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**From center-stage to the sidelines:
Community organizations and the state takeover of the Philadelphia schools**

In the midst of contemporary debates over the organization of urban education, the term “partnership school” has a compelling ring, implying shared power, pooled resources, cooperation between individuals and groups, and an overarching vision for reform. When the governor proposed a reorganization of Philadelphia’s schools last fall, he called the 60 schools identified for major reform “partnership schools” and planned to turn the operation of each school over to a collaboration between a local community organization and Edison Schools. Since that time, the school district has been the site of significant turmoil, and much of what was originally predicted for Philadelphia has not come to pass. While the scaling back of privatization has been the most visible result of the past year’s struggles, the plan for community organizations to help operate schools was another casualty of the process, one that attracted little attention amidst the clamor of education politics in Philadelphia. In this paper, I plan to look more closely at the “rise and fall” of the community partnership model. I will argue that, as an idea, the model has merit, and I will attempt to provide an explanation for its disappearance from the Philadelphia reform scene.

I gathered the data I will discuss today as a part of my work with Research for Action, a Philadelphia-based, non-profit research organization currently conducting a study of the state takeover of the Philadelphia schools and the reorganization of the district. In an effort to understand both the roles community organizations were poised to play in the district and the disappearance of the community partnership plan, I attended

numerous public meetings, at the school district and at individual schools, reviewed local and national newspaper coverage of the takeover, and conducted interviews with representatives from a number of local organizations.

Because theories of change are critical to my argument, I will begin with the thinking behind the state takeover of the Philadelphia schools. Tom Ridge, Republican governor until the fall of 2001, is a strong proponent of privatization in education. He has pushed for a statewide voucher program, was an avid supporter of Pennsylvania's charter school legislation, and, as Andrew has discussed, hired Edison to study Philadelphia's schools. As we shall see, Mark Schweiker, who replaced Ridge as governor, shares Ridge's enthusiasm for privatization.

While the term privatization actually refers to a number of education reform strategies, from vouchers and charters to private management of public schools or school districts, these reforms are often lumped together because they tend to be based upon several key assumptions. The first is that public schools, with their centralized bureaucracies, are inherently inefficient; second, that existing systems of accountability are insufficient to prevent poor performance on the part of educators and administrators; third, that decentralization and market forces can be trusted to enhance efficiency and efficacy; and fourth, that the term *public* means that education should be free and accessible to all but does not mean that the public, beyond students and their parents, has any inherent interest or investment in schooling (Lubienski, 2001).

Though the first three points are fairly straightforward, this fourth assumption, the changing definition of "public education" merits a bit more attention. In fact, arguments over privatization in education tend to revolve, implicitly or explicitly, around another,

larger issue: the extent to which education should serve public and/or private purposes. By *public purposes of education* I mean the expectation that schools will prepare students to be knowledgeable, competent, responsible citizens, to place “civic values and ideals above individual self-interest” (Reese, 2000, p. 14), and to participate productively in the economy. Rhetoric about *the private purposes of education* tends to focus on achievement, preparing students to be economically successful, and enabling a degree holder to compete on the job market. According to historian David Labaree, “[t]he purpose of education from this angle is not what it can do for democracy or the economy but what it can do for me” (Labaree, 9/17/97, p. 3). In this framework, the *public* in public education has to do with funding and access, not with any larger vision for the nation as a whole (Lubienski, 2001).

When Governor Schweiker announced his plan for Philadelphia’s schools, a plan that was informed both by the movement towards privatization in education and by Edison’s report, he identified six local organizations as potential community partners. These groups, four community-development corporations, an umbrella organization of West Philadelphia groups, and an organization founded in response to the takeover, were obvious choices because they shared the governor’s theory of action in a number of ways. One was established by a former Edison executive and two are led by local politicians who had been vocal supporters of Pennsylvania’s charter school law. In fact, State Representative Dwight Evans , the founder of one potential community partner, is often recognized nationally as one of the first African-American politicians to advocate school choice (Reid, 2/6/02a). All of the organizations named by the governor also run, or are closely associated with, charter schools in Philadelphia.

When representatives of these groups spoke in public or to the press, they often echoed the assumptions that inform the governor's approach to education reform. First, they were extremely critical of the status quo in the schools: "We can't do worse than what the [district] is doing," said the executive vice president of Universal Companies, while the representative of another group remarked, "I know we can do better." Similarly, in his remarks at a public meeting on the city's schools, State Senator Anthony Williams, the founder of another potential partner, said the current system "stinks," city students all over the country are relegated to educational "leftovers," and that it is time for urban parents to have the same choices other parents have always had (Fieldnotes, 1/26/02).

Representatives of these groups also share some of the deeper assumptions that underlie the logic of privatization—that parents and students are educational consumers and that "public" education simply means that education should be free and accessible to all (Lubienski, 2001). This definition allows them to focus on parent satisfaction, accountability and individual student achievement and dismiss potential concerns about the involvement of private corporations. As Reverend Cortes, the director of Nueva Esperanza, told *Education Week*, he is more concerned about student achievement than a particular governance structure: "Why should I care if someone makes money if my kids can read? It's not about who makes money. The point is, who is learning to read and who is not.'" (Gewertz, 11/07/01). To them, the system is so entrenched and the schools serving their children so inadequate that nothing less than a major reorganization and new forms of accountability (such as parental choice of schools or the ability to fire companies that do not perform) will suffice.

