



# TURNING CLASSROOMS INTO LABORATORIES

*The University of Chicago's high-stakes  
bid to reinvent urban education*

STORY BY MICHAEL HAEDERLE

PHOTOGRAPHS BY DAN DRY

**The Woodlawn neighborhood on Chicago's South Side** has been beset for decades by a familiar and depressing assortment of urban ills — gangs, arson and depopulation. The commercial buildings that once lined East 63<sup>rd</sup> Street, the main business thoroughfare, have simply vanished, leaving blocks of vacant lots.

Yet, Woodlawn Secondary School, a sixth-through-12<sup>th</sup>-grade charter in the heart of the community, is thriving. Last year, 98 percent of its graduates, most of whom are African American, were admitted to four-year colleges. It's an especially impressive outcome, considering that 85 percent of these kids come from low-income households, and most started out reading below grade level.

Results like that explain why Timothy F.C. Knowles, from time to time, allows himself a satisfied smile. He heads the Urban Education Institute, which operates Woodlawn and the three other South Side campuses in the University of Chicago Charter School with the express aim of sending 1,750 inner-city kids to college.



**DIFFERENT  
APPROACH**

Timothy F.C.  
Knowles is leading  
the University of  
Chicago's multifaceted  
experiment in  
reimagining urban  
education.



“There’s very high demand for our schools, so you’re turning away three or four people for every slot,” he says. “It’s a difficult moment every year. But the level of support we get from parents and community leaders — because we’re providing a legitimate college pathway for children who wouldn’t otherwise have it — has been remarkable.”

The institute does more than run charter schools, though. A century after the philosopher John Dewey put an enduring stamp on American education here, it is the University of Chicago’s multifaceted 21<sup>st</sup>-century experiment in reimagining urban education that is making a new mark. It all rests on a commitment to support innovative classroom practice with empirical evidence, Knowles says.

The keystone is the institute’s Consortium on Chicago School Research, a unique, decades-long partnership with the Chicago Public Schools — the nation’s third-largest district, with more than 400,000 students. The consortium’s data-driven findings have helped the local schools improve their instruction and graduation rates, but as often as not, they apply to urban schools in general. That could explain why this university-public school model is being copied in other cities around the country.

The institute also operates the two-year Urban Teacher Education Program, which uses the charter schools as a training ground while offering its graduates long-term professional backup. Statistics show they remain on the job far longer than their conventionally trained peers. The institute’s Strategic Teaching and Evaluation of Progress reading system is used in the charter schools and has been adopted by elementary schools throughout the country. Meanwhile, its “5 Essentials” tool offers a sophisticated method for evaluating and improving schools, and the “6to16” program prompts kids from disadvantaged backgrounds to start planning for college while still in middle school.

I have come to see all this firsthand. When I was a student here in the 1970s, the University of Chicago was, to put it kindly, self-absorbed — more preoccupied with the “life of the mind” than the gritty realities of adjoining communities such as Woodlawn, Kenwood and Oakwood. Patrolled by the university’s large police force, the Hyde Park neighborhood seemed an island in a sea of troubles, and few students ventured far from its shores.

All that is ancient history. Now, Knowles tells me, the university has committed itself to urban education on a scale that none of its peers — such as the University of Pennsylvania and Columbia — has quite dared to attempt. The Urban Education Institute counts 300 employees and an annual budget of around \$27 million, he says, much of it provided by gifts, private foundations and federal grants.

“It’s a big commitment, and in many ways, there’s no exit strategy,” Knowles says. “The University of Chicago is not going to sit down with a group of third-grade parents and say, ‘We’re sorry, this isn’t working. We’re finished now.’ We have to prevail.”

**The Woodlawn campus shares** a long, tan brick building with a public elementary school. Shouts and laughter echo in the hallways as students wearing dark blue golf shirts and khaki slacks change classes. Shayne Evans, the no-nonsense director of the University of Chicago Charter School, leads me into a conference room, where the kids’ voices drop to a muted roar.

Evans grew up on the South Side with a story not unlike those of many of his students. He left home each day at 6 a.m., taking three buses to get to school, returning after basketball practice at 9:30 or 10 p.m. “Too bad for me,” Evans tells me. “That’s just what it was. I believe that those types of things help develop young people’s ability to do great things despite significant odds.”

