Philadelphia School System: Hope among the Problems

The Philadelphia School System has been suffering through a period of severe problems. These problems include high drop out rates, low college enrollment even for those who do graduate, very low reading levels, and violent schools. West Philadelphia High School (which is fed by two of the schools I will discuss later) has only 2.6% of its students proficient in math and 9.2% proficient in reading.\(^1\) The schools have been afflicted with these problems for a very long time but most seriously since the 1960’s. The actual date these problems first started is less important than understanding what forces, both internal and external, have been the driving the schools failure. I will look at the schools’ problems from two perspectives, the first is limited to the school itself and will focus on the lack of funding and other issues and the other is more open to the macro problems of the community and will delve into the drug trade and other problems.

The worst Philadelphia Schools are concentrated in poor, neglected, and blighted areas. Funding for the Philadelphia Schools comes from a tax based upon property values of the neighborhood buildings. In these poor areas the buildings are some of the oldest housing stock in the city. Adding to these problems is that these buildings have not been improved like some of the old buildings around Society Hill and Rittenhouse Square. This causes many of the buildings to be literally falling apart. The old decrepit buildings all cause the value of the properties to be extremely low. These low property values...
values ensure that schools in the poorest parts of the city receive the least amount of school funding. The gap between the richest and poorest Pennsylvania school districts in per student spending is over $8,500.²

This financial impropriety results in schools which cannot compete with suburban and wealthier school districts. Poor schools have less books and the ones they do have are outdated and in disrepair. Poor schools do not have the same type of college guidance services and also not as many after school activities. Most importantly, the poor school districts cannot recruit the most talented teachers. They pay the least and the teaching environment is less than ideal. Therefore the best teachers are lured away to the suburbs where they can be paid more money and work in a more stable environment.³

I believe that the macroeconomic and social problems in Philadelphia urban life bear the bulk of the responsibility for turning the schools “bad”. Of these economic and social problems the drug epidemic and high birthrate in young mothers have been two of the driving forces most directly behind the problems of the Philadelphia school system. In these poor urban neighborhoods there are very few opportunities to make money. The residents are more concerned with their next meal and paying this month’s rent then how dropping out of high school will affect their future. Therefore a large portion of the young males drop out of school and start dealing drugs in order to make the quick dollar. This in turn leads to an endless cycle of violence, high dropout rates for the students and a school system which cannot count on having students stay there until completion. On the female side a large number of students become teen mothers and therefore cannot

finish high school. The inner city Philadelphia Schools have been marked by upheaval as students do not see the connection between going to school and being successful in life. Instead the negative forces of making the quick dollar force people out of school and into the street culture.\textsuperscript{4}

Four out of the five schools that we researched have been marred over the past decades by the similar plight of other Philadelphia schools of low graduation rates and low scores. The one exception being the Alexander School, whose district is Sansom to the North, Chester to the south and east to west between 40\textsuperscript{th} and 47\textsuperscript{th} Street, which because it just opened there are not accurate statistics to compare it to other West Philadelphia schools over the past 40 years. The other four schools are all located in extremely poor neighborhoods and serve as perfect examples how poor neighborhoods and bad schools work hand in hand. The Belmont School district lies south of Westminster Avenue, between 39\textsuperscript{th} Street on the east and Lancaster Avenue and 44\textsuperscript{th} Street on the west. The school has a median household income of $14,500 with 70\% of its residents living below the poverty line. The situation improves slightly but is still very depressed in the Bryant School District bounded by Chestnut to the North and Catherine to the South and 58\textsuperscript{th} to the east and Cobbs Creek to the West. Here the median income is $25,000 with 46\% living under the poverty line. Similiarly the Lea School is bounded by Sansom and Baltimore and 46\textsuperscript{th} Street to the east and 50\textsuperscript{th} Street to the West and its median income is $25,000 with 47\% below the poverty line. Finally the Harrity School

includes the area north of Washington Street and south of Pine from 54th to 58th streets. Here the income is $25,000 and 51% below the poverty line.⁵

These schools along with the rest of the Philadelphia Schools have long been victims of tight budgets and poor students who in order to survive follow the paths of the streets rather then the classroom. However, these five schools have been somewhat unique in their pursuit of trying to fix these problems. The Penn Alexander was built in 2002 as a school that serviced the children of Penn faculty and staff and also the people of University City. The Penn Alexander School hopes to fix the problems faced by others schools in the community by spending $1,000 per pupil above what the school district normally spends. This subsidy is paid for by Penn.⁶ In addition Penn provides grad students and undergrads to serve as mentors and tutors for the school. The idea here is to keep the students at school for a longer period of time so that they are exposed as little as possible to the street culture which has destroyed other schools in the community. The school has only been open for three years and only goes until 8th grade so the effectiveness of the school is difficult to determine. However, the Penn grant has been successful at keeping classes smaller in size so that students can get more attention from teachers.⁷

The Lea School University Related Program was initiated in 1962. Penn and other institutions used their knowledge and teaching resources to create a plan for the school. This plan divided the school into different academic areas where students would study what they were the best at. The faculty and students at Penn would help the

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⁵ Lloyd, Mark Frazier. “West Philadelphia Public Schools,” The University Archives and Records Center.
teachers and also provide additional hours of teaching. Overall this plan has been a failure. Only 39% of the 8th graders are proficient at reading and 30% at math. This school has shown that without direct financial support from higher institutions the mere restructuring of a school learning program is not enough.

