Marie Belin

Email: mariebel@sas.upenn.edu

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Penn and West Philadelphia

Mark Frazier Lloyd

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West Philadelphia Schools
West Philadelphia schools history is related to the whole community history and evolution throughout the years. The development, improvement, and then decline of the schools is directly linked to the global evolution of the area during the last 50 years. West Philadelphia has hosted several waves of immigration in the past, which gave it its ethnically diverse character. West Philadelphia also welcomed more recently African and Asian immigrants and had to face integration issues with those new immigrants. As one can understand, the integration is a cultural and social challenge, upheld by education and schools. West Philadelphia hosts very diverse but also very poor neighborhoods, sometimes reaching a 45% of inhabitants below the poverty level. We will see why and when the neighborhood problems have started to affect and deteriorate the quality of education and thus the failure of students at school. There are 21 elementary schools in West Philadelphia, 6 junior high and 6 senior high school programs. The focus will be placed on the examples of 5 schools; the Belmont School, the Sadie Tanner Mossell Alexander School, the William F. Harrity School, the William Cullen Bryant Academic Plus School, and the Henry C. Lea School.

- When and why the schools went bad

Before 1969, West Philadelphia schools were doing quite well, and Penn related programs had been established, such as the universities-related program in Lea school in 1962. There was a very good cooperation between the School District of Philadelphia and Penn. The projects and organizations among institutions were all aiming at improving the level of education, the training of teachers, reinforce the relations between the schools and the communities and provide the children with a wider range of activities and facilities. In 1962, University City related schools received investments and support from Penn in a wide range of programs. In the late 1960's, the educational environment started to degrade. This phenomenon is usually seen as related to the arrival of many immigrants
from Africa and Asia, which led to the overcrowding of schools and thus to the degradation of the education quality. Lea was not anymore the competitive renowned school, and parents started little by little to withdraw their children from public schools to place them in private, sometimes Christian, schools. It was more and more difficult for the parents to find an acceptable school for their children, though some of them had come to a neighborhood for the particular good reputation of the schools in the early 1960’s.

The example of the Belmont School as a school with very bad economic features but a quite good educational success is interesting. More than 45% of the population there lives below poverty level, and the median household income is $14,566, far below the other schools taken as examples. It has also the higher percentage of population under age 18. But this data has to be compared with the Lea school’s one, one of the toughest school in the area but which has not received the Say Yes to Education program. It has a very high median household income; $24,816, and a smaller proportion of population living below poverty level, only 24.35%. It can be explained by the fact that it is located in an area which used to be associated with drugs and crime activities.

- Existing Solutions

In order to fix these problems, several initiatives have been taken such as the « Open Classroom Program », an after-school program at Lea school in the 1970’s and 1980’s.

In 1962 Penn established a very good cooperation with the Lea School and made many investments in it to develop programs and projects aiming at enhancing and integrating the already very renowned school. The work of Martin J. Warnick, principal of the school, was also very important in the cooperation. « He won the Lea school a unique, university-related status. Penn and Drexel adopted the school as part of their University City project, using their educational teams and facilities to bolster those in the elementary school. »

The Lea school was used as a test for cooperation between public schools and
universities. This new conception of education attracted more and more families and pupils. The program consisted in understanding «how and why the pupils were motivated to study. Emphasis was placed on enriching studies in the lower grades, adding science and foreign languages to the standard classroom fare. To help carry out the program, the universities provided manpower, expertise and equipment to aid in curriculum planning, counseling and library service expansion. » But this program failed, and Penn withdrew its help in 1969, leaving the school management by itself and the school’s educational level went very low.

In 1987, the Belmont School was chosen by the philanthropic George Weiss, alumnus and trustee of the University of Pennsylvania, to start a new educational experience. He picked 112 underprivileged sixth-graders from a tough and poor neighborhood of West Philadelphia; and promised them a free college education if they succeeded at high school. The aim of this program was to offer very-low income households children the possibility to follow a College education for free. To achieve this, the children were helped by mentors and advisors, their families received support and free trainings, and were getting involved in their children’s education. But this first experiment known as «Belmont 112» failed; 20 pupils had a bachelor’s degree but 20 ended in jail. The reason of this failure is maybe the chance factor. Young kids are not able to realize the gift that is being made to them if they succeed and do not have a personal motivation for success. The other point is to know whether support services, caring and mentoring are more important than the promise of a free education for a pupil’s success?

