and math achievement on the ITBS. As shown in Figure 2, in schools where academic press was low, reading achievement rose on an average of 0.57 GEs (5.7 months) and math achievement rose 0.90 GEs (9 months). In schools where academic press was high, reading achievement increased an average of 1.37 GEs (1 year, 3.7 months) and math achievement increased an average of 1.64 GEs (1 year, 6.4 months). Here, too, students who attend schools with higher levels of academic press learn more than students who attend schools with low press, even after taking into account their previous levels of achievement.

Figure 1

Student Social Support: Relationship to Average Gains in Reading and Math Achievement
6th and 8th Graders



After assessing the separate relationships of social support and academic press to academic achievement, we examined the relationships of support and press to academic achievement in tandem. We did this because students experience different combinations of press and support together, and not one in isolation from the other. We grouped schools according to low, medium, and high levels of academic press, and we grouped students according to low, medium, and high levels of social support they reported receiving.[36] Then, we analyzed relationships of different combinations of these groups to one-year gains on the ITBS, controlling for student background and school demographic characteristics. As shown in Figure 3 (page 16), students who attend schools with high levels of academic press and who also report high levels of social support make the greatest gains in reading achievement on the ITBS—1.82 GEs (1 year, 8.2 months). In contrast, students who attend schools with low levels of press and who report low levels of support do relatively poorly. They gained at an average rate of 0.56 GEs (5.6 months). Students who experience high social support but attend low press schools achieve somewhat better (0.94 GEs), as do students in high press schools who experience low support (1.05 GEs). Still, these gains are far less than those of students who experience strong press and strong support together. As shown in Figure 4 (page 17), similar relationships exist for math achievement. With math, these relationships are even more pronounced.

Most important about these findings is that students do best when they experience both strong academic press in their schools and strong social support from people in and out of their schools. Regardless of the background characteristics of students and the demographic characteristics of their schools, when either support or press is strong and the other is weak, students learn less. As illustrated in Figures 3 and 4, students achieve less if they experience high levels of social support but attend schools with low academic press. Likewise, students achieve less if they attend schools with high levels of academic press but receive

little social support for their academic work. These findings strongly suggest that efforts to improve academic achievement by primarily emphasizing social support in or out of school will not be sufficient unless these efforts are accompanied by strong academic press in schools. They also suggest that efforts to improve academic achievement primarily by increasing school academic press will not be as effective unless students also have a strong system of social support to rely on for their academic work.

Which Chicago schools are characterized by strong academic press and strong student support? We grouped kindergarten-through-eighth-grade elementary schools and middle schools in Chicago by their racial and ethnic composition, size, concentration of low-income students, and 1997 achievement levels. As shown in Figure 5 (page 18), the proportion of racially and ethnically integrated schools with both strong press and strong support is three times greater than the proportions of predominantly African-American, predominantly Hispanic, and predominantly minority schools with both characteristics present. The proportions of small and medium-sized schools with strong press and strong support are over three times as great as the proportion of large schools with this combination. The proportion of least economically disadvantaged schools with this combination is four times greater than the proportion of the poorest schools with high press and support. Finally, the proportion of the highest achieving schools with high press and support is two-and-one-half to almost five times greater than the proportions of the lowest and middle achieving schools that have high press and support. These findings indicate that students who attend the most racially isolated, lowest-achieving, economically poorest, and largest schools have been the least likely to experience the combination of press and support that are most conducive to gains in achievement. These are exactly the characteristics that typify schools that most students in Chicago attend.

Figure 2

School Academic Press: Relationship to Average Gains in Reading and Math Achievement
6th and 8th Graders

