

Nominate an Innovation: Children's Scholarship Fund Philadelphia

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Summary

Philadelphia's public schools leave many parents wanting better options for their children. Children's Scholarship Fund Philadelphia (CSFP) provides four years of tuition assistance to help kindergarten through 8th grade students from low-income Philadelphia families attend the private or parochial school of their choice. It is a unique regional provider of scholarships to students who are early in their academic careers. CSFP emphasizes parental participation in education, and program participants achieve significantly higher educational outcomes than their non-CSFP peers. Critics charge that CSFP draws resources away from public schools, but the nonprofit argues that students cannot wait for the public schools to improve; they need better educational opportunities today.

The Problem: Low-Performing Philadelphia Public Schools

The School District of Philadelphia and its students are struggling. One half of Philadelphia ninth graders will not graduate from high school (White-Williams Scholars 2007). Only one third of high school juniors test “proficient” in reading on the Pennsylvania System of School Assessment exam; one third test proficient in math. And in 2007, the average Philadelphia SAT score was 788 out of 1600.

The district drew national attention in 2001 when the state of Pennsylvania revoked control of the schools from the City of Philadelphia (Mezzacappa et al. 2001). The state established the School Reform Commission, still today the administrator of Philadelphia schools. Over the last 10 years, the commission has tried a number of strategies to turn the schools around—including partial privatization, converting public schools to charter schools, and redistributing district resources. But despite state and local efforts and some evidence of improvement, the district’s low performance still leaves many families wanting more. In fact, there are so many families that the nonprofit Children’s Scholarship Fund Philadelphia (CSFP) simply cannot keep up with demand

The Solution: CSFP

CSFP provides four years of tuition assistance to help kindergarten through 8th grade students from low-income Philadelphia families attend the private or parochial school of their choice. In little more than a

decade of existence, CSFP has received more than 90,000 applications for 7,000 available scholarships (CSFP 2009). In 2001, a full 33 percent of Philadelphia's eligible population applied for scholarships. Clearly, families want the power to choose better opportunities for their children.

But do families *need* to have the option to send their children to private schools, when public schools are available? For many families, school choice is a very powerful tool against poverty. Seeking an alternative to Philadelphia's public schools, affluent families can choose to send their children to private schools. With a solid foundation, these children will be better prepared to succeed in life and are more likely to achieve success. But low-income families cannot always afford to send their children to alternative schools. Instead, these children attend the public schools and chance an education. Without a strong education, they may fail to lift themselves out of poverty, gain an education, and become productive members of the workforce—and the cycle continues.

CSFP tries to end cycles of family poverty by creating new cultures of education within families. It helps children access high-quality schooling, but demands that their parents participate as well. CSFP advertises its scholarships in low-income communities so that parents are aware of the program and its application deadlines. Parents then complete an application in which they are

required to answer the essay question: "If selected, how would this scholarship help your children?" Though CSFP does not evaluate applications based on the content of the answer, it still requires that parents give substantive thought to the importance of education in their child's life.

Parents are also required to pay a portion of their child's private school tuition, which ensures that they make tangible sacrifices for—and therefore genuine commitment to—their child's educational success. By asking families to make education a top financial priority, CSFP empowers parents to be true active partners in their child's education. Children in the program are required to achieve a minimum 90 percent school attendance rate, and parents are required to visit the school twice yearly.

Eligibility for the program is based entirely on income, and families making 270 percent or less of a federal poverty-level income are eligible. For the 2010–2011 school year, a family of four earning \$22,050 or less each year would be considered at "poverty level." But a family of four earning up to \$59,535 (270 percent of poverty level) would still be eligible for a scholarship. Families at poverty level generally receive scholarships worth 75 percent of the cost of tuition; families earning up to 185 percent of poverty level are eligible for 50 percent scholarships; and families earning up to 270 percent of poverty level receive 25 percent scholarships. The minimum contribution from parents is \$500 per child per year or 25 percent of tuition—whichever is greater.

