

# "Two Steps Back"

## The Rise and Fall of Irving Elementary School

Originally broadcast nationally on October 15, 2004 on the public radio program *This American Life*.

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*Note: Italicized script sections denote excerpts from Ira Glass's original stories for NPR's All Things Considered.*

## PROLOGUE

HOST, IRA GLASS: At the end of last school year, I got some surprising news – that a public school teacher I knew named Cathy La Luz was thinking of quitting teaching. It's *This American Life*, I'm Ira Glass, by the way.

I knew Cathy because before *This American Life* started, I was a reporter for NPR's news programs *Morning Edition* and the thing that I reported on more than anything was education. Back in the 1990's, Chicago was going through the most ambitious school reform in the country and as a reporter based out of Chicago, I spent lots of years in lots of classrooms all around the city. And I can say hands down, that Cathy la Luz was the single best classroom teacher I ever witnessed. And she taught at a great school.

So last spring, when I heard she might quit, and that she might quit out of *frustration* – frustration with changes at her school, I visited her classroom. It was the day after school ended, she was packing up.

TAPE, IRA GLASS: Seven, eight. There you go.

GLASS: And I'd barely walked in her room and turned on the tape recorder when this happened.

CATHY LA LUZ: I was saying that I told all my students that I *might* not be here next year, so if they wanted a letter of recommendation they had to give me a letter now. So few of them took advantage of this... but what was funny was the domino effect is they did it for every teacher, just in case. They went to my partner, they went to the writing teacher, it was cute, it was cute. *[crying]* excuse me.... I'm sorry, I'm sorry... excuse me for a minute.

GLASS: I mean Cathy we haven't even started to talk—

LA LUZ: I know, I know, I know.

GLASS: Is it just the thought of just not being back at all?

LA LUZ: It is the thought of not being back because I really love teaching. *[crying]* And then the other thing is um... I'm just sad because I don't understand really how this could happen in a year, nine months... don't see how this could happen so fast.

*[music]*

GLASS: Before the changes this past year, Cathy's school, Washington Irving Elementary, was special in a couple of ways. They weren't a magnet school or a charter school or anything fancy like that. The staff at Irving wanted to prove you could make school reform work at just a regular neighborhood school. At the start of reform, in fact, Irving was one of the worst schools in the system ... but they moved into a brand new building, got an energetic new principal, and – it doesn't get more symbolic than this – in 1988, the governor of Illinois signed school reform into law in the Irving Gymnasium.

*[Newscast plays underneath...]*

TV coverage that night showed him under the unflattering fluorescent lights in the gym, with a stack of pens, and the thick legal document that was the school reform law.

NEWSCAST: Governor Thompson signed the measure into law in a special ceremony at the new Washington Irving elementary school on South Oakley. When the reforms go into effect next July, one school administration will be decentralized. Some of the power goes to parents and local school boards, principals will be gaining more control over their own schools.

OK, Fast forward six years - at the height of school reform in Chicago- I spent a full year at Irving Elementary filing a story every few weeks for *All Things Considered* about how things were going there. In lots of ways, Irving became a real symbol of what could be done under reform. Test scores were moving up, everything was getting better. They started with only a tiny fraction of their students - 15 percent - doing reading and math at national standards. And they got to the point where two thirds of their students were regularly at or above national standards. This is considerably better than most Chicago schools.

But things soured at Irving in the last year or so. The program the Irving teachers created, the one that was so much more successful than the rest of the school system, was getting dismantled, piece by piece. Cathy starting talking about quitting. Here's the reaction she got from a former principal at Irving, Pat Mizerka.

PAT MIZERKA: I cried. I was so sad, I mean Cathy is probably the best teacher that I have ever seen and if she leaves, I mean, you know what hope is there than for others?

*[music]*

GLASS: Cathy's classroom window looks directly out onto a commemorative plaque that says that this was the place where the nation's biggest school reform bill was signed. Now that monument seems more like a tombstone, she says.

LA LUZ: School reform is dead. I mean everybody in the building, that's just what we say now. You know it's like if somebody has a complaint about the way it is, someone will say, "school reform's gone, relax, it's over."

*[music]*

GLASS: Today on our radio program, I'm going to take you back in time ten years and explain how Irving Elementary accomplished this thing that is so rarely accomplished in our country: they took a lousy inner city school and they turned it into a great school. With no special money, no special anything - they just did things smarter. And I'll explain what happened in just a year to set it back. How things got to the point where an exceptional teacher is thinking of quitting.

From Chicago Public Radio, you're listening to This American Life of course, distributed by Public Radio International.

Our show in two acts. Act one. 1994. Act two. 2004. Act one kind of gives you faith and hope in everything good. Act two sorta, kinda does the opposite. Stay with us.

*[Music]*

ACT ONE  
1994

GLASS: Act One. 1994. Okay, let's roll some of the old tape from back in the days when I was a little sir.

*ROBERT SIEGEL: [Theme music] This is All Things Considered. I'm Robert Siegel. This year, we're following the study of one school, Washington Irving Elementary on Chicago's west side. Over the past few years, the school has boosted reading scores with an innovative program. NPR's Ira Glass has our report.*

*IRA GLASS, Reporter: The most striking thing about Washington Irving is that it's an unusually happy school. There's no other way to say it. Happy. When I asked eight-grader Bianca Cannon to give me a little tour of the building—*

OK... I'm just gonna stop that right there - this is me in the present. I'm just gonna play you some old clips from some old stories right now. A little background first, might be helpful.

The idea behind Chicago's school reform was to let each school set education policy for itself instead of some bureaucrats at the central office dictating everything the way they had in the past.

