A steady trickle of well-wishers approach former Chicago schools superintendent Paul Vallas during a quiet morning at Petro’s, the Greek-run downtown coffee shop where Vallas is holding forth. Some congratulate him, some thank him for putting in a good word at a selective parochial school, some ask after his family, and some make sure he’s got enough coffee.

Vallas, a famously tireless worker, has had a busy year. Since tendering his resignation, Vallas has run for—and only narrowly missed becoming—the Democratic nominee for Illinois governor. He has spoken at venues across the country, including talks before the U.S. Congress and the city council of New York City. He has consulted to Britain’s Tony Blair. And at one point he was simultaneously in the running for three high-profile jobs: chancellor of the New York City schools, CEO of the Philadelphia schools, and Illinois state superintendent of education. He has since accepted the job heading the turbulent Philadelphia school system, where tensions between the city and state have been escalating for years and Edison Schools, Inc., has taken responsibility for running 20 schools (see Jay Mathews’s article, “The Philadelphia Experiment” on page 50).

The Vallas Legend

Perhaps the most prominent big-city superintendent in the nation, Vallas is widely credited with having turned around the Chicago school system. Before his arrival in 1995, the Chicago schools had been labeled by William Bennett, the secretary of education in the Reagan administration, as the “worst in the nation.” And the label may have fit. Teacher strikes had become common, the district was on
the brink of ruin financially, academic performance was abysmal, and school facilities were crumbling.

During his tenure, from 1995 to 2001, Vallas racked up a long string of accomplishments that would be the envy of nearly any superintendent. The budget was quickly put in order. Vallas rehabbed old schools and built attractive new ones. Test scores reported to the public rose nearly every year, two union contracts were negotiated without any strikes, and a host of new programs—summer school, afterschool programs, alternative schools, new magnet programs—were all created. Most important, for perhaps the first time in Chicago’s history, low-performing schools were pressured to do better, and students and their parents encountered a system that did not just pass everyone through regardless of what they learned.

Not surprisingly, acclaim poured in for Chicago’s turnaround and Vallas’s leadership. A Clinton administration favorite, Chicago was twice cited in state of the union speeches. Glowing profiles of Vallas appeared in glossy magazines, and he was given numerous business and education awards. Crossing party lines, he was invited to be part of the Bush administration’s transition team. Public opinion polls—paid for by Vallas through the school board—showed support for Vallas that sometimes beat the mayor’s approval ratings.

To most outside observers, the ingredients of the Chicago formula for success seemed clear: mayoral control, a nontraditional superintendent, and a strong emphasis on accountability. But other, less-heralded attributes helped just as much, including provisions in the state’s 1995 legislation that greatly expanded Vallas’s power over teachers and schools; school construction and other appealing initiatives undertaken in part to soften the accountability focus; and characteristics in Vallas that aren’t necessarily the trademark of the latest fashion, the big-city superintendent who rides in from another walk of life.

More than a Mayoral Takeover

Vallas’s tenure was directly preceded—and made possible—by Chicago mayor Richard M. Daley’s 1995 takeover of the city’s school district. Vallas’s accomplishments, in turn, were aided immensely by the political muscle and resources Daley put into school reform.

First Daley moved two of his key aides, Vallas and Gery Chico, from City Hall to the school district, with more than 100 others in tow. Vallas became the school district’s CEO, Chico the president of the school board. In the beginning, Vallas reportedly spent two days a week in the mayor’s offices. Shortly
thereafter, he abandoned the Board of Education complex on distant Pershing Avenue and moved the board headquarters downtown—just a block from City Hall. An extremely tight-knit team nicknamed “The Three Musketeers” by some, the Vallas-Chico-Daley triumvirate heralded rising test scores together and fended off efforts to drive wedges between them. Having these three intelligent and ambitious men working on school improvement was a powerful symbol for change. The team was effective in lobbying downstate for increased funds, and with bond houses as well. Almost overnight, the schools became one of the city’s top priorities.

These changes weren’t really the result of a “mayoral takeover” in the traditional sense. Chicago hasn’t had an independent elected school board in at least 100 years. The 1995 law simply reduced the board’s size, gave Mayor Daley the right to appoint anyone to the board instead of picking from a community-generated list, and granted him the right to pick a schools’ chief. The powerful local school councils, a vestige of Chicago’s 1980s reform approach, “site-based management,” remained in place.

The 1995 legislation also gave the school board sweeping new powers over individual schools and principals, allowing the board to take over local schools that were in crisis. In addition, the law block-granted several state and local funding streams, giving the board much more flexibility to fund its initiatives. And the law curtailed the rights of the teachers union that had long limited what Chicago superintendents could do, regardless of who appointed them. Chicago teachers were prohibited from striking for at least 18 months and banned from bargaining on a number of issues, including charter schools, privatization, and class schedules—provisions they are still seeking to overturn seven years later.

“The legislation cleared enormous brush piles away,” says Linda Lenz, publisher of Catalyst, an independent Chicago education magazine. Billed largely as the Republican-controlled state legislature’s effort to create problems for Daley, the 1995 law did much more than simply give Daley the keys to the building. In fact, Daley insisted on additional controls that would give him some chance of success.

