Education in West Philadelphia: When did it go wrong and how will it be fixed?

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The creation of a society that allows people to prosper and thus lead a better life is one of the many goals of people who are trying to improve the West Philadelphia society. However, one of the main problems is a lack of quality education for young people in the West Philadelphia area. West Philadelphia is a community with significant concentrations of poverty and certain populations are at risk.\(^1\) West Philadelphia doesn’t provide families with adequate options for a quality education and particularly for the less privileged segments of the community.\(^2\) Schools such as the Lea School, Belmont School, Harrity School, Bryant School, and the Penn Alexander School all exist in the West Philadelphia community. These five schools are trying to make strides in order to increase the educational standards of West Philadelphia. Programs such as Say Yes to Education, which was started by George Weiss in 1987 at the Belmont Elementary School, have been created to help the problem. However, these programs while giving students more opportunity than they had before, are not fixing the problem. The problem that was created in the 1960’s when the neighborhood shifted to a lower socioeconomic status is what created the initial problem of education. This time period saw the influx of immigrants and poverty into the West Philadelphia area thus taking the focus away from education and more on the lives of people who were settling here. However with increases in population that are occurring in West Philadelphia, it is the job of the City to work toward providing citizens of this area with better educational opportunities. It is now the job of the city to provide money to improve these schools to create an equal balance between a public school and a private school. This will help create a better

\(^1\) City Planning Commission, The Plan for West Philadelphia, pg 145.  
community because it keeps the people of West Philadelphia in their own society thus making it a stronger place.

“Currently, there are 34 active public school facilities in West Philadelphia with 21 elementary, 6 junior high and 6 senior high school facilities.”\(^3\) The schools were constructed and upgraded as the population increased. “Eight of the existing schools in West Philadelphia were built before 1920; 16 between 1920 and 1960; and 15 since 1960. The Henry C. Lea School (located on 47\(^{th}\) and Locust Street in the Walnut Hill neighborhood) was one of the first schools constructed in West Philadelphia. The Lea School was constructed in 1957 but was already seeing trouble by 1962.\(^4\) “In 1962 the Universities-Related school Program was initiated as an extension of the existing relationship on a broader scale with expanded objectives.”\(^5\) The school at the time was so bad that Betty Revis, who now is one of the heads of the Walnut Hill Association center, pulled her kids out of the Henry Lea School and sent them to a private school on the mainline.\(^6\) Bill Bauman and Mike Jones, of the Powelton community, described that people who lived in the Powelton community at the time would search for education outside of West Philadelphia because of safety issues.\(^7\) The effort of the Lea School at the time with the help of Universities-Related School Program was seen as ineffective and thus left a dent on the educational system in West Philadelphia. Families needed to send their kids outside the West Philadelphia area to find good quality education. Another problem in this area around the Lea School was the overcrowding population.\(^8\) Students

\(^3\) City Planning Commission, The Plan for West Philadelphia, pg 145.
\(^4\) Mark Frazier Lloyd, Class lecture 10/31.
\(^5\) The Universities-Related Program in The Henry C. Lea School Packet, pg 1.
\(^6\) Guest Lecture, Betty Revis, 10/10
\(^7\) Guest Lecture, Bill Bauman and Mike Jones, 10/31.
\(^8\) City Planning Commission, The Plan for West Philadelphia, pg 145.
in the Lea feeder area, prior to 1998, had to be bussed to the Locke School.\footnote{City Planning Commission, The Plan for West Philadelphia, pg 145.} This causes people to leave their community in search of a new school and this ends up reflecting West Philadelphia in a negative way. The academic performance as it stands now at the Henry Lea School is not meeting the standards of which education should be. In the 1992-1993 school year, there were 351 suspensions during the year.\footnote{http://partners.upenn.edu/wp/k12/lea/profile.html} There were 51 kids who required special education needs and only 89.6\% of the people were meeting criteria for promotion.\footnote{http://partners.upenn.edu/wp/k12/lea/profile.html} This is a problem because the amount of suspensions as well as the number of kids, who are not meeting requirements to move along in their education, is a direct reflection of the inability of the cities government to provide sufficient funds to offer better educational opportunities to people who need it. The time period from the late 1960’s to the late 1990’s has seen no change in the education at the Henry Lea School. The problem with education started with the influx of people in the late 1960’s and still has had nothing done about it.

