



Barbara Sizemore Stresses Test Preparation to Help Poor Black Children

By

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Chicago

The answer to Barbara A. Sizemore's prayers is a tall, white Chicagoan with a Midwestern twang and a balding pate. He is Paul Vallas, the brash new chief executive officer of the Chicago public schools.

Before Vallas and his team swept into "City Hall South" last summer, Sizemore operated on the fringes of the system. In a city where school reform has become a cottage industry, her insistence that African-American children be taught to take standardized tests made her an outcast from the established reform community. She had no time for the "reformers" either, accusing them of an infatuation with process over substance.

The adversarial stance was a familiar one for Sizemore, now 69. In 1975, she was fired from her job as superintendent of the District of Columbia schools after a combative tenure during which she accused the "racist white power structure in Congress" of financially starving the schools. She then spent 15 years at the University of Pittsburgh, researching successful schools that served low-income black children and pooh-poohing progressive ideas, especially the calls for alternative assessments.

What African-American children who live in poverty need most, she insists, is a highly structured school with firm discipline that is focused on teaching them to take and pass standardized tests. Sizemore, who is now the dean of DePaul University's school of education, is fond of pointing out that students must score 1040 on their SATs to even be considered for admission to her school. Police officers, firefighters, civil servants--they must all take standardized tests, "the new lynching tool." Her goal, then, is beating the system at its own game.

"Where do you get admitted by portfolio?" Sizemore asks. "Prison. I rest my case."

Chicago reformers, most of them liberals devoted to improving the education of minority children, are horrified at Sizemore's focus on testing. With its aim of sorting and labeling children--and its cramped view of what is worth knowing--standardized testing is widely disparaged.

Yet, Sizemore's views are shared by many African-American educators and parents who fear that abolishing standardized testing would disenfranchise their children just as they are making gains. And more than a few black teachers and principals are, like Sizemore, wary of the progressive pedagogy that accompanies the contemporary reform agenda.

By constantly hammering away at the need for results, Sizemore started to get noticed. In 1994, she launched the School Achievement Structure process. Twelve schools signed on to implement her "10 routines" to "accelerate and elevate" for success. She remained a vocal critic of Chicago-style reform, debating people who were resisting efforts to identify and intervene in failing schools. And she was dismayed to find that many of the most vociferous supporters of local control--and a hands-off attitude toward failing schools--were minorities. Once, a speaker called Sizemore an "Uncle Tom" in a public meeting.

"So, I reached in my case and got out the scores for his school," she recalls. "I said, 'You don't care that 52 percent of your students are in the bottom half of the country? That's what I am trying to do, I'm trying to teach your child how to read.'"

"After that," she says, "people started asking me to discuss my point of view."

To Vallas, Sizemore's arguments simply made sense. He was the former city budget director, appointed by the newly empowered Mayor Richard M. Daley, not an educator. And his charge was to balance the system's budget and raise test scores. Mayor Daley, a Catholic school graduate, had been insisting on the educational "basics" for years. The mayor didn't hide his frustration that Chicago reform never seemed to get beyond questions of governance raised by the 1988 law that put local school councils in control of schools.

Vallas liked what he heard and saw of the School Achievement Structure. In fact, he offered to make Sizemore his chief education officer. She said she was too old for the stress but promised to do what she could to help.

Thus was born an alliance that has given Sizemore the chance to work in 30 schools at a cost of about \$2.5 million--including the first six schools to be placed "on remediation" for severe shortcomings. Sizemore also has become a close adviser to Vallas. In him, she has found the support she needs to try to accelerate and elevate minority student achievement. In her, he has found someone willing to tackle some of the worst schools in the city.

"I didn't have any troops," she says of the years before Vallas' appointment. "This is like the answer to my prayers. I talked to the ministers, but I didn't get a bit of help. Those people don't care any more about these children than anybody else. I said, 'Lord, send me some kind of signal.' "

With his feet up on his desk and a cafeteria tray of dirty lunch dishes before him, Vallas looks like a busy bureaucrat, not a sign from God. As Sizemore enters his office, he rises and circles the desk to envelop her in a bear hug. "Barbara, Barbara, Barbara," he enthuses.

The two have a lot to talk about. The day before, they attended a tense meeting with a local school council at one of the schools on remediation; now, they have a quick strategy session to figure out how to handle the volatile situation.