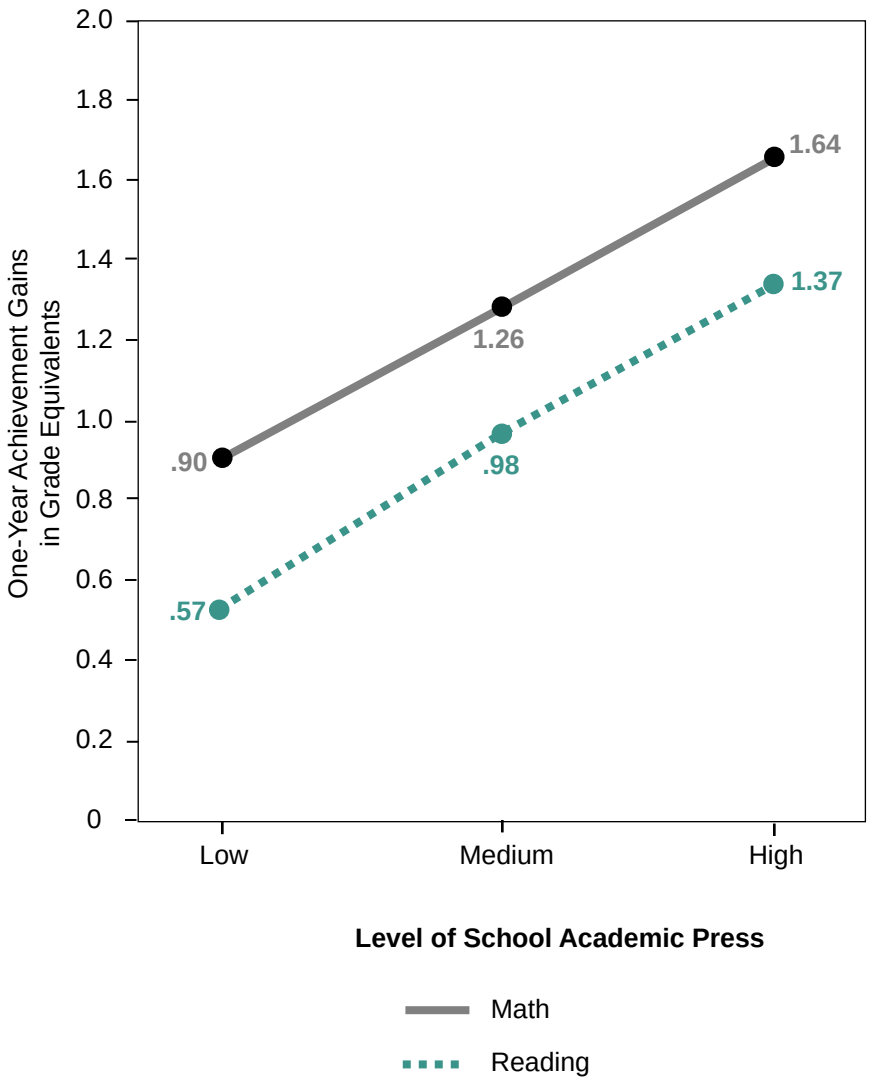
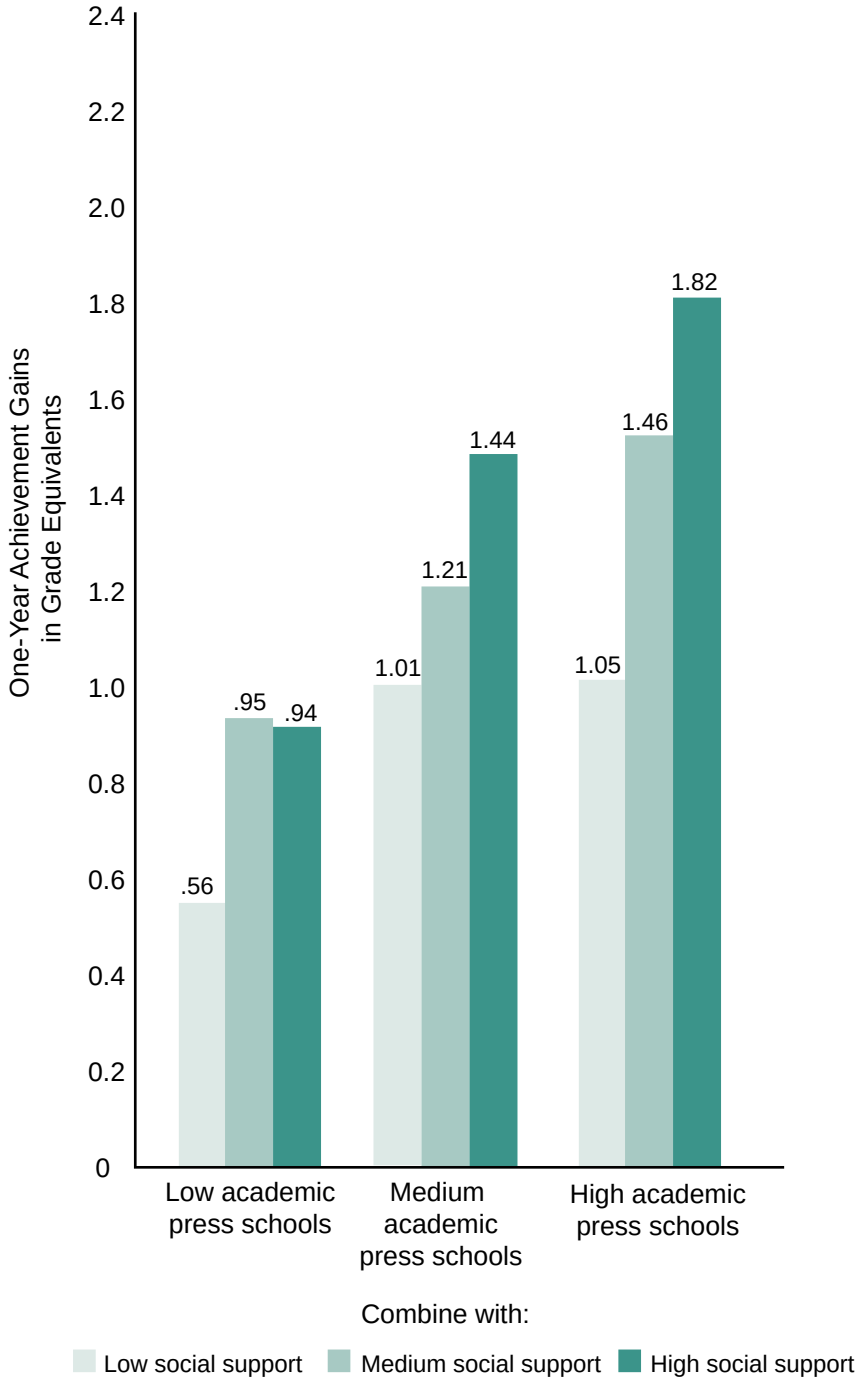


