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West Philadelphia Public Schools: What Works, What Doesn’t

Philadelphia has a lot to offer its residents, a rich history, vibrant neighborhoods and prestigious universities among other things. However, one area in which Philadelphia cannot boast is their public school system. Sure there are a few standout institutions such as Central High school, but on a whole the public schools are not much to desire. I grew up in Northeast Philadelphia, but I am not able to provide first hand experience as a student, because I attended parochial school K-12. My parents did want me to receive a Catholic education, but they also were just not comfortable with my siblings or me attending a public school in the city and they were willing to take on the financial burden to ensure that we did not have to. However, since entering college, I have become familiar with West Philadelphia public schools because I have tutored at various places on a weekly basis. Within this group of schools some ranked better than others, but on a whole they were lacking in both discipline and resources. There was a great disparity between these students’ educational experiences and my own, even though both schools were situated within the same city.

Fortunately, the Philadelphia public school system is not just being abandoned to waste away. There is always an interest as to how to better these failing schools, but there is just not a definitive answer. Therefore, throughout the years there have been many attempts and initiatives to improve public schools and their students’ education. These attempts range from charter schools to investments made by surrounding universities to private investors. Thus far some have fared better than others, but none has solved the huge problems facing public schools. A few have even completely failed,
such as when the University of Pennsylvania abandoned its involvement with the Lea School in 1969, which is now one of the toughest schools in the city. For the most part, however, these programs have offered individual students hope and assured Philadelphia residents that there are people who really do want a better education and chance for children in the city.

In 1962 the University of Pennsylvania launched a collaborative effort with the Henry C. Lea School to reinforce community-school relations and build a network that would strengthen the grade school curriculum. The University of Pennsylvania along with The West Philadelphia Corporation (a non-profit group that consisted of the University of Pennsylvania, Drexel Institute of Technology, Philadelphia College of Pharmacy and Science and the Presbyterian Hospital) lent resources and faculty to Lea. The initiatives were aimed at establishing a library, art education, and foreign language program and further enriching the existing reading, mathematics and science departments.1

Unfortunately though, the 1960s proved to be a turbulent time for Philadelphia, and the Lea School felt the effects. Many African-Americans from the South began to move up North, settling in cities like Philadelphia. This led to a huge white flight to the suburbs, dramatically decreasing the number of owner occupied homes in West Philadelphia. City officials and other real estate agencies were less than thrilled with this change in population and often made it very difficult for African-American families to acquire loans that were needed for purchasing homes. The new residents also did not

1The West Philadelphia Corporation “The University-Related Program in The Henry C. Lea School.” Jan 1964
have the same income as the former, and the socioeconomic status of the neighborhoods dropped, including the area around Lea.

When Penn first began investing in Lea in the early 60s it was seen as a very competitive, promising school. The high status of the school was even the reason why some residents settled in West Philadelphia. This was the case with Betty Reavis who moved into the neighborhood in 1957 and is now the president of the Walnut Hill Civic Association. She and her husband were considering other areas, but Walnut Hill won out because of Lea’s high academic standing. Unfortunately, Lea did not hold this image of a quality education for long, because by 1969 it was no longer viewed as competitive and Penn pulled out leaving the school to fend for itself. Penn, however, was not the only group to abandon Lea; Betty Reavis also took her children out of the public school and enrolled them in a private academy.

Penn and The West Philadelphia Corporation abandoned Lea at a time the school needed them most. Had the 1960s not been so tumultuous for Philadelphia or if Penn had ridden it out, Lea may have been considered one of the best public schools in the city. But that was not the case, and now it is thought to be one of the worst. Penn’s first attempt at setting up an extensive relationship with a public school was disastrous. However, this did not stop them from trying again nearly 40 years later.

