A Study of Education in West Philadelphia

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The education system in the United States is structured to provide every child with the opportunity to attend a public school. However, no two public schools are the same and the education received at public schools can often vary greatly from district to district. For instance, public schools in suburban areas often perform at a much higher level than those within cities. This gap in the performance of students indicates the disparate quality of education received at various schools. Through a comprehensive examination of a cluster of schools within West Philadelphia, several factors contributing to the decline in academic performance of inner city students in recent decades become evident. While the schools evaluated are specific to West Philadelphia, many of the pitfalls found in these schools correspond to the pressing problems urban public schools encounter throughout the country.

Resources and money are essential to success in today’s world and school systems are no exception to this rule. Public schools receive funding via property taxes and business taxes within the school district. Unlike their counterparts in the suburbs, most inner city schools have significantly less funding available to them, and the public schools in West Philadelphia are no exception. The problem is exacerbated in West Philadelphia because most businesses are categorized as “Meds and Eds,” medical and educational institutions such as the Hospital of the University of Pennsylvania, the Children’s Hospital of Pennsylvania, Presbyterian Medical Center, Drexel University, and the University of Pennsylvania. These institutions operate on a non-profit basis and are exempt from most taxes, thereby reducing the available revenue inner city schools could receive from taxed sources, citizens and institutions. The lack of funding received by public schools in West Philadelphia then translates into inferior curriculums provided
to students, and a lack of facilities to diversify their curriculums, resulting in limited options for career tracks. Consequently, this often precludes the more gifted students from accessing material that can challenge them to think creatively and progress as students. This can then result in boredom in the classroom, thereby further impeding the learning curve. In the absence of a challenging, creative classroom, all children fail to perform up to their potential, and the brighter students often end up advancing at the pace of the “slowest” child. In order to combat this inevitable progression, students should be evaluated in elementary and/or middle school and placed on a track with students of comparable abilities. The school system in West Philadelphia is currently trying to identify and help children with special needs, but resources for such individualized education are limited.

Public schools are further hindered by both a lack of individual donations and economic fluctuations. Private schools often receive donations from alumni in the form of cash, new buildings, programs or scholarships. Most public schools lack the strong connection that private schools and their graduates enjoy. Economic changes in the country also affect the funding public schools can receive from the local and federal governments. Although some government funding is received, it is not nearly enough to fund and support significant improvements in the quality of education at public schools. Additionally, the lack of other revenue, such as endowments from alumni donations, hampers the school’s ability to withstand such fluctuations. Although a strong financial base is necessary for a school’s success, there are other factors that play an integral role.

Motivation to perform well in school is extremely important in acquiring a good education. Both teachers and students need this motivation in order to create a sense of
hope in neighborhoods that are downtrodden. Children who do not care enough to work hard to improve their education will not succeed. Therefore, parents must remain actively involved in their child’s schooling so that good learning habits can be encouraged and formed early. In West Philadelphia, however, families living below the poverty line, coupled with single parent homes, are prevalent. These parents are often absent from the home because they work long hours in order to feed their family and pay the bills. They lack the time and energy necessary to provide direction in their children’s lives and education. Their absence significantly increases the likelihood that this vicious cycle will continue and that their children will similarly struggle upon reaching adulthood.

Coupled with a lack of parental involvement is a poor learning environment in the schools of West Philadelphia. Whereas private schools remain selective in their admissions process, public schools must accommodate all students who wish to attend. Therefore, students who lack the motivation to learn often use the school as a social playground, disregarding rules and disrupting classes. Their conduct impedes the teachers’ capacity to teach and the students’ ability to learn. This disruptive behavior has reached the point where teachers are unable to control the students and disciplinary action fails to be effective. Those students who are either absent from the classroom or unruly in the classroom, are not only neglecting their own education which they should be actively pursuing in order to better themselves, but are also stunting the learning curves of the students toiling in the classroom. Moreover, the teaching environment in West Philadelphia schools fails to be conducive to learning. Teachers become frustrated with their lack of control over the students and consequently lower their own teaching
standards. In addition to their lack of motivation is their membership in the teachers’ union and the job security associated with it. As a result of the unions, schools are forced to consider seniority and tenure over competency. Teachers are not evaluated on the basis of how well their students perform and therefore lack the drive to teach to their full potential. The lack of clearly defined criteria to evaluate teachers’ performance leads to lower quality teachers and lower quality education for students.

