Overview and Introduction to the Education Reform in the 21st Century

Rachel Meadows and Michael Clark 07 April 2011

Introduction

The need to improve access to quality education has come thundering into our national consciousness. Terms such as “achievement gap” and “dropout factories” have made their way into our vernacular. Attempts for scalable education reform have been well documented throughout the past three decades, yet nothing has proved to be a silver bullet solution.

So, how do we fix the education system? This edition of the *Philadelphia Social Innovations Journal* will give the reader a strategic approach to disrupting the current educational status quo and a guide to increasing access to seats in quality schools. Some of the ideas presented in this edition could redefine how education is provided within our schools. For some schools, this could be a zero-sum game in which they lose. For others, it could mean the difference between ceasing operations and expanding enrollment. But most importantly, for the students, this could shift their trajectory. Dropping out could transform into graduating high school, going to

college, and securing a stable job in a global economy.

A Historical Perspective on Education Reform Initiatives

Through the 1960s and even the 1970s, Americans considered their education system to be the best in the world. All this changed with the 1983 report from Ronald Reagan's National Commission on Excellence in Education. The report, entitled *A Nation at Risk*, emphasized that American schools were failing, and the country was slipping from its number one spot. Along with other criticisms of American's education system, the report led to the development of outcomes-based education reform in the late 1980s and early 1990s. Outcomes-based education emphasized outcomes that were concretely measurable (test scores, achievement levels, etc.), as opposed to inputs (time spent in the classroom, quality and quantity of textbooks, etc.).

By the late 1990s, outcomes-based education had evolved into standards-based education. The main premise behind standards-based education is that there are academic standards against which all students can be measured. The standards lay out what a student should know, understand and be able to do. Instead of students having their performance compared to that of other students, each student is measured against the standards. The standards further serve as a guide to developing curriculum and assessments.

In 1994, Bill Clinton signed the Improving America's Schools Act (IASA), which was a reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) of 1965. The ESEA is a statute that funds primary and secondary education and forbids the establishment of a national curriculum, and it is reauthorized every five years. With Clinton's IASA in 1994, the law added the stipulation that states must have rigorous standards for all subject areas and grade levels. ESEA was reauthorized under President George W. Bush as the now famous No Child Left Behind Act of 2001.

During the 1970s and 1980s, a new idea in the education reform world was germinating—the charter school. Ray Budde, a professor at the University of Massachusetts, published his "Education by Charter" paper in 1974, but it was not until 1988, when the President of the American Federation of Teachers publicly supported the idea in the *New York Times*, that the idea took off (Kolderie 2005). The first charter school law was passed in Minnesota in 1991, followed quickly by California in 1992. Today, 41 states, plus the District of Columbia, have charter schools.

After three decades of education reform efforts, it is difficult to say whether these initiatives have been worthwhile. On the one hand, we have some incredibly high-achieving schools and some very successful programs to stop high school students from dropping out. But on the other hand, America's international standing in

terms of academic achievement has dropped, and continues to drop. President Barack Obama's Race to the Top program has certainly helped spur education reform across the fifty states. Furthermore, in President Obama's most recent State of the Union speech, he indicated that he would be replacing No Child Left Behind. When a movie like *Waiting for "Superman"* becomes a national blockbuster and a person like Michelle Rhee becomes a national hero, the momentum behind education reform is unquestionable. But many worry that if we do not start seeing viable results in some of these education reform efforts, momentum will be lost and we will have to start over.

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This issue of *PSIJ* also pays careful attention to education reform on the local level. Chris Bravacos, a political insider who has been at the table for much of the Pennsylvania-based reform effort over the past two decades, provided valuable insights into the reform process in the state during this time period. Bravacos traced the movement from the first push for school vouchers in 1991 by State Senator Hank Salvatore to Governor Ed Rendell's accomplishments of increasing state funding for public

education. During this time period, legislative action and public discourse oscillated between the introduction of a voucher system and increased support for public education.

The first wave of voucher legislation was denied as a result of constitutionality issues, but reappeared in 1995 because of efforts made by then-Governor Tom Ridge. However, this round of legislative reform brought a broader agenda that included mandate reform and the first proposals for charter schools in the state. Voucher proposals ultimately failed because of enormous pushback from teachers unions and vitriolic public debate. However, the first charter school law was created in 1997, opening the door for the state's charter explosion. Educational Improvement Tax Credit (EITC) legislation also passed in the state, allowing businesses to receive a tax credit for funding scholarships to private schools. Bravacos attributes the passage of these reforms to their original non-threatening nature. Vouchers were viewed largely as a right-wing conspiracy, while charter school legislation and the EITC program hovered below the surface of public discourse. These reforms have had an enormous impact on Pennsylvania's educational landscape. Over 70,000 students currently attend charter schools, and 33,000 students currently receive financial support from the EITC program.

In the late 1990s, the Philadelphia School District was running out of money, and Mayor John Street warned the

district would be “out of business” without new state aid. Governor Tom Ridge used the district’s precarious financial situation as an opportunity to increase state control over its most delinquent school system. The State Legislature passed Act 46 as law in April 1998, and the act granted the state the ability to take over Philadelphia schools if the state declared the district financially distressed. Act 46 further gave the state the ability to name the School District CEO and to create the five-member School Reform Commission (SRC) consisting of the state Secretary of Education, three members appointed by the governor, and one member appointed by the mayor (Baer 2000).