We head upstairs to a classroom where Robert Lane, the middle school dean, leads sixth-graders through a 6to16 exercise (the name refers to grade six through the fourth year of college, grade 16). Two girls sit facing each other, one designated as the interviewer and the other the interviewee. The class watches as Lane plays director, calling out, “Aaaand, action!”

The first girl reads from a list of questions scrawled on the whiteboard: “When were you born?” “What college would you like to attend?” “What challenges have you already faced in life?” Afterward, Lane has the class rate their poised performances.

In the hallway, Evans introduces me to Josh McGowan, a shy, serious 17-year-old whose high school experience has included building model rockets and traveling to Michigan with the Blueprints engineering club. He shows me an ingenious device club members built that simulates the forces buildings might face in an earthquake. “I sometimes question myself, like, ‘Why am I in this school? Why didn’t I go to a public school where there were more students, more activities?’” McGowan says. “But I realized this school had everything I needed. I just wasn’t seeing it.”

Graduating seniors such as McGowan write a 15-page thesis during a yearlong independent research class — an important step in preparing them for the demands of college, Evans says. “Urban students, first-time college students of color, typically aren’t prepared for college because they haven’t been doing intensive research, their reading skills are maybe deficient, and their writing skills are definitely below proficiency,” he explains.

David Williams, 2010 class valedictorian and now a student at Minnesota’s Carleton College, feels he acquired solid academic skills at Woodlawn Secondary. “In the first trimester of college, I started to realize I felt comfortable with the work that was expected of me,” he says in a phone call. “I never really had a significant problem that I wasn’t in some way familiar with.”

Williams thinks he and his fellow students, the school’s first graduating class, were, to a certain extent, “guinea



#### **SERVING STUDENTS**

Darion Nicholson attends class at the University of Chicago Charter School Woodland campus, which is a secondary school serving students in grades six through 12.

pigs,” but the trial-and-error process had its upside. “I definitely think it was a worthwhile experience,” he says. “All the teachers I interacted with I could tell cared about what they were doing and my progress as a student. I tried to take advantage of that.”

College, Evans reminds me, is the whole point: “You’re going to graduate from college, and you’re going to become a leader committed to making the world a better place for all. Period.” Yet, he is the first to say that not everyone makes it. More than half of the 100 students in the first class of ninth-graders in 2006 left or were held back before graduating, many of them thwarted by the lack of social promotion or daunted by the program’s demands. “We wish them the best,” he says.

I bring up a frequent criticism leveled against charter schools: that they get better results than regular public schools because in effect they cherry-pick the best students. “That’s absolutely, fundamentally not true,” Evans declares. Illinois law requires that charters admit students on a lottery basis, he points out, and most of Woodlawn Secondary’s students come from low-income families. “When this building opened five years ago, the incoming class, on average, read at a fifth- to sixth-grade reading level,” he says. “We’re not cherry-picking.”

It may not be cherry-picking, exactly, but something distinguishes kids who graduate from Woodlawn — greater parental support, or perhaps simply an innate determination to succeed that not every student shares. Of course, those who exit Woodlawn early end up in public schools that can’t turn them away.

Woodlawn Secondary receives the same funding per student — \$7,200 — that the Chicago public schools get, although a portion is paid back to the district for use of the building. That is offset to some extent by “soft money” from foundations, he says.

“All this is possible,” Evans emphasizes. “We’re not special. We’re not doing anything amazing. We’re asking kids to do work and to commit. We’re telling them that they’re intelligent. Of course they are — and that’s it.”



**Kavita Kapadia Matsko** was teaching in a progressive suburban school and finishing her graduate work at Northwestern University when the problems of inner-city schools got under her skin. “I was thinking, ‘This is happening in our own backyard, and here I am,’” she recalls. “It was just not OK for me anymore.”

She quit her comfortable job to teach in a Chicago public elementary school. Soon, she and a friend were urging their Northwestern classmates to follow suit. “We got a group of eight or nine people to teach in the Chicago public schools,” she says. In 2000, she joined the first University of Chicago Charter School, North Kenwood-Oakland Elementary, and in 2003 became director of the newly launched Urban Teacher Education Program.

Referred to as Chicago UTEP (so as not to antagonize the University of Texas at El Paso), the program offers a two-year master’s degree and elementary education teacher certification. It originally only admitted fourth-year University of Chicago undergraduates, who received both bachelor’s and master of arts in teaching degrees and an elementary education certification, but it is now open to everyone and has added a secondary school math-science specialty, Matsko says.

