

**The Past and Future of Five West Philadelphia Schools**

November 3, 2005

By Evan Goldin

The fortunes of West Philadelphia's schools have risen and fallen with the prosperity of the area they inhabit.

Eastern West Philadelphia began to see significant growth beginning in the first few decades of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, when the first bridges were built across the Schuylkill River. By the late 1800s, an explosion of growth in West Philadelphia accompanied the expansion of Philadelphia's trolley system. As it became possible to live farther away from Center City, well-to-do families began moving westward.<sup>1</sup>

Many schools were constructed in the first few decades of the 19<sup>th</sup> century to service the burgeoning upper-middle class residents that resided about 20 blocks west of the University of Pennsylvania campus. The Philadelphia School District constructed the William Cullen Bryant School in 1904, the Henry C. Lea School in 1915 and the William F. Harrity School in 1913. The Belmont School, which services the working-class neighborhood of Mantua was built in 1925.<sup>2</sup>

However, new transportation changes in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, coupled with massive demographic and economic shifts, would send West Philadelphia and its schools on a spiral downward.

With the advent of the automobile and its widespread use after World War Two, many families who lived in West Philadelphia could now afford to live farther away from the city, in suburbs such as Gladwyne and Haverford. Due to new housing construction and financing regulations, "it was cheaper to buy a new suburban home ... than to rent a comparable structure in the city."<sup>3</sup> Thanks to the Federal Housing Administration's anti-

---

<sup>1</sup> Lawrence J. Biond, "West Philadelphia and Powelton Historic District Development Timeline," Powelton Village Community Association, September 1996, 9 Oct. 2005, <[swarthmore.edu/Humanities/langlab/powelton/powelton2.html](http://swarthmore.edu/Humanities/langlab/powelton/powelton2.html)>

<sup>2</sup> West Philadelphia Data and Information Resources. Sidney Wong. 2002. University of Pennsylvania, 8 Oct. 2005 <[westphillydata.library.upenn.edu](http://westphillydata.library.upenn.edu)>

<sup>3</sup> Kenneth Jackson, *Crabgrass Frontier*, (London: Oxford University Press, 1987) 206.

urban bias<sup>4</sup> — “white flight” to the suburbs took place at a quickening pace in the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, following World War Two.

Making matters worse, this pattern of white flight coincided with a massive movement of blacks from the South to urban areas in the North. Coupled with former West Philadelphia residents subdividing their houses into apartments to pay for their new suburban homes<sup>5</sup>, West Philadelphia saw a steady population with a decreasing tax base. In 1925, 30,498 blacks lived in West Philadelphia; by 1970, that figure had skyrocketed to a peak of 184,865.<sup>6</sup>

As Penn’s former secretary, Lillian Burns, described, “Homeowners who chose to stay found themselves surrounded by and powerless before the gradual decay. Population density increased, crime increased, all the city problems increased.”<sup>7</sup> This created a vicious, downward cycle, in which decreasing quality of life, schools and safety only served to quicken the pace of “white flight,” which then served to increase the problems further. With these changes, the neighborhoods of West Philadelphia and the schools that serviced them began to fall into decline.

Making matters worse, poor families often have much less parental involvement than their wealthier counterparts. One study showed that 71 percent of mothers in poverty have no paid sick leave — as opposed to 36 percent of those not below the poverty line — 46 percent had no paid vacation and 67 percent do not have the flexibility to leave their job site.<sup>8</sup>

Because poor families are forced to work full schedules — sometimes taking two jobs — parents undoubtedly have less time to be involved with their children’s education. As a result,

---

<sup>4</sup> Jackson, 217.

<sup>5</sup> Elizabeth Rossi, “Civic House lecture explores history of local community,” *The Daily Pennsylvanian*, 17 Oct. 2003.

