

# Philadelphia Young Playwrights: Improving Student and Educator Engagement Through the Art of Playwriting

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## Summary

Philadelphia Young Playwrights' program model is arts-based education with a built-in, two-tiered innovation. The program has energized students in Philadelphia schools by tapping into their interest in playwriting. The program has also given a dynamic teaching tool to Philadelphia teachers, enabling them to reach students in new and inventive ways.

Philadelphia Young Playwrights is a stand-alone organization whose mission is formed around the empowerment of youth. The program puts students and their work center-stage. With the support and guidance of Teaching Artists and traditional classroom teachers, students write a full one-act play. The experience of learning the craft of playwriting is formative. Students find their footing and learn to hone their voices and thoughts, as well as their craft. Philadelphia Young

Playwrights keeps students returning; as they are nurtured and encouraged, they are also pushed to break out of their comfort zones. This is a formative experience for an adolescent. Students see, perhaps for the first time, that they have a voice—a powerful and authentic voice.

Philadelphia Young Playwrights also provides a sought-after teaching tool for educators. Teachers are incorporated into the model as equal partners with the student and the Young Playwrights Teaching Artist.

The program shows an impressive social return on investment and the potential for replication. In a world with high stakes around literacy and violence, and low expectations around the potential of youth, Philadelphia Young Playwrights provides an important service for Philadelphia youth and the teachers who work with them.

## **The Issues: Reaching Potential Dropouts**

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Each year, more than 8,200 Philadelphia students drop out of school (Project U-Turn 2006). The ripple effect of dropping out is profound for both the individual (income and quality of life) and society (crime rates).

Dropping out in Philadelphia is a serious problem among

all racial/ethnic groups, and for both males and females (Project U-Turn 2006). About half of the dropouts in the city's public schools can be identified as early as sixth grade. Eighty percent of students who eventually drop out are at-risk in either eighth or ninth grade (Project U-Turn 2006). The probability of dropping out decreases dramatically for students who arrive at tenth grade on time (Project U-Turn 2006).

According to the National Assessment of Adult Literacy, 19 percent of students who drop out are able to perform at only basic or below-basic levels on prose literacy tasks such as reading editorials, news stories, and instructional materials (Kaestle 2001). The percentage of eighth-grade students in Philadelphia who performed at or above basic level was 56 percent in 2009 (National Center for Education Statistics 2008). Over a lifetime, high school graduates earn \$260,000 more than dropouts, and pay additional tax revenue of \$60,000 (Alliance for Excellent Education 2007).

Lack of access to resources and income is related to a student's readiness for school, school experience, and completion; it contributes to desperation, and by proxy, crime. If we were able to increase graduation rates by 10 percent, we would prevent over 3,000 murders and nearly 175,000 aggravated assaults in America each year (Trubow et al. 2009). And the country could save as much as \$1.4 billion annually in reduced costs from crime if there had been just a one percent increase in graduation

rates nationally among men who are now between 20 and 60 years old (Wise 2007).

This is the context in which Philadelphia Young Playwrights operates, and the context in which the typical student in a Philadelphia Young Playwrights' program lives. They see their peers struggle or struggle themselves. They may lack confidence; they may be victims of violence or witnesses to violence done to others. They do not see their lives reflected back to them and aren't able to feel the validation that those reflections bring.

Philadelphia Young Playwrights gives grade school and high school students, between the ages of 8 and 18, the tools to tell their stories. The plays written by students are often autobiographical or semiautobiographical. As students see their words and thoughts given life, they are able to meditate on other choices for their lives, to get past struggle, to build up their self-esteem and confidence. They are better suited to participate in the world at large.

## **The Origins and Philadelphia Young Playwrights Today**

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Adele Magner, an area college professor and theater

enthusiast, conceived of Philadelphia Young Playwrights in 1986. As an educator, she saw few plays and texts, creative works, being written by students. She set out to help foster young playwrights' creativity and to include this underrepresented group in the larger Philadelphia theater community. With help from her connections in both the education and theater worlds, Adele first saw her vision realized during the 1987-1988 academic year.

