Failure and blame

By Bromleigh McCleneghan
September 12, 2012

Americans are not very good with failure. We take it personally; we draw lines in the sand and cast blame. And the Chicago Public Schools are, for the most part, failing—failing to provide an environment that fosters teacher excellence, failing to provide a physical environment in which kids can learn, failing to graduate kids with the basic skills to succeed, failing to graduate kids at all.

Three days into the Chicago Teachers Union strike, it's interesting to imagine analogies between CPS and other complex systems. I think of debates in my denomination and others, as we contemplate the number of churches that are apparently failing to produce leaders or disciples or financially viable futures. Author and 826 Valencia founder Dave Eggers wonders what would happen if we blamed soldiers, not higher-ups, when a war effort fails. (For additional thoughtful reporting and commentary see *Chicago Magazine*, *Mother Jones* and *Chicago Tonight*.)

My teacher husband blames Rahm Emanuel for this particular strike: the mayor threw down the gauntlet by reneging on a contract for a pay increase to accompany his insistence on a much longer school day. But Josh knows this strike is about more than compensation. It's about the teachers' refusal to be scapegoated for CPS's failures. Sure, CTU president Karen Lewis has a bombastic personality—as does Emanuel—and this no doubt exacerbates the impasse. But most CPS teachers work in extraordinarily difficult situations because they love to teach and they love kids—just as Josh loves his middle schoolers and feels called to his work.

Chicago is having a rough year—record gun violence, increasing homelessness—but the school system's failure has been long in the making. It's the country's third largest school district, and thousands of its students live in poverty or have extremely unstable home lives. Many grow up more familiar with violence and drugs than with books. Educating Chicago's kids would be an enormous task even if funds were unlimited—and leaders made all the right decisions.

Which, of course, they don’t. Education’s would-be reformers—Emanuel, secretary of education (and former CPS head) Arne Duncan, others without hands-on experience in the field—have long touted the need to “get back to basics,” that is, to measure student learning and teacher skill with standardized tests. This move is at the top of the CTU’s list of objections—because student testing involves far too many variables to lay student scores in the laps of individual teachers.

When Josh taught on the city’s south side, his kids routinely saw huge jumps in test scores. They essentially couldn’t read or add before they got to him, so they had nowhere to go but up. He could teach them to take a test. Now, in his high-achieving suburban district, he rarely sees increases—the kids are already leading the state. But he gets to do infinitely more creative and engaging things with his classes, ways of helping his students truly understand and master the material.

Everyone needs accountability. The CTU isn’t objecting to evaluations; it’s objecting to how those evaluations are measured. Those of us serving in denominations with a growing emphasis on “church metrics” have an easy solidarity with the Chicago teachers. We know that our bureaucracies have gotten out of hand. Teachers cost $40-70K, after 30 years. Pastors too, if they’re lucky. What are principals and technology coordinators making—or denominational higher-ups? And how are we going to evaluate *their* effectiveness?