And at Irving they used that freedom to put in place a great reading program and a great writing program. Both of them were based on the commonsense idea that they should have kids read lots more than they were and write lots more than they were. More about that in a minute.

But the other thing they did was institute this kind of teaching that goes under different names - student-centered curriculum, hands-on learning, holistic learning. The idea is instead of a teacher standing at the chalkboard lecturing and assigning chapters and questions from a textbook and handing out dittos students are more actively doing stuff. They're working in groups, they're doing projects.

It's the kind of thing good teachers do anyway, when they can, but at Irving, they went further with this idea than at any school in Chicago. Teachers worked in teams. They had an hour of planning time each day to scheme out inventive lessons. And it worked. Kids liked it.

Here are some eighth graders in Mr. Perlstein's class, back then.

*GLASS: In the back of the room, the two Veronicas sit next to each other. The Veronicas remember what it was like years ago at Irving, before they changed the curriculum. You read from a textbook. You answered questions in the back.*

*1st VERONICA: Read the books, do the work in the books. It was mostly that. They gave you handouts and everything, but I didn't really like it.*

*2nd VERONICA: Me either, because it was so-it gets boring. It was boring every day, you know. It's, like, the whole thing like you did the day before. It was over and over and over every day.*

*1st VERONICA: I hated it, but now every morning I really want to come to school. I want to come to school. You know, I can't miss school,*

*GLASS: It wasn't always this way at Irving. Just a few years ago it ranked in the bottom hundred schools in the city. Eighth graders who did their homework and participated in class were*

*ridiculed by the other kids, and, as in most Chicago schools, the longer a child stayed in school, the worse he was likely to do.*

*MADELEINE MARALDI, Principal, Washington Irving Elementary: Everyone always used to say, 'Oh, God, by third grade, man, that glaze has come over the eyes.'*

*GLASS: Irving Principal Madeleine Maraldi—*

*Ms. MARALDI: You know, they've shut down on hearing and speaking and listening, and they don't care anymore.*

*GLASS: Madeleine Maraldi began with the Chicago schools 33 years ago. She's the kind of principal that nearly everyone, even the school secretaries, calls by first name. Her management style tends toward group discussion and consensus building. In her six years at Irving, she and the faculty have rebuilt the curriculum around two main pillars. Students here read a tremendous amount each day in class,. And students here write a tremendous amount each day in class. Writing, in fact, was the first thing the staff decided to tackle.*

*Ms. MARALDI: I asked the teachers to come to consensus, to meet and come to consensus on what was the worst subject for the children, and they came up with writing because they said, you know, "Oh, they don't want to write, and when they write it's terrible, and they, you know, they hate it, and it's too much work, and, you know, you don't get anywhere with it."*

*GLASS: The principal and teachers got retrained in a different style of teaching writing. Instead of emphasizing the mechanics of writing like they used to -punctuation and paragraphing and so on -the new method had kids first do lots of writing, learn to enjoy and invest in the writing before they worry about mechanics.*

*Ms. MARALDI: You can't be a writer unless you write. So when I say to them, 'Let them write. They have to write every day. Let them write for journals. Let them write about their reaction to a math lesson. Write all kinds of things. Do writing all the time.' And people would say, 'But I can't grade all of it.' And I say, 'Well, don't grade it. OK? Don't grade it.'*

*GLASS: In fact, teachers were told emphatically, 'Do not redline every error in grammar and spelling. Do not discourage the kids.' The results of the new program were immediate and dramatic -an outpouring of writing from Irving students.*

GLASS: OK, it's me again, in the present. Once the students got to sixth grade that's when the teachers starting grading them and teaching them the traditional mechanics of grammar and spelling and all that, in a very aggressive way.

Then there was the reading program. There are studies showing that kids do better in school if they come from homes where people read to them. Homes where they're encouraged to read themselves. Since most kids at Irving didn't come from homes like that, the staff decided to give them that experience during school time.

*IRA GLASS, Reporter: One afternoon, I happened to be sitting in Mr. Perlstein's classroom when his 8th graders came back from lunch. 'Watch this,' he said, and I saw something that would be unimaginable in many city or suburban schools. Without any instructions from their teacher, the students filed into the room, quietly took out books and read.*

*JOE PERLSTEIN: They're on automatic pilot and they just simply read because they enjoy reading. You'll notice that around the perimeter of the room we have hundreds of pocket books. You can see the bookshelves on the right hand. Whenever they feel the compulsion, they can simply get up and go and look for a book.*

*IRA GLASS: Every day, every class in this school does between 30 and 50 minutes of silent reading. Each of these 8th graders is required to read 2,800 pages per semester minimum. An 'A' requires twice as many pages.*

*It's a dramatic change from the old days. Principal Madeleine Maraldi says that when they first tried this approach five years ago, they learned just how little students had been reading when one teacher received this complaint.*

*MADELEINE MARALDI, School Principal: 'This is painful. I can't take this.' She said, 'What's the matter? Are you sick?' He goes, 'No, you're making me read for 50 minutes a day all by myself. I can't do this.' She says, 'You're in 8th grade. Get real. You can't read for 50 minutes a day?' The kid says, 'No. I've been at Irving for eight years. Reading is you sit in your reading circle, you read a sentence or a paragraph when the teacher calls on you and you are finished with reading for the day.'*

*IRA GLASS: The only way to become comfortable reading is to practice and this is why so many schools put so much effort into trying to change student's attitudes about books and reading. At Irving, this achieves the scale of a cultural war. Pro-reading propaganda posters and bookworm club certificates line the hallways. The phrase, 'Read, Read, Read to Succeed' is the school's mantra and its war cry, repeated so often that even the day before Christmas vacation as kids said good-bye to their principal at the front door, they knew what she wanted to hear.*