<sup>6</sup> Philadelphia City Planning Commission, *The Plan for West Philadelphia*, (Philadelphia: June, 2004) 62

<sup>7</sup> Leon S. Rosenthal, *A History of Philadelphia’s University City*, “A New Concept For New Neighbors” (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania, 1963)

<sup>8</sup> Gerald Bracey, *Social Involvement and the Working Poor*, Education Disinformation Detection and Reporting Agency, 2001.

with a home environment that is not conducive to learning, students are less motivated and do not perform as well in school. A two-year study of parental involvement in low-income schools showed “the single variable most positively connected to all literacy skills was formal involvement in parent-school activities such as [Parent-Teacher Association] participation, attending school activities and serving as a volunteer.”<sup>9</sup> These social and economic changes began to take a toll on the schools.

School district test scores from 1981 show the depths of the problem. By that time, schools that had once taught advanced reading and writing skills to middle-class students had fallen to or below the national average in many categories. At the Bryant School, the distribution of percentiles on the California Achievement Test reflected the national average. Lea and Harrity schools showed similar patterns. At the working-class Belmont School, only seven percent of students placed in the top 15<sup>th</sup> percentile.<sup>10</sup> Unfortunately, the situation would only continue to deteriorate.

Since 1981, the first time each school’s CAT scores were released, the quality of education in West Philadelphia has fallen drastically. According to Bryant Elementary School’s Pennsylvania System of School Assessment scores, 42.5 percent of fifth graders were below basic math proficiency levels. Statewide, the figure was 11.9 percent. Almost 60 percent of Bryant’s fifth graders have below basic reading skills, compared to 19.1 percent statewide.<sup>11</sup>

Similar conditions persist elsewhere.

At the William F. Harrity School, only 5.4 percent of fifth graders showed advanced math skills, while 49 percent of third graders were below basic reading levels. While 13

---

<sup>9</sup> San Diego County Office of Education, “Parent Involvement and Student Achievement,” 1997. [sdcoe.k12.ca.us/lret/family/pia.html](http://sdcoe.k12.ca.us/lret/family/pia.html)

<sup>10</sup> Veron Loeb, *Philadelphia Inquirer*, “Analysis – Test Shows a Crisis in Upper Levels of Philadelphia Schools,” 16 Dec. 1982.

<sup>11</sup> Pennsylvania Department of Education, PSSA Mathematics and Reading Results - 2005 Scores.

percent of Lea Elementary third graders have advanced math skills, 43 percent still showed below basic math capabilities, compared to a statewide average of 8 percent. Results were even worse at Belmont Elementary School, where three quarters of fifth graders lacked proficiency in both math and reading.<sup>12</sup>

Just as telling as low student achievement, however, is the dilapidated state of many of West Philadelphia's schools.

One day last spring, two teachers led a visitor to the top floor of Bryant Elementary School, a big, old brick building in West Philadelphia where three classrooms had been declared off-limits because they turn into swamps during downpours. In one of the darkened rooms, where chairs were piled on desks like a restaurant after hours, the two men pointed angrily at water damage that had ruined walls and ceiling. . . . A leaky roof is not the worst problem, just the most visible one, they said.<sup>13</sup>

Because of Philadelphia's declining tax base in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, school district officials were forced to cut back on budget items such as maintenance. The school district's repair budget was slashed by 75 percent from 1975 to 1980. "By putting off small repairs, small problems, when neglected, become bigger and more expensive problems . . . so the school system is creating a massive burden for the future by allowing its buildings to deteriorate."<sup>14</sup> This makes fixing schools after years of neglect incredibly expensive — and it means diverting money that could be going to hiring more teachers.

In the meantime, many of West Philadelphia's schools have become extremely segregated. Harrity, Bryant and Belmont elementary schools all have more than 97 percent black students — and 95.6 percent of Belmont students come from low-income households. Lea elementary is one of the most "integrated," with 88.5 percent black students and 86.4

---

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> Mary Bishop, Thomas Ferrick and Donald Kimelman, "The Shame of the Schools: The Obstacles are Many, the Rewards are Few," *Philadelphia Inquirer*, 2 Sept. 1981.

