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IF ELECTED ...

## Obama Looks to Lessons From Chicago in His National Education Plan

By [SAM DILLON](#)

CHICAGO — Senator [Barack Obama](#) learned how hard it can be to solve America's public education problems when he headed a philanthropic drive here a decade ago that spent \$150 million on Chicago's troubled schools and barely made a dent.

Drawing on that experience, Mr. Obama, the Democratic nominee for president, is campaigning on an ambitious plan that promises \$18 billion a year in new federal spending on early childhood classes, teacher recruitment, performance pay and dozens of other initiatives.

In Dayton, Ohio, on Tuesday, Mr. Obama used his education proposals to draw a contrast with Senator [John McCain](#), his Republican opponent, and to insist to voters that he, more than his rival, would change the way Washington works.

Were he to become president, Mr. Obama would retain the emphasis on the high standards and accountability of President Bush's education law, [No Child Left Behind](#). But he would rewrite the federal law to offer more help to high-need schools, especially by training thousands of new teachers to serve in them, his campaign said. He would also expand early childhood education, which he believes gets more bang for the buck than remedial classes for older students.

Mr. Obama added a new flourish to his stump speech, promising for the first time on Tuesday to double federal spending on public charter schools while holding those with poor records accountable.

But more than most campaign blueprints, Mr. Obama's education plan reflects his own work with Chicago's public schools, campaign staff members and people who have worked with him said in interviews. His plan signals that he is looking to apply those lessons nationwide.

"Barack has been very engaged, very inquisitive about the dynamics of how do you improve public schools," said Scott Smith, a former publisher of The Chicago Tribune who has collaborated with Mr. Obama on education projects here for a decade.

One of the biggest lessons Mr. Obama drew from his experiences in Chicago, associates said, is that student achievement is highly dependent on teacher quality.

In the two decades since Mr. Obama arrived in Chicago, its public schools have undergone a sweeping turnaround, from an education wasteland to a district that, while still facing major challenges, is among the most improved in the nation. The city has closed many failing schools and reopened them with new staffs, making it an important laboratory for one of the country's most vexing problems.

The city closed the failing Dodge Elementary School, for example, in 2002 and reopened it as an academy where candidates for advanced degrees in education work in classrooms under master teachers while studying at a local university. Mr. Obama visited the school in 2005, liked what he saw and now proposes to create 200 such teacher residency programs nationwide. The goal, he says, would be to turn out 30,000 teachers a year to work in the toughest schools.

Mr. Obama's views have drawn heavily from a cast of experts who helped mold the Chicago experience. Strategies for overhauling failing schools have come from Arne Duncan, who as chief executive of the Chicago public schools led the turnaround efforts. The senator derived his views on early childhood education in part from the work of a [Nobel Prize](#)-winning economist based in Chicago.

The scope of Mr. Obama's plan has impressed many educators, but not everyone.

Michael J. Petrilli, a former Education Department official under Mr. Bush, said Mr. Obama's plan was more comprehensive than Mr. McCain's.

"That's because Obama is proposing what somebody called a Christmas tree of new programs," Mr. Petrilli said. "McCain is suggesting a couple of new things, but doesn't think Washington should spend more on education than we already are."

Mr. Obama's interest in education extends back to his work as a community organizer here in the mid-1980s. In his memoir, "Dreams From My Father," he describes a school system plagued by textbook shortages and teacher strikes. He carried those experiences with him to [Harvard](#) Law School, where he took courses on school issues taught by Christopher Edley Jr.

"Barack became committed to the notion that progress in school reform can't come through volunteerism and professional aspiration alone," said Mr. Edley, now dean of the law school at the University of California, Berkeley. "It has to be undergirded with a legal and regulatory structure that rewards success and goes after failure."

Mr. Obama immersed himself in education issues after his return to Chicago, where he began lecturing at the [University of Chicago](#) Law School and joined the boards of two education foundations.

Chicago received \$49 million from a \$500 million endowment by [Walter H. Annenberg](#), the billionaire publisher, for school reform efforts nationwide, and the city added \$98 million in matching funds for the Chicago Annenberg Challenge, a philanthropic campaign that financed enrichment projects at a third of the city's 600 schools.

