Public Education in West Philadelphia

The so-called “going bad” of Philadelphia public school education began in the mid 20th century, during the period of time we have already highlighted as a turning point in the growth of the city. As “white flight,” driven by low-cost mortgages for homes in the suburbs emptied urban areas of the middle class and lower income families moved in to fill the vacuum, the tax base of the city dropped significantly. This decline in tax revenue, the primary funding source for public education, was part of a vicious, seemingly inescapable cycle that characterizes the decline of education in the city.

The difficulty of escaping the cycle is easy to see. A decline in tax revenue leads to a decrease in school funding. The loss of funding for the schools leads to poor-quality education. Undesirable education drives people to leave the neighborhood as soon as they can afford it, leaving behind only those who would most benefit from improved educations, but are powerless to do anything about it. Students who attend these underfunded schools in bad neighborhoods find little direction in education, and can end up contributing to the decay of their neighborhood, rather than to its improvement.

This essay will examine three different strategies that the University of Pennsylvania — directly or with the aid of benefactors — has attempted to bring about meaningful change in surrounding elementary schools. I will then try to explain why all three of these strategies — the University-Related school program begun in 1962, the Say Yes to Education Program begun in the late-‘80s and the Penn-Alexander School — fall
short of what should be the ultimate goal of Penn’s involvement in public education in West Philadelphia: making the entire system viable.

Penn’s first foray into assisting local public elementary schools was at the Henry C. Lea school on 47th and Locust Streets. The University-Related School Program was the brainchild of the West Philadelphia Corporation, who declared it an exercise in “sharing the resources of higher education with the public schools in University City.” For several years, the program worked well, with Penn and Drexel offering facilities improvements and curriculum development to the school, as well as using it as a laboratory for experiments in new educational techniques.

Soon, though, it became clear that all was not well in the University-Related Schools program. Lea was improving, and other local schools were eager for the program to expand throughout the district. Early on, the universities were eager for expansion as well. However, elementary school administrators and university program leaders had very different notions as to the scope of further university involvement. As early as 1967, Penn President Gaylord Harnwell acknowledged the difficulty of getting involved in what was a needy public school system. The local schools that had pledged time and money to Lea, Harnwell said, were unable “to expand upon their commitments to the program and redistribute substantial quantities of funds from other areas of university concern.” That is, the Lea experiment couldn’t be repeated indefinitely throughout the school district. Eventually, even the university’s affiliation with the Lea School came to an end.

Today, the Lea School has no formal affiliation with Penn or any other university in the city and is one of the 70 worst-performing public schools in the school district of
George Weiss is a multi-millionaire and trustee of the University of Pennsylvania who decided, in 1987, to begin using part of his millions to start a novel new initiative to improve education in West Philadelphia. He began by offering 112 sixth graders at the Belmont School on 40th and Brown Streets free post-secondary education, provided they could get accepted to college or trade school. It also includes after-school tutoring sessions to the randomly selected students. He calls the program Say Yes to Education, and has since expanded it to several other schools in West Philadelphia, as well as across the Northeast. One chapter of the program is at the Harrity School, where the promise of free college was bestowed on third graders, and the third chapter in Philadelphia is at the Bryant School, where 50 kindergartners were promised the all-expense-paid trip to college if they could make it that far.

Weiss’s idea is an optimistic one, and he admits as much. As the Say Yes to Education Web site puts it, “Say Yes is built upon the belief that inner-city children are resilient, and that with support and encouragement, high expectations can be achieved.”

His first group, the so-called “Belmont 112,” are the only chapter to have reached the graduation age. According to The Philadelphia Inquirer, only 16 of the 112 were attending four-year colleges in 1996, and even the head of Say Yes at the time was calling Weiss’s vision a “well-intentioned mistake.”