Sizemore began her teaching career in the city and ran an experimental-schools project in Chicago before heading to the District of Columbia. Her background makes her someone Vallas can trust to give him advice on working with the African-American community on the West Side.

Sizemore insists that the principal must go. If she isn't removed, the dean says, she will stop working at the school. "If you get out, then they win," Vallas argues. "So you have to dig in harder. Just as you've put a lot of eggs in my basket, I've put a lot in yours."

"You would support her for what reason?" she presses. "Why sacrifice these kids on the altar of political expediency?"

Vallas doesn't flinch at the blunt language. Sizemore's no-nonsense demeanor is part of her appeal.

"Barbara takes over schools that no one wants to take and makes them work. Period," he explains. "They have nowhere to go but up. Everybody wants to take the elementary schools, and nobody wants the high schools. She's the only one with the guts."

In embracing Sizemore so enthusiastically--and paying her millions to implement her 10 routines--Vallas alarmed some reformers. Several advocacy groups had gained considerable influence over education policy under his predecessor. To them, it seemed as though Vallas was turning his back on progressive education and endorsing old-fashioned instructional methods that hadn't worked before.

"This team doesn't come to the school system pretending to be education experts, and so they have a very open mind about what will work," observes G. Alfred Hess Jr., the executive director of the Chicago Panel on School Reform. "I think Vallas really stumbled into all of this very naively. He had no idea he was opening up an educational can of

worms. He had no sense that in offering a contract to Barbara Sizemore, he was cutting off most of the well-known reform community."

Signing up Sizemore was only the first step. Last fall, the school-reform board of trustees awarded contracts to two more "basics" vendors: Malcolm X College, which operates a direct-instruction program that uses scripted lessons, and Sylvan Learning Systems, which is training tutors to bring students up to grade level.

Just last month, the new leadership further riled progressives by announcing plans to adopt a systemwide instructional model based on direct instruction. Advocates of local control argued that such a step would violate the state reform law that leaves curriculum decisions to individual schools.

Despite this unmistakable direction, Vallas and the board of trustees--whose president is Gary Chico, the mayor's former chief of staff--have awarded contracts to help underperforming schools to colleges and universities that use progressive reforms. There's plenty of work to go around: A total of 132 of Chicago's 557 schools are on a state watch list because they have failed for three consecutive years to meet Illinois' academic expectations.

The trustees are creating small schools and alternative schools for students who aren't making it in regular schools, both using a request-for-proposals process. And they're in the process of training judges to evaluate exemplary schools that are to be rewarded and used as resources for troubled schools.

"This kind of openness, I've never seen in this system in 15 years," Hess says. "It's a very agnostic approach, one that is not well-favored by the liberals who think they're ideologically correct and anybody opposite them is wrong."

Sizemore insists that practices like cooperative learning and whole-language approaches to reading and writing--which downplay phonics and skills--just don't work with low-income children attending racially isolated schools in impoverished neighborhoods. They may work with middle-class children who come to school already reading, she says, and with students who already possess the social skills to flourish in classrooms that give them plenty of choices.

"Reading is the most impacted by culture because kids are constantly translating all the time. That's never taken into consideration," she says. "You have to use strategies to give the kids what they need to overcome these obstacles. Structure is the thing. My progressive friends are death on me for that. They want kids to discover things for themselves and help each other. But if your mother is working two shifts at the nursing home to feed all of you, who is saying, 'Turn off the lights and go to bed'?"

"There is too much laxness in our schools," she insists. "The fear of the progressive people is that teachers will get caught up in the mechanics. Their own flaw is that they don't teach the kids how to read."

Sizemore, who by her own description was once a talented reading teacher, is nearly obsessed with teaching children to read. It is the gold standard by which she judges reform programs and "best practices" that are touted for fixing schools. In her eyes, the whole progressive agenda gets a failing grade because it hasn't shown any results for low-income black children. Too many people, she says, are "married to a conclusion" about education without any evidence that their method works.

Chicago exasperates her, because so much of the debate about schools has focused on the local school councils. She accuses a local research consortium, which has downplayed test scores, of becoming an advocacy group. She doesn't agree with calls to develop performance assessments--too subjective. And she thinks the powerful foundations that distribute money here disdain programs supported by African-American teachers and principals. She has never sought foundation support for her program.