Families can choose from 205 participating private schools, whose missions and cultural affiliations run the gamut: Catholic, Baptist, Jewish, Islamic, Lutheran, Pentecostal, traditional college preparatory schools, Montessori, Afro-centric, foreign language, and other non-sectarian private schools are all represented. If a family is unhappy with a chosen school, they are free to take their scholarship to another. CSFP also guarantees that if one child in a family receives a scholarship, up to three siblings will receive scholarships as well.

Best of all, CSFP gets results. More than 95 percent of former CSFP students graduate from high school within four years, compared to 49 percent of all Philadelphia public school students. And more than 90 percent of former CSFP students have enrolled in college. Because CSFP has operated for only a little more than a decade, it does not have a critical mass of longitudinal data to report on the long-term (adult) success of former CSFP students. But so far, longitudinal studies conducted by private educational evaluators and the University of Pennsylvania suggest that CSFP students continue to excel long after their private school scholarships run out.

CSFP is Philadelphia's chapter of the national Children's Scholarship Fund, which operates in 35 communities across the country (Children's Scholarship Fund 2009). The Philadelphia chapter is the third largest (behind New York City and the Bay Area), serving 3,019 students during the 2009–2010 school year. The Children's Scholarship

Fund national office is the active sponsor of each of its chapters, and matches every chapter contribution on the dollar. The national office also ensures that 100 percent of donations made to its chapters go directly to scholarships; the national fund's impressive board of directors covers all of the organization's administrative costs (CSFP 2009). CSFP raises private dollars to provide more scholarships. They receive no public funding.

How CSFP Is Innovative

CSFP is an innovative program for many reasons. It is chief among very few area providers of scholarships to children in kindergarten through 8th grade. Research consistently suggests that in education, the earlier, the better, and CSFP is committed to getting children off to the right start. Because these scholarships are given early, children who may be struggling in their current school still have time to catch up to their peers. CSFP is also unique because it does not award scholarships based on merit or aptitude. Rather, it awards scholarships at random in an attempt to give a fair chance to all of Philadelphia's students in need.

The CSFP model is a welcome innovation that upsets oppressive social norms—norms that say private schools are only for rich kids, and that poor families don't have the right to choose among the best schools for their children. CSFP is uniquely positioned to help families and students because it is free from serving a political agenda, a

reelection campaign, a teachers' union, a religious mission, or any of the interests that so often dictate education policy. Its independence helps CSFP to break down long-standing silos among public schools, private schools, churches, neighborhoods, and government, all in the interest of helping individual children and their families.

How the CSFP Model Can Be Applied

Many facets of the CSFP model could be replicated in both public and private school systems. For example, research consistently suggests that parental participation is a key factor in a child's academic success (Michigan Department of Education 2002). Following CSFP's example, schools could make a significantly stronger effort at engaging parents and demanding their participation in their child's education. School systems could also form partnerships to implement programs like CSFP where school districts need time and resources to turn failing schools around.

One possible byproduct of the CSFP program is that participating students could have a positive effect on their peers who are not participants in CSFP. Participating students likely spend social time with their neighborhood peers who attend public grade schools, and CSFP advocates are hopeful that CSFP students will set positive academic examples for their peers. Moreover, most CSFP graduates will attend public high schools with peers who

did not attend private grade schools. Advocates are again hopeful that the scholarship fund's "college-going culture" could permeate the halls of Philadelphia's public high schools.

The most obvious critique of the program, one that CSFP Executive Director Ina Lipman says she faces nearly every day, is that the program draws much-needed attention and resources away from the struggling public schools. But CSFP sees itself as an advocate of individual families and students, not of a particular educational system. Today's struggling fifth-grader will not be helped by a 10-year plan to improve Philadelphia public schools; she needs help today, and CSFP is willing to help her.

References

Philadelphia public schools are indeed slowly improving. But in the meantime, Children's Scholarship Fund Philadelphia is here to invest in the life of a child today, when it matters most.

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