*MADELEINE MARALDI: Are you going to say Merry Christmas to me?*

*CHILDREN: Merry Christmas!*

*MADELEINE MARALDI: And*

*PETER: Read, read, read.*

*MADELEINE MARALDI: Thank you, Peter.*

*IRA GLASS: Everything a book-loving parent would do for his child, teachers do here for these children. They read to the younger kids each day. Grant money buys each child books as gifts to keep. There are frequent trips to the public libraries and regular class trips to bookstores, where students choose the books that they will share in their classrooms.*

*1st CHILD: This one, please? Can I get this one?*

*TEACHER: All right, this is by the same author that wrote Bunnicula. OK, I think that's fine.*

*2nd CHILD: Can I get this one?*

*TEACHER: You're interested in Power Rangers too?*

*IRA GLASS: On a trip to a big Barnes & Nobles Store, the Irving 3rd graders are allowed to spend \$4 each on a book. They check with their teachers.*

*TEACHER: Yes.*

*3rd CHILD: Is this \$4?*

*TEACHER: No. See, the price is right there. What does that say?*

*3rd CHILD: \$17.95.*

*TEACHER: So no, it's not four.*

*IRA GLASS: The 3rd graders aren't choosing great literature. It's Power Rangers and joke books, scary books and mysteries. Older classes tend toward horror and teen romance. Their teachers point out that in addition to these trashy pleasures, the kids do read decent books in a regular literature class. The principal says the fun of choosing books for themselves is part of what will turn them onto reading. Also-*

*MADELEINE MARALDI: They see other people in the bookstore. They see adults purchasing books. That's why I like to send them to the public libraries also, because they see adults in the public libraries borrowing books. I think it's important that they see that there are other people out there doing these things*

*IRA GLASS: Since they began this program, reading scores have been climbing steadily at Irving. Depending on which standardized test you look at, the number of students reading at grade level has either doubled or quadrupled in five years. And it's instructive to note that in an era when politicians and educators often look for the quick fix for schools, teacher Joe Perlstein says that it took three years of tinkering with the program and pushing kids, before he was seeing the kind of results he wanted.*

*JOE PERLSTEIN: At times, it was like hell. It was very difficult to do. You know, you have to -you have to really be willing to invest the energy to overcome the storm.*

GLASS: Hi, me again, today. This is one of the most interesting things I found at Irving was that even doing everything right, fixing a school is just incredibly slow work. They'd been at it for five years when I was there, and their test scores were only *half* of what they'd eventually become. It took another five years for them to get there.

Remember, this is still an inner-city school, with all the problems of any normal inner-city school. Over 90 percent of the families were below the poverty level. Lots of kids in tough home situations. Absent parents. Gangs. Lots of Latino kids who enter kindergarten at Irving speak Spanish, not English.

*JUDITH MEUNCH, Writing Lab Teacher: Well, of course, there are some kids who are better than others. What do you want to see? Yeah, you want to see a sort of-a medium-type student?*

To give you a sense of just what the teachers were up against and how hard it was to make up for how badly these children had been taught in the past, here's the writing lab teacher Judith Meunch. I asked her in one of my stories to show me a typical essay from one of the older students.

*Ms. MEUNCH: OK. This is a first draft in a longer project from the first marking period. Do you want me to read it?*

*[reading] 'One day me and my friend was walking to the store. Then a big pit bull jumped out and started to chased us to the store. Then he went back. I said I hope that dog stay where it was. As soon as I said it the dog chased us to my house. Then my auntie said get on away from here. The we don't see the dog and dog don't see us. Come to find out the was me Keesha dog.'*

*GLASS: Aside from the grammatical problems in the early sentences and the pure mystery of that last sentence, there are punctuation problems -no quotation marks, no indenting of paragraphs.*

*She's only able to move these students so far so fast. And, overall, when Mrs. Meunch tried during the first marking period to hold these students to tougher standards in the mechanics, it didn't work. They didn't perform.*

*Ms. MEUNCH: It's kind of, like, you know, Madeleine saying-the sixth grade hit the wall, you know, they hit the wall, and I gave out a lot of incompletes and stuff and I caught a lot of heat for it from the parents, and Madeleine basically said, you know, 'Back off.' You know, 'Don't-don't-you're expecting too much. You really-you know, it's just too hard, because they have so much to relearn.'*

*[music]*

GLASS: It's an interesting question, why in the end, Irving had so much more success than other public schools in Chicago and a lot of the answer has to do with the way the principal Madeleine Maraldi implemented the changes.

First off, she didn't force the changes on her teachers. When there was something new to try, she took volunteers. If it worked, other teachers signed up. As reform progressed, the teachers met and they decided on the curriculum changes together, with Madeleine. The teachers felt like they were in charge of what was happening.

This might not sound like a big deal but one of the most common reasons that school reform fails is a reason you never hear about in the press and in the normal political debates about how to fix schools. School reform often fails because teachers kill it. The teachers don't wanna do it, they don't agree it'll work, they try it and it doesn't work at first, they fight among themselves and it dies.

The year before I was at Irving, I spent a year at a Chicago high school, Taft High School, where the teachers started all kinds of changes, spent three-quarters of a million dollars in grant money, but never came to agreement in four years about how to fix the school, and the bitter politics of all that wiped out the reform there. At the end of four years the principal resigned, a lot of the pro-reform teachers resigned.

And it's not like Madeleine didn't face this problem at first.

*[music]*

Remember - when she began, Irving was like any other public school, only a little worse. When she initially suggested making some changes, teachers openly laughed at her. They said the reasons kids performed so badly at Irving had nothing to do with the way they were teaching.