"I'd been away 20 years," she recalls of her time in Washington and Pittsburgh. "When I returned, I found that everyone was talking about governance, and no one was talking about student achievement. I want these children to learn how to read before they graduate from high school. I don't think that's too much to ask, for God's sake. It's racist to have a kid 180 days a year and he can't read. And if it's a poor white kid, it's classist. I think it's progressive to expect that a poor child can learn and to have high expectations and their outcomes match them."

Donald R. Moore, the executive director of Designs for Change, an influential reform group, says Chicago schools have far from dispensed with traditional teaching methods. Surveys of Chicago teachers, he notes, have shown that most continue to rely heavily on worksheets and textbooks.

"The kids in Chicago have historically been drilled to death, so the notion that we've somehow gotten away from teaching the basics is really erroneous," says Moore, whose organization Sizemore frequently criticizes. "If that had worked, we wouldn't be in an educational crisis in most of our cities."

"Children need more than being trained to take standardized tests," agrees Lynn Cherkasky-Davis, a teacher at Foundations School, a teacher-run school that uses multiage grouping and performance assessments. "It's not only what you know, but what you can do. Take her analogy of policemen. Yes, they do take a test. But they also have to take a performance test, and a secretary takes a performance exam, and a fireman takes a performance exam."

The real proof, Moore and others say, will be in whether the School Achievement Structure can in fact raise scores quickly, as Sizemore promises. Three of her schools have moved on to accelerate and elevate achievement on their own--although turnover of teachers and principals in two threatens their ability to do so, Sizemore laments. Three left SAS to work with other universities. One high school dropped the program because teachers resisted it.

There was a time in her life when Sizemore railed against standardized tests as forcefully as she backs them today. When she was superintendent of the District of Columbia schools, she stopped giving them, arguing that they were biased against minorities. But she kept losing that argument--and she got fired. The school board voted at 4 p.m. on Oct. 9, 1975, she remembers. "I had never had to look for a job. They fired me, and I had two kids in college."

While she had never previously lacked for a job, Sizemore had experienced the discrimination of Jim Crow practices. She was not allowed to live on campus at Northwestern University, where she earned a degree in Latin in 1947 and was one of only a handful of black students. Her teaching opportunities in Chicago were restricted to black schools.

At one school, her principal charged Sizemore with insubordination because she refused to set aside 20 minutes of class time--a waste for students already far behind--for the Pledge of Allegiance and other routines.

Although she started out teaching high school, Sizemore switched to elementary school and discovered a talent for teaching reading. Her own success, in addition to her academic research, is one reason she's so impatient with teachers and principals who can't get the job done today.

In 1962, she took the principals' examination and headed two Chicago schools. Next, she ran an experimental-schools project for the Woodlawn Organization, made famous by the community organizer Saul Alinsky. Because she once shared it, Sizemore understands the enthusiasm here for involving parents and community members in school governance. But she now dismisses it as romantic and fears the school councils are prone to patronage.

Nancy L. Arnez, a retired professor of education at Howard University in Washington, wrote a case study of Sizemore's tenure in the nation's capital called "The Embattled Superintendent." Sizemore, she says, was before her time.

"She's a brilliant person. She tried to do some things in D.C. that people couldn't accept," Arnez says. "The fact that she could stand up to authority is one of the things that frightened people. Her approach to Congress was not one of supplication and of begging. She was just putting forth, in a strong manner, the kinds of things she had in mind to help these nonachieving students achieve."

Sizemore's formula for school improvement mirrors the effective-schools research conducted in the 1970s by the late Ronald Edmonds. Effective-schools findings have been widely embraced, particularly by African-American educators. They are the backbone, for example, of the "blueprint for action" developed by the National Council on Educating Black Children.

The School Achievement Structure is not a program, Sizemore cautions, but a mix of 10 essential routines that schools must conduct to offer a quality education. The routines are assessment, placement, pacing and acceleration, monitoring, measuring, discipline, instruction, evaluation, staff development, and decisionmaking.

She wants schools to make constant use of data to target their teaching and accelerate students' skill development. Youngsters who master a concept--which is checked off on a wall chart--should immediately move on to the next task. They should also be flexibly grouped and regrouped as they move through the curriculum, not placed in rigid tracks.

The SAS coordinators spend four days a week in schools, visiting classrooms and helping principals become instructional leaders. On Fridays, they get together at DePaul to discuss their progress. Twice a year, the coordinators come together at each SAS school for an "impact visit," in which they make the rounds to determine whether it's on the right track. They also provide retreats for teachers and principals, summer workshops, and annual evaluations of student progress.