As long as education and students are concerned, I would say that it is necessary to have a good balance between social and financial help. The concept of picking up a group of pupils, and not another one, is quite unfair and can even discourage the majority of other students. Indeed these children from low-income and tough areas need financial help to envisage a future in College. But it would require a very strong personal motivation from a children to achieve it by himself, this is why other programs such as tutoring, after-class help and personalized support are also necessary.
• Ideal Solution

The ideal way to put the West Philadelphia schools in the right way is far from being obvious, and has not been found yet. The focus has been put alternatively on the preparation of children with academic programs, the training of teachers, the help given to parents with after-class and summer hours, the extra-curricular activities etc. But none of these solutions, even combined between them, have had great results. I think that the solution lays in the combination between the daily life of the children and their school. They feel that school is just a place where they need to go but do not consider it as a real means of success and empowerment.

To attract children and make them want to stay at school and love it, as a second home, the extra-curricular activities linked to school should be developed. Such as group activities, organized in smaller groups than in the daily class, which could create ties between teachers or teaching assistants and the children, and make the children know each other better and appreciate their classmates. The development of arts activities such as dancing, singing, painting etc. could allow the children to explore some fields that they may not even know. Each of them could participate in an activity of their choice after class, twice a week. I think it is very important to develop an affective relation between the children and their school, classmates, teachers and activities. This is the reason why they should be proposed a very wide range of occupations, adapted to each age group.

After school programs and tutoring assistance are an important key to school achievement and allow pupils with difficulties to catch up with the average level of the class. These programs provided notably by the GSE (Penn’s Graduate School of Education) could create strong links between pupils and mentors or assistants, and give them the will to follow the same path. It would also offer them an alternative to the « normal » teaching system and thus be a good means to overcome some learning difficulties.

Another major problem to deal with is absenteeism, which increases when
children become older. Older pupils are sometimes drawn away from the school path by other children or older friends and engage in illegal activities. As long as this kind of behavior can be avoided in such low-income areas, a prevention program should be launched, warning children about drugs, crimes, violence and provide them with birth control information in high schools. Many young girls drop out of school because of teenage pregnancy that might be avoided with such information and allow them to graduate from high school and even go further to College.

Finally, the poor results of West Philadelphia pupils at S.A.T. tests, compared to the state average results, highlight the need for a better education and more personalized teaching. One of the means to improve pupils' results comes from the teachers' expectations: « high staff expectations of students can result in success - no matter what neighborhood a school is in and no matter how poor its children may be. »

This theory can let think to a much brighter future for these children if the commitment of teachers and assistants was more important.

But as it has been understood by Weiss and the Say Yes to Education program, a child success also relies on his family and personal background. A child whose parents do not speak English and are not familiar with the American culture will have much more difficulties to integrate his class and to success in his education.

Programs to help parents integrating into their community are very important too and should make them realize the importance of their child's education and success, and be conscious of the help that they can provide to support him. The very diverse population of West Philadelphia has the advantage to gather together a very rich cultural plurality and exchange of knowledge and experiences, but it also makes the programs even more difficult to design and to adapt to everybody.

The commitment of parents into organizations with schools, for school-based management, is also very important for the well-being of the community and the success of children. If parents participate in the schools' management, then they can have a more precise view and idea of what their children are expected to do
and how to help them to achieve their goals.

The solution to West Philadelphia Schools’ problem is not yet defined. It is rather a global social issue that has to be dealt with in order to understand and manage what the children from this area have to be helped with. The diverse community pattern is both an asset and a disadvantage for the public education and it has to be taken seriously into account when dealing with success in education. The ideal solution that I described is an utopia, and could succeed if there was a great availability of teachers or mentors for a small group of children, and given the number of pupils in this area, it would be unfeasible. But I think that trying to get as close as possible to this ideal description could ensure a good level of education and a quite high success rate.
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