West Philadelphia Schools

The history of West Philadelphia’s schools begins with an overview of the area’s demographics since the close of World War II. Even before the war, the city was flooded with workers—many of them African American, moving north in the Great Migration—looking to capitalize on the increase in factory jobs needed as the nation prepared itself for war. In the decade after the war, returning G.I.s, a national baby boom, and continued resettlement in major cities triggered a sudden increase in the construction of Philadelphia schools, especially in the busy West Philadelphia community. The new schools seemed to define the promise of a nation enjoying economic security for the first time since the roaring 1920s; education could once again become a priority.

This began to change as increased wealth prompted many families to move outward from the cities into the suburbs. What was once a thriving urban community was left to the people who couldn’t afford to move to suburbia, or were otherwise discouraged from moving due to issues of race or nationality. Most of the new suburban developments either implicitly or explicitly refused to admit people of color, immigrants, or Jews. Philadelphia was no exception; by the mid 1960s the city was disproportionately poor, underprivileged, and populated by the groups excluded from suburbia, most prominently African Americans.

West Philadelphia, an area especially affected by the great movement towards the suburbs, was left to fend for itself. The many public schools became inundated with
students from poor families who couldn’t afford to put emphasis on education. Classroom sizes soared, as resources became more and more scarce. As early as the 1960s city officials knew that their schools were in trouble. The University of Pennsylvania, housed in the heart of West Philadelphia, began to fund a system of various programs designed to improve local schools; a 1964 partnership with the Henry C. Lea School attempted to help by enhancing curriculum, offering in-service training to teachers and administrators, and putting emphasis on subjects like science, art, and foreign language.\(^1\) Over the next two decades Penn developed similar programs with other university-related schools, only to find that by the 1980s the education system was in nothing short of peril.

The problems with West Philadelphia schools were manifold: insufficient funding, enormous class sizes, trying to teach students living in poverty (who often had more pressing concerns to contend with), and a city-wide policy of promotion based not on academic standing but by age group had devastated schools almost beyond repair.\(^2\) The Henry C. Lea School, the university-related institution previously mentioned, was one of the lowest ranked elementary schools in the nation. In 1985 the district implemented a new promotion policy—the first in almost forty years—demanding that students receive passing grades in several specified subjects, as well as perform within a specified range on standardized tests, to advance to the next grade level. To accommodate the increased number of students expected to be held back, Lea School expanded its remedial summer school program,\(^3\) but little else was done to supplement the new promotion policy.
The 1985 district promotion policy, while somewhat standardizing ability within grade levels, did little to help grades, test scores, dropout rates, or other related social ills such as teen violence, drug use, and pregnancy. West Philadelphia schools were in trouble, and the entire community felt the effects. Education was in dire need of funding, which the city didn’t have, and attention, which administrators, teachers, and parents hardly knew how to direct. Students were generally unmotivated, and even those that were faced socio-economic hardships that restricted if not outright denied them success after graduation.

Enter the Belmont 112. In 1987, philanthropist and Penn alumni George Weiss and his wife Diane promised the entire class of sixth graders of Belmont Elementary School full college scholarships upon graduation from high school. This astounding offer was given in conjunction with some after-school tutoring programs, as well as counseling designed to help the 112 youngsters achieve Weiss’ goal. The students could not have been more in need; Belmont School was known to have “a history of low student achievement,” among other difficulties.4 Almost all of the Belmont 112 were African American, about a third were from single parent households, and 43 were classified as special education students, many with learning disabilities.5

Weiss’ program seemed to be a godsend: within a year, 98 of the 112 were promoted to eighth grade (8% more than the district average), and 10 of the 43 special education students were moved up into normal classes.6 But despite the astounding reward awaiting those students who continued their education through a diploma, Weiss’ program did not transform the education system as drastically as he had originally hoped. At graduation, the moment of reckoning, fewer than half of the original class were on
schedule to receive diplomas. Two boys were dead, two were in prison, and twenty girls had carried pregnancies to term. But statistics of the class as a whole were encouraging, as 17% more students and 9% more special education students graduated on time than from the sixth grade class just one year above the Belmont 112. The Weiss’ goal needed some fine tuning; it was apparent that even grand financial incentive was not enough to motivate most schoolchildren.

In 1990 another philanthropic couple, Robert and Jane Toll, made a similar offer to a class of twenty-six third graders at the William F. Harrity School under Weiss’ “Say Yes to Education” program, created in 1987 with the University of Pennsylvania and based on his work with the Belmont 112. College was guaranteed if the students could graduate high school, and programs were supplemented with help from Penn’s Graduate School of Education. A few months later they expanded their offer—bolstered by independent donors—to include all Harrity School third grade classes.

The second school to be a part of “Say Yes to Education” in West Philadelphia, Harrity’s program increased the level of out-of-class activities, including summer field trips and more counseling and tutorial programs after school. Harrity had been one of the poorest schools in the area, with almost 75% of their students from families on welfare, and both Weiss and the Tolls hoped that reaching students at a younger age—by three years—and expanding the after-school tutoring and counseling sessions would help the Harrity class be more successful than the Belmont 112. And eventually, numbers proved that the Tolls’ “Say Yes to Education” efforts had indeed improved the original Belmont School program. Significantly more students graduated from high school, and at the close of 2004, eight of the Harrity students had graduated from college,
ten were still enrolled, and even more were seeking degrees in various trade schools.\textsuperscript{11} But even with this improvement, the numbers were still disappointingly low.