The Sadie Tanner Mossell Alexander University of Pennsylvania Partnership School opened in 2001 to just those students who were in kindergarten and first grade. The classes were held in a building that used to house Penn’s Divinity school. By 2004 the Penn Alexander School was located in a brand new $19 million building, made
possible by Penn, and was open to pre-kindergarten through eighth grade. ² The building has a television studio for student productions, an art room that features a kiln and carpeted corridors. ³ These are Luxuries that other Philadelphia public schools can only dream about.

The building, however, is not what makes Penn-Alexander so impressive; it is their curriculum and classroom environment. With the $1,000 per student subsidies provided by Penn, the school is able to maintain much smaller class sizes, start Spanish instruction during kindergarten and allow each student to learn an instrument of their choice. The case is immensely different in other Philadelphia public schools; where one-third do not even have full-time music and art teachers. ⁴

Penn-Alexander seems much more promising than Lea ever did, because Penn did not go into a preexisting school, it created its own. Now, Penn has much more control, and much more invested. However, the school has not yet been open long enough to test Penn’s commitment. Thus far this new millennium the West Philadelphia community has been on an upswing. The climate of today is placid compared to the turmoil of the 1960s. If that type of chaos returned to Philadelphia in the near future there is no way of telling how Penn would react in regards to the Penn-Alexander School.

Penn-Alexander provides a wonderful opportunity for some West Philadelphia public schools students. But the key word there is some; therefore the majority of children do not reap the benefits of this school. The school can only take so many

² Saffron, Inga “Model School in West Philadelphia is built for Learning.” The Philadelphia Inquirer 3 Jan 2003: E1
³ Snyder, Susan “Penn’s resources give school a lift—fine reviews, atrium view mark school’s opening.” The Philadelphia Inquirer 23 Oct 2002: B1
⁴ Saffron, Inga “Model School in West Philadelphia is built for Learning.” The Philadelphia Inquirer 3 Jan 2003: E1
students, and there must be neighborhood boundaries marking who can and cannot attend the school. The making of these boundaries proved to be a very contentious process, leaving many angry. However, there really is nothing that can be done as of right now to address this inequality. The funding is not available and odds are never will be. The Penn-Alexander school is only an experimental ideal, and as of right now there are no plans of how to make it the norm.

The University of Pennsylvania is not the only actor trying to make the public school system better in West Philadelphia. There are also individual philanthropists that have donated both their time and money to better students’ educations. One of these people is George Weiss a Penn alumnus and the founder of Say Yes to Education. In 1987 Weiss held an assembly for the 112 students in the 6th grade at the Belmont School; there he promised them a free college education if they graduated from high school. The program was not limited strictly to the prize at the end of the journey, Weiss, his wife and the organization they created would accompany the students. Say Yes to Education was equipped with dedicated mentors, reading teachers, after-school enrichment and summer school. Weiss believed he was providing the children with everything they needed to succeed. As it turned out it was just not enough for the majority of students, and the path was much tougher than ever imagined for both parties.

As was the case with the Lea school, timing proved to be a problem for the Belmont 112. There was a crack epidemic across the United States in the early 90s and the problem had a crippling effect on the West Philadelphia community. Therefore these students were coming of age in a period that was tougher than the generation before and

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5 Ibid.
6 Mezzacappa, Dale “For 17 years, gifts have signified hope—A free college tuition program keeps expanding.” The Philadelphia Inquirer 19 Dec 2004: B1
after. In the end 20 students got bachelor degrees, but the same amount had also gone to prison. Christopher Wood is one of the Belmont 112 who somehow veered off the track, and now sits in prison for third-degree murder. Wood now realizes the opportunity he missed. However, his mother, Hannah Oakman has somewhat of a different opinion. She takes some of the blame for Wood’s mistakes, but she also believes that Weiss’ generosity did more harm than good. In fact, if she could do it again she would decline the offer. Oakman believes that the scholarship just added more chaos to her son’s unstable life and it facilitated jealousy from others in the neighborhood that were not part of the program.