Figure 3

Biggest Reading Gains in Schools that Combine High Levels of Student Social Support and School Academic Press



Related Findings: The Influence of Academic Press and Social Support on Student Academic Engagement

In its July 1996 report, *Charting Reform in Chicago: The Students Speak*, the Consortium on Chicago School Research found significant positive relationships of social support and academic press to student engagement in school.[37] In that report, which was based on analyses of 1994 citywide student survey data, social support was defined more narrowly in terms of personal relations that students felt with their classroom teachers. Called personalism, this aspect of social support was measured by students' perceptions of how much their teachers knew them, had confidence in their ability, helped them catch up after absences, and did not "put them down" in class. Academic press was

measured by students' reports of whether their teachers expected them to do well, expected homework to be completed, provided extra work and help as needed, and praised them when they did well. Student engagement was measured by student reports of how hard they worked to do their best in school, their interest in subject matter, whether they looked forward to class, how bored they were in class, and whether they completed their homework.

The analyses indicated that personalism, by itself, had only a small influence on student engagement, and the same was true of academic press. But the combination of the two elevated academic engagement substantially. That is, the most positive reports from students about academic engagement came from schools that students rate as high on both personalism and press toward academic achievement.

Figure 4

Biggest Math Gains in Schools that Combine High Levels of Student Social Support and School Academic Press