In Sizemore's schools, standardized tests determine what gets taught. The wall charts break down the skills included on the tests and function as the curriculum guide. Sizemore wants teachers on their feet, moving around classrooms, constantly checking to see if students have understood and mastered concepts.

"You have to address students' needs," she argues. "You have to take your text from asking, 'What does this student need to know?' and teaching as rapidly as possible."

Sizemore's message, and her powerful delivery of it, resonates with some Chicago parents. Michael Klonsky, the director of the Small Schools Workshop at the University of Illinois at Chicago, recalls hearing her make a pitch to the local school council at Austin High School last summer.

Austin was the first Chicago school to be placed on remediation. Initially, its teachers worked with the Small Schools Workshop to devise plans for breaking the school into smaller units. After the new administration came to power, Austin was declared to have "flunked" remediation, and potential partners came to the school to describe their programs.

"Barbara Sizemore gave this powerful, powerful speech to the community," Klonsky recalls. "She talked about her background, how she had been victimized by Jim Crow, the fact that these so-called reformers had come in and had experimented with their kids but hadn't produced any outcomes, that their kids weren't learning how to compete, that any good job or university requires you to pass standardized tests."

"She said, 'If you bring me in here to run this school, I'll pick my own principal, keep the teachers in line, and teach to the tests. First, we'll test them to see what they know and don't know. What they know, we'll throw that aside. And for what they don't know, we'll set up a program to bring them up to grade level.'"

"Then she said, 'If you don't agree, let me know right now and I'll walk right out of here.' The crowd was on its feet, demanding Barbara Sizemore."

On an impact visit to the K-8 Brown Elementary School in January, Sizemore's coordinators are dismayed at what they see. "I would like to take all these kids home with me," says Kymara Chase, the director of SAS, who is Sizemore's daughter and a former Chicago special-education administrator.

The school is a dim and cheerless place, located in a redeveloping West Side neighborhood near the shining new United Center, the home of the Chicago Bulls. Brown has been placed on remediation and assigned to Sizemore. If the principal and teachers don't make progress, the school can be placed "on crisis," which would allow Vallas to remove the principal and some of the teachers.

Barbara Onofrio, the SAS coordinator, is doing her best to help the Brown faculty overcome serious limitations. The school had no workable classroom rules before she arrived last fall, she says. Many of the classrooms are bare collections of desks and textbooks. And the teaching is very uneven. Some teachers plant themselves at the front of the room and read to students out of textbooks, barely looking up. One teacher loses his temper and shouts at an autistic child who has been included in his classroom. A 2nd-grade classroom wastes time with a substitute who has been left a two-month-old lesson plan. The computer lab, full of obsolete equipment, is locked tight. There is no librarian.

Brown Elementary has been involved with the Comer School Development Program for several years. The nationally known program focuses on creating teams to address students' needs, including boosting parent involvement. "What does the Comer project do?" Sizemore demands. "These foundations keep giving all these people money and nobody is teaching the kids to read."

In Chicago, the Comer project is funded through a youth-service agency, so the coordinators who work for the program aren't educators, explains Rodney Brown, the Comer facilitator at Brown. "We've not been able to focus on academics," he admits. "We need what SAS has to give."

At lunch time, Sizemore and her team meet with Principal Shayle Gerstein and his instructional team. They shake their heads over news that a teacher walked out and left his class unsupervised. Then, they ask to hear about the progress the Brown team believes is being made.

"I see SAS as a double-edged sword--it's either a challenge or very stressful," reports Alyane Jones, a special-education teacher. "In general, people in the classroom have operated on whatever basis they felt like. When you came to Brown in the past, it was catch-as-catch-can. The change is accountability. Having to look at an objective analysis of what is going on."

When it's Sizemore's turn to sum up her team's findings, she unloads with both barrels.

"Some of these washrooms stink," she chides. "You can't run a school like this and have kids feel proud of themselves when the washrooms stink like urine. These problems are easily solved, ladies and gentlemen. You just make the people who get paid to do this job do their work."

"The lessons aren't exciting enough. The children need to be inspired--they need to be excited, engaged, and encouraged. In the classes I saw, I saw whole-group instruction used. I didn't see any evidence of grouping and regrouping so that the children feel they are learning something and moving on."