Belmont did not completely fail, but by no means was it a complete success. However, Weiss and others did not stop; they tried to learn from Belmont’s mistakes. One obvious point was concluded—they started too old. Therefore, when Robert Toll and his wife Jane followed in Weiss’ footsteps, it is not surprising that their offer was extended to the 78 3rd graders at the William F. Harrity School in 1990. The Toll’s promised the same type of commitment and funding that the Weiss’ had provided for the Belmont 112. As of May 2004 eight students had graduated from college and 10 were enrolled.

In 2000 George Weiss once again extended his generosity in Philadelphia, this time it was at the William Cullen Bryant Academic Plus School and it was to the

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7 Ibid.
9 Mezzacappa, Dale “For 17 years, gifts have signified hope—A free college tuition program keeps expanding.” The Philadelphia Inquirer 19 Dec 2004: B1
11 Mezzacappa, Dale “For 17 years, gifts have signified hope—A free college tuition program keeps expanding.” The Philadelphia Inquirer 19 Dec 2004: B1
kindergarten class. The students may not have understood what was going on, but the parents did, and they were elated. This time Weiss’ offer was also extended in some form to the parents and siblings of the kindergarten student. This was added onto the program at the suggestion of the Belmont 112. Weiss provided aid for parents who wanted to continue or finish their education, and supplied “last dollar” scholarships to siblings who did not have enough funds for college.12

The new extension added onto the program by Weiss, in a way answered Hannah Oakman’s complaint that Say Yes to Education had isolated her son. It does not take away neighborhood jealousy, but it does alleviate tensions within the family. However, Weiss’ newest additions do not answer those critics who believe the program is too arbitrary. They think that Say Yes just reiterates that luck is needed to in order to make it, and that is not the message that should be sent. It has to be communicated to these children that it is hard work and determination that results in success. Of course, these critics recognize the good that Weiss is doing for some students; he is motivating and providing a wonderful opportunity. They are just concerned for the majority who is not getting such an opportunity.13 Say Yes to Education is not even addressing an entire school like Penn-Alexander, the program is only directed at a very small grade.

With the five schools just analyzed there have been several programs and initiatives launched to help a specific group of public school students. However, what needs to be achieved is betterment on a massive level. It cannot be the exception, it must be the standard. Of course, this is near impossible because the funding is just not available to make every Philadelphia public school the ideal. However, if we did live in a

12 Ibid.
world where a perfect public school system was possible, I think it would draw elements from both Penn-Alexander and Say Yes to Education.

The schools themselves would follow the Penn-Alexander set-up, very well-equipped, with a rich curriculum, headed by enthusiastic teachers. This would help facilitate an environment that children would want to be a part of, not run away from. For some it may even be a place of relaxation away from their chaotic homes, a special relationship of comfort and security could even be established with school. These schools then could be paired with a Say Yes to Education Program. Therefore, the students would have something to work toward without having to worry about funding.

Weiss has expressed concern that if Say Yes were to develop into a mass bureaucracy it would lose its caring element. However, in this ideal system the intensive mentoring would not be left behind. And therefore every child would have someone who is always behind them, pushing them to go further.

In this ideal system I also think that there should not be such a strong emphasis on four year colleges. Not all people are equipped for four year colleges, and they may easily be discouraged if they see this as the ultimate goal. I would want there to be just as much stress and pride put on two year colleges and trade schools. Therefore, it will keep motivation up knowing that there are other avenues considered successful.

The most important aspect would be its accessibility for everyone. If this were the case there would be no neighborhood resentment, as is with Penn Alexander, nor would it be viewed as completely arbitrary like Say Yes to Education. The entire community would have no reason to not back the students. The jealously and inequality would be replaced by equality and support.

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14 Ibid.
My ideal public school would only be possible in a perfect world which is clearly not the case. Therefore, unless there is some type of miracle public schools in Philadelphia will just have to make due with what they have. This may not be much, but the initiatives and resources have made a difference in certain students’ lives thus far. Hopefully those who have made already made a difference will inspire others to participate. The only way that Philadelphia public schools will continue to progress is with committed individuals and organizations that are willing to pour time and resources into the schools.
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