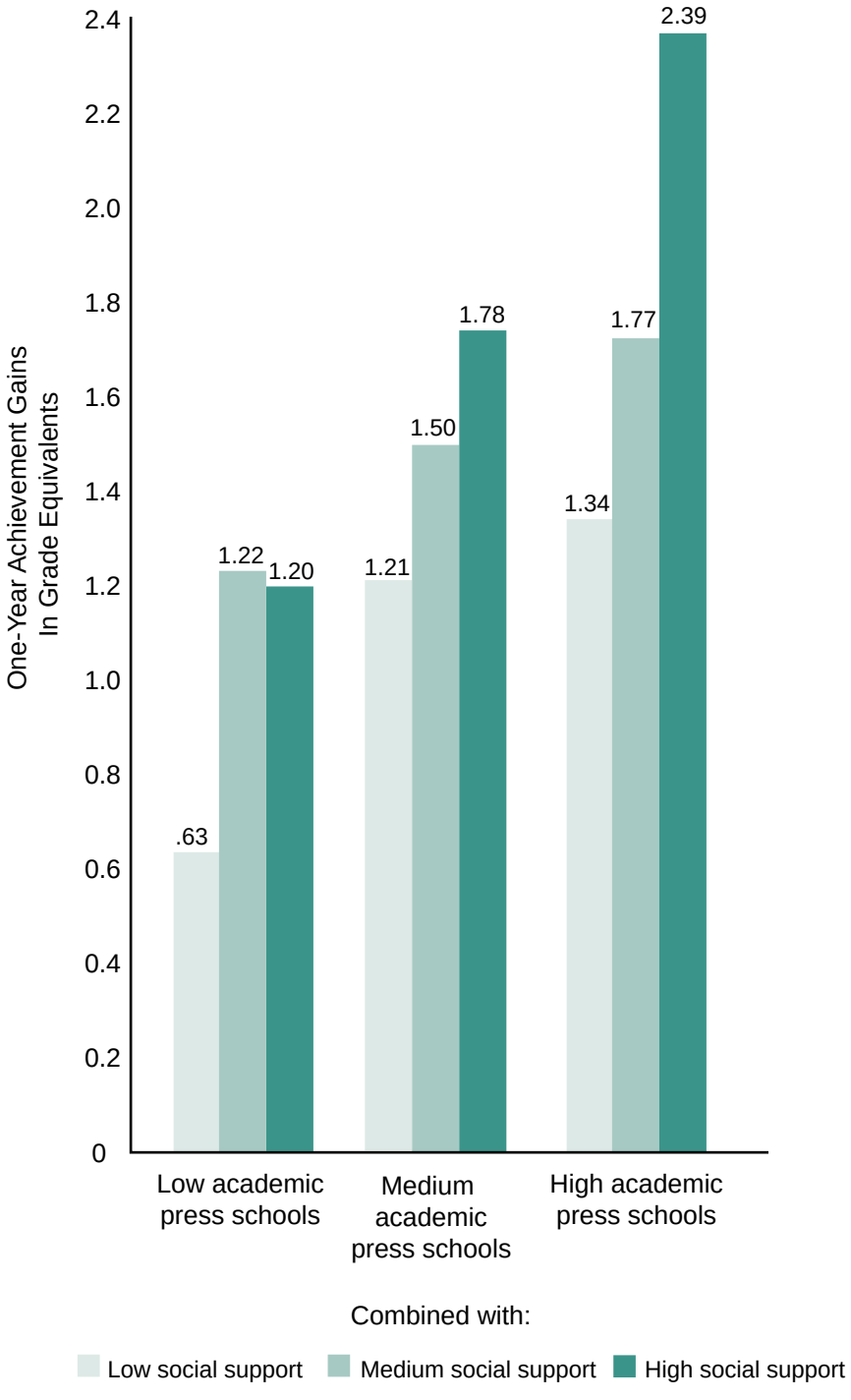
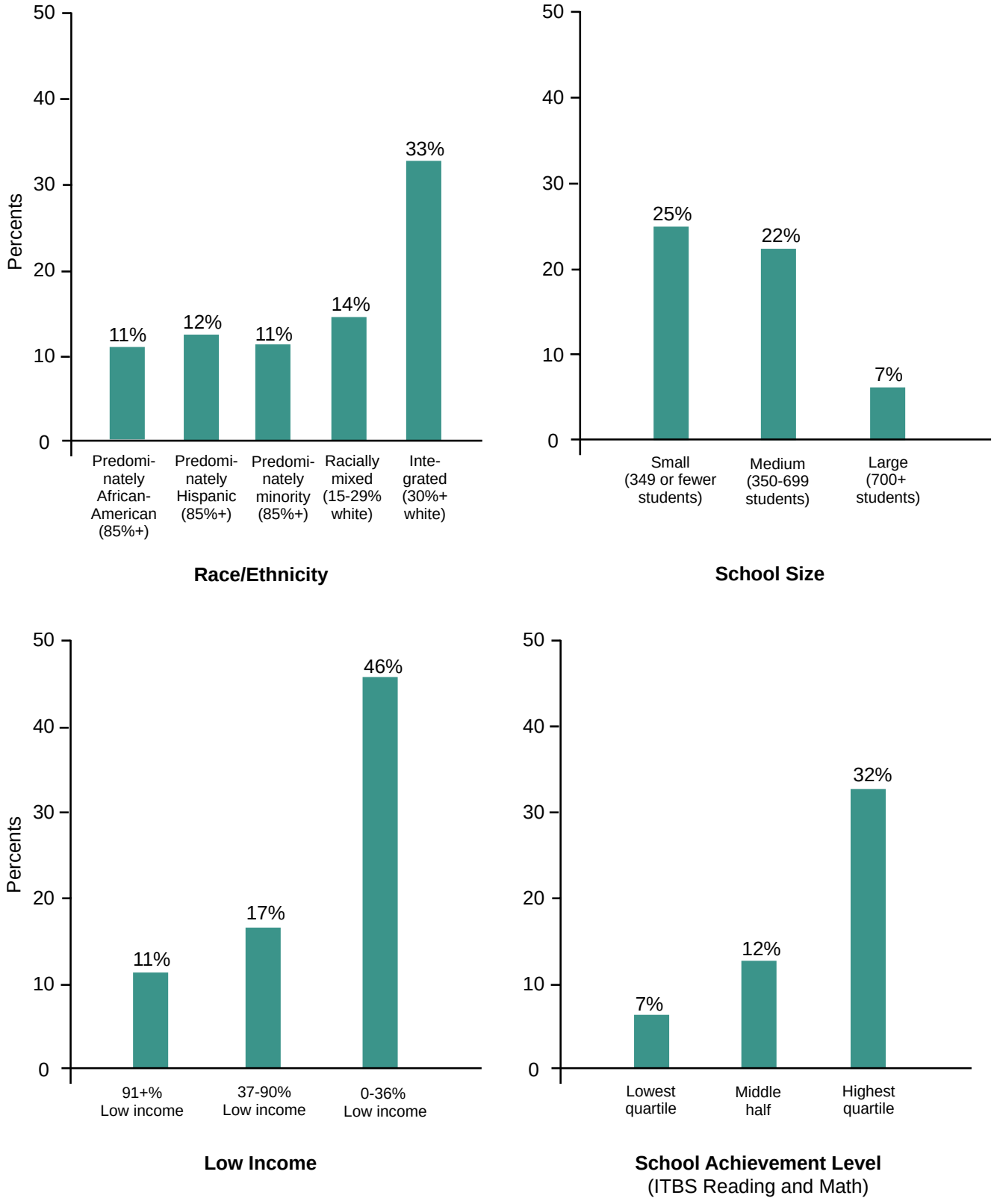


