

# THE SCHOOL Administrator

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## **A New Philadelphia Story**

*By Scott Joftus*

**A**dministrators and policymakers considering changes to the governance of their districts would be wise to study the experience of the School District of Philadelphia, which may represent the most successful district governing experiment in the country.

Admission: My consulting firm, Cross & Joftus, was hired by Philadelphia Mayor John Street to support a 35-member task force's review of the progress made by the school district since the governance change took place.

In December 2001, Pennsylvania declared the Philadelphia district academically and fiscally distressed and installed a "friendly" state-city partnership that included three key features:

- The district's nine-member school board (all mayoral appointees) was replaced by a powerful, five-member School Reform Commission with three appointments made by the governor and two by the mayor;
- The city and state committed tens of millions additional dollars to the district; and
- The governor dropped his plan for the Edison Schools to assume extensive central management authority. Instead, a strong, accountable CEO would be installed who, together with the School Reform Commission, would determine educational policy.

## **Ailments Linger**

In the roughly six intervening years, real change has taken place. Most importantly, student achievement in kindergarten through 8th grade across the school district has increased steadily.

The district managed to make these changes with a level of funding significantly less than that of surrounding suburban districts and less than many other large urban systems across the country. The district achieved a significant bang for its educational buck.

However, serious problems remain:

- The district recently announced a large deficit (more than \$190 million as of June 2007) despite significant gains in revenues that threaten implementation of reforms.
- Aging facilities require massive investment just to keep them from shutting down.
- Educator morale is low, and community stakeholders complain they have few ways to influence district policy and practice.
- Alternative high schools (now serving more than 3,000 students), designed to remove from class disruptive students and to educate youth returning from the criminal justice system, operate completely outside of the accountability system. No one knows the quality of education these schools provide.
- High school achievement and graduation rates are well below acceptable levels with one prominent researcher describing the situation in Philadelphia as a “dropout crisis.”

## **More Centralization**

How to make sense of the Philadelphia story? It is a complex and fascinating one, but two themes emerge. First, troubled school districts can be turned around, but it requires strong leadership and, most likely, increased centralization.

One of the first actions of the School Reform Commission was to hire Paul Vallas, the former superintendent from Chicago, as CEO. In Philadelphia, Vallas furthered his reputation as a turnaround artist by initially winning over the local teachers’ union and news media, thus giving the district time and support it needed to implement reforms and putting in place several key initiatives.

But often overlooked is the role played by the School Reform Commission. It stayed focused on important policy issues, usually developing broad consensus among its politically diverse members, and allowed Vallas to manage the district.

And manage he did. The Philadelphia system instituted a “diverse provider model” by assigning management of 45 of its lowest-performing schools to three national for-profit organizations, two universities and two local nonprofits, and by expanding charter school options.

Despite the attention brought by this effort, we concluded that the factors most likely to be responsible for the gains in K-8 achievement were the expansion of access to prekindergarten programs, implementation of a core curriculum and aligned periodic assessments across all schools, reduction of teacher turnover and absenteeism and the improved use of data to drive district, school and classroom decisions.

The second theme is that it is quite possible that many of the strategies and tactics enabling the district to turn around quickly will not be sufficient to continue or even maintain progress. For example:

- The closed decision-making style of the School Reform Commission, which enabled it to make tough decisions quickly, prevents meaningful input by stakeholders.
- The kinetic management style of Vallas — which initially helped to build support by demonstrating energy and a commitment to change and by granting the major wishes of many key constituents — is partly to blame for the deficit and has resulted in confusion and frustration among administrators, teachers and others.
- And the core curriculum, which increased the rigor of many teachers' lessons, does not allow teachers to address the individual needs of students and has not been well supported with professional development. Also, the contract with the teachers' union all but prevents the type of professional development for teachers that is necessary for sustained growth in student achievement.

### **A Model Try**

Going forward, the new CEO — Vallas resigned last summer to attempt another turnaround (in New Orleans) — and the School Reform Commission need to focus on getting the financial house in order, making more transparent the decision-making process and managing in a way that develops educator capacity, seeks educator and community input, provides some curricular flexibility to high-performing schools and improves high schools.

Despite these challenges, Philadelphia's unique governance structure can serve as a model for other cities and states hoping to turn around troubled districts. Cities and communities should see there is some value to having the state actively involved: Increased funding and real support, rather than compliance monitoring, are more likely to ensue. And states should see the participation of the city increases the likelihood that local constituencies support and inform reform efforts.

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