Vallas too was more than just a nontraditional superintendent. For ten years Vallas directed the budget arm of the state legislature in Springfield. For the five years preceding his job as schools’ chief, he was the city’s budget director, administering his own $2.5 million budget and overseeing the city’s $3.5 billion in spending. These skills certainly helped him in many ways. Budgets were a snap for him, large bureaucracies were not intimidating, and he had no previous allegiances within the school system to hold him back from asking hard questions or demanding new solutions.

In short, unlike the corporate or military leaders normally envisioned as candidates to head urban school systems, Vallas was neither an outsider to Chicago nor unfamiliar with schools and large public agencies. Son of Greek immigrants, native Chicagoan, a long-time political staffer with close ties to City Hall, Vallas was a total political insider whose entire professional life had been in politics—the Chicago equivalent of President George W. Bush’s putting staffers like Andrew Card or Karl Rove in charge of the Department of Homeland Security. (Indeed, Vallas’s lack of insider status may be a significant obstacle to his ability to achieve equal success in Philadelphia.)

In addition, there just aren’t many people like Paul Vallas around. Tall and ungainly, Vallas is nonetheless a charming, intellectually imposing man, a charismatic bully. In many situations, he simply steamrolls most of those around him (including the state Democratic party, which he almost upset single-handedly by stealing the gubernatorial primary from Congressman Rod Blagojevich). He does what he wants—sometimes rashly—and bristles at any whiff of opposition. Known to berate underlings, educators, and members of the press alike, Vallas has a leadership style that seems more a product of his Greek roots and intellect than of any management book or bureaucratic experience.

Self-assured and capable of torrential speech, Vallas only rarely admits to doubt or fault. “The job was easier than I thought it was going to be,” Vallas recalls, walking briskly on a sunny weekday shortly before his appointment as Philadelphia schools CEO was announced. “The honeymoon never ended.”

How could you replicate that, even if you wanted to? As CEO of the Chicago schools, Vallas combined Rudy Giuliani’s gruff exterior and stunning self-confidence with a Bill Clinton–like mastery of policy minutiae and John McCain’s open door to a fawning, half-intimidated press. He held regular press conferences, called back reporters at all hours of the night, and spoke in commanding detail about specific schools and neighborhoods. In fear as much as in admiration, educators worked day and night to please him, to find ways to get done the things that he wanted. The result was a stream of positive press coverage, growing public confidence in the schools, and renewed energy within the school system. Under Vallas,
Though the city school system was officially limited to just 15 charters, **VALLAS found creative ways to cluster different campuses together under a single charter**.

“People started feeling better about signs of progress,” reports Victoria Chou, dean of the school of education at the University of Illinois at Chicago. “A lot more people began trying very hard to sustain this difficult work.”

**More than Accountability**

On a policy level, Vallas’s efforts to bring strong accountability to Chicago schools were his signature approach. In short order, he declared that students whose scores did not reach a certain level on standardized tests would be required to go to summer school and could be held back a year. Schools that did not bring their average reading and math scores above a certain level were put on probation and threatened with a series of interventions. Under this program, tens of thousands of students were required to attend summer school, thousands who did not master basic skills were held back rather than being promoted as was traditional in most school systems, and more than 100 schools were put on probation for low test scores.

Here again, however, the conventional wisdom fails to explain the whole story. First of all, accountability was not the only thing going on during the Vallas years. Other initiatives, while less prominent at the national level, made significant contributions to improvements and balanced the harshness of the Vallas accountability regime. Less noted outside of Chicago, but just as important, was a massive capital improvement campaign that accompanied the push for academic accountability. Facing a dilapidated set of facilities that discouraged academic improvement and scared off middle-class parents, Vallas and the equally ambitious Chico, who recently announced his intention to run for the U.S. Senate, embarked on a $2.5 billion school construction and renovation program that was at one point the largest building project in the nation, according to Vallas. Building new schools and renovating old ones was an important, concrete representation of the hard work going on inside the schools. Though the city school system was officially limited to just 15 charters, Vallas also found creative ways to cluster different campuses together under a single charter, eventually funding more than 40 different schools throughout the city.

**Premature Departure**

Vallas lasted six years—a veteran among big-city superintendents, but still shorter than one might have expected for a CEO who had been the subject of so much praise. The explanation for his departure is part politics, part ego, and part Vallas.

In his last year, the signs were increasingly clear that Vallas’s tenure was in trouble. The mayor became much more openly critical of the schools for failing to make ongoing progress and started announcing his own initiatives and events, including a citywide reading summit to which Vallas was barely invited. A much-heralded mayoral effort to increase first-day attendance and encourage parents to bring their children to school turned into a fiasco. Meanwhile, rumors about Vallas’s possibly running for governor kept circulating, and his name mysteriously appeared on a list of possible education secretaries in the new Bush administration. Vallas antagonist Debbie Lynch defeated Vallas’s long-standing ally Tom Reese for the teacher union presidency, running on an anti-Vallas platform. With Chico departing, test scores flatlining, and having lost favor with the mayor, there was no real way for Vallas to stay. While Vallas continues to claim that he left Chicago voluntarily, most everyone else knows better.