Figure 5

Proportions of Schools with High Levels of Student Social Support and School Academic Press



V. What Can Schools Do to Strengthen Social Support and Academic Press?

An Example from the Field

This report has provided evidence that a combination of social support and academic press is most likely to improve academic achievement. Nevertheless, the question remains: "What steps can schools take to strengthen the two?"

Fieldwork for the Chicago Annenberg Research Project has revealed a number of different strategies schools use to enhance social support and academic press. Some schools we have studied have sought to strengthen social support by creating smaller, more personalized learning environments for students, such as schools-within-schools, classes where teachers teach the same group of students for two grades in a row, or supplemental one-on-one tutoring with teacher assistants. Some schools provide teachers with professional development to promote more supportive interpersonal relationships with students. Other schools have sought to strengthen social support through parent education programs and/or by involving parents in classroom activities and in one-on-one student mentoring programs. Several others have provided students with opportunities to develop relationships with older, resourceful community members who can offer students support and guidance as role models. Still other schools have sought to increase student affiliation through recognition programs and extracurricular activities.

Strategies to increase academic press include setting and communicating high expectations for student learning and delineating clear responsibilities for students in raising their own achievement. Such strategies include teacher professional development aimed at improving the overall quality of instruction and pressing students toward more challenging work and higher order thinking. Some schools we are studying have developed incentive systems to reward students for high academic performance. Other schools have developed student assessment systems that are used not only for student and teacher accountability

but also to help teachers examine their teaching and improve instruction.

These strategies represent some ways that Chicago schools can strengthen social support and academic press for student learning. In this section, we describe one elementary school that has worked to develop both strong academic press and social support for its students. This school, like others we are studying, has struggled with problems faced by many CPS schools: overcrowding, low student performance, and safety concerns. This example illustrates how efforts to strengthen press and support can complement each other.

In our fieldwork, we assure the schools in which we work anonymity. This assurance encourages individuals to speak with candor about their schools, giving us the most accurate view of their schools possible. Thus, we use a pseudonym for the school we discuss below—Flexner Elementary School.[38]

> ***"[Teachers] have to know what it is their kids have to know to go to the next grade. . . .And I think they have to let the kids know that they can do this stuff."***

Flexner Elementary School is located in a predominantly Hispanic neighborhood where many families are recent immigrants to the United States. About half of Flexner's student population is limited-English proficient. During the past few years, several areas of the neighborhood immediately surrounding the school have been redeveloped. Housing prices and rental rates have risen and, as a result, many low-income families have had to move. Still, many areas of the larger community served by the school remain run-down and continue to have their share of crime and gang activity.

When the Chicago Annenberg Research Project first visited Flexner in 1997, we found the school struggling to revive itself and redefine its direction. Historically plagued by high mobility rates, overcrowding, and low standardized test scores, Flexner was one of several CPS schools receiving intense criticism and attention due to its students' performance on the ITBS. A new principal, new teachers, and newly cooperative relations between the school and its Local School Council and community provided a new foundation for improvement. Rather than concentrating on either social support or academic press to boost student achievement, Flexner placed strong emphasis on both. While the curriculum sets high standards for student academic success, many other programs at Flexner focus on providing students with support to enhance their self-esteem and help them achieve academically. Some aspects of school life promote both press and support in unison.

Academic press is evidenced in several ways at Flexner. The new principal has set clear goals for student academic achievement and performance on standardized tests. "All students at grade level" is the administrative "mantra" at Flexner. This is the clear expectation for students and the driving force behind school improvement activity. A number of curricular and instructional reforms are aimed at improving students' test scores. The school has placed more emphasis on reading and writing in kindergarten and the primary grades. It has introduced a writing resource program for students in third through eighth grades, moved toward a literature-based reading program in the upper grades, and joined the Chicago Systemic Initiative to improve math and science achievement. In order to support these initiatives, Flexner has reduced class size in the primary grades, increased opportunities for teacher professional development in core subject matter instruction, and increased the numbers of resource staff in reading, writing, and English as a Second Language. Flexner has also established a reading enrichment computer laboratory, classroom libraries, and a central media center.