Throughout the length of the program, The Inquirer kept a close eye on the Belmont 112 and reported extensively on the successes and failures of the group and of Weiss’s plan. In 1988, they wrote, “Diane Weiss and her husband, George, may be able
to transform impossible dreams into legitimate aspirations. But they can't yet change the
daily struggle of their lives - the struggle that forces some children to show up for
tutoring dragging along younger siblings and others to look for help because their parents
are on drugs.

Such are the limits, and the challenges, of a miracle.”

The evolution of the Say Yes program from making the offer the sixth graders to
making it to kindergartners shows that the Say Yes directors are learning about how
entrenched the shackles of urban poverty can be in a child and a family’s way of life. It
has already been made clear that bad schools are difficult to change socially. Thanks to
Weiss’s program, it’s been proven that poorly-performing students are also difficult to
change.

Weiss is still alive, and his last group of students, at the Bryant School, were
selected only five years ago. His experiment is ongoing, and there is a definite increase in
performance among the classes he endows. Still, he has fallen short repeatedly of his
ultimate goal.

Penn’s latest effort in improving public education in Philadelphia is the Penn
Alexander school, which opened its doors in 2002 to kindergarteners and first-graders,
and has since expanded to grades K-8. It is located at 42\textsuperscript{nd} and Locust Streets. In an
Inquirer article detailing the architectural beauty and educational superiority of the new
school, the newspaper admits “the school … includes features that educators and students
in most Philadelphia public schools can only dream about: Class sizes capped at 17 in
kindergarten and 23 in other grades. The district's cap is 30 students in the primary grades
and 33 in upper grades.”
Moreover, the school, which has proven to be one of the most outstanding public schools in the district, draws from a small neighborhood area directly around it. Its geographical selectivity has driven up real estate costs in the neighborhood and forced out many residents who were promptly replaced with wealthier Penn faculty and staff. Penn Alexander is a great public school, but it is still within a terrible public school system.

This fact, the weakness of the Philadelphia public school system itself, is what non of these three strategies manages to attack. All three make “special” schools, or, in the case of Say Yes, “special” students, who really did nothing except be born in the right year. Sweeping, systemic change is the only kind that can really make a dent in the city’s public schools, and Penn, by creating schools like Penn Alexander and getting behind programs like Say Yes, isn’t doing much to help. This is not to say Penn Alexander or Say Yes are bad for Philadelphia schools. Rather, there is an issue of sustainability to think about. Long after George Weiss’s money is gone and the University stops giving $1,000 per student per year to Penn Alexander, there will still be hundreds of thousands of students in Philadelphia who need education. Penn should be directing more of its resources towards finding solutions to the public education problem that are sustainable; that is, they can exist totally within the public school system, free of outside manipulation.

The Say Yes to Education program, while started with the best of intentions, fails when put to the sustainability test. George Weiss has millions of dollars, and gives of it freely to select classes of gradeschoolers. In doing so, he creates a sort of privileged class inside the schools he chooses to help. There are still students — the majority of the
students in the school in fact — who go without any assistance and remain mired in a sub-par school system. Weiss’s program is completely outside the educational system itself; it doesn’t improve the system, it only improves certain students. Moreover, the high cost and low success rate of the program precludes it from being an efficient, sustainable solution to the problem of improving public education.

The Penn-Alexander School suffers from the same problem; sure, the school is great, and lures a lot of tax revenue into the school district, but it relies on heavy financial assistance from the University. As we’ve heard in class, longtime neighborhood residents know Penn’s history when it comes to financial assistance of public schools; they need only look five blocks west of Penn Alexander to the Lea School. If Penn really wanted to make a difference on the macro level, they’d be investing heavily in investigating systemwide changes that could benefit all Philadelphia students, not just those lucky enough to live in Penn Alexanders catchment zone.

Sources:

*Say Yes to Education.* [www.sayyestoeducation.org](http://www.sayyestoeducation.org)

Kerkster, Patrick. “More Phila. students admitted into Penn — This fall's class will have the most in decades. The university, criticized for neglecting its community, stepped up recruitment efforts at city schools.” *The Philadelphia Inquirer.* July 10, 2005.