And she reviews their test scores: 73 percent of Brown 3rd graders did not meet the state goals in reading on the Illinois Goals Assessment Program, or IGAP, for 1994-95. Seventy-nine percent of 4th graders did not meet the social-science goals. Eighty-four percent of 8th graders did not meet the state mathematics goals.

"I don't see the follow-through and the work happening," she concludes. "What we give you is like what a dentist does. You have to floss and brush your teeth every day. This is the routine, the habit."

Two weeks later, Paul Vallas removes the Brown principal.

In stark contrast to Brown, Spencer Elementary is a school close to Sizemore's heart. Like the majority of the SAS schools, it's on the state watch list. But it's getting better, thanks to Sizemore's 10 routines, according to teachers and Principal Sandra Givens. It's about ready to be weaned away from DePaul, once teachers come up with a plan for continuing staff development.

Givens, whose background is in counseling, spent her first few years at Spencer establishing discipline and cleaning up the building. There was little professionalism among the faculty, she says. During class time, teachers played cards, ate chicken, and went to the bank. There were factions on the staff; some teachers got supplies, and some didn't. "People were really like abused children. Many of the good teachers had left. It took me almost three years to bring the staff together."

Next, it was time to overhaul instruction. At a conference for a federally funded program for low-achieving schools, Givens heard Sizemore speak. She was electrified. She wanted SAS for Spencer.

"She said that the first people to get to her would have the opportunity," Givens recalls, "so I told my clerk to put everything else down and type this letter. Then, I sent my security guard to DePaul to deliver the letter in person."

Grady Norwood Jr., the president of the Spencer local school council, also was impressed. "I heard her do her speech about test-taking, and instead of the system changing that route, to focus on kids being able to pass the tests. She wanted our children to be critical thinkers. It's really just that simple. She's really concerned about making sure our children get a quality education."

Since Spencer began using the 10 routines three years ago, 3rd-grade reading scores have gone up 20 percent, Givens says. In addition to standardized testing, the school gives its own reading and math assessments every 10 weeks. The results are posted, by classroom, outside the main office.

"I don't care how low they are, I want teachers and students to know where they are," Givens says. "Then, I want to see progress."

The school is so focused on tests that students hold pep rallies to get ready to "Zap the IGAP." Sizemore has sat approvingly through three of them. But Givens says the testing emphasis doesn't mean that students are only being taught isolated skills.

"We're concerned about critical thinking, drawing inferences, comparing and contrasting," she explains.

Every classroom at Spencer posts school and classroom rules. Teachers also prominently display their daily schedules, which all start with a five-minute "bell ringer" exercise for warm up. Here, the skills charts are filled in correctly, showing what children have mastered and what they need to work on.

Teacher Carol Nelson is so enthusiastic about SAS that she's wearing a white T-shirt bearing its name. "You don't teach haphazardly," she says. "You teach what a child needs to know. These skills are so excellent, the way they are laid out. In this program, when a child comes from a non-SAS school, you know exactly what he needs. First, you test, then you teach. They're grouped in class according to their scores on the quarterly tests."

In another classroom, students are arranged for a phonics lesson in neat rows at two chalkboards. When their teacher calls out a word, they repeat it, turn, and write it in neat cursive on the board, marking the sound they're studying. They wear uniforms of light and dark blue.

Sizemore is an ardent believer in phonics, because it teaches children who speak black English how to make the sounds necessary to speak standard English. "Unless we want them to go through life saying, 'Axe me a question,'" she says.

With only 37 days to go before the next round of state testing, Spencer students are practicing test-taking skills with IGAP study guides.

A 6th-grade class is studying the difference between narrative and expository writing. Their teacher moves around the room, questioning the children, as Sizemore watches. "She's up in their faces," Sizemore says. "It's exciting; she's moving. They can feel it."

Even with the strides it has made, Spencer still has trouble attracting good teachers. Good teachers get results, whether they teach phonics or whole language or a mix of both. For schools that have lost their way, the School Achievement Structure provides the foundation that can make success possible.

In SAS schools, Sizemore says, "We use anything that works. I believe that teachers need to have an arsenal of strategies. I encourage my teachers not to label themselves."

But while the ideological debate rages around them, Sizemore's teachers will have to make progress--both to boost test scores and to satisfy the critics who are sure her approach will fail.

Pushing them on will be Sizemore, still combative, still determined to see African-American students achieve.

After all, she says, "I'm 69. I don't have much time left."

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