The press for academic achievement at Flexner comes not just from new curricular programs and the goal that all students achieve at grade level on stan-

dardized tests. It also comes from the alignment of new curriculum with CPS learning goals and standards and with the ITBS and the Illinois Goal Assessment Program (IGAP) tests.[39] In addition, press comes from the school administration's push to develop uniform curricula for each grade level in the school and greater curricular coherence from grade to grade. These efforts have created a stronger focus on academic achievement and encouraged greater attention to the content and pacing of instruction. Instructional objectives and activities have become more clearly articulated. The school has introduced quarterly student assessments in core subject areas. These assessments help teachers gauge student progress and identify problems. They also provide administrators a means to hold teachers and students accountable for their performance.

Concurrent with these efforts to increase academic press, Flexner also has sought to strengthen the social support available to its students inside and outside the school. The school has tried to create an organized, caring learning environment that provides stability and emotional security for students and buffers them from distractions and dangers in the neighborhood outside the school. A number of its incentive programs are designed to engage students in school and instill a strong sense of self-worth and personal accomplishment. Most of the teachers we observed were working hard to develop strong supportive relations among students in their classrooms. They encouraged students to help and respect each other and actively discouraged teasing, ridicule, and other negative interactions.

As a Chicago Annenberg Challenge school, Flexner has worked with its external partner to develop parent education programs and make the school a more central institution in its community. Such programs are designed to help parents develop better child-raising skills, support their children's learning, and secure community services for their children and families. A large part of the effort to expand Flexner's role in the community involves linking local resources, such as libraries and churches, to the school and linking students and their families to these sources of support.

Many of Flexner's improvement initiatives combine elements of social support and academic press. For example, the school's two tutoring programs provide both press and social support. One program brings adults from the community into the school to tutor students. In the other program, high school students tutor Flexner students in math and reading. These programs provide focused instruction and interpersonal interaction that aim to accomplish the common goal of academic achievement.

Flexner's dual emphasis on social support and academic press is also evident in the incentives it offers students. School assemblies recognize students with perfect attendance and honor roll members. Each month, Flexner honors some students by inviting them to breakfast with the principal. Selection criteria include attendence, citizenship, and academic improvement.

In sum, social support and academic press are both seen as important for promoting student achievement at Flexner. The school recognizes that academic press and social support are interactive and mutually reinforcing. As one teacher with whom we spoke explained, the school should not only press students to learn new knowledge and skills. It should support them, helping them develop the confidence to achieve: "[Teachers] have to know what it is their kids have to know to go to the next grade. . . .And I think they have to let the kids know that they can do this stuff."