The most obvious political explanation for his departure was that, from the mayor’s perspective, Vallas grew too big for his britches. Like many other deputies before him—remember Rudy Giuliani’s famed police commissioner, William Bratton—too much adulation can become a problem. Daley is famous in Chicago for firing staffers who steal his headlines, and he replaced Vallas with 36-year-old Arne Duncan, an unknown.

“Vallas fatigue” may also have played a role in constraining Vallas, who was nearly always battling someone or something. During his time as schools chief, he took on the reform groups, the local school councils, the education schools, the state board of education, and the education research community. His verbal attacks on teachers and the teacher union were not matched by any significant attempts to address problems with teacher quality. At one point he threatened to cancel all field trips. At another he threatened not to participate in the state’s testing program. The public ate it up, but that kind of endless battle could last only so long.

Substantively, many cite policy churn—the surfeit of programs and the lack of quality implementation—as a major problem. Vallas tried to do everything, from social services to extended-day programs. “He would dump a little bit of money in them, he would get a lot of press, and then they were left alone,” says Chou. “It would have been better to have had three
or four initiatives, take some time, and stay with them. His way drained resources and energy.”

Vallas says that there were simply “lots of things to do,” like providing eyeglasses for the 27,000 students who were shown to need them by a Vallas-inspired vision screening program. Typically, Vallas turns the criticism back on his critics. “Others may not be able to chew gum and walk at the same time,” says Vallas, “but I can.” To many educators, however, the effect was like a Christmas-tree school system, with too many policy ornaments and not enough follow-through.

The Vision Thing

Underlying these mundane and bureaucratic reasons may be the fact that, beyond imposing accountability, Vallas lacked a sophisticated or flexible education vision, or ready access to one. Over and again during his last year, the mayor called on Vallas for new ideas, to “think outside the box.”

After cleaning things up and implementing his accountability plan, many think that Vallas didn’t have more to give. “While Vallas may have been the right choice to clean up the administrative act immediately, he really doesn’t have the skills to do academic improvement,” says Dorothy Shipps, a Columbia University education professor who served for three years as one of the directors of the University of Chicago–based Consortium for Chicago School Research. She echoes a sentiment expressed by many. Academic improvement is “just not a matter of yelling louder or applying the sanctions harder,” Shipps says.

However, others think that Vallas’s aggressive focus on accountability was necessary and appropriate. “I think he moved the system forward in a couple of ways,” says John Ayers, executive director of the business-affiliated Leadership for Quality Education in Chicago. “He was constantly trying to get to yes, which is the opposite of the typical school administrator.” According to Ayers, accountability measures implemented in the mid-1990s should not be judged by today’s standards. “All the accountability efforts look more flawed now than they did then,” he says. “Remember, this was the first attempt of a major system to create accountability.”

For all his success, Vallas is at heart a top-down manager who rarely sought the big-picture educational wisdom that he needed once the budget was balanced. Unlike cities like Boston, where Mayor Thomas Menino installed Thomas Payzant, a nationally known education leader, or San Diego, where former federal prosecutor turned schools chief Alan Bersin brought in the big education guns in the form of New York City’s Tony Alvarado (who some say would have joined Vallas if he had asked), Vallas rarely availed himself of that kind of advice. Deeply suspicious of the reform groups whom he says “exploited” failing schools, critical of ed-school policy experts, and antagonistic toward the independent research shop set up at the University of Chicago, Vallas seems to have been focused on political and managerial rather than educational priorities. Even after six years running the Chicago schools, Vallas still talks about time on task rather than methods or quality: more kindergarten, double periods of reading for struggling students, summer school, mandatory extended day.

It is also worth noting that serious flaws in the Vallas accountability system were apparent almost at once, and they were only slowly addressed. Vallas had based his accountability system almost entirely on what percentage of all students scored at or above national averages on the norm-referenced Iowa Test of Basic Skills. Vallas claims that broader measures and progress indicators were always a part of his system, but few others recall such a balanced approach. For better or worse, the Iowa test scores became “the one thing that everyone looked at,” according to DePaul University education professor Barbara Radner, director of DePaul’s Center for Urban Education, even as the state haltingly developed its own standards and testing system. The use of district-determined cut scores as the sole determinant of whether most students were promoted to the next grade struck many as narrow and arbitrary. And Vallas’s decision to put more than 100 schools on probation one year and to intervene at seven particularly troubled high schools shortly thereafter overwhelmed the district’s ability to give these schools any meaningful help.

Moreover, the Vallas focus on accountability meant that several other needs went largely unaddressed. Vallas was famous for creating new programs, but not as well known for quality implementation or for addressing the most difficult classroom learning problems. Professional development is one example where only now, two years into the Duncan regime, the district is focusing significant attention.

“I don’t know if the mayor was as impatient with the reading scores as he was with the sterility of our schools,” says DePaul’s Radner. “I think the mayor understands that the schools are supposed to be places where kids want to learn.”

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