MARALDI: It was everything out there: it was parents, it was the community, it was drugs, it was teen pregnancies, it was violence. You know it was gang activity, it was everything outside this building. Those were the reasons why. So that's how it started.

GLASS: As the reforms progressed, three teachers transferred to other schools. It took the rest of the teachers, Madeleine says, a year before they even started to trust her. And she slowly won people over and built her team to the point where word got out what a special place Irving Elementary was; a place where teachers were *encouraged* to try new things, and place that set *higher* standards than the school board had.

Really good teachers started to transfer to Irving when vacancies came up. Like Cathy La Luz, who we started today's program with. She was such an interesting teacher to watch, that one of my stories for All Things Considered was simply a typical Friday in her classroom. Here's a big chunk of that story.



*IRA GLASS, Reporter: Great ball players and great musicians make the remarkable look easy, and great teachers do that too.*

*CATHY LA LUZ: Do you like my hair today? I thought you would, Tracy.*

*IRA GLASS: The school day begins at 10 minutes before nine. Ms. La Luz picks up her kids in the gym and then brings them to the classroom*

*[sound of classroom noise]*

*CATHY LA LUZ: No, we don't need the lights today, do we, guys?*

*IRA GLASS: Part of what makes Ms. La Luz such a good teacher is her classroom manner. She seems utterly relaxed, happy, in control; calls the kids baby, sweetheart, angel, and in Spanish, mijo and mija. Most people seem to become someone else when they stand in front of a classroom, like they're playing a character in a drama. Ms. La Luz seems like herself.*

*CATHY LA LUZ: [to students] What did I do?*

*1st BOY: You got some different earrings. [students begin shouting out answers]*

*2nd BOY: You got a new hair style.*

*CATHY LA LUZ: Everybody's right. New shirts. Candell [sp] noticed my earrings, and somebody noticed Ms. La Luz's new haircut, which is only going to last for today. All right. Take our seats. [child singsongs, 'It's very sharp, very sharp.]*

*IRA GLASS: The philosophy of this school is to motivate the students with all sorts of active lessons where the children do projects and express their ideas. Fifth-graders day usually begins with half the kids going to writing lab, where they each write on computers, and half the kids staying for literature, where they read and discuss books in groups of four. Next is math. Last Friday, Ms. La Luz had a hands-on activity to help students understand one of the hardest and most abstract ideas in fifth grade math -fractions.*

*CATHY LA LUZ: [instructing students] OK, you cut it into two pieces. OK. Now, do you understand why this is a half? What does half mean?*

*IRA GLASS: The students spent an hour cutting construction papers into fractions halves, quarters, eighths, and sixteenths -preparing actually for a fractions game. Ms. La Luz circulated, helped kids one on one.*

*CATHY LA LUZ: [to students] What is this? This number means this is one piece out of two, that there's two pieces all together and this one says here's one piece out of two. If I showed you something that said one piece out sixteen, how many pieces are there all together? How many slices would the pie cut into? Right.*

*IRA GLASS: Now, as good as all this sounds, Ms. La Luz says that about a third of her students aren't doing math as well as they should, and however wonderful a teacher she is, keeping everyone on task still means prodding the stragglers into action here and there. There aren't too many -one every five minutes or so.*

*CATHY LA LUZ: [to students] This doesn't look finished. Come to the hallway. You are clearly not paying attention, all right? What are you supposed to do once you fold those pieces?*

*3rd STUDENT: Cut them.*

CATHY LA LUZ: *Have you done that, darling? No. And if you don't*

*[to Glass] I pretty much know who needs the nudge, but I don't-as long as I don't do it in a disrespectful manner, it has to be a nudge. It has to be, 'Come on, you know what to do.' That's why I say you know what to do, you know. It's not, 'Do what you're supposed to do it.' It's, 'You know what to do. Do it, baby.'*

*[to student] Did you do something inappropriate? What did you do? [student answers inaudibly]*

*[to Glass] If I was aggressive. If I was saying, 'Come on, you're not doing your work. What's wrong? What's wrong?' They won't get involved at all. They totally disengage. They do what they're supposed to do only, and they won't get involved in the process. It's meaningless. It's, 'OK, what step do I have to follow? You're making me do it, I'll do it, fine, if you make me.' I'm not interested in making you. I'm just sort of interested in-almost like-this is going to sound funny, but almost like a seduction. Almost like a, 'Come on, come on' -luring them -you know what you're supposed to do,' and appealing to the good in them.*

*[to student] Now, baby. Now, I'm really concerned about something. Turn around, my angel. What am I concerned about, Essence? Can you tell? Yeah. I know you weren't really talking to me, and I also know you would never be rude on purpose to me. I know, sweetheart, I know that, but-*

*[to Glass] I think that's the mistake a lot of teachers make. They don't appeal to the good in the kid. 'You know what to do, sweetheart. Do it.' You know, that's way more powerful than, 'You better do it because you have to. You're going to fail.' 'Fine. I'm a failure, fine. Leave me alone.'*

*IRA GLASS: With some prodding, most of the class is energetically engaged for most of math. As they cut their fraction strips, the kids nearest to me happily chatter away about the Forrest Gump episode of Blossom and whether Montel Williams is better than the Richard Bey Show.*

*Ms. La Luz, herself, is a graduate of the Chicago public schools, grew up in a tough Puerto Rican neighborhood, and says that she wanted to teach partly because she had so few good teachers herself.*

*At the heart of Ms. La Luz's classroom practice is the notion that she wants her students to feel respected and to feel that their ideas are worthwhile. The day I visited, during their discussion of the book, The Bridge to Tarabithia, she tried to get them to talk about a point in the book that struck a chord with her, but realized after a few minutes that they weren't going with it, and listened to where they were taking the discussion -namely, some alternate endings that they would prefer to the book. She changed their writing assignment to accommodate this.*