In 2001, Governor Mark Schweiker moved to take over the Philadelphia School District. Following negotiations with Mayor Street, the SRC would now be composed of three members appointed by the governor and two members appointed by the mayor. The takeover gave the SRC great powers, including the ability to hire for-profit companies to manage some schools. Initially there was strong pushback to this privatization approach, particularly because an education management organization, Edison Schools, was going to be given control over 60 schools. A compromise was reached in which multiple organizations could manage the schools. This “diverse provider model” led to seven private sector organizations taking over 46 Philadelphia schools. The diverse provider model has evolved in the past decade, with private providers coming

and going, and university partners and additional charter school operators being added to the mix (Gold 2006).

The Current Problem

Today, Philadelphia's schools are not producing employable American adults who can compete in a global economy. Over 50 percent of Philadelphia's adults struggle to follow written instructions or complete routine paperwork, and they greatly need enhanced reading, writing and math skills (Green 2010: 5). No matter how one analyzes the data, American students in general are not doing well compared to their international peers. The Program for International Student Assessment (PISA) is a system of international assessments that focus on 15-year-olds' capabilities in reading literacy, mathematics literacy and science literacy. Out of 34 participating countries, the United States ranks 12th in reading, 17th in science and 25th in math according to the latest PISA results (Education Trust 2011).

Unfortunately, the only place in which America ranks high among countries is in our inequality. The United States currently has the fifth largest gap between highest-achieving and lowest-achieving students. We have some of the largest gaps between highest- and lowest-achieving students in math, science and problem solving. Today, African-American and Latino 17-year-olds do math and read at the same level as white 13-year-olds (Education Trust 2011).

If the comparison of the United States to other countries is bad, then Philadelphia's comparison to other urban American cities is worse. Out of over a dozen cities, Philadelphia's students rank near or at the bottom in terms of reading proficiency (Education Trust 2010: slides 69-74). In Philadelphia, fewer than half of the school system's students can read at grade level, and only slightly more can perform math at grade level. The majority of these poor-performing students are minority African-American and Hispanic students, and the racial academic achievement gap is mostly wider today than in the late 1980s and 1990s (Education Trust 2010: slides 9-11). Philadelphia's four-year graduation rate remains a dismal 57 percent, and the majority of those students not graduating are poor and minority students (Green 2010: 6).

These academic achievement gaps begin before the children even start school, but rather than organizing our educational system to improve this problem, we organize it to intensify the problem. On average, high-poverty school districts in America get $773 less per student than low-poverty school districts, and high-minority districts get $1,122 less per student than low-minority districts (Education Trust 2010: slide 33). Moreover, students in poor schools receive A's for work that would earn C's in more affluent schools (Education Trust 2010: slide 36). Lastly, minority students are less likely to be enrolled in a full college prep track, and high-poverty, high-minority

schools are more likely to have inexperienced teachers and teachers without a major or minor in the field for which they are teaching (Education Trust 2010: slides 38-42). In essence, the students who come into school a little behind leave a lot behind.

The Demand

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In reaction to the state of Philadelphia's schools, parents are demanding change. A comprehensive study from the Pew Charitable Trusts' Philadelphia Research Initiative explains the multitude of confusing educational choices that parents must make for their children and the parents' overall opinion that they still do not have enough quality options. *Philadelphia's Changing Schools and What Parents Want from Them*explains that whereas charter school parents and Catholic school parents are highly satisfied with the quality of their children's education, 62 percent of parents in district-run schools have actively considered transferring their kids out. Furthermore, 42 percent of parents find it very hard to get information about school options, and 72 percent of parents believe there are not enough quality choices (Pew Charitable Trusts 2010: 6). The study defines an "aspiring class" of parents who aspire to a quality education for their children and are unhappy about not getting it. This aspiring class cuts across racial and socioeconomic lines. The study

goes on to explain how the educational landscape is changing, and concludes that one thing driving this change will be parents' demand for choice and quality education for their children.

Philadelphia's schools are not just sitting idly by, further disappointing parents and watching their students fail and get left behind. The Philadelphia School District, which has seen declining enrollment and a declining status in the past decade, is implementing a strategic plan that calls for the replication of high-performing schools and the transformation of low-achieving schools. The charter community, which educates 20 percent of the students attending public school in Philadelphia today, operates many of the best schools in Philadelphia and has the capacity to serve more children. Charter schools' biggest challenges will be continuing their rapid expansion and dealing with expanding waiting lists. Lastly, the parochial school system, which has seen quickly declining enrollment in the past decade, has a proud history of educating Philadelphia's children and stands ready to rethink how it delivers education to the thousands of students, many of them now non-Catholic, it educates each year.

All this being said, however, the ongoing problem throughout the entire school system (public, charter and parochial) is that there is a shortage of quality seats. A "quality seat" can be defined as a school seat in which a student both is scoring proficient or above on a variety of

reading, math and problem-solving tests, and is graduating. The problem is compounded by the fact that these three school systems—public, charter and parochial—operate in three separate silos where competition, not collaboration, is the name of the game.

Conclusion

Education reform efforts in the United States have drastically evolved since the 1980s. In Philadelphia alone, the city has seen many changes since the establishment of the first charter schools of the late 1990s and the creation of the diverse provider model of the SRC in the early 2000s. Today, vouchers are back on the table with the proposal of Senate Bill 1. Additionally, many are predicting a steep rise in the number of charter schools under Governor Tom Corbett. Lastly, newer reform initiatives such as cyber charter schools could really take off. Regardless of which reform efforts thrive and which ones fizzle out, they must be managed responsibly. After all, the people who are most affected by these initiatives are the students of Philadelphia. These students are the future taxpaying and voting citizens of the city, as well as the future leaders, and their education must be taken seriously.

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