<sup>14</sup> Mary Bishop, Thomas Ferrick and Donald Kimelman, "The Shame of the Schools: Falling Apart at the Seams," *Philadelphia Inquirer*, 3 Sept. 1981.

percent from low-income households.<sup>15</sup> And the extreme poverty makes learning much more difficult, as students are often less focused on education and many decide to drop out early, taking jobs instead of staying in school. As one Philadelphia teacher describes,

When you have kids who live with rats and roaches, who have seen dead bodies in the street, who come in and tell you a little story about how their uncle got shot the other night, you come to understand why they don't always concentrate the way you would like them to.<sup>16</sup>

Even the best teacher has a tough time overcoming their students' lifetime of deprivation. However, despite serving some of the poorest students in the country, Philadelphia's teachers are some of the best-paid urban teachers in the country. On average, they made \$56,071 last year, \$10,000 more than the national average.<sup>17</sup> In 1981, Philadelphia ranked first in teacher pay and fringe benefits out of the 10 largest urban districts. At the same time, "Among those same urban districts, Philadelphia rank[ed] dead last in spending for textbooks. . . . Homework is nearly unheard of in many classes because students are forbidden to take books home. Some history and social studies texts are outdated to the point of near uselessness."<sup>18</sup> Teacher pay, mismanagement and a number of other factors came to a head in December of 2001, when the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania took over Philadelphia's failing schools. While some gains have been made since — including millions in state aid — many problems remain. However, there is some good news coming out of West Philadelphia.

In 2001, the School District, in cooperation with the University of Pennsylvania, finished construction of a new elementary school in the Spruce Hill neighborhood west of its

---

<sup>15</sup> *West Philadelphia Data and Information Resources*, Sidney Wong.

<sup>16</sup> Mary Bishop et al., "The Shame of the Schools: The Obstacles are Many, the Rewards are Few," 3 Sept. 1981.

<sup>17</sup> Martha Woodall, "Doing More and Getting Paid Less is Routine at Private Schools," *Philadelphia Inquirer*, 6 Mar. 2005

<sup>18</sup> Mary Bishop, Thomas Ferrick and Donald Kimelman, "The Shame of the Schools: How the City's Children are Neglected by the System," *Philadelphia Inquirer*, 3 Sept. 1981.

campus. The school — the first university-assisted school in the nation<sup>19</sup> — has become a model of high quality, urban education.

Penn-Alexander has truly become one of the most diverse elementary schools in West Philadelphia, with 57 percent black, 19 percent Caucasian and 18 percent Asian students. And the attendees aren't simply just from Penn-related families: Penn-affiliated students make up only 23 percent of the student body.<sup>20</sup> So while the school draws many students from the local community, 52 percent of fifth graders showed advanced math skills, and two-thirds of eighth graders demonstrated proficient or advanced reading skills — a vast difference from Lea, Bryant, Harrity and Belmont schools.<sup>21</sup> Due to a \$1000-per student subsidy from Penn, which has kept class size below 23 students<sup>22</sup>, and direct assistance from the Graduate School of Education, the Penn-Alexander School has proven great urban education can be achieved, even at a school where 34 percent<sup>23</sup> of students are below the poverty line.

Another reason for the success is the school's practice of selecting teachers on the basis of quality, whereas most Philadelphia schools are forced to abide by union rules mandating top spots for senior teachers. Philadelphia Schools CEO Paul Vallas has said, "Having the ability to select staff is something that really has to be done."<sup>24</sup> The lessons of Penn-Alexander should not be contained to Spruce Hill, however, they can be used in bringing a high quality education to other schools across the area and city.

---

<sup>19</sup> Lara Gitlin, "Conference Analyzes U.'s Assisted School," *The Daily Pennsylvanian*, 4 Nov. 2003.