*CATHY LA LUZ: [to students] I was going to do a journal response about something else, but you guys already know where you want to go. So if you want a different ending or more information, why don't you put down what you wish you could see next in the story?*

*5th STUDENT: All right. I wish a journal response.*

*IRA GLASS: Studies show that only 40 to 60 percent of a school day in cities and suburbs is spent in actual instruction. The rest of the time is spent settling down, getting materials ready, giving instructions, taking attendance, moving through the halls, lunch -you can imagine. Ms. La Luz is as efficient as any teacher. The day I visited, her class spent about two and a half hours on hard-core academic subjects and another hour and a quarter on various other subjects -band, media, arts, gym, counseling. Anyone who learned their fractions in grammar school could tell you that this works out to about two-thirds of the school day spent in instruction. It was low for Ms. La Luz because she decided to forego the usual hour of project time that ends the day so the kids could end their week joyfully,*

*singing and then playing outside.*

*CATHY LA LUZ: [to students] I hope we're ready. Deandre? Looks like you need a partner, baby. Come to me. [students respond with wolf whistles].*

*IRA GLASS: It was the kind of song with funny choreography that went with it. Even the most reserved of the boys played along, sang and danced, and left school last Friday wanting to come back, just as their teacher hoped for. I'm Ira Glass in Chicago.*

*[sound of class singing, "down by the valley, two by two, rise Sally rise."]*

GLASS: OK, what kind of moronic policies would you have to put in place to make *that* teacher think about quitting? We jump forward ten years in just one minute from Chicago Public Radio and public radio International, when our program continues.

*[0:59 of I.D. Break Music]*

ACT TWO  
2004

IRA GLASS, HOST: It's *This American Life*, I'm Ira Glass. If you're just tuning in, all this hour we're hearing the story of an unusually good public school. But in the last year or so that school's gone through some changes parts of the program that made it one of the most successful schools in Chicago are being dismantled, and it's gotten to the point where one of the best teachers in the school - who you just heard before the break, Cathy La Luz, is thinking about quitting teaching.

So what happened?

Well a couple things changed in the ten years since I first visited Irving Elementary. First, the matriarch behind the changes at Irving - Madeleine Maraldi, retired. Fortunately, there was somebody on staff who was trained and ready to step in as her successor, Pat Mizerka, who'd been a 7th grade teacher in the school and then assistant principal. She'd been there through most of the changes.

If anything, the school got even better under Pat Mizerka. Test scores climbed higher, partly thanks to a tutoring program the central school board provided the school. And partly, she says, for a reason that's completely surprising.

MS. MIZERKA: Glasses.

That's right.

MS. MIZERKA: Glasses. Unbelievable right? Unbelievable. We had a dean of students, Mr. Pearlstein, and he was just, I mean he was on top of this, every child who should be wearing glasses, will be wearing glasses.

IRA GLASS: How many kids ended up having to get glasses?

MS. MIZERKA: Oh, I would say between 30-40 percent of our student body wore glasses.

At the end of this process, that is. Grant money paid for the glasses.

But during Pat Mizerka's time as principal, the central office at the Chicago schools started to issue orders. Each of these orders small, each of them well-meaning, each of them, in a certain way, so tiny that by themselves, they didn't mean all that much. But added up together they pulled down some of the underpinnings of what Irving Elementary had built.

One of the first things to go was the Irving report card. Over the course of a decade, Irving teachers had designed this report card that, in addition to all the regular grades, had a space where students evaluated themselves - which most kids took very seriously and which was part of getting them to take responsibility for their work. Pat Mizerka had to deliver the news to the Irving staff that they'd been ordered to do a report card like the rest of the school system.

MIZERKA: Oh, they were very upset. And then so I had to relay that the board was looking for uniformity and they wanted all schools to have the same report card because when children transfer from one school to another, you know, it's hard then for another school if they're not using the same report card, to mesh, you know, the grades together.

This wasn't so convincing to the Irving teachers. The Irving report card evaluated students on the specific things being taught, the number of pages they read, the specific reading skills they did and did not have, in much more depth than the standard Chicago report card.

The Irving report card didn't have a D grade. Irving teachers didn't believe in the D – that there should be a grade that admits you didn't learn the material, but you should still pass.

In short, Irving teachers were giving up a tougher report card for one that held kids to lower, vaguer standards.

LA LUZ: I remember the shock, we just stand there, it was just quiet.

Which brings us back to Cathy la Luz. She remembers when Pat Mizerka gave them the news.

LA LUZ: I was just like, this can't be! That's just – erase this? Everything we've--? We've been making this report card for 12-13 years, and we couldn't believe we didn't have a choice. There's that weird feeling of all of a sudden there's no choice. There's no negotiating, no, "how 'bout if we say this?" And I remember Pat just saying to us, "no."

*[music]*

Before long, the Irving teachers lost something else. Something that was at the very heart of their education program.

*MR. PAUL: and number 4732, who's next? What number are you? Number seven?*

Over the course of years, the Irving teachers had developed a system where, three times a year every parent had to come in with their child for an appointment to meet with the teacher and go over their report card. It took a full day and a half each time they did it. But the teachers said, it meant everything to get to know the parents this way, and to get them this involved in overseeing their children's education.

Seeing it in action, it was hard to imagine why every public school didn't do it. Here's a section of a story I did ten years ago about it.