Philadelphia Young Playwrights quickly became known as a groundbreaking tool for classroom teachers to inspire student literacy and creativity, as well as for driving students and self-esteem. This legacy has been maintained through several school administrations and continues today with Glen Knapp, Philadelphia Young Playwrights' Executive Producing Director, who has been with the organization since 2001 (Philadelphia Young Playwrights 2010a).

## **Philadelphia Young Playwrights Today**

Philadelphia Young Playwrights has grown substantially from their 1987 start. During the 2008–2009 academic year, it provided services in five Greater Philadelphia counties: Bucks, Chester, Delaware, Montgomery, and Philadelphia. Programs were hosted in 44 private, parochial, and public schools, in 62 classes with 1,700 students aged 8 through 18 (Philadelphia Young Playwrights 2010a).

The program model pairs the students with a theater professional and their individual classroom teachers to form artistic teams. This pairing is unique in that the teacher is an integral component of the process. Most programs take place during the course of the student's school day, but the programs can also be structured to fit into after-school settings or rolled into specific curricula (Philadelphia Young Playwrights 2010a).

Each class program hosted by Philadelphia Young Playwrights provides 25 hours of classroom visits by the Teaching Artist, professional development services for the teacher, and an end-of-year class mini-festival.

Additionally, artists and professional actors can provide schools with visits and trips to local professional theaters (Philadelphia Young Playwrights 2010a).

By the end of this program each student writes a complete scene, and most students complete a full one-act play. After completing their plays, students are encouraged to enter work into Young Playwrights' annual playwriting festival. Any student who submits a play can take advantage of services provided by Philadelphia Young Playwrights' Literary Committee, which include encouragement and customized suggestions for revision.

## **The Innovation Behind Philadelphia Young Playwrights**

## **The Innovation Behind Philadelphia**

# Young Playwrights

Philadelphia Young Playwrights' project-based arts learning program brings playwriting into the classroom in new and inventive ways. The program makes learning and empowerment enjoyable for students. Students who are involved in the program are stimulated and engaged by learning, some perhaps for the first time. Equally important, Philadelphia Young Playwrights provides a dynamic teaching tool for educators.

The Young Playwrights' mission is to "tap the potential of youth" and inspire "learning through playwriting." In striving towards these goals, the program has four primary focuses:

- Improving students' writing, thinking and interactive skills
- Enhancing students' sense of agency, responsibility and self-esteem
- Reaching students of diverse backgrounds and abilities
- Stimulating awareness of and building new audiences for theatre with students, their families and communities (Philadelphia Young Playwrights, 2010a).

What separates Philadelphia Young Playwrights from other organizations is how it achieves those mission goals. Knapp sums up Philadelphia Young Playwrights'

philosophy: "Every young person is an artist; every young person is an individual learner." It's a philosophical concept as simple and powerful as it is innovative.

Philadelphia Young Playwrights is brought into schools, commissioned by interested principals and with the encouragement of teachers or school administration. The program functions as an alternative to traditional theater classes and is often the only creative theatrical outlet at the schools it serves. In this way, the work also serves to continue a history of theater arts in education.

In a school culture so focused on test scores and standardized scholastic mile markers, Philadelphia Young Playwrights stand out. It has the same goals of literacy and success, but approaches those goals in an intensive "one-on-one" manner that most schools have been forced to abandon. Additionally, the way that Philadelphia Young Playwrights brings playwriting into the classroom is dynamic. It brings together theater arts professionals (Teaching Artists), teachers, and students to form artist teams. These teams work side-by-side through the fall and spring semesters. Individual students are nurtured throughout the program as they work to complete a one-act play. At year's end, their progress is celebrated and their play is performed by fellow students and professional actors in Philadelphia Young Playwrights "mini-festivals."

Key to the success of education, and to the Young

Playwrights program, is engagement. Philadelphia Young Playwrights engages students, keeping them active participants. Knapp explains, "You bring playwriting into a classroom and interact with every student as a writer—as an individual learner—and that's the best way for every individual to actually find a way to move forward: if they are given that individual attention."