VI. Summary and Implications

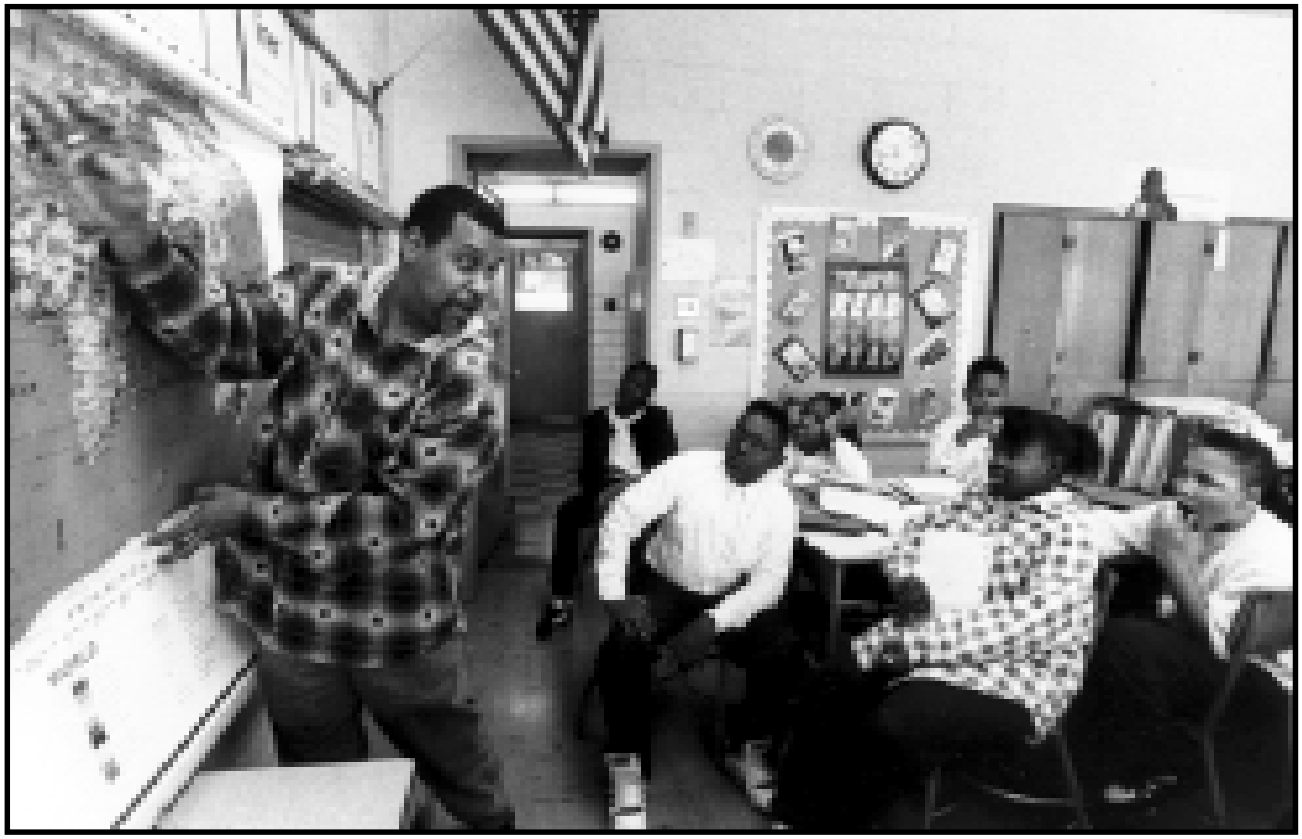
In this report, we examined relationships of academic press and social support to Chicago Public Schools students' academic achievement. We found that students learn substantially more when they experience high levels of academic press and strong social support together, but they learn much less when they experience only one of these conditions. These findings challenge "either-or" proposals for school reform that view academic focus and rigor and social support for students as contradictory strategies.[40] To succeed in schools that press them hard to learn, Chicago students need social support. And, even in the presence of strong social support, Chicago schools need to press students to achieve academically.

Our findings suggest that when school systems seek to improve student achievement by raising standards and expectations for learning and by creating high stakes for academic performance, they should not ignore the social support that may be necessary for students to succeed. For students who may receive little support from home, peers, and community, it becomes even more important that principals and teachers create school and classroom environments that provide personal support for learning. In the absence of such support, raising standards and increasing accountability will surely leave some students behind. When schools focus only on increasing academic press, the consequences for students who have few sources of support can be quite serious. To be clear, we endorse high expectations for all students. We believe that students need to be pressed hard to learn. We stress, however, the importance of providing support for students when press is increased.

Likewise, our findings suggest that efforts to improve students' academic achievement by creating more personal learning environments or strengthening relationships between students and adults are important but insufficient. These efforts may well achieve valuable social and emotional outcomes, but without academic press in schools and

classrooms, supportive environments alone may not lead to meaningful gains in academic achievement. Reforms that focus only on improving personal relationships among students and adults in and out of school miss something important. Even students with a great deal of support do not learn much when they are not pushed hard in school for academic success.

Although our survey analysis defines social support broadly by drawing it from a variety of sources (e.g., teachers, parents, peers, and community), observations in our Annenberg field research schools suggest that there may be two types of social support. One type of social support focuses primarily on the social development and emotional well-being of students, whereas a second type of social support focuses more directly on helping students excel academically. Although this difference needs to be explored more systematically, our findings are consistent with a growing body of research that emphasizes the importance of communicating high expectations for achievement and offering consistent help for students to meet those expectations.[41]



Endnotes

[1]See Cremin (1961), Tozer, Violas, and Senese (1995), and Shouse (1996).

[2]Nasaw (1979).

[3]Cremin (1961), p. 340. These critics included Arthur Bestor, Robert Hutchins, and James Conant. Among their favorite targets were Charles Prosser's "life adjustment curriculum" and the growing emphasis placed on guidance and the emotional development of students by reformers such as Robert Mathewson. See also Graham (1967).

[4]Conant made a distinction between academic and vocational curriculum based on the needs of the labor market, national security, and perceived student talent. His argument for higher standards and rigor was directed primarily toward the academic curriculum.

[5]See for example Kohl (1969), Kozol (1967).

[6]Flexner and Bachman (1919).

[7]Tozer, Violas, and Senese (1995).

[8]Annenberg Institute for School Reform (1994); Chicago School Reform Collaborative (1994).

