

The New Wave of Education Reform in Philadelphia: Change We Can Believe In?

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Introduction

Once considered a hotbed of public education innovation, Philadelphia is currently witnessing yet another wave of efforts to redefine and redirect publicly funded K–12 education, particularly for low-income kids and students of color who together constitute about three-quarters of the District's current enrollment.

Successive waves of education reform in Philadelphia date from Mark Shedd's "turning on the system" through Connie Clayton's "Replicating Success" to David Hornbeck's "Children Achieving" to Paul Vallas' "let a thousand flowers bloom" to Arlene Ackerman's "Imagine 2014" today. While each wave produced notable improvements, none led to systemic or sustained transformation. Some schools improved, while many remained underperforming. And all too often schools that were "turned around" by a charismatic principal "relapsed" after he or she left (often for a job in a central or regional office, removed from daily contact with teachers and students).

Previous efforts have left too many Philadelphians today with children and grandchildren who do not see today's schools as able to fill the void created by the exit of the factory economy. They do not see the schools as able to connect to a positive future for this generation. Many see only the void, not the connection.

What's Changed?

In times past, public education and an industrial economy were key democratizing factors in helping much of the population to secure an adequate income and climb the ladder of upward mobility. Fifty years ago, many students with special needs did not attend school, and most good jobs in Pennsylvania did not require a high school diploma, much less postsecondary study. Today, as students with the greatest challenges are guaranteed a right to education, and as the knowledge economy has replaced the industrial economy, a strong back and a willing attitude are no longer sufficient to ensure a living-wage job. Without sound academic skills, today's students will likely be tomorrow's unemployed and underemployed.

Ironically, the importance of school success is increasing at the same time as schools across the nation are losing public confidence and financial support and struggling to address the needs of increasing numbers of students in poverty, a growing number of non-English speakers and more students with academic, developmental and behavioral challenges. The need for transformational

change has never been greater, nor the obstacles to it more daunting.

In today's changing education landscape, charter schools now educate 45,000 Philadelphia students—more than 20 percent of all students in publicly funded schools.

Thousands more attend alternative programs operated by private providers for students with serious discipline problems or at risk of dropping out. While the charter and alternative movements have been building locally for several years, President Obama, U.S. Education Secretary Arne Duncan and school choice advocates in Harrisburg have accelerated the reform movement with calls for radical restructuring of persistently failing schools.

No longer is the change strategy to graft one or two innovative practices onto struggling schools as we did in the past; the strategy now is to overhaul them—from top to bottom, all at once, to speed the change. While there is not much evidence that this kind of broad-brush, wholesale change approach works, the urgency of the times and the crisis of student underachievement are moving change forward.

In two years, the School District will have initiated transformation in 31 persistently low-performing schools serving 18,700 students, a population larger than the third biggest school district in Pennsylvania. More than half of these Renaissance Schools will remain under District management (Promise Academies), with the rest

becoming neighborhood charter schools. Almost all will have new principals and faculty; a longer day, week and year; upgraded facilities; more extensive enrichment programs; and heightened parent involvement. Most of the schools will receive \$1 million in supplementary funding to underwrite these new resources.

Criteria for Transformation

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So what is the likelihood that the current wave of “transformational” education reform will bring greater success and longevity than previous efforts? By changing the action from *reform* to *transform*, will today's innovative school management models reinvent a struggling school system into a high-performing system of schools?

We believe the answer is a qualified “yes” —*if* the transformation strategy meets four basic tests:

- The system of schools must be a learning organization where schools and faculty learn from each other, where help is asked for and provided when stumbling blocks appear, where best practices are identified and mechanisms are developed for their replication. The evolving system must encourage communication within and between schools, learn how to proliferate success, and recognize that transforming a school requires both

students *and* adults to become better learners.

- The system of schools must build positive culture and climate within schools and at all management levels. Clear behavioral expectations, interventions for struggling and troubled students and staff, ongoing assessment of school and individual student outcomes, and recognition and rewards for progress must characterize every organizational unit, from the classroom to the School Reform Commission and the Office of the Superintendent. The evolving system must foster respect and collaboration, striking a balance between consistent norms and the flexibility schools must have to address their differing needs, histories and environments.
- The system of schools must operate with integrity and transparency. The evolving system must adopt and apply high performance standards across the board to all publicly funded schools—District-managed and charter. All elements of the community must give up their blame game and “gotcha” attitude while maintaining a commitment to meaningful oversight and course correction. The evolving system must open itself to widespread public scrutiny and debate so that citizens and the media acknowledge its legitimacy and can judge its performance prudently.
- The system of schools must be accountable. Educational, community and political leaders both in Philadelphia and in Harrisburg must unite to provide

both equitable and adequate financial resources and rigorous oversight to ensure their effective use. The evolving system must have the courage to base decisions on evidence rather than on ideology, political alliances or fear of change.

Implementation of these four principles will require a fairly radical restructuring of the mission of the School District's central office and its interactions with schools.

- The central office of the District must look to see what is working and replicate positive findings. The function of visits from the central office to the schools should be to provide support as well as identify problems and provide assistance in finding solutions. The District must provide timely, user-friendly data on all aspects of its operations.
- The School District leadership together with the school and regional administration should develop clear, measurable goals for each school's improvement.
- Principals should be provided with ongoing staff development and autonomy as they are held increasingly accountable for achieving measurable outcomes. Those with exemplary outcomes should be provided more autonomy; those who need help should receive it.
- The District must develop those who show promise, and remove those who fail.
- The District should create incentives for effective

principals to take on different and expanded leadership throughout the system.

- The District must support struggling schools by providing technical assistance and access to information and demographically comparable successful schools both here and elsewhere
- The District as a whole and individually must engage parents, community members and high school students in decision-making.

Perhaps a future Superintendent or CEO of the School District will come with a singular priority of identifying, scaling up and deeply rooting the many successful practices and people that already exist here.

A Call to Action

Republicans and Democrats, public school advocates and proponents of privatization, old school and new school educators, downtown and neighborhood interests—all must come together now as never before and unite with educators who too often feel beleaguered and blamed, and with parents and children who too often feel hopeless or do not connect schooling to future success, to support this transformation.

Only by working together across all the lines that have traditionally separated us can we create the change we can believe in.

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