
Public Education In Philadelphia: The Crucial Need for Civic Capacity In a Privatized Environment



A broad coalition of educators and community groups is necessary to achieve equity and excellence in urban schools, Ms. Blanc and Ms. Simon argue. But the Philadelphia schools' system of privatization and strict contractual obligations presents obstacles to those goals.

BY SUZANNE BLANC AND ELAINE SIMON

LIKE MANY other U.S. cities, Philadelphia experienced a prolonged period of deindustrialization and job loss during the second half of the 20th century. As in other northern cities, the process of suburbanization went hand in hand with white flight, increased racial segregation of the city and its schools, and increasingly inadequate funding of the school system. During this period, education activists and school reformers were unable to rally the civic community in support

of policies that would have helped to maintain equitable or high-quality education in Philadelphia's public schools.

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Today, the city's long-term trends of job loss and depopulation appear to be reversing. The school district has also made rapid changes and has been at the forefront of a national trend toward private-sector involvement in urban education. However, there are reasons to question whether the form of public/private collaboration pursued in the School District of Philadelphia is an adequate basis for a policy agenda that can reverse the city's long-standing history of educational inequity based on race and social class.

PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT WITH URBAN SCHOOLS

In the 1990s, the work of Clarence Stone and his colleagues affirmed the importance of public participation in education, arguing that only broad-based public engagement with urban schools can overcome the problems stemming from underinvestment in the children of the poor. According to this line of research, individual decision making and market forces create a radically uneven distribution of educational resources in the United States. However, Stone and his colleagues argued that underinvestment in urban children is not inevitable: "The combined actions of the government and nongovernmental sectors can provide a compensatory response to underinvestment in children in urban school systems."¹ In an empirical investigation of 11 cities undertaking school reform efforts, these researchers found that school reform was more successful in cities with higher levels of civic capacity.

In the more successful sites, representatives of a range of sectors — including grassroots and community groups as well as the business community and traditional civic leadership — were willing to go beyond conventionally conceived self-interest. They worked together to develop a shared vision and plan for action, and they created a context in which ongoing collective problem solving could take place.

Other researchers have also argued that independent, locally based organizations familiar with local schools and school policies play critical roles in addressing issues related to educational equity. For example, in a national study of community organizing for urban school reform, Eva Gold and Elaine Simon demonstrated that organized community groups were able to mobilize their constituencies and develop networks of relationships in order to overcome persistent obstacles to school reform, such as continual turnover of leadership and competing priorities of local and state politicians.²

Several examples from Philadelphia's history suggest that in the second half of the 20th century, community

and civic groups, as well as educators, identified viable solutions to key challenges facing the schools. However, none of these efforts was able to leverage the sustained civic capacity needed to address the critical issues of urban public education.

Challenges of racism, equity, and accountability. As African American migration to Philadelphia and other cities around the country increased after World War II, Philadelphia rapidly developed a highly segregated school district. It is often assumed that school segregation simply mirrors residential segregation in northern cities. However, school boundaries were commonly drawn to create segregated schools in neighborhoods that were racially mixed.

In Philadelphia, supporters of a liberal, integrationist vision of schools advocated for policies that could have strengthened Philadelphia's racially mixed neighborhoods, as well as its school system, by redrawing the existing school boundaries that created racially segregated neighborhood schools. The civic elite failed to support integration as a way to alleviate the conditions of overcrowding and lack of resources that were typical of black schools, and many white working-class communities across Philadelphia actively opposed school integration efforts.

Issues of community control. During the late 1960s and early 1970s, many African American activists in Philadelphia turned their efforts away from integration and embraced community control and an emphasis on black identity as ways to improve the schools serving African American children. The Philadelphia public schools soon became a central symbol in the ongoing battle pitting white communities and politicians against the proposals of African American activists and students. Former Police Commissioner Frank Rizzo won a key political victory in that battle when he ran a successful mayoral campaign that played on white fears about African American students and the educational aims of African American activists. During the same period, the Philadelphia Federation of Teachers gained recognition and strength among teachers, at least in part, by opposing calls for community control and African American studies in the Philadelphia schools.

Issues of accountability. In 1982, Constance Clayton became the first woman and the first African American to lead the School District of Philadelphia. As urban school districts across the country dealt with the consequences of increasing urban poverty and decreasing city revenues, *A Nation at Risk* stimulated national conversation about the need for academic excellence. During Clayton's tenure, the district adopted a standardized

curriculum with the goal of increased instructional coherence.

Many of Clayton's reforms, which had the potential to support both excellence and equity, were welcomed by people both inside and outside the district. However, the school district remained an insular institution during Clayton's superintendency, with limited outreach to the public and limited public involvement with the schools. Eventually, a broad spectrum of civic groups, including representatives of the business community that had initially supported Clayton, grew frustrated with her leadership, aggravated in particular by Clayton's unwillingness to make information about student outcomes public.

Issues of equity. Local foundations and business leaders were initially enthusiastic about Children Achieving, a new systemic change initiative developed in 1995 by David Hornbeck, the incoming superintendent. Hornbeck placed increased state funding, educational equity for children of color, and increased accountability for student outcomes front and center in the reform effort. This initiative provided some openings for community-based groups to engage with the district in a meaningful way. However, the lack of consensus among local actors about specific strategies undermined the efficacy and sustainability of the reform. Hornbeck had limited success in rallying community groups and parents to increase state funding to Philadelphia's schools.