An advanced education has become an essential component of success in today’s service-based economy. Primary and secondary school education provide the necessary skills and knowledge needed in order to obtain a job and then advance within a field of interest. However, this goal is not wholeheartedly met by many public schools, especially the urban schools in West Philadelphia. In an attempt to understand what “went wrong” in the West Philadelphia schools and how to improve/“fix”, the following schools will be examined: the Henry C. Lea School, the Belmont School, the William F. Harrity School, the William Cullen Bryant Academic Plus School (Bryant), and the Sadie Tanner Mossell Alexander School (Penn Alexander). These five case studies will provide background on attempted solutions to effectively raise the success of education in West Philadelphia.

Located on the corner of 47th and Locust streets, the Henry C. Lea School admits students in grades K-8. In the Spring of 1962, the West Philadelphia Corporation, a non-profit organization comprised of the University of Pennsylvania, the Drexel Institute of Technology, the Philadelphia College of Pharmacy and Science, and the Presbyterian Hospital, along with the Lea Home and School Association and the Principal, Mr. Martin J. Warnick, collaborated to form the Universities-Related Program. This endeavor was
the only one of its kind at the time and came about from the “Lea School’s close and constructive relations with institutions of higher learning in University City.”¹ The program sought to improve the school through a series of fundamental and institutional changes. Its goals were clearly defined to improve the curriculum across the disciplines of science, mathematics, foreign languages, art and music, reading, counseling, and library services. Additionally, it provided in-service training for the teachers of the Lea school and other teachers and administrators in the public school system. Furthermore, the program planned on publishing the results of its expanded objectives while continuing to endorse university involvement in the public schools.

The Universities-Related Program established a tracking process that would assess the performance of students in the Lea school through regular testing and place students in one of six “tracks” according to their results. Movement between tracks could be achieved depending upon the students’ educational needs. In addition, a library program was established, which allowed the Lea School to claim that it was “the only elementary school in the Philadelphia System to have a staff member devoting full time to library services.”² The library program increased participation by mothers in the district and has also involved Greek student volunteers through the Inter-Fraternity Council at the University of Pennsylvania.

In a summary of recommendations composed as an appraisal of the Lea School and the Universities-Related Program in 1968, it was suggested that four non-teaching assistants be provided to help monitor hallways and playgrounds while other non-

teaching assistants be provided to help teachers in the classrooms. Moreover, the report suggested that “additional reading specialists, psychological service personnel, and guidance counselors be assigned to each of the schools participating in the program.” This extra supervision and guidance would be critical in developing a child’s education while simultaneously teaching him/her norms and acceptable behaviors, enforcing rules and developing good habits. Reinforcement of these practices in the home would be vital to the full growth and development of a good student, but this home reinforcement was often lacking.

In 1969, Penn pulled out of the Universities-Related Program as a result of both conflict between the community and the University, and criticism from within the University. The community expected direct monetary assistance to be provided by the University; however, money alone would not have solved the problem. When the University stated it could not provide the funds the community demanded, it ceased its involvement all together. Penn argued that there was never a written promise to provide these funds, and the university needed the money to put into other parts of the its’ campus first.

In 1987, George Weiss initiated the “Say Yes to Education” Foundation in an attempt to reform a West Philadelphia public school. Mr. Weiss promised 112 sixth graders at the Belmont School that he would finance their college education on condition that they graduate from high school. This promise provided both future incentive and motivation for these children, most of whom would otherwise have not had the money required to attend college. Through the “Say Yes” program, Mr. Weiss was able to

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transform these students’ lack of motivation to do well in school into enthusiasm to excel in the classroom. Extensive tracking of the students’ progress as well as with rigorous tutoring represented crucial components to this free college tuition program. The program at the Belmont School yielded 62 high school graduates. Although this improvement was a step up from the regular patterns established at Belmont, a roughly 50% graduation rate is still not acceptable by today’s standards. While using money to fund these initiatives is a start, it is certainly not the only answer to the rampant educational problems in West Philadelphia. Along with sensible allocation of funds, new comprehensive educational programs and innovative and enthusiastic teachers are necessary to improve the quality of education in West Philadelphia schools. The “Say Yes to Education” Foundations has sponsored other schools around the country in similar ways in an attempt to provide poor inner city children with the opportunity to attend college and enhance their quality of life.