“For people who are really committed to the idea of social justice or think of education as a lever, UTEP is really appealing, because that’s what we’re about,” she says. “We’re thinking about how we can improve the quality of our schools and really help level the playing field over time.”

Social justice matters for Maureen Murray, who says, as she wraps up her student-teaching at Woodlawn Secondary, “Our students need to realize that their voice is valuable, and what they have to say means something.” Her year-long student-teaching residency (half spent in the charter school), coupled with three years of post-graduate induction — ongoing classroom mentoring, courtesy of her program instructors — will help her to succeed, Murray believes.

The classroom experience and follow-up support help explain why 88 percent of the program’s graduates are still teaching in public schools after five years, compared with around 50 percent nationally, Matsko says. Chicago’s teacher program soon will admit 60 candidates a year — a drop in the bucket compared with the numbers graduating from state university teacher preparation programs. Still, it recently received an \$11.6 million federal grant last year to scale up and conduct research on the outcomes.

Chicago UTEP is not a household name, Matsko acknowledges, but that could change. “We’re in the phase of our work now where we’re documenting the strengths and the struggles of our graduates so we can begin to be a voice in the national conversation about urban education,” she says.

## **The Consortium on Chicago School Research**

is the glue that holds the Urban Education Institute together. Launched some 20 years ago, it supports the other branches of the institute (see Page 55), says its chief, Paul Goren: “If we want to query questions about teacher capacity, because that would relate to our UTEP program, or if we want to ask some tough questions that emerge from our charter schools, we’re able to do that.”

But its primary job is to hold up a mirror to the Chicago Public Schools by conducting independent surveys and mining two decades’ worth of detailed student data, Goren says. In 2004, for example, the consortium and school district won a grant from the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation to gather information on where high school graduates were enrolling in college. That project led to a widely discussed 2006 report that found a dismal 8 percent of public school ninth-graders would likely graduate from a four-year college by the age of 25.

While other school districts collect data, and scholars routinely conduct educational research, the consortium’s access to the vast public school database and its ongoing relationship with the school district are unusual. Others are starting to take notice.

“Our findings are relevant to urban schools nationwide,” Knowles says. With help from the Urban Education Institute, university-public school research partnerships modeled on Chicago’s consortium are springing up in cities such as New York, Newark, N.J., Baltimore and Los Angeles, he says.

Knowles has focused on urban education for most of his career. He taught in Botswana and Boston, helped launch the Teach for America program in New York City and served as a school principal in Brooklyn’s Bedford-Stuyvesant neighborhood before becoming a deputy superintendent in the Boston public schools. Five years later, he came to Chicago to take over what was then called the Center for Urban School Improvement, lured by the university’s commitment to charter schools. “Part of the attraction of the University of Chicago was they put their stake in the ground and said, ‘We’re going to put our name on the door and be accountable for the extent to which children learn.’”

In the 1970s, Chicago’s education department had turned its back on applied research in favor of theory and seemed to lose its way, Knowles says. Eventually, it was shut down, a controversial move that drew considerable national attention. “This had been a very difficult moment for the university,” he says, “but the intellectual and institutional appetite here was still very high to be engaged in K-12 schooling. So I was asked to come and help think about what that would be like, and the Urban Education Institute has since emerged.”

He credits university President Robert Zimmer, who took the post in 2006, with deciding to put the research consortium, the teacher training program and the charter schools under one roof. “Zimmer talks explicitly about teaching,





#### **FOCUS ON LEARNING**

Marjorie Ford, a teacher at Woodlawn Secondary, helps Gerod Gueringer during class. At left, Shayne Evans, director of the University of Chicago Charter School, speaks during a Woodlawn graduation.

research and service,” Knowles says, “but he also talks about impact. He’s really interested in knowledge that has a direct influence on the biggest problems that we face.”

The institute officially opened for business in 2008. It receives deep financial support from private donors and the likes of the MacArthur, Joyce, Spencer, Pritzker and Gates foundations, Knowles says. It also has a close working relationship with the university’s Committee on Education, a group of social science faculty — several of whom chose to come to Chicago because of the chance to do hands-on work with the institute, he says.