Students began to voice their opinion as well about the harsh conditions of public schools in Philadelphia compared to the private schools around the West Philadelphia area. Gabriel Galson (a 16 year old at the time) posted his arguments on the Newshour Extra website to voice his frustration. Galson states, “a Philadelphia student receives an insufficient $7,105 yearly for their education, far less then their suburban counterparts…the best teachers…are lured to the suburbs where they can expect more money and better teaching conditions…schools often turn to ‘permanent subs’ to head untaught classes…The replacement walked into the classroom, introduced himself, took roll, wrote ‘Agenda’ on the blackboard, wrote ‘1. Be Quiet’ underneath, then sat at his
desk for the remainder of the period while the class talked.”12 It is the inability of the city government to financially support the public school system as well as provide teachers that will teach students and provide them with the education they need to succeed in life. It can be argued that West Philadelphia schools had gone bad with the influx of poverty in the late 1960’s to the area, however it is the inability of the city government along these years to provide sufficient funds to keep kids in school.

Since school systems in West Philadelphia had been so poor since the 1960’s causing people like Betty Revis to move their children to private schools on the mainline, steps have been taken, in particular two, to help kids in West Philadelphia succeed. These two processes are the Say Yes to Education program as well as the creation of the Penn Alexander School. While these two steps have not completely answered the problem of education in West Philadelphia they are two stepping stones for the creation of a better educational environment. The Say Yes to education program was created by George Weiss in 1987 at the Belmont Elementary School (located on 41st and Brown Streets in the Belmont Neighborhood), to rescue students from the depredations of poverty “by expertly shepherding them toward high school graduation and through college, all expenses paid.”13 The program tends to connect the student with a greater educational environment and opportunity at and early age. At the Bryant School in 2000 (located on 60th and Cedar Avenue in Cobbs Creek neighborhood), the Say Yes to Education for Headstart children about to enter kindergarten was created.14 Also the Say Yes to Education in 1990 created a program for third graders at the Harrity School (located on

12 http://www.pbs.org/newshour/extra/speakout/editorial/philly_schools.html
13 For 17 years, gifts have signified hope- A free college tuition program keeps expanding, Dale Mezzacappa, Philadelphia Inquirer, pg 1.
14 http://www.volunteersolutions.org/volunteerway/org/542351.html
56th and Christian Streets in Cobbs Creek neighborhood). These programs ultimately give students the encouragement to pursue their education with the reward of free college tuition. Weiss has spent over the past 18 years around $20 million from his own pocket and $30 million from donors he hopes to rally.15 “Of the 70 Belmont students who received their high school diplomas, 44 (63%) took advantage of post secondary education, of which 20 went to 4-year institutions and received BA’s, 14 completed trade schools, and 10 completed 2-year associate degrees and went on to enroll in other programs.”16 The Bryant School has made great strides with this program as well. “At the Bryant School where a Reading Specialist has been retained, 61% of 3rd graders are reading at average and above average levels. In contrast, only 25% of the district’s 3rd graders are reading at average or above levels.”17 This gives children who don’t have the money to attend college, an opportunity to earn a college degree.

Weiss’s Say Yes to Education program can be seen in a negative light however by some critics. “Of the sixth grade class known as the “Belmont 112”, only 20 received bachelor’s degrees, while the same number of kids landed in prison.”18 When he created the Say Yes to Education program he learned that more than one third of the sixth graders were in special education and 40% of them read at a second-grade level.19 Many of these kids were also on the cusp of adolescence and were being sucked into street life.20 The argument can be made that this program while it is putting money toward the education is