In 2000, Hornbeck left the district after having antagonized state officials through his battles over fund-

ing issues. In a report about Children Achieving, two of our colleagues at Research for Action noted that it is difficult to "build resilient civic coalitions necessary for improving urban schools, especially in the harsh circumstances of inadequate funding."³

DEVELOPING A PUBLIC AGENDA IN A CONTRACTING ENVIRONMENT

In December 2001, after years of conflict between the city and state over education funding, the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania took over the School District of Philadelphia, declaring the city's schools to be in a state of academic and fiscal crisis. Since 2001, the Philadelphia district has created a new governance model — a partnership with the private organizations that were managing a significant proportion of the district's lowest-performing elementary and middle schools. Substantial improvement has been reported in a number of arenas since the state takeover. One notable and significant change has been a dramatic increase in the number of elementary and middle school students who perform successfully on Pennsylvania's standardized tests. Another significant change has been the introduction of a standardized curriculum and a sophisticated data management system that tracks student achievement.

However, other arenas were barely touched by the reforms enacted in the four years following the state takeover. This is particularly true in comprehensive high schools, where there have been few achievement gains and fewer than 50% of ninth-grade students graduate within four years. At all grade levels, the achievement gap between white students and African American and Latino students remains unacceptably high.⁴

Many observers in Philadelphia believe that the School District of Philadelphia has effectively responded to the pressure exerted by the state takeover and by the federal No Child Left Behind legislation. In their view, increased reliance on relationships with external partners and openness to the concept of outsourcing have made rapid change possible over the last four years. Paul Vallas, who was appointed CEO of the district following the state takeover, created a new Office of Development. This office was charged with handling contracts with outside organizations, fostering an "entrepreneurial spirit" in the district, and creating an environment conducive to productive relationships with for-profit and nonprofit groups.

During Vallas' tenure, district staff members have been able to develop relationships with businesses, universities, community groups, foundations, city programs,

faith-based groups, and local cultural institutions, as well as with national for-profit corporations that offer services in such areas as school management, curriculum development, and technology. According to many district staff members and civic leaders, the number of new partnerships is an indication that the district is taking the initiative in addressing pressing issues.

While many in the civic community respond positively to the district's growing web of contract-based relationships, the evolving system of "partnerships" and contract-based relationships carries consequences for civic participation. The process of developing and approving contracts has been largely hidden from public view. The public plays no role in choosing which firms or organizations are selected and has little information about the rationale for particular choices.

In addition, the contracting process is changing the relationship between the school district and the grassroots organizations and community groups that have traditionally acted as independent voices for those who have historically been disadvantaged within the school system. Because higher-status nonprofits, such as universities and cultural institutions, have much to offer the district in terms of resources and legitimacy, they may be able to accept contracts without sacrificing their ability to exert pressure when and where they see fit. For grassroots and community groups that have little in the way of material resources to offer the district other than the services outlined in their contracts, it appears that the contractual relationship with the district may be narrowing their input.

For example, in June 2003 one local parent activist observed that the district had hired a number of parents to do the work that they were already doing as volunteers — changing their status from grassroots actors to district employees. This activist commented that at least one person hired by the district was told she could no longer perform her advocacy work because of a "conflict of interest" between her role as an advocate and her new role as a district employee. Later that same year, the director of a different organization noted that, when the district hires community leaders, community activists become much more careful about criticizing district policies.

[Vallas has] been so effective at hiring people that we respect. So everyone has been very polite about how we in the Latino community attack the district. We don't want to hurt people that we respect and have a long history with, like [a local leader now working for the district].... How would you attack the district when she's in such a high position there? Be-

cause when I attack the district, I'm also attacking someone I respect.⁵

Our evidence indicates that participation through contracts makes it difficult for some groups, especially small grassroots and advocacy organizations, to perform their traditional role as activists and critics, even while it offers employment to depressed communities and resources to financially strapped organizations. The result may be something of a tradeoff: wide-ranging dialogue and critique sacrificed for civic peace and resources for grassroots organizations.

BUILDING CIVIC CAPACITY FOR THE FUTURE

Our overview of Philadelphia school history indicates that for more than 50 years, civil rights advocates, community activists, and leaders within the school district have been advocating for education policies that have the potential to challenge racial inequalities and support academic excellence in Philadelphia's public schools. However, past efforts have not been successful in building the momentum necessary for deep change within an urban school system. According to Clarence Stone and his colleagues, long-term improvement in an urban school district depends on sustaining a broad-based political coalition with a vision and commitment to urban children.

In recent years, the School District of Philadelphia has certainly been characterized by rapid change. We are concerned, though, that the pace of that change and the centrality of contractual relationships have actually inhibited the type of engagement needed to develop sustained momentum in support of public education. If Philadelphia schools are to successfully address long-standing issues of equity and quality for all children, we need to develop an agenda and a vision that can unite traditional civic elites and grassroots groups and at the same time extend well beyond the strict contractual obligations and responsibilities that characterize Philadelphia's public/private configuration.

1. Clarence Stone et al., *Building Civic Capacity: The Politics of Reforming Urban Schools* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2001), p. 12.

2. Eva Gold and Elaine Simon, "Public Accountability: School Improvement Efforts Need the Active Involvement of Communities to Succeed," *Education Week*, 14 January 2004, pp. 28, 30.

3. Jolley Bruce Christman and Amy Rhodes, *Civic Engagement and Urban School Improvement: Hard-to-Learn Lessons from Philadelphia* (Philadelphia: Research for Action, 2002), p. 57.

4. The following section is adapted from *Time to Engage? Civic Participation in Philadelphia's Reform*, by Eva Gold, Maia Cucchiara, Elaine Simon, and Morgan Riffer, published in 2005 by Research for Action.

5. *Ibid.*, p. 11.



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