

An Analysis of West Philadelphia Schools: Partnership with Community and Hope

Urban public school decline is not unique to West Philadelphia, but is more of a nation-wide phenomenon. Throughout the 20th Century urban schools have been deteriorating due to the white middle class flight to the suburbs post World War II. The departure from the city affected tax monies for city schools, the availability of teachers and staff, and the class composition of the remaining student bodies. The resulting disparity in socioeconomic status produced an educational segregation between those who could afford to send their kids to private schools and those who were left behind to languish in the decaying public schools. The crisis of West Philadelphia schools is characterized by high rates of absenteeism, higher percentage of drop-out rates, low-quality teachers, and behavioral problems. The poverty in West Philadelphia becomes a vicious cycle in education, very low-income populations create lower educational standards, which in turn keeps people in poverty.

Suburban sprawl has severely affected West Philadelphia, ghettoizing residents and their educational institutions. An underclass is created with the withdrawal of the upper and middle class, (The Truly Disadvantaged) flattening the class pyramid to the lowest level without any higher role models to look to for attainment. While this situation sounds bleak for West Philadelphia schools, an analysis of five schools in the area shows promise for change and solid partnerships and support to the West Philadelphia schools. The Belmont School, the William F. Harrity School, and the William Cullen Bryant School are three schools in severely economically depressed

areas. An analysis of the effects an enterprising new charity, the Say Yes to Education fund, has on these three schools shows results in high school graduation rates. This nurturing, mentorship, and promise of scholarship funds for post-secondary education on condition of graduating from high school supports kids who were thought to be hopeless and damned to the ghetto. Starting with younger grades and offering family support as well has allowed the Say Yes foundation to thrive in West Philadelphia, becoming the societal parent figure that is missing in many West Philadelphia youths. The Lea School and the Sadie Tanner Mossell Alexander School show the positive effect that community can have on West Philadelphia schools. Penn has offered various supports to these two schools and can be used as a template for other community neighbors to get involved.

The issue of teachers in urban schools is a difficult problem as well. While there are noble efforts from organizations such as Teach For America, it is almost illogical to convince bright and proven teachers to tackle the horde of social problems at issue with teaching a class of sixth graders in a poor, under performing, and behaviorally scary West Philadelphia school. Teaching in an inner city school can be seen as a dead end, and otherwise promising teaching candidates are swayed by the allure of big capitalism and corporate jobs. Many American teachers fall back on their position, and it shows in commitment to their students. One way to combat this issue would be to create a more rewarding teaching environment that would attract the innovative and dedicated teachers West Philadelphia schools desperately need. If a corporate donor or philanthropist could fund the educational experiment, a project that gives individual teachers more creative control over their curriculum could be devised. Teachers would then be judged at the end of a school year in terms of standardized test results, student attendance rates, and

evaluation forms, with monetary sums being awarded on scale. This idea encourages innovation in practice, and eliminates the complacency of salaried teachers. This would also attract the brighter entrepreneurial teachers who want to shape academics instead of just collecting paychecks. Efforts could also be made to retain great teachers and encourage them to develop community roots. Other economic incentives may help attract better qualified teachers to West Philadelphia schools. Penn could adopt the employees at one school at a time, providing them with access to the Penn employee mortgage program, encouraging home ownership, community growth, and root formation, as well as access to discounted CGS graduate courses. Special local tax breaks could be proposed to help establish promising teachers as fixtures in West Philadelphia schools.

Philadelphia has made great strides with the creation of career driven charter schools like CHAD and cooperation with Penn, Temple, and Edison. West Philadelphia is home to Belmont School, a charter school in one of the most depressed neighborhoods in the city. There also future plans for a rigorous academic public school modeled after Boston Latin as well another school dedicated to continuing education for dropouts. The radical reform of the school institution, not token budget increases, is the key to completely overhauling West Philadelphia schools. The Philadelphia School District, in conjunction with Microsoft's Partners in Learning Initiative, has plans to open the 800 student School of the Future in West Philadelphia. This \$63 million facility hopes to use state of the art technology to make learning "more continuous, more relevant and more adaptive." ("School of the Future" Promises Next Generation Education, August 31 2005) The Microsoft school blends the community and the school boundaries by

incorporating the Philadelphia Zoo, Philadelphia Museum of Art and the city's historic district to bring learning to life.