Philadelphia Young Playwrights put students and their work center stage. The program keeps students returning to school each day. Students are nurtured and appreciated while at the same time pushed to break out of their comfort zones. This is a formidable experience for an adolescent. Students see, perhaps for the first time, that they have a voice—a powerful and authentic voice. As Knapp describes the formula:

*Playwriting is the creative instrument that unlocks the door, offering even the hardest to reach student a reason to engage and participate. The interaction that results from this creative process gives students opportunities to tackle thorny personal and societal topics together, in a constructive way. It builds bridges to understanding, it provides a positive outlet for expression, it teaches respect for self and others—all the while improving literacy (Philadelphia Young Playwrights 2010b).*

Philadelphia Young Playwrights has also innovated the ways in which it brings plays into the schools. Very rarely are these programs specific to theater arts. They are

almost always tied into a traditional curriculum, becoming a dynamic teaching tool by which teachers can tap into a student's potential. Like the student, the educator is empowered through Philadelphia Young Playwrights. The program increases adolescent literacy, self-esteem, and learning comprehension, and teachers can use the art of playwriting to teach their students a variety of topics and curricula.

Though there are options for after-school programs, most Philadelphia Young Playwrights programming happen during traditional school hours. The program can be tailored to meet particular needs of location, student body, or participating school. Having teachers work directly with Teaching Artists and students both gives validity to the program and normalizes the classroom, making the students at ease with school and the new craft they are learning.

Marsha Pincus, a former Philadelphia School District Teacher and a current Teach for America Instructor at the University of Pennsylvania, began working with Philadelphia Young Playwrights in 1987. Her experience with the organization highlights the power that the program gives to the teachers:

*Simply stated, Young Playwrights' programs enabled me to get to know my students as human beings, to see the world through their eyes and to become a more effective and responsive teacher. While I always believed that*

*education is a transformative act and that young people have agency in their own lives, it was not until I became involved with Young Playwrights that I was able to put these beliefs into practice. Young Playwrights provided me with the tools that I needed to become the kind of teacher I was meant to be (Philadelphia Young Playwrights 2010b).*

## **Philadelphia Young Playwrights' Impact**

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At the end of the 2008-2009 academic year, Philadelphia Young Playwrights conducted a program-wide survey. The results highlight the impact of the organization on the students who go through the program. The respondents were confident and had learned a great deal about playwriting. They had also learned communication and interpersonal skills that will translate to their other classes and their post-graduation work.

When students were asked about the writing and revising process, 74 percent responded that it was a "great help" in organizing their ideas; 72 percent said it was "some help" or "a great help" in allowing them to communicate their ideas to an audience; 75 percent responded that the process was "some help" or a "great help" in developing their ideas. Over 40 percent of the students revised their plays two or three times; 15 percent revised their plays six

or more times. Students were asked, "Did writing your own play and/or reading classmates' plays help you to explore others' points of view?" An overwhelming majority of 81 percent said that it was a "great help" in their ability to see from another person's point of view (Liu 2010).

These numbers speak volumes about the program and the drive and determination it develops among the students. Young Playwrights has helped the students with their literacy skills, their self-esteem, and their appreciation of diversity. It is clear that Philadelphia Young Playwrights plays a large role in cultivating the skills necessary for students' success.

## **What's It Worth? The Social Return on Investment**

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Philadelphia Young Playwrights yields an impressive social return on investment. Its work increases student self-esteem, promotes literacy, and increases the likelihood that those students will graduate from high school. The individualized attention given to students by their teachers and the Teaching Artists encourages independence and constructive problem solving. With constructive problem solving, students are less likely to enter into crime or commit violence.

# Graduation/Income Ratio

Throughout one academic year, Philadelphia Young Playwrights works with up to 1,700 Philadelphia area students in 62 classrooms. The program spends approximately \$4,140.00 per classroom. The average class has 30 students. If we assume that there are 30 students per class, Philadelphia Young Playwrights' program costs only \$138.00 dollars per student. For this low cost there is a big social return.

