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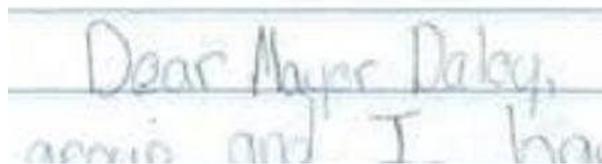
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“Dear Mayor Daley...”

By Patrick T. Reardon on Tue., 07/14/2009 –4:04 pm.

Andjurette is a bright-eyed, quick-to-smile third-grader at the Daniel Webster School at 4055 W. Arthington St., serving the West Side neighborhoods of North Lawndale and West Garfield Park.

She’s standing in front of a glass cabinet displaying dioramas of Chicago history that she and her classmates created earlier in the school year --- scenes of first-settler Jean Baptiste Pointe du Sable’s home, of the Tremont Hotel where Abraham Lincoln often stayed and of the ruins left in the wake of the Great Chicago Fire of 1871.



But, at this moment, Andjurette is excited about a more recent class project, dealing with present-day Chicago -- a class project in which the nine-year-olds wrote letters to Mayor Richard M. Daley.

“I asked the Mayor,” she says, “if he could replace all the vacant lots with parks.”

In the letter, Andjurette included a drawing of a tree, swings and a slide with the explanation: “This is how Chicago can look.” And she wrote, “If we replace them with parks, kids will be able to play...This will cost a lot of money, but it is a great idea and it can help the community.”

THE BURNHAM BLOG

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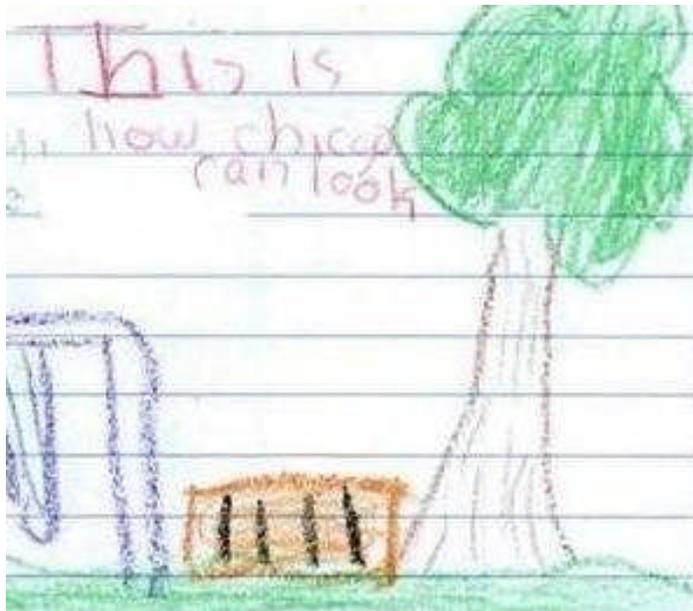
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ABOUT THIS BLOG

This blog is about history, planning and the future. It’s rooted in the recognition that we live in a world that is created by plans – and by the failure to make plans. [\[MORE\]](#)

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

[Patrick T. Reardon](#) is a Chicagoan, born and bred. He has been writing about the city, its region and planning issues, mainly in the Chicago Tribune, for nearly 40 years. [\[MORE\]](#)



Who knew Daniel Burnham had been re-incarnated as a nine-year-old West Sider?

Burnham-like

While not quite as sophisticated as her renowned planning predecessor's Plan of Chicago, Andjurette's letter was very Burnham-like in its use of text and colorful images to make its case. And in its emphasis on the creation of parks. And in its recognition that great ideas can be costly --- but are still great ideas.

The letter-writing campaign by Andjurette's class is part of the Bold Plans Big Dreams education program, which is just getting underway in the Chicago Public School system and will hit full stride in the fall. Even so, more than 2,200 children from 78 schools already have sent Mayor Daley their dreams and plans for the city.

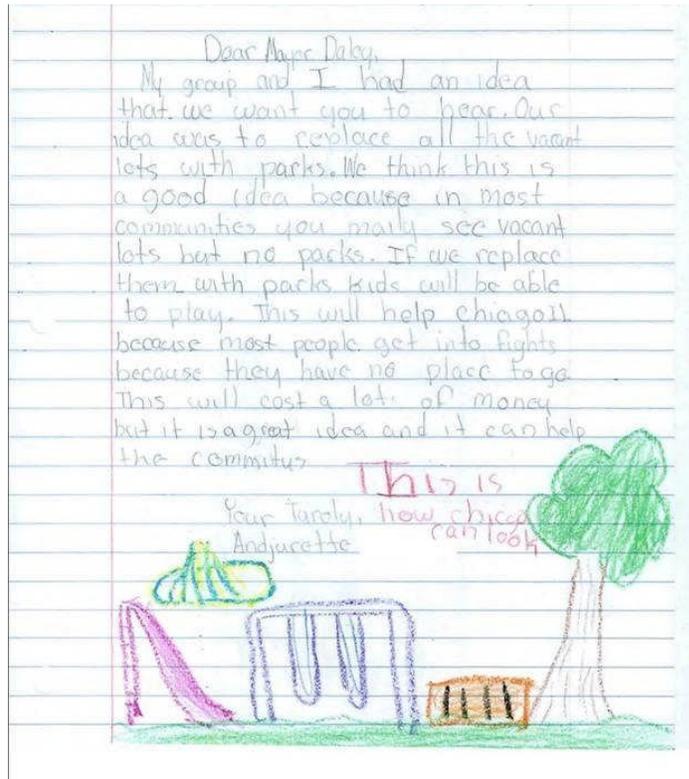
The idea of Bold Plans Big Dreams is to use the 100th anniversary of Burnham's Plan to "embed" the study of Chicago back into the public school curriculum, particularly for third-graders and eighth-graders.

The goal is to help the students learn about the past and --- even more important --- begin to see their own roles in the present and future of the city. To understand that the city gets better, or doesn't get better, based on the choices that people make individually and together.

To help the children understand that their ideas are being heard, Adele Simmons, vice-chair of the Burnham Plan Centennial, sent personalized notes to each of the letter-writers, thanking them on behalf of Daley.

“A gaggle of little activists”

Sandra P. Guthman, president of the Polk Bros. Foundation, a major funder of the program, put the goal succinctly at a meeting with school principals in April: “We want to create a gaggle of little activists.”



Barbara Radner, director of the Polk Bros. Foundation Center for Urban Education at DePaul University, has been closely involved in the development of the program and its curriculum guide, called “Chicago: Choices and Changes.”

In March, Radner led workshops on the program for more than 500 teachers from 150 Chicago elementary schools, including a team from Webster School.

“If you don’t understand the past, how can you possibly understand the present?” she says. “And how can you figure out what should happen next?”

Learning about the city where they live will help students be better citizens in the future, says Princetta Preston-Scott, the Webster principal. “When you study anything, you claim ownership. You care, and you have a lot of respect for it,” she says.

And you know better how things work.

Making a difference

So under the program's curriculum, third-graders send tenderly heartfelt letters to the mayor. But eighth-graders are expected not just to learn about the city but also to do something, even while still in grade school, to make a difference.

As part of that, they write letters, too --- but to their local alderman.

“Because, after all, this is Chicago,” Radner says.