The institute has had an impact beyond Chicago, Knowles says. In 2007, when then-senators Barack Obama

and Edward Kennedy were rewriting the federal Higher Education Act, they included a provision for full-year residencies in teacher training based on the results from Chicago’s teacher program, he says.

More recently, the government simplified the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA), the notoriously painful rite of passage for parents of college-bound students, after the institute’s research showed that many children from poor families were so intimidated that they never completed the application, Knowles says. That same study spurred the Chicago Public Schools to help graduating seniors complete it, raising the number of successful financial aid applications from 67 to 84 percent, he says. “This, to me, is both a testament that it’s possible to do this work on the ground in the schoolhouse and also do this work at scale.”

The institute recently created a marketing arm called UChicago Impact to help disseminate these findings. It is headed by Nick Montgomery, a researcher with formidable programming chops who described a tool called a ninth-grade on-track indicator.

“I can tell you with 80 percent certainty whether or not a student will graduate from high school just from looking at their freshman transcript,” he says. “The freshman transcript is more important than anything else you can tell me about a



student — their race, their test scores coming into high school or the neighborhood they grew up in.” Knowing whether ninth-graders are off track gives schools time to intervene and improve their graduation odds, Montgomery says.

The city’s school district has since improved ninth-grade on-track records from around 50 percent to nearly 70 percent, Knowles adds. “That means 10,000 more students in Chicago public schools are going to graduate from high school every year,” he says. “That’s significant. Those kids are going to live longer, earn more in their lifetime, vote more often and go to prison less. They’re going to give blood more, and they’re going to have kids with higher levels of education. This is game changing.”

In 2010, consortium researchers published *Organizing Schools for Improvement: Lessons from Chicago*, which laid out the 5 Essentials school-assessment metric. Based on a study of 200 Chicago schools, this tool weighs factors such as effective leadership, collaborative teachers, family involvement, a supportive environment and ambitious instruction. These categories are “not rocket science,” Montgomery acknowledges. “What’s different about the 5 Essentials is that we can measure them, and we’ve proven that the way that we measure them is linked to the way in which schools are going to improve.”

Institute researchers also developed the Strategic Teaching and Evaluation of Progress reading-assessment program for pre-kindergarten through third grade. It uses graded readers to regularly monitor a student’s progress over four years. Studies show that 86 percent of kids who reach the 12<sup>th</sup> step by the end of third grade will meet or exceed state reading standards. The Baltimore public schools and some Chicago public schools already are using the program, along with many charter schools.

These programs and research findings all share an empirical foundation. The institute charter schools are effectively laboratories, where these tools can be methodically evaluated.

“We carefully test and revise our tools in our schools before they are shared broadly,” Knowles explains. “Some of our tools are designed directly by extraordinary teachers and leaders, then refined by researchers and designers at UEI. Some are designed the other way around, where our researchers identify a problem of practice, and then work with practitioners to build solutions for it.”

**Tanika Island-Smith freely dispenses hugs** as she walks through the halls of the North Kenwood-Oakland Elementary on East 46<sup>th</sup> Street, where she has been the director since 2007. North Kenwood-Oakland first opened its doors in 1998, while the University of Chicago’s education department was winding down.

The pre-K-through-fifth-grade program draws kids from all over the city, but nearly half come from the surrounding



#### FREE HUGS

Tanika Island-Smith, director of North Kenwood-Oakland Elementary, with one of her students.

neighborhood. Fewer than 3 percent transfer out each year, prompting me to suggest that it must be a measure of parental satisfaction. “It also says something about what the neighborhood options are,” she says dryly.

Academic results help explain the school’s popularity: Last year, 84 percent of its students met or exceeded state reading standards, and 88 percent did the same with regard to the math standards. Some 91 percent of its students who graduated from eighth grade in 2006 graduated from high school in 2009; the average graduation rate in Chicago is less than 55 percent.

Island-Smith taught in suburban Evanston before joining the University of Chicago Charter School as a literacy teacher a decade ago. Evanston spends around \$14,000 per student, she tells me, while her school, in a neighborhood with an eroded tax base, receives a little more than \$5,000 in public funding. “This is how we ended up with such inequity,” she says.