Statistics on earnings and contributions show that over a lifetime, an 18-year-old who graduates earns \$260,000 more than a person without a high school diploma and contributes \$60,000 more in federal and state income tax (Alliance for Excellent Education 2007).

With the tools of literacy, confidence, problem solving, and the like that students develop with Young Playwrights, we can assume that the large majority of those students will graduate from high school. Assume that 75 percent of students who go through Philadelphia Young Playwrights' program go on to graduate high school, or 1,275 students. The annual cost to host those 1,275 students is \$175,950. If the 1,275 students graduate they can each be expected to earn approximately \$260,000 in additional income over their lifetimes, for a total estimated return on investment of \$331,500,000.

Finally, with extra income there will of course be additional

taxes paid to the city and federal government, filtered back into society: an estimated \$60,000 per student. For 1,275 students, this totals \$76,500,000 in additional taxes paid.

## **Literacy**

The National Assessment of Adult Literacy measures three different kinds of literacy: prose literacy (written word), document literacy (work with documents, bills, etc.), and quantitative literacy (ability to perform calculations). Difficulty with literacy of any type is a major hurdle that carries with it stigma. These difficulties can affect students' self-esteem, morale, drive, and confidence.

Literacy is directly linked to graduation rates. Nineteen percent of students who drop out are able to perform at only basic or below-basic levels when presented with prose literacy tasks like reading editorials, news stories, and instructional materials (*National Adult Literacy Survey 2001*).

Not only are literate students more likely to graduate high school, they are also, and importantly, far more likely to be employed. Multiplying 1,700 students by the average post-graduation income of \$30,000 per student yields a total of \$51,000,000 in collected revenue—a great social return on investment.

# Antiviolence

Barbara Gottlieb, a teacher from Andrew Hamilton School and participant in the program, draws a connection between Philadelphia Young Playwrights and antiviolence. From her experience with Philadelphia students and watching those students' personalities shaped by Young Playwrights, she observes, "I see Young Playwrights as a deterrent to violence, as it teaches alternatives, which empowers students to find peaceful solutions... . Through the playwriting experience, my children are able to address critical issues in their lives" (Philadelphia Young Playwrights 2010b).

As mentioned above, 81 percent of students stated that the craft of playwriting learned through Philadelphia Young Playwrights helped them appreciate "others' points of view." This appreciation for diversity points a student in a positive direction, away from violence and potentially the criminal justice system. That is a great social return on investment.

It is valuable to consider the "what ifs." In this country, it costs an average of \$22,600 to incarcerate a person but only \$9,644.00 to educate him (Alliance for Excellent Education 2006). That is a difference of \$12,956.00 per student. If 81 percent of the 1,700 students that go through the program each year (approximate 1,377 students) didn't have the experience of Philadelphia Young Playwrights, those students could have ended up

“in the system,” involved in crime, and possibly imprisoned. For the 1,377 students, the difference between education and prison is a staggering \$17,840,412.

Notably, Philadelphia Young Playwrights also gives students a platform to speak out against violence. In 2008, two public school students who had gone through the program, Marquis Herring and Nia Davis, received a special acknowledgment. Not only were their plays produced professionally, but the Philadelphia Coalition for Victim Advocacy bestowed an award on them, noting the “anti-violent intent and beautiful themes of their plays” (Philadelphia Young Playwrights 2010b).

## **Replication/Scalability/Policy Implications**

### **Replication**

The longevity of Philadelphia Young Playwrights’ program throughout cultural shifts and administration changes is an indication of its solid business model, which to date has been replicated twice. A training team from Young Playwrights facilitated onsite replication training for staff and teachers at the City Theatre in Pittsburgh and the Children’s Theatre Company of Minneapolis. Training includes intensive work around Philadelphia Young Playwrights’ ideology and methodology and also includes guidance and help setting up suitable frameworks for success around their needs and goals. Since that

replication training, both theaters have adopted their own versions of the Young Playwrights model.