Mr. Obama was nominated to the Challenge board and was elected chairman in 1995, said Ken Rolling, executive director of the group, which operated through 2001. Mr. Obama continued to teach law during his five-year unpaid tenure as board chairman, and he was twice elected to the Illinois Senate.

Several board members, including two university presidents, far outranked Mr. Obama in education experience.

"Let me say the room had no shortage of egos, including my own," said Stanley O. Ikenberry, a board member who at the time was president of the [University of Illinois](#). "It was unusual: here you had a person

trained in the law chairing a board on school reform.” Still, he said, Mr. Obama won his colleagues’ respect.

Supporters of Mr. McCain have been trying to taint Mr. Obama by highlighting his ties to [William Ayers](#), a member of the violent Weather Underground in the 1960s, by pointing out that they worked on the Challenge project together. Mr. Ayers was indicted on conspiracy charges that were later thrown out for prosecutorial misconduct.

Mr. Obama has acknowledged that he is a friend of Mr. Ayers but has sought to minimize their interactions. Records show that Mr. Ayers, now a professor of education at the University of Illinois at Chicago, helped write the Challenge proposal. The records also show that he and Mr. Obama worked on the Challenge project together and that they attended some of the same meetings.

The Challenge’s overall approach — supporting many diverse education projects rather than a coordinated school improvement strategy — had been established before Mr. Obama was named board chairman, and the board came under immediate pressure to approve grant proposals quickly.

“If you throw \$10 on the table in Chicago, people are going to fight over it, and we had \$50 million,” Mr. Rolling recalled.

Proposals poured in and the board eventually financed projects involving 210 schools. Some were imaginative: one, for example, connected schools with museums in the Chicago area so that students learned science from a paleontologist at the local dinosaur exhibit. But many were not.

“The project proposals by and large were awful,” one board member told an evaluation team in 1998.

Relations with school authorities were difficult. Just as the Challenge got under way, the Illinois Legislature gave Mayor [Richard M. Daley](#) control of the school district, and he began an improvement campaign based on high-stakes testing and other measures. Annenberg’s let-a-thousand-flowers-bloom approach often seemed at cross-purposes with that strategy.

Ben LaBolt, a spokesman for the Obama campaign, said the reading and math scores of the lowest-achieving students improved in the years when the Challenge was investing in the Chicago schools.

But a final report on the Challenge concluded that the huge effort had brought little change.

“The Challenge’s ‘bottom line’ was improving student achievement,” the report said. “Among the schools it supported, the Challenge had little impact on student outcomes.”

But the experience gave Mr. Obama an appreciation for the multiple problems facing urban schools, Mr. Rolling said. The city has been a pioneer ever since in exploring ways to recruit, train and support teachers.

This has been especially true since leadership of the city schools passed in 2001 to Mr. Duncan, a friend of and sounding board for Mr. Obama. The two also frequently play basketball.

Mr. Duncan accompanied Mr. Obama on his visit in 2005 to the Dodge school, now the Dodge Renaissance Academy, on the West Side of Chicago. After the school’s makeover, student scores rose significantly, and Mr. Obama wanted to know why.

The two men arrived with no entourage and sat down with the staff in a library. Mr. Obama asked about the best way to train teachers, according to those who participated. What would it take to keep qualified teachers from leaving the profession? Would merit pay help? “He wasn’t checking his Palm Pilot,” recalled Karla Kemp, a teacher.

Mr. Obama has brought a similar intensity to discussions of early childhood education, on which he proposes to spend \$10 billion a year. A Chicago expert who has influenced his thinking on this is the Nobel laureate, James J. Heckman, an economist at the University of Chicago. Mr. Obama’s plan cites Dr. Heckman in connection with research that found that for every dollar spent on prekindergarten education and the care of infants and their families, there is a \$7 to \$10 decrease in spending on special education, remedial education and prisons.

The two men have never met, even though they live so close to each other in the Kenwood neighborhood that they use the same dry cleaner and it occasionally sends Mr. Obama’s suit coats to Dr. Heckman’s home.

Last year, when Mr. Obama started his presidential campaign and began preparing his education plan, an assistant to Mr. Obama contacted Dr. Heckman and asked him to react to an early draft of the early childhood plan.

“I completely redrafted the section,” Dr. Heckman said. “Most striking about the campaign was that they listened to what I said.”

*Jeff Zeleny contributed reporting from Dayton, Ohio.*

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