The most interesting and most unusual of the programs to improve the Philadelphia Schools comes in the form of the “Say Yes to Education” initiative. George Weiss founded the program in 1987 and made a pledge to 112 sixth grade graduates of Belmont Elementary that he would pay for their college degree. The program was of mixed success as, “62 members graduated from high school, 7 got GEDs, and 13 finished trade school. There were 20 bachelor’s and 10 associate’s degrees.” However 20 also landed in jail and three were killed and one committed suicide. Weiss believed in his program and therefore three years later did the same thing just with younger children as he made the guarantee to 78 third graders at the Harrity Elementary School. Of those 8 graduated college and 10 more are still enrolled. In 2000, Weiss started with kindergarten and guaranteed 50 Bryant Elementary students that he would pay for their college. In the Bryant School, Weiss also promised to pay for the continued education of their parents and siblings. Weiss listened to the Belmont students and expanded the program so that the entire family benefited from access to education.

The success of Say Yes is very hard to determine. The results are still out on how the newest class, which began in kindergarten, is doing. However I think certain features from the Say Yes program coupled with the new system introduced by the Penn Alexander School will definitely improve the Philadelphia Schools. The Say Yes

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program allows wealthy patrons to actually see in a tangible way how their money is improving people’s lives. A wealthy patron can go to one of these schools and see the students receiving tutoring and also know that if the student sticks with school he/she will be educated. The Say Yes program is ideal for people who want to donate money but at the same time want to see its direct impact on people. In this regard Say Yes is a major selling point to wealthy patrons and therefore can be enlarged to include even more people. I think the Say Yes program should be changed slightly by adding a financial aid advisor. This person’s responsibility would be to get the best financial aid package from each college the Say Yes student is accepted to. If these people are coming from a household that makes $15,000 a year they will qualify for a huge amount of aid from most schools. This in turn allows more students to be guaranteed college and also more money to be spent on after school help and activities in order to keep the students away from the street culture.

I think it is important to also involve large institutions to further provide money. If the tax situation can not be changed and the macroeconomic and social problems are not improved then the actual schools must be improved. By getting institutions to sponsor schools you allow the schools to spend more money on students and this in turn leads to better quality of teachers and smaller class sizes. Businesses are always looking to improve their image and what better way is there than sponsoring a school in a poor area and thereby helping out the community also?

These two solutions are feasible and can be expanded relatively easily. However, these two programs alone will not completely fix the public school system in Philadelphia. Firstly the ways schools are funded need to be changed. Some of the
money should be rerouted from the wealthy schools and put into the poor school districts. This will certainly be met with opposition but people in the wealthy district should be educated that their tax dollars are being used to fund prisons and one of the best ways to stop people from going to jail is to improve their education. Also some of the problems of drug abuse and drug dealing should try to be solved. I think for some non-violent drug related crimes prison should not be the answer, but rather these people should be trained with skills so that they do not have to sell drugs to support themselves, that instead they can make money with skills they were taught. I also believe the city government should give teachers subsidies for homes in the school district they teach in. This would be limited to the most severely distressed communities and would entice teachers to live and try to improve the community. Since teaching is a relatively stable job, these teachers would be tied strongly to their community as a place they both worked and lived.

Finally, I think it is important to keep people who succeed in the Say Yes program in the community which they are from. The program is not going to be effective if the people go to college, get rich and then move out to suburbia. Rather money should be given to these people in order to encourage them to stay in their community. It is unlikely that a family from the Mainline is going to take their children out of school, move to southwest Philadelphia and enroll them in West Philadelphia High. However, there is much greater chance that someone from West Philadelphia High who goes to college on the Say Yes program will move back into the community, as long as they are rewarded with some form of compensation. This is the only way that these depressed communities can be completely improved and revitalized.
The Philadelphia School System has faced tremendous adversity over the past 50 years. However, as cities continue to increase popularity, there grows hope that even the poorest sections of the city can be improved. I feel the same way George Weiss did in 1987 when he stood on the stage at Belmont Elementary and threw out the footballs to the crowd. I believe the schools can be improved and the first step is to expand the Say Yes program and model more schools around the Penn Alexander School. The next step would be to integrate the wealthy success stories of the Say Yes program back into the communities they came from.