Philadelphia Young Playwrights was sought out because of its reputation in the education world for providing a powerful teaching tool for educators. Young Playwrights does not currently do outreach but rather responds to requests for training.

Continued replication relies on access to additional funds. One way Philadelphia Young Playwrights has begun garnering additional funds and expanding its brand is with a program called Creating Impact, in partnership with the Wilma Theater in Philadelphia. The program provides professional development to local businesses and corporate business. It offers workshops in innovation strategies, intentional leadership, communication strategies, and team building (Philadelphia Young Playwrights 2010a). This program helps Young Playwrights with local exposure as well as additional revenues.

## **Scalability**

Philadelphia Young Playwrights' expansion and scalability depends heavily on human and monetary resources. The biggest hurdle is procuring talented and dynamic theater professionals interested in being trained as Teaching Artists. The program cannot expand without theater professionals who have time and interest in teaching

artistry or without the funds to properly train them.

Philadelphia Young Playwrights has begun laying the groundwork in finding additional Teaching Artists by doing outreach at theaters. It has also established relationships with theater departments at local colleges and universities, encouraging those college students to focus on teaching artistry. At Temple University, for example, Philadelphia Young Playwrights helped design and launch an arts education concentration.

## **Policy Implications and Recommendations**

Is there space on the education landscape for a year-long intensive arts-based programs? So far the answer appears to be yes. Philadelphia Young Playwrights has grown and thrived in both conservative and liberal administrations.

With that said, the pitfalls are always there. On the city, state, and national level the program navigates issues and restrictions around budgeting and fund prioritizing. If restrictions are placed on principals' discretionary budgets, the Young Playwrights' program might have to be dropped from school curricula. Philadelphia Young Playwrights combats a culture that can devalue art and arts education. Combating that cultural devaluing is important to the program's continued success. Perhaps some creative direct partnerships with the Philadelphia

School District would eliminate financial insecurities and open up more funds for scalability.

Young Playwrights improves student literacy. With the goal of further embedding into the School District, Philadelphia Young Playwrights could do direct outreach to city schools that are testing as low literacy schools. Direct outreach could also be done to schools that focus on teaching students with learning differences.

Attempts at diversifying funding sources would help grow and expand the program's mission and programming. Funding from individual donors, a traditionally difficult market, is Philadelphia Young Playwrights' least profitable. Additional outreach to that market could help with diversifying. Allocating funds for continued and increased tracking of student progress after the Young Playwrights' program would help its portfolio when seeking donations of any sort.

## **Student Success**

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When Glen Knapp was asked how he gauged his program's success, without hesitation he replied, "I see success in the faces of the students who go through the program." That success is evident when we hear the students speaking for themselves about how Philadelphia Young Playwrights has helped shape their lives.

Moses Aidenaike, an eighth-grade student and winner of the 2009 Adele Magner Memorial Award, talked about how the program helped him find his voice: "I had a story to tell and my way was the only way I could tell it, and the Philadelphia Young Playwrights really helped me discover and express my uniqueness" (Philadelphia Young Playwrights 2010b).

Aimee Leong, whose play *Torn Between* won a variety of awards and was part of Philadelphia Young Playwrights' annual professional production, said about the program, "I can't thank them enough for giving me that extra push, for giving me confidence in not only my writing but in myself too" (Philadelphia Young Playwrights 2010b).

## **Conclusion**

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Philadelphia Young Playwrights' innovation is rooted in a balance between art and education. It garners results not commonly associated with arts-based programs: improving literacy skills, contributing to a reduction in dropout rates, and helping combat crime and violence. It helps students build confidence and self-esteem as well as growing their perspectives of their peers and the world around them.

The program is also a valuable teaching tool for educators. Young Playwrights' ability to help schools meet

state standards for education makes it a great asset to the Philadelphia School District.

Expansion of Philadelphia Young Playwrights' program model is possible with increased funds and continued creative vision. Continuing to firmly embed itself into the Philadelphia School District is wise, including through direct outreach to schools that teach students at risk or with specific needs.

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