West Philadelphia schools could definitely benefit from this emphasis on community in practice. Going outside of the generally depressing dilapidated (save for the gorgeous Penn Alexander) West Philadelphia school building and out into the real life applications of class is a great way to engage students while also promoting good citizenry. If community involvement became part of the curriculum, an elective instead of physical education or music, students would be required to volunteer and research local community businesses, hospitals, libraries, or senior centers. This practice encourages volunteerism, while also providing community roots and relevant environments to apply class concepts. All city offices and organizations, as along with participating colleges like Penn, Drexel, Restaurant School, and USP would be required to have a minimum number of class internships taken for credit for West Philadelphia students. Seeing what kinds of jobs a diploma can get you is a successful motivator for staying in school. Local civic and business leaders could also provide mentorships. Another facet of the community involvement in West Philadelphia schools is the establishment of WPA style work credit after school opportunities. Why not allocate state or city funds to pay students that opt to participate in mural arts, park renovation, and elderly service programs? Programs can have a pay scale as well, rewarding greatest economic incentive to students who become employed as after-school tutors to their classmates, thus validating academic strength. Programs like Big Picture Mural Arts support mural arts in West Philadelphia and involve students in bettering the community while also offering a respite from bad home situations.

[\(http://www.muralarts.org/education/\)](http://www.muralarts.org/education/) Individual schools could adopt local neighborhood issues to focus on, such as William Cullen Bryant Academic School working with the Cobbs Creek Community Environmental Center, the Henry C. Lea School partnering with Cedar Park Neighbors, or the William F. Harrity School striving to clean up Mount Moriah Cemetery. All of these programs provide an alternative to students who feel they have no other options than to join underground economies or feel that traditional schooling does not apply to them

The Belmont School at 41st and Brown is located in a very depressed section of West Philadelphia. In the year 2000, 95.6% of the students came from low-income backgrounds, and not one person in the school achieved PSSA scores in the top percentiles. (Info Resources West Philly Data) It was at this very school that the Say Yes to Education program started with the Belmont 112. A sponsorship and academic intervention program founded by money manager and Penn graduate George Weiss, the Say Yes to Education Fund sponsors a selected class and pledges post-secondary scholarship funds for each student that can graduate high school. In the Belmont census tract, 6% of adults have a Bachelor's degree. In contrast, 19% of the Belmont Say Yes students have earned Bachelor's degrees, and another 20% have earned 2-year Associates degrees or completed trade schools. The success rates are possible at other schools in West Philadelphia, if similar support structures are founded. The Say Yes to Education Fund supports the students in offering tutoring, guidance, and internship opportunities. [\(http://www.sayyestoeducation.org/about/about.shtml\)](http://www.sayyestoeducation.org/about/about.shtml) On a higher level, the Say Yes to Education Fund not only promises financial support, but shows respect for kids that many other authority figures do not deign to care about. The impact of a hugely successful

New York businessman mentoring you gives hope to kids whose only connection to the Ivy League may be the shared 40th street El stop. Some members of the Belmont 112 were invited to the White House. Of the 70 Belmont students who received their high school diplomas, 44 (63%) took advantage of post secondary education, in the form of four-year institutions, trade schools, and associate degrees.

(<http://www.sayyestoeducation.org/>) This statistic is quite high compared to the average Philadelphia rates. However, one would probably expect higher rates when someone else promises to foot the financial bill for post high school education. So why are the percentages of students not closer to 90%? Current social stratification theories surmise that the most accurate indication of an individual's success rate in terms of educational attainment and income is related to his or her's parents' level of educational achievement. George Weiss may already be onto the connection between family educational involvement and exposure to a child's motivation and success in the scholastic world through the newest incarnation of the Say Yes program at the Bryant school in West Philadelphia.