15 For 17 years, gifts have signified hope- A free college tuition program keeps expanding, Dale Mezzacappa, Philadelphia Inquirer, pg 1.
16 http://www.sayyestoeducation.org/about/about.shtml
17 http://www.sayyestoeducation.org/about/about.shtml
18 For 17 years, gifts have signified hope- A free college tuition program keeps expanding, Dale Mezzacappa, Philadelphia Inquirer, pg 3.
19 For 17 years, gifts have signified hope- A free college tuition program keeps expanding, Dale Mezzacappa, Philadelphia Inquirer, pg 2.
20 For 17 years, gifts have signified hope- A free college tuition program keeps expanding, Dale Mezzacappa, Philadelphia Inquirer, pg 3.
still not creating the opportunity for children to succeed at a young age. This program however creates opportunities to further education after high school and thus attempt at creating a better life. However, this program will only succeed with the help of the Philadelphia city council and its commitment to creating a better public educational system in West Philadelphia. More money needs to be generated by the government and directed towards schools such as the Henry Lea School, as well as schools such as the Belmont School, The Harrity School, and the Bryant School. Getting better teachers in these schools, which provides guidance for kids who don’t have direction in their life’s, as well as creating an environment where students want to learn and feel they can succeed is the only way in helping the Say Yes to Education program remain strong.

The University of Pennsylvania is playing a strong part in the creation of a better educational environment. In 1998, the University of Pennsylvania agreed to “make available at nominal cost a development site for the construction of a new school facility; to fund a subsidy of $1,000 per student and up to $700,000 a year for 10 years in annual support for the school.”21 The committee determined the boundary area of the school to create a diverse student body based on the demographic of the community.22 The site created was named the Penn Alexander School (located on 42nd and Locust Streets in the Spruce Hill Neighborhood). The school opened in the fall of 2001 and was completed in the fall of 2002.23 The school added Head Start and grades 2, 5, and 6 when the school was completed and then completed grades, pre-kindergarten through eighth grade in 2004.24 The University of Pennsylvania’s Graduate school of education played the

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21 West Philadelphia Initiatives, pg 45.
22 West Philadelphia Initiatives, pg 46.
23 West Philadelphia Initiatives, pg 46.
24 West Philadelphia Initiatives, pg 46.
leading role in helping in the design of the curriculum, management of professional and
the development of programs related to the school.25  Penn not only has worked closely
with the Penn Alexander School, but with the Henry Lea School, William Bryant School,
and Alexander Wilson School with the goal of improving student achievement. Penn has
been very involved with the community and the goal of improving the education of West
Philadelphia’s youth. Penn’s involvement with the Lea Elementary School has seen a
completed three-year intervention to strengthen curriculum in literacy, math, and
science.26 “Penn also developed a model for aligning curriculum with statewide standards
and tests.”27 Penn has provided student teachers as well as tutoring assistance in math,
reading, and English to these local schools. The results of the Penn Alexander School
since 2001 have already seen positive effects. “At least 70 percent of primary grade
students have demonstrated proficiency in reading and math on standardized tests.”28 The
ratio of teacher applicants to teaching positions at the school is now 25:1.29 The school
now as well has an active community school, which two evenings a week brings the
community together for educational, recreational and cultural activities.30 The active
participation of Penn to help out the community is helping this area make great strides in
education.

The University of Pennsylvania and contributions of Say Yes to Education have
provided West Philadelphia with a start in the right direction for correcting the education
problem that was apparent in the late 1960’s with the influx of immigration and spread of

25 West Philadelphia Initiatives, pg 46.
26 West Philadelphia Initiatives, pg 47.
27 West Philadelphia Initiatives, pg 48.
28 West Philadelphia Initiatives, pg 48.
29 West Philadelphia Initiatives, pg 49.
30 West Philadelphia Initiatives, pg 49.
poverty. Since the late 1960's education in West Philadelphia has caused families to send their children outside their community for a quality education. However, if the city government can provide more funds into the public school system as well as provide schools such as the Lea School, Belmont School, Harrity School, Bryant School, and the Penn Alexander School with good teachers who will provide leadership for the youth of the community, West Philadelphia will be seen as a strong educational society. The contributions that George Weiss and the University of Pennsylvania have made to education in the community have given West Philadelphia schools a positive light. It is now up to the City to provide these schools with the sufficient funds and teachers in order to strengthen the community within the school and provide us with the new leaders of the next decade.
Bibliography


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