*IRA GLASS: In room 306, the two eighth grade teachers sit at separate tables. The teachers' strategy is this - do not blame the parent, but make the child realize it's his responsibility to do the work, and get the parent to reinforce this. Mr. Paul begins his conference with Cornell Miller with a time-honored teacher technique you may remember from your grade school days. He tells Cornell to explain his bad grades to his mom.*

*Mr. PAUL: Reading. What didn't happen there for you to get an incomplete?*

*CORNELL MILLER, Student: I didn't read. Well, I read, but I had to read it for the second marking period, and I had to read it for this marking period.*

*Mr. PAUL: Was there a different way you could do this?*

*CORNELL MILLER: Yeah.*

*Mr. PAUL: Would you share that with us?*

*CORNELL MILLER: I got to read all the books. That's all.*

*Mr. PAUL: You could have read all the books. Why didn't you read all the books?*

*CORNELL MILLER: (long pause) I don't know.*

*CORNELL'S MOTHER: He never have a answer for that.*

LA LUZ: Those three report card pickups, where parents have to come in with their child, that structure matters, I think that structure is part of our success.

GLASS: Again, here's Cathy La Luz, in the present.

LA LUZ: Cause you know what happened one year we didn't do it? This is before things were going downhill, some teachers were like, "well why do it?" so one year we didn't do it. We saw drops. Like the reading program that we had, less books being read. Less reading happening. Uh, less homework coming into me. Watching the work ethic kind of go downhill in terms of what was coming to us, we had this long talk at the end of the year. I remember, Pat was a teacher at the time and she was the first one to say, "This was awful." And you heard other voices, everybody. "Wow! What a drop in terms of taking the classes seriously. We can't do this again."

GLASS: This year, thanks to a minor rule change from the central school board, Irving has to give out report cards the same way all other schools do. Instead of a total of four and a half days devoted to parent conferences, they'll have one day. Cathy's prediction?

LA LUZ: If I was going to predict, I'd predict what happened that time will happen again. We'll see less output, less parent involvement, less connection with the parent.

*[music]*

GLASS: Last year, After two years as principal, Pat Mizerka had to the principal's job for personal reasons. She was replaced someone named Rita Ortiz, who came from outside Irving. Very quickly this new principal got off on a bad foot with teachers by insisting on something so basic that she never suspected it could be controversial.

Rita Ortiz asked that they turn in lesson plans.

LA LUZ: At Irving school, we never had to write formal lesson plans.

Again, Cathy la Luz.

LA LUZ: It was, "if you like writing formal lesson plans, go ahead, if you like taking notes, go ahead. If you just keep a diary, and let my principal read it, whatever works for you in planning your day. Your style is your style, just prove to me that it works."

HEATHER MADDEN: There was a meeting where she asked announced that she wanted us to do lesson plans and I believe it was every Friday.

Heather Madden teaches Special Ed at Irving.

MADDEN: It was horrible reception, the gasps and “oh my goodness!” the rustling of the papers, just feel the tension in the air, it was horrifying. Typically the decisions at Irving had been made in kind of a democratic manner, if there was something new that was going to be taken on it was always not necessarily brought to a vote, many times it was brought to an open forum, many times we got our opinions out and you know, hashed it out and come to a conclusion that was agreeable between everyone.

From Principal Rita Ortiz's perspective, this really wasn't the kind of thing that bore any discussion. *Every* school had been ordered to do lesson plans. *Irving* would do lesson plans. Here's Rita Ortiz.

RITA ORTIZ: Plans are a part of the teacher observation sheet that a principal or another administrator involved in classroom observation uses. It's one of the criteria in observing a teacher.

GLASS: So, so were you surprised at the reaction?

ORTIZ: I was, coming from a background where not only did I do them, I saw everyone else do them, um, in various situations. So.

MADDEN: I'm sure to Rita it was just format, it was the way things were done and I can understand that but at the same time it was really disheartening to watch the atmosphere of the school change and the atmosphere of the staff change so quickly.

At the heart of this change was that the staff wasn't used to being ordered to do thing. When the school board would mandate something like formal lesson plans, the teachers in the past would sit down together with the principal and figure out how to respond.

MADDEN: we would come up with something that would meet the board's requirements but also meet the philosophy and the practices that always occurred at Irving.

GLASS: and did anybody say to her, “look, the way we usually do this is if the board asks us to do something like this we talk about it and come up with a solution together.”

MADDEN: yes. It definitely has come up a number of times where, “this is how we do it, we like to discuss it out.”

GLASS: and when this has come up, what does she say?

MADDEN: honestly, it's more lip service, I feel. “OK, I understand that's how you've done it in the past, but we really do need to get this accomplished and we really do need to get this done and it's just that there's more of an agenda at hand.”

There were a number of orders just like the lesson plans, all things that were mandated by the board, all well-meaning. Like the rule that every teacher needed to state or write on the chalkboard, at the beginning of each class which specific objectives in the state education goals would be met by this particular lesson.

LA LUZ: They had to be on the blackboard.

Again, Cathy la Luz.

LA LUZ: I'd have to say, "we're covering standard 1A and we're going to be using prefixes and suffixes to understand root word meanings." That's what was supposed to be on the board every day.

GLASS: As if a seventh-grader would care?

LA LUZ: They didn't care. They didn't care. *[laughs]* It wasn't meaningful to them.

GLASS: What would you tell—

LA LUZ: Well the first time the kids laughed at me. Like, what are you telling us Ms. La Luz?

Cathy says she understands why the school board is asking her to do this. Lots of schools need rules like this.

LA LUZ: And I know that's true, I know there are terrible teachers out there and schools in trouble. So when I look at this I think that this is for those schools and those teachers that they're trying to bring to a more formal standard. They're trying to say, standards matter, criteria matter and we want you teacher, to meet this level of professionalism in teaching. That's what I think they mean, I really don't think this was supposed to be, crazy.

GLASS: Right, but the problem is at this school you guys are already thinking, you guys are so far ahead of this and yet they're asking you to go back to the most basic kind of thinking.