The William F. Harrity School is located at 56th and Christian and enrolls students grades K-5. (West Philadelphia Public Schools, University of Pennsylvania Archives) Daily student attendance has averaged around 92% for the last five years, and teacher attendance was around 93% in 2004. There have been 148 suspensions from 2000-2004, with many being for repeat offenders. The school is seeing negative mobility, with more kids withdrawing than enrolling, and the current student population is down to 529. (School District of Philadelphia Harrity School Profile) It is in this context that the Say Yes to Education program selected a younger cohort than the Belmont 112, instead

focusing on two sets of third graders at Harrity. Robert and Jane Toll sponsored this group, using their affiliations with Penn to provide the students with after-school tutoring, summer educational opportunities, individual student tutoring services and a variety of cultural and social enrichment activities. (<http://www.sayyestoeducation.org/>) An astounding 94% of students in this cohort completed high school. The impact of community involvement and mentorship on urban youths is not easily ignored

The William Cullen Bryant School is home to the newest Say Yes to Education installment and its most recent permutation. The latest offer to the William Cullen Bryant students, who were just entering kindergarten, includes the offer to pay for parents to get their high school equivalency or community college degrees. For siblings, Weiss offered to supplement financial aid they get on their own. (Connecticut Philanthropist 1) Weiss' method of supporting the whole family in addition to the student helps foster a home environment conducive to academic achievement. West Philadelphia institutions of higher learning University of Pennsylvania, USP, and Drexel could implement similar programs that offer discounted opportunities for parents of West Philadelphia students to receive career training through their schools. Weiss himself comments on the family support model saying, "Our thought is that if we inspire parents to get their GED or community college degree, we end up bettering the whole family. Just doing it for students, as we realized, is great, but not enough." Stressing the active role parents play in encouraging school attendance and allowing parents academic participation opportunities keeps young students focused on graduating and achieving academic success in cooperation with the family.

The William Cullen Bryant School was one of the few West Philadelphia schools that has a substantial website. Although it has not been updated since the mid 1990s, Bryant's website provided information on the school's layout and goals. Bryant is divided into three small learning communities consisting of a primary unit (K-2), a non-graded unit, and an intermediate unit (3-5). (Info Resources West Philly Data) Bryant's goals focused on mainly behavioral problems, with emphasis on reducing suspensions and increasing attendance. Low attendance rates are common in West Philadelphia schools, a problem that may be combated with curriculum changes to better connect with urban students. Teaching African cultural history and engaging students in the community would help retain students that may otherwise feel like skipping a day is worth it. The Bryant school, in conjunction with the Say Yes to Education organization team, has championed a "Rites of Passage" program stressing character development, values orientation, citizenship, African American History and culture. (Bryant Chapter News, October 2004) Tailoring a curriculum to show students that academics can relate to them is a nice step towards engaging students. Also, researching African American history in a school that is 98.3% black helps foster a healthy sense of respect and cultural identity in students. Betty from the Walnut Hill Community Association's story of the students ignoring many of the business stories and anecdotes of speakers but tuning in to stories about hunting and guns that appealed to their interests relates to this idea, as an African American history course appeals to the culture of African American students, while still being respectable course material. Studying one's own history, especially when any cultural history and pride is not reflected in family life helps to boost student confidence, which in turn impacts behavior and success patterns. I feel that maybe

extending the study of African American history to also include Philadelphia history may be helpful in connecting to students in a relatable way. In a similar fashion, other cultural studies should be provided such as Latin American or Asian American. To supplement the cost of these new courses, perhaps an agreement with University of Pennsylvania and other area schools such as Temple, Drexel, West Chester, and Widener could be proposed in order to encourage college students to teach courses for credits, grant money, financial aid, and teaching experience.