Ten years after Harrity School third graders got their chance at a full college education, George Weiss and his “Say Yes to Education” came back to West Philadelphia to try again. The target: 47 kindergarteners at William C. Bryant Elementary School and their families. Like Belmont and Harrity, students at Bryant School were overwhelming underprivileged and mostly African American.\textsuperscript{12} The previous “Say Yes to Education” efforts had proven that simple fiscal incentive had failed to fulfill the goals of the organization; supporting that incentive with counseling and tutoring, and starting with younger students, had improved results, but only slightly.

This time around Weiss decided to bolster “Say Yes to Education” in a few revolutionary ways. He started with the youngest students possible (kindergarteners), and targeted kids whose families had already proven to be involved in their education: the Bryant 47 were all students who had already completed a preschool program. Weiss aimed part of the new effort towards bettering the welfare of the entire Bryant School, agreeing to employ a reading teacher to help all students achieve early literacy. But most importantly—and perhaps most dramatically—Weiss had included resources to help the 47 kindergarteners’ families to continue their education. Parents were encouraged to use financing and support from “Say Yes to Education” to get high school equivalency diplomas, or even community college degrees. Siblings of the Bryant 47 were promised help with college tuition. Additional programs and services provided by the Penn Graduate School of Education along with “Say Yes to Education” offered after-school activities, tutoring, a summer school open to the entire neighborhood, and individualized
counseling for the students as well as their families. This multi-pronged approach—financial incentive, trying to improve the schools themselves, engaging the whole community, and getting the families involved—seems to have created the most successful “Say Yes to Education” program yet, although the students are still too young to provide graduation and college statistics.

Here, then, are several examples of attempts to fix failing West Philadelphia Schools. The Lea School, despite early partnership with the University of Pennsylvania, has succumbed to the pressures of being understaffed, underfunded, and full of students from low socio-economic backgrounds that have little incentive to learn, or indeed to show up at all. The three “Say Yes to Education” programs held in West Philadelphia—at the Belmont, Harrity, and Bryant Schools—were increasingly successful with each level of community involvement. This seems to prove that the answer to failing schools is not simply to throw money at the problem; instead, it would appear that we need to reach students early, provide assistance for the school and the neighborhood as a whole, and, most importantly, involve the parents and families of students in their education. Hiring more teachers to make class sizes smaller—a standard political response to problem schools—will only do so much; West Philadelphia schools are in trouble because the families and communities that attend the schools are in trouble. We need to make efforts to improve the basic quality of life of these students, not just through incentives to attend college or continue education, but by real personal support. This means more tutoring, more counseling, more one-on-one conversations, more after-school programs: all the elements that have made George Weiss’ most recent “Say Yes to Education” the most successful.
Currently, a new school in the West Philadelphia area seems to incorporate all of these advantages into one gleaming package. The Sadie Tanner Mossell Alexander University of Pennsylvania Partnership School, more commonly known as the Penn Alexander School, was built just two blocks from the university in 2002. Like the Lea School and the “Say Yes to Education” programs, Penn Alexander is closely tied to the university, bragging an extra Penn supplied $1000 per student per year. Classes are small, and more diverse than other West Philadelphia schools, but the Penn Alexander School’s real advantage lies in its auxiliary programs.

Children lucky enough to live in the immediate neighborhood have found a school that specializes in subjects far beyond the classic staples of reading, writing, and mathematics. Students are taught Spanish from kindergarten; art and music departments flourish. Physical differences between Penn Alexander and other West Philadelphia schools are impressively evident, as well: there is new technology in every classroom, and the school’s architecture was based around small-group instruction and inventive teaching strategies. Teachers are hand picked by school administrators, and are encouraged to collaborate within the grades. The university provides after-school services, like tutoring, and the school often reaches out to the surrounding community with events and activities that attempt to involve entire families and even neighbors.

Although only in service for a few years, Penn Alexander has already opened its doors to students in preschool through eighth grades. The results have been encouraging, even if it is far too early to determine if all these extracurricular advantages dramatically improve the quality of education for these students.
It seems then that there is no simple answer to improving West Philadelphia schools. Small class sizes and a variety of curriculum—such as music, art, and physical education—are no longer answers to the problems today’s students face. They need incentive, they need desire, they need support: namely, conditions that can only be found outside of the classroom. Education is no longer a problem contained within the school system; administrators, public officials, and taxpayers must look to families and communities to take responsibility for their students. After-school programs that encourage learning, give more personalized attention, keep kids off idle streets, and offer tutoring, clubs, or athletic activity seem to be one answer. Getting parents directly involved with their children’s education—in any way possible—seems to be another. But a deep and constant communication between school and community seems to be vital for the success of either. It is clear that the obstacles students face today are largely socio-economic. Therefore, we cannot hope to significantly improve the quality of education in West Philadelphia until we can manage to improve the quality of life in West Philadelphia. School and community: the two institutions are invariably linked, indeed totally dependent on each other. The problem of failing schools needs to be approached with a broader eye, like in the case of George Weiss’ Bryant Program or the Penn Alexander School, a view that understands that students face adversity from a number of directions, not simply curriculum. Only then do our students—and our communities—stand a chance.
Works Cited:

3. Woodall “New Promotion Rules”
5. Russ “Present for the Future”
13. Mezzacappa “For 17 Years”
15. Snyder “Penn’s Resources”
16. Snyder “Penn’s Resources”