In 1990, the Harrity Elementary School (grades K-5), located at 56th and Christian Streets, initiated a program similar to Weiss’s. Robert Toll and his wife, the benefactors of this program, chose 58 third graders to participate in the program under the same conditions as Weiss’s “Say Yes” program. Out of the 58 children admitted to the program, 54 of them completed high school and 21 of them are currently enrolled in college. “About three of every four of the school’s 450 students are children of welfare recipients.”

Despite these adverse economic conditions, Toll’s program at the Harrity School, initiated in the early stages of the participating students’ education, was very successful in improving their level of education.

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The “Say Yes to Education” Foundation, sponsored by Weiss, presented a rewarding opportunity to a group of 47 kindergarten students entering the Bryant school in the fall of 2000. Under the terms of Weiss’s new program, he agreed to fund the education of both the chosen students and their parents. The idea behind Weiss’s new program was that the parents would be able to set a good example for their children and also be educated enough to help their kids with school. Furthermore, Weiss agreed to provide financial aid for the siblings of the students selected. This attempted to alleviate hostility in families with more than one child and motivate the family as a whole by creating an environment suitable for progression. Unfortunately, the results of this program will not be available for several more years as the students chosen to participate are currently in fifth grade.

The University of Pennsylvania has recently undertaken new initiatives in the West Philadelphia community with the hopes of improving the quality of education for children. A new school, the Penn Alexander School, was planned and developed in cooperation with The School District of Philadelphia and The Philadelphia Federation of Teachers. Under this program, the University provided land for the school and $1000 per student for ten years in order to cover operating costs. The School District funded the construction of the school, which contains modern equipment, and agreed to work with the University in order to develop a curriculum that would meet or exceed the standards of the district. Additionally, the University assisted with the selection of a principal and faculty members. The school exclusively enrolls local children and is limited to seven hundred students in an attempt to keep class size low and the quality of education high.
The University has also begun to form partnerships with other West Philadelphia schools. It has rekindled its partnership with the Lea Elementary School, as well as formed new initiatives with Bryant, Wilson, Turner, Sulzberger, University City High, West Philadelphia High, Powell, Sayre, and Drew Schools. Much of this work has been established through the Center for Community Partnerships formed at Penn. Improvements in student performances are evident in these schools and continue to progress in the right direction.

Vouchers represent a viable solution to the failure of inner city public schools. They allow students to go from failing schools to a school of their choice. Setting specific guidelines before vouchers are issued would give the individual schools the opportunity to improve before attendance wanes. A voucher would allow a child in a failing school who is unable to afford any alternatives a chance to receive a better education elsewhere. Vouchers create an incentive for failing schools to improve. Rather than holding the students responsible for creating poor learning environments, a voucher system places the onus on the schools to improve the quality of education.

However, vouchers are currently not implemented in all areas. If implementation was widespread, it would create a sense of competition between schools and artificially deplete the availability at good schools.

Through an exploration of the public schools in West Philadelphia, it becomes evident that the earlier educational programs are started, the greater effect they will have on successfully improving the quality of education in schools. In addition to promoting early literacy for inner city students, active involvement from the University of Pennsylvania and its students can facilitate the improvement of the quality of public
education in West Philadelphia. More specifically, the University’s concept of academically based community service (ABCS) can generate substantial changes in the advancement of education within the West Philadelphia community. Nevertheless, contributions from both parents and teachers in young students’ education are invaluable and must remain steadfast if dramatic improvements in academic achievement are to be realized within the West Philadelphia public schools.
Bibliography