Island-Smith expects her faculty to step up, challenging them to examine their beliefs about student achievement. “If you can see them as doctors and lawyers delivering closing arguments, then the instruction that you design will serve that purpose,” she says. “But if you think the capacity is to work at McDonald’s — no offense to McDonald’s — then you’re going to cap them at a certain point. It’s unconscious.”

Island-Smith warns prospective teachers that colleagues and administrators will often be in their classroom watching them work, at times videotaping or critiquing their performance. “Our practice is public,” she explains. “You have to be open to it if you’re interested in becoming an expert at what you do.”

One visitor is likely to be university President Zimmer, who visits each of the charters from time to time. A mathematician educated in New York City’s public schools, Zimmer sees the charter school network as a public service

# By the Numbers: Urban Education Institute, University of Chicago

Year Founded: **2008**  
Employees: **300**  
Annual Budget: **\$26.7 million**  
Number of Charter Schools: **4**  
Number of Students: **1,745**  
Students from Financially Disadvantaged  
Backgrounds: **85 percent**  
College-bound High School Graduates:  
**More than 90 percent**

## BRANCHES

The Consortium on Chicago School Research  
University of Chicago Charter School  
Chicago UTEP (Urban Teacher Education Program)  
UChicago Impact

## TEACHING & ADMINISTRATIVE TOOLS

### Strategic Teaching and Evaluation of Progress

Developed in the mid-1990s to provide pre-K-third-grade teachers with real-time information about their students' literacy skills.

**6to16** Starts students of color start down the path toward higher education while they are still in middle school with a suite of classroom and online exercises to help them craft a life vision, develop their interviewing skills and learn how to navigate the college application and financial aid process. It has been adopted by schools in Houston, New York City, Washington, D.C., and the Bay Area.

**5 Essentials** Uses the School Effectiveness Survey, a reliable, empirically validated tool that measures a school's effectiveness and prospects for improvement. It focuses on five major categories: whether a school has effective leadership, collaborative teachers, involved families, a safe, supportive environment and ambitious instruction.

**Ninth-Grade On-Track Indicator** Uses a student's ninth-grade performance to gauge whether he or she is likely to graduate from high school, allowing educators an opportunity to intervene with at-risk kids.

that complements the university's academic mission.

"It becomes something that's of great value to the city because it's a way we can have direct impact," he says. "On the other hand, it comes back and helps the university because it's actually something that enhances our capacity to do research around a very important societal problem."

The institute "is an enormous undertaking," Zimmer admits. While many other urban universities partner effectively with their neighbors, "I think we are really pretty much the leaders in engagement in a powerful, active way — the charter school and school education area. When I talk to many of my colleagues, they're quite startled by how deeply involved we are."

University and private-funding support are important, Knowles says, but they're hardly lavish. When public and private resources are combined, the charter school campuses each year receive \$8,000 to \$10,000 per student, he says; it varies between elementary and secondary grades. "The additional money we raise is spent largely on extending time — the length of the school day, week and year — for children who need academic acceleration," he says.

Given those numbers, could this model be replicated elsewhere?

"At \$10,000 per student, the answer is yes," Knowles says. "Schools across the nation — charter and otherwise — in New York City, Washington, Newark, Boston, Cleveland — are at or significantly above that number. The fact that we are doing this work in Illinois, which is 49<sup>th</sup> out of 50 in state investment in public education, suggests we can make this work in many other parts of the country."

But it's more than a matter of money. Knowles points out that the institute applies its own methodology, routinely conducting the 5 Essentials evaluation with its own charter schools to see where the strengths and weaknesses may lay. Yet, what sets it most clearly apart is something subtler: a frank willingness to embrace complexity.

Knowles tends to disparage the faddishness of school-reform discourse, where catchphrases such as "standardized testing" are repeated like a mantra. His point is that when would-be reformers repeat simplistic talking points, they mislead the public about what it really takes to provide effective education. The institute's approach, he says, calls for attending to many variables, keeping more than one thing in mind at a time and heeding the data, as opposed to what ideology may dictate. "We don't believe there are silver bullets in this profession," Knowles says. "We are not convinced it helps to vilify organized labor, to exalt charter schools or to look for other singular solutions to fix schools."

In the end, the University of Chicago's tradition of hard-nosed, evidence-driven inquiry will be critical if urban-school reform is to succeed, Knowles says. "You have to be willing to break eggs and gore sacred cows. But you have to know something about the actual core technology of this enterprise." ¶