[9]Chicago Annenberg Challenge (1995).

[10]Chicago Public Schools (1996).

[11]The Consortium provided assistance to the CPS in developing its framework for school improvement: the Five Essential Supports for Student Learning. This framework, which incorporates social support and academic press, is used by the system to guide local school improvement planning.

[12]A more detailed version of this report will soon appear in the American Educational Research Journal as Valerie Lee and Julie Smith, "Social Support and Achievement for Young Adolescents in Chicago: The Role of School Academic Press." That article contains a more in-depth review of related literature and more specific information about how the analyses of survey and student achievement data were performed.

[13]See, for example, Dorsch (1998), Noddings (1988).

[14]Weiner (1985).

[15]See, for example, Bandura (1986).

[16]Bandura (1986), Deci and Ryan (1985).

[17]Coleman (1988), Schein and Bennis (1965).

[18]Coleman (1988).

[19]Coleman (1987), Furstenberg and Hughes (1995), Hagan, MacMillan, and Wheaton (1996), Valenzuela and Dornbush (1994).

[20]McDill, Natriello, and Pallas (1986).

[21]See, for example, Edmonds (1979), Good and Brophy (1986), Purkey and Smith (1983).

[22]Lee, Bryk, and Smith (1993), Phillips (1997).

[23]See, for example, Bandura (1991), Bednar, Wells, and Peterson (1989), Harter (1990). This literature indicates that the relationship of academic success to student self-concept is influenced by the extent to which students attribute academic success to their own efforts.

[24]Shouse, (1996).

[25]McDill, Natriello, and Pallas (1989).

[26]Bryk, Lee, and Holland (1993).

[27]Shouse (1996).

[28]Sebring, Bryk, Roderick, and Camburn (1996).

[29]See Eccles, Wigfield, Reuman, MacIver, and Feldlaufer, (1993), Inhelder and Piaget (1958), Roeser, Midgley, and Urdan (1996), Wigfield, Eccles, and Rodriguez (1998).

[30]More information about the Consortium's 1997 surveys may be obtained through the Consortium on Chicago School Research.

[31]Seven items composed the measure of social support from teachers, twelve items composed the measure of support from parents, ten items composed the measure of support from peers, and seven items composed the measure of support from the community. In the factor analysis of the composites, the factor scores were .39 for support from teachers, .39 for support from parents, .33 for support from peers, and .42 for support from the community. The four composites were weighted by these factors' scores and averaged. This score was then reconverted to a student-level z-score. Each composite was created as a Rasch-equated score.

[32]This measure is the sum of school-level aggregates of four teacher and nine student survey items. Each aggregate was created as a Rasch-equated score. The sum was standardized to a z-score (mean = 0; standard deviation = 1). The reliability of the academic press measure is .73.

[33]For a review of this literature, see Lee and Smith "Social Support and Achievement" (Forthcoming).

[34]Our results are derived from an overall HLM analysis of social support on individual student achievement gains within schools. Projected effects of social support are taken using one standard deviation below the mean as "low social support" and one standard deviation above the mean as "high social support." Because achievement scores were z-scored around each grade-level's average, the overall effects are comparable for sixth and eighth graders and are therefore not shown separately. Our findings as displayed were adjusted for students' 1996 achievement, gender, ethnicity, income level, over-age for grade level, and mobility in the student model. They were adjusted for school size, presence of a middle school program, percent low-income students, school racial composition, and average mobility rate in the school model. More information about the control variables and the statistical procedures used in this analysis may be obtained from the authors.

[35]Information concerning the fieldwork strand of the Chicago Annenberg Research Project may be obtained from Mark Smylie at the Consortium on Chicago School Research.

[36]We divided students into three groups—those whose levels of social support were greater or equal to one standard deviation above and below the mean, and those who fell less than one standard deviation on either side. We also divided the schools into three levels of academic press, based on the same criteria. Of the 14 percent of students in high press schools, 12 percent are students with low levels of social support and 19 percent are students with high levels of support. Conversely, of the 15 percent of student in low-press schools, 13 percent are low-support students and 13 percent are high-support students. Based on these categorizations, about half of the student sample—52 percent—falls into the middle category, that is, students with medium levels of support who attend medium press schools.

[37]Sebring et al. (1996).

[38]This pseudonym was chosen because the improvement efforts of this school reflect the findings contained in Abraham Flexner and Frank Bachman's seminal study of the Gary, Indiana school system . See Flexner and Bachman (1918).

[39]Subsequently, the IGAP has been revised and renamed the Illinois Standards Achievement Test (ISAT) program.

[40]Phillips (1997).

[41] Bryk, Lee, and Holland (1993), Marks, Doane, and Secada (1996), Shouse (1996).

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Notes