<sup>20</sup> John Kromer and Lucy Kerman, *West Philadelphia Initiatives*, (University of Pennsylvania: 2004) 48.

<sup>21</sup> Pennsylvania Department of Education, PSSA Mathematics and Reading Results - 2005 Scores.

<sup>22</sup> John Kromer et al, *West Philadelphia Initiatives*, 48.

<sup>23</sup> *West Philadelphia Data and Information Resources*, Sidney Wong.

<sup>24</sup> Lara Gitlin, "Penn Alexander School Commended by District," *The Daily Pennsylvanian*, 20 May 2004.

If Philadelphia's schools, such as Henry C. Lea Elementary, are to succeed, it is going to take a huge infusion of money, a more progressive attitude toward education more community involvement and a commitment to reducing educational segregation.

Money is by far the single most important factor in a quality education. Penn's experience in local education provides a great example: When the institution retracted its support of University City High, the school fell into disrepair, whereas a 10-year financial commitment to the Penn-Alexander School has had great success. And on the whole, the gap in funding between Philadelphia and suburban schools has grown wider. In 1992 the average suburban district spent \$690 per pupil — 10 percent — more than Philadelphia did. By 2002, the difference rose to \$1,867. The best suburban districts spend from \$3,800 to \$7,962 more than Philadelphia. Even closing the gap with average suburban schools would require \$300 million, but it is an investment that is badly needed.<sup>25</sup>

Using more funding to create a more competitive hiring environment is only effective if it is coupled with a different attitude toward education in Philadelphia. School District Management must work to curb the excessive power of the teachers' union. The district must have the ability to fire the worst and hire the best teachers, without coming to blows with union leaders.

On a more individual level, schools must strive to involve the community in the education process. Philanthropist George Weiss used his Say Yes to Education program to galvanize parents and students and to take money out of the education equation for an entire class at Belmont Elementary. As a result, 20 of his 112 students went on to earn bachelor's degrees.<sup>26</sup> While an equal number ended up in jail, the Belmont 112 did beat the odds: On average, among all blacks who start kindergarten, only one in 10 complete four years of post-

---

<sup>25</sup> Michael Churchill and Paul Socolar, "In a Highly Segregated System, Many Racial Gaps," *Public School Notebook*, Summer 2005.

<sup>26</sup> Dale Mezzacappa, "For 17 years, Gifts Have Signified Hope," *Philadelphia Inquirer*, 19 Dec. 2004.



secondary education.<sup>27</sup> Parents must be able to get excitement about things other than a free education, however. They must be involved in every step of their children's education; in 2003, Philadelphia reported only 154 schools had "school councils," where parents could provide input to school administrators and teachers. Perhaps more telling, "at a majority of predominantly nonwhite schools there are no school councils."<sup>28</sup> The Philadelphia School District, along with principals and administrators at schools like Bryant and Lea, must make a concerted effort to make sure the push for education does not end when the bell rings — it must continue at home. Pushes for racial equality in education, which did not end with the Civil Rights Movement, must also be expanded.

Schools occupied mostly by blacks, who make up a large proportion of Philadelphia's public school students, must be brought in line with racially mixed schools. "The gap between White and African American students' math scores was 29 points in 1992 and is 31 points today."<sup>29</sup> In addition, school administrators should make a concerted effort to reverse the trend of resegregation, and, where possible, encourage white, black, Asian and Hispanic students to be educated together.

School administrators, state and federal government officials, along with parents, must make a permanent commitment to urban education. A great education can be achieved in inner cities — the Penn Alexander School shows that — but only with the commitment of money, teachers and the community.

---

<sup>27</sup> Dale Mezzacappa, "Dreams of College Meet Dose of Reality," *Philadelphia Inquirer*, 25 Feb. 1996.

<sup>28</sup> Michael Churchill and Paul Socolar, "In a Highly Segregated System, Many Racial Gaps,"

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*