A recurrent theme in West Philadelphia schools, 93.1 % of students in the Lea School are from low-income families. 59 students were enrolled in Special Education, and 131 students were of Limited English Proficiency. (Info Resources West Philly Data) In 1993-1994, there were 225 out of school suspensions at the Lea School, showing a real problem with discipline and behavior. The concept of suspensions relies on the punishment parents will dole out after a child is forcibly adjourned from attending school for a certain time period. When the traditional family unit is unavailable, the efficacy of suspension is affected and suspension can actually turn out to be a mini vacation for many students. One way to deal with uninvolved parents and troublesome kids is to create a boarding school for disciplinary students. Removing students from the environment that was encouraging unacceptable behaviors is a first step towards preventing this behavior and retraining students. Penn has had a history with the Henry C. Lea School. The University has finally returned to the school in the past decade, after removing support and affiliation back in the 1960s. Perhaps in atonement, Penn, the Graduate School of Education, and the Center for Community Partnerships have become very involved with this under performing school. Penn affiliated students and faculty

volunteer as tutors, counsel on behavioral issues, and also help train teachers. The University has aided in opening a new library at Lea, a key to promoting literacy. The University District teamed up with Penn to construct a 1,600 square foot Lea School Garden. The garden serves not only as a beautiful respite from the concrete jungle of Walnut Hill, but also as a learning center for botanical study.

The Sadie Tanner Mossell Alexander School resides on the site of the former Philadelphia Divinity School at 42nd and Spruce and is commonly known as the Penn Alexander School. Born out a Memorandum of Understanding about creating a new public school to combat existing overcrowding and build local ties, Penn Alexander has been strongly affiliated with Penn since its inception. The Graduate School of Education dean assists the academic development, Penn students tutor Penn Alexander students, Penn buildings are made available to Penn Alexander students, and faculty members help select the highly qualified teaching candidates. (West Philadelphia Initiatives 47) The physical \$19 million dollar, 83,000 square foot edifice is definitely not the norm for West Philadelphia schools. Harrity was built in 1913, Belmont in 1927, Lea in 1915, and Bryant in 1904. (University Archives) Going to school everyday in a poorly-maintained, very old building is not an enjoyable experience. Seeing the School District's neglect in addressing old school buildings does not do much for a students self image and notion of their school's worth. Students in the Lea School area are being bussed to other areas due to overcrowding and spatial issues. (The Plan for West Philadelphia) The very desirable Penn Alexander School has a teaching applicant to position rate of 25:1, teacher to student ratio of 23:1, and receives up to a \$1,000 per student subsidy from Penn. Not every school can afford this luxury to keep class sizes down. This illustrates the success

corporate sponsors can have on public schools. Businesses should be awarded tax breaks for financially supporting and adopting causes at West Philadelphia schools. The Penn Alexander School has already been hailed as a “gold standard” by the National Association of Independent Colleges and Universities be used to show the amazing effects of large outside donors adopting and incubating an innovative urban school environment.

Large, national school reform based on accountability, improving PSSA scores, and choice vouchers can help impact West Philadelphia schools. However, the key to “fixing” West Philadelphia schools lies on a more micro-level, within the very neighborhoods and city in which they reside. West Philadelphia school reform should stress Gemeinschaft community involvement both on the students’ part with after school programs and on the adult level with mentorships, corporate sponsorship, and the University of Pennsylvania’s assistance. Inculcating the values of good citizenry, while also showing students that they can make a difference in their community does a lot more in creating stand-up and motivated individuals than drilling the antiquated curriculum and PSSA tests. The Say Yes to Education fund shows the effect of sponsoring children has as well, even in areas of West Philadelphia that are drowning in poverty. The outside organization has probably had more effect on Belmont, Harranty, and Bryant school kids than any impotent bureaucratized decision from the Philadelphia School District. West Philadelphia schools can get better, if both the schools and community realize their interconnectedness and begin to unite and mentor one another.

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