LA LUZ: That's how it feels, and I don't mean to disrespect them. They have a tremendous job, and I know there are reasons for the mandates coming down. I know there are teachers that shouldn't be teaching, but we're not that school, we're not those teachers, and we've proved it how many times?

*[music]*

Now if Irving had a more experienced principal when these rules came down ... she might've might have gotten waivers to the rules, or fought the board, or figured out permissible ways *around* the rules - that's essentially what the two principals before Rita Ortiz, Pat and Madeleine, had done. But Rita was new, and she saw it as her job to enforce the rules and really, maybe the time had passed when *any* principal could've fought the board on these things. Here's Cathy.

LA LUZ: I remember the last year Madeline was here. Leaving meetings and hear teachers say, "thank God we have Madeline, thank god we have Madeline." But Madeline even said to me before she left, we were sitting down at the beginning of her last year, and she said, um, "I'm losing more battles than I'm winning." And she was, sad. "I'm losing more battles," and I'm looking at her thinking, "Oh my god how much longer will she be with us?" And that's when I got scared, realizing that we were going to be affected by the changes. If Madeline's saying that, Irving School was not going to be able to stay as protected as we were.



MADDEN: we were watching our world kind of crumble.

Again, teacher Heather Madden.

MADDEN: I mean everyone was just so appalled that it wasn't going to be the same, and everything that they had worked for, for so long – it was just kind of this atmospheric change.

GLASS: Why, describe more what it had changed from, to.

MADDEN: um, there was a lot more commitment on behalf of the teachers beforehand, teachers would be at Irving till 6, 7 at night, just working, making sure things were taken care of, really just pride in what you were doing and knowing that everything you were doing was respected, and I think that quickly, I know personally I didn't spend as much time at school. You kind of watched everyone's posture walking around school and the looks on their faces and it was a different group of people, just because we were disheartened.

When I ask Rita Ortiz about this she seems to have been oblivious to it all of it. Especially to the part that was the most important to the teachers: that they were used to making decisions together, with their principal, coming to consensus.

ORTIZ: I think, yeah, I'm just thinking right now about what you're saying. And I can't speak for what was before. Perhaps that was more their style of things and I don't think that I didn't ask.

GLASS: did you notice a change in morale or the number of hours the teachers were working? Or anything like that?

ORTIZ: I didn't notice a change in morale. Um, teachers put in their full days as far as what I was aware. No I really didn't notice a change in morale.

By December of last year Cathy la Luz had had enough. She was tired of seeing things that were effective, like meetings with parents, being taken away. And things that were just seemed like busy work added to her day.

LA LUZ: And I had a moment there, and not just a moment, like a week or two, where I felt like, "screw it – you want me to fill out paperwork, I'll fill out paperwork. You want me to do lesson plans? Fine. But the time that it's taking me to do this is taking me away from something else and I'm not going to kill myself to figure out a way to fix that." And we're talking about what's happening next year and I remember, it came out of my mouth, "I just don't care. Fine." You want me to just hand out a report card? I had that come out of my mouth and that's when I thought I need to quit, I need to leave. If that's how I'm going to be, I can't be teaching anymore *[crying]* if that's what's going to happen."

*[music]*

Yeah, and I would never have thought that could happen to me, I mean, that's why I became a teacher, I didn't have a teacher I liked or felt connected to or felt anything – all of my grammar school career. High school was a joke for me. I'm not going to be that teacher, that kind of

person, the kind of teacher I had. I don't want to be a teacher who just gets done what she has to get done.

Not sure what else to do, she wrote a letter to the people who run the school system.

"This is my message in a bottle," she wrote. "I throw it out hoping someone will read it and hear me."

She said the demand for uniformity, for every school to be the same, was chipping away at the things that made Irving a good school. And given how successful Irving was -- couldn't they have more leeway to do things their way, which is what made them a success in the first place?

Why fix something that's not broken?

LA LUZ: Like, what did I think was going to happen when I wrote that, really? And I feel sad when I read that. That letter's still full of hope, what's funny is that letter's still full of *hope*. I feel like a little girl who's been living in a fairy tale who's waking up to find, sorry, this is the real world because those are the kind of words I'm hearing about our school. It's like, you had 10 great years, what are you complaining about? Most schools don't get this.

That's what older teachers at the school have been saying to her: be realistic.

LA LUZ: You know, I've taught only 14 years, we've got people here who've taught 30 years, 28 years, 20 years. And they've seen changes with the board and different new mandates come down, so the look at me and they say, "you know, things like this have happened before, this is the way it is. You know, Cathy, we were lucky. Now we're going back to the way that the rest of Chicago is and that's the way it is and this will pass to and there'll be another change one day, and another change, and you just have to roll with the punches. And these are people I respect and understand exactly what they're saying. I may not be the kind of person who can do that, is what I -- That's all. I may not be the kind of person who can roll with the punches when, no, I just don't know if I can do that.

I suggest to Cathy she could just do what I've seen lots of other Chicago schools do, ignore the administration, close the door, teach.

LA LUZ: Yeah, if it wasn't going to affect the structure of my day, I'd agree with you. Cause there are other things that have happened that you just let roll off your back. But, the changes that are happening are affecting what's happening in the classroom. So I'm going to spend a summer thinking about it.

And that's how we left it, at the end of last school year.

*[music]*

Teachers in America are told two contradictory things about their jobs, that they're professionals, who know best what'll work in their own classrooms, and that they're workers – there to carry out orders, do the curriculum the way others set it for them. Obviously, in any school system, a teacher is a little bit of each. And at Irving, the fight is about where to draw the line.

Even in this era of national education standards and "No Child Left Behind." In theory, the idea is, people at the top set educational goals, teachers at the bottom should be free to meet those goals how they see fit.

That's a rather delicate thing to manage, especially in a school system the size of Chicago's; it's staggeringly big. Nearly a half million kids and teachers – a population equal to New Orleans, or Tucson. In a school system that large, the natural tendency is to wanna make everyone do the same thing. It's easier that way.

[music]

What took place at Irving is so common in a big school system -- and the way it took place is so common -- that it just happened at a *high school* not far from Irving. One that was founded on the same kinds of teacher-centered ideas that Irving was. It was called the Best Practice High School. A new principal came in, was under pressure from above to make their school more like other schools, and it wiped out a lot of the curriculum the teachers had designed.

Steve Zemelman is a national figure in what's called the Best Practice movement and was one of the founders of this high school. He says he remembers this principal's job interview.

STEVE ZEMELMAN: We had a candidate we thought was strong, she said all the right things and we were fooled by her, I have to admit, it was a terrible mistake and the moment she got in there, it was like, all of a sudden, everything changed.

GLASS: Did she in the end not agree with the basic program of what was going on with the school?

ZEMELMAN: I don't think so, no. Another thing is that new rules and mandates were coming down from CPS

GLASS: CPS, Chicago Public Schools.

ZEMELMAN: And you see good things being erased. And good reform-minded teachers being very unhappy and they leave.

GLASS: Yeah, explain how many of them left.

ZEMELMAN: It's painful to think about, but all but a few of the, all but like, three or four are gone.

GLASS: do you think that could happen at Irving?

ZEMELMAN: I don't know.

What's so crazy about all this, is that officially, the Chicago Public School system is in favor of the kind of successful innovation that was happening at that High School, and Irving. Here's the head of the public school system, Arne Duncan.

ARNE DUNCAN: I'm pushing very very hard is to get away from a one-size fits all mentality. Those schools that are very high performing academically and fiscally responsible, I actually want to do everything we can to remove any bureaucratic hurdles and really give those schools really much more flexibility, and really give them a chance to innovate.

GLASS: I understand that that's the intent, but I think what the Irving teachers would tell you is that the times they've applied for waivers, like with their report card, they were turned down pretty firmly on that.

DUNCAN: and I would be happy to take a look at that, I wasn't aware of the situation, so I can't speak to the specifics, so it may well be a legitimate concern in that case, obviously do we do it perfectly in every situation, maybe not – and that's where we want to continue to change and frankly change the culture here so that it's more supportive of that type of innovation where it's leading to progress.

GLASS: I gotta say, hearing you say this, I feel like you're heart is in the right place, I think the way things are getting implemented it's making a lot of teachers unhappy at this particular school.

DUNCAN: yeah, and again, I don't know all the specifics at that one school, so where there are issues I'm more than happy to look at it and actually will look at it. Where teachers are really trying to innovate and take the system to the next level that's exactly what we want to support. If they're doing some great things in terms of report card, or spending time with parents, those might be lessons that really should be informing the entire system rather than the entire system sort of hurting this.

*[phone ring sound]*

LA LUZ, ON PHONE: Hello?

GLASS: Hello, Cathy? Hi, it's Ira Glass.

LA LUZ: Hi, Ira Glass.

GLASS: How the hell are you?

LA LUZ: I'm ok.

GLASS: I'm calling you, it's now the fall, summer has passed, have you got a minute?

LA LUZ: yeah.

GLASS: So what'd you decide?

LA LUZ: I went back and it's worse than I thought it would be. I don't see how this is going to work, anytime I get another memo or another directive, we're being told things that we have to do this and this and this according to the rules of the board, and I really miss that feeling of being trusted and it's not there anymore. It really feels like us against them right now. And it's terrible.

Over the summer, the new principal, Rita Ortiz – without consulting her teachers – eliminated the hour of planning time Irving teachers get each day, but teachers and parents raised such a fuss in September that it's been put back. I tell Cathy that I spoke with her boss's boss's boss, Arne Duncan, the head of the school system, and play her the tape from my interview, him saying that maybe Irving *should* be allowed to do some of the things it wants, and he'd look into it.

She was skeptical much would really come out of that.

LA LUZ: I have to say, when I sent that letter I sent a copy to Arne Duncan, I sent a copy the next person below him, Barbara Eason Watkins, and I got a letter saying, basically “sorry” – conformity, using the word – no, “we need coherence throughout the system.” And it's a management issue, and I totally understand that, it's a big system and it's hard to monitor a big system.

GLASS: where are you standing this week on whether or not you're gonna stay?

LA LUZ: Oh, I'm definitely keeping my eyes open, I'm not thinking I'm staying. What I wanna do is go. I want to go.

When I was an education reporter, I was always struck by how what happened in schools was such an unpredictable mix of real public policy issues, and human personality. The chemistry of the teachers, the way they were managed, always seemed like this x factor that nobody really talked about but that seemed to make all the difference in the world.

Not that anybody wants to hear that. Even Irving teachers, like Heather Madden, don't want to hear that.

MADDEN: It can't just be magic, it can't just be fluky things landing people in the right places, it just can't be that. I mean, what's the hope for the rest of the schools? What's the hope for Irving in the future? What's the hope for any school anywhere?

*[music]*

I think there's hope, but it has to do with understanding that it *is* all about personalities. Seeing what's happened lately at Irving, I think, in a way, Madeleine's greatest achievement wasn't that she implemented decent reading and writing curricula. It was that she made the teachers feel in charge.

Now that that's gone it will be interesting to see if the kids' test scores stay as high. It will be interesting to see if by following Chicago Public School rules, Irving sinks to the level of the rest of the Chicago public schools.

*[music, cross fades to end song]*