For several of the potential community partners, however, school reform means more than simply giving parents choices or even making sure that individual students achieve at higher

levels. They see improving education as critical to their larger task—enhancing the quality of life in the communities they serve. To Representative Evans, education is the “final piece of the revitalization puzzle,” while at Universal Companies, schools complement the variety of services the organization provides, ranging from housing and business development, to job training and social services. Reverend Cortes wanted to use the governor’s proposals to “create partnership schools where the people in our community run them,” and he has long argued in favor of Latino empowerment: “We want to open Latino-owned-and-operated institutions that service our community. There’s a saying out there about teaching people to fish for themselves. But if you teach them to own a pond, someone will fish for [them]. In a community that is economically impoverished, that has to be the goal” (Inquirer, 5/11/98).

In many respects, the four community development corporations named as potential partners, with their not-for-profit status and their emphasis on community strength, local ties, and improving the quality of life for neighborhood residents, seem to offer a counter of sorts to the logic of privatization. After all, though organizations like Universal Companies or Nueva Esperanza may define “public” locally, rather than broadly, their work in the community does seem to be rooted in a sense of collective goals and common good.

The community partnership model has potential precisely because of the ways these organizations’ theories of action overlap with, and diverge from, the privatization agenda. It strikes me as possible that each of the entities potentially involved in running schools—the educational management organizations (or EMOs) and the community groups—could have the effect of mitigating that which is most worrying about the other. The community organizations, with their vision of schooling as critical to community life, could counter the overly individualistic, instrumental bent of the EMOs. In addition, their ties to the

community could also help an EMO like Edison, which is a national organization based in New York City, understand and respond to community concerns. On the other hand, the EMOs could compensate for some of the community group's potential weaknesses. EMOs bring resources, experience with running schools, and pedagogical and curricular knowledge that the community organizations may lack. These various forms of capital are crucial when it comes to the day-to-day running of schools. My argument here is not that community partnerships are the solution to the problems of urban education; rather I believe that it is an idea with potential. Certainly it has more to offer than the current model in Philadelphia, in which EMOs and other managers work only with the school district to operate their schools, and communities are no more involved in their schools than they had been before.

Despite the conceivable strengths of this model, it was never actually put into effect in Philadelphia. In fact, by the beginning of this school year, the groups I have discussed—once so prominent in newspaper coverage and conversations about the takeover—had all but disappeared from public discourse. When, during late summer and early fall of last year, I conducted a series of interviews with representatives from several organizations, I learned that not only had the groups *not* been named to serve as community partners—in fact, none of the “partnership” schools was assigned a partner organization—but the School Reform Commission had never even responded to their applications. In interview after interview I was told, “we never heard from the SRC, so I guess we’ll just assume we didn’t get it” or “the school district never communicated with anyone.” Several respondents were angry about the process, saying it was “asinine,” “fraught and laden with politics” or, more circumspectly, “a bit rushed.” Overall, they

were disappointed that the community partner piece had fallen from the agenda and concerned that, without it, real reform would be impossible.

This shift is puzzling. How could organizations that seemed poised to play such a major role in the newly organized district actually be playing no role at all? I would like to propose two possible explanations for this sequence of events, one based on conflicting theories of change and another based on the need for legitimacy.

When the state takeover went into effect, the governor's appointees to the School Reform Commission largely shared his views with respect to the efficacy of privatization and increased competition, and they continued to push the privatization agenda, including the community partnership plan, throughout the winter and spring of last year. Grassroots opposition to privatization, from local activists, student groups, parents and teachers, was vocal and intense, however, and the SRC responded by scaling back the number of schools to be turned over to for-profit companies and developing a number of other reform models. Community groups opposed to privatization continued to hold protests and rallies, wrote letters to local newspapers, and were a strong presence both at weekly SRC meetings and at meetings held at individual schools. At many of these events, parents, students, and activists shouted down the commissioners, booed, hissed, chanted, and waved anti-privatization posters. One commission meeting became so heated that a police officer moved to stand between the crowd and the commissioners. Local activists grew increasingly indignant over the summer, as Edison's stock continued to fall—Edison was *the* symbol of privatization in the city— and Philadelphians learned that districts across the country were canceling their contracts with Edison. In addition, the controversy over the governor's efforts to secure additional funding for EMO-run schools , which I will discuss in a moment, raised the ire of

Philadelphians across the city, even those who did not necessarily oppose turning some schools over to private companies.

While it is not clear exactly how much the SRC was affected by community sentiment and the continual challenges to Edison's reputation that the summer's news raised, it is clear that the appointment of Paul Vallas as the district's CEO marked the start of a new era and the reign of a new theory of action. Paul Vallas, formerly the chief of Chicago schools, was appointed CEO on July 10 with great fanfare: the local papers told of his successes in Chicago, the SRC lauded his credentials, and his performance at various public meetings seemed to win him supporters wherever he went.

As Kara has described, Vallas does not adhere to the sort of decentralization the governor and the SRC originally envisioned. In fact, he seems to have endless faith in the ability of the central office, particularly his team, to take on new tasks. All of Vallas' initiatives involve a strengthening of the role of central administration, a recentralization of sorts, and he consistently portrays himself, and in fact the school district administration, as capable of solving whatever problem emerges—or, as has often been the case when he is confronted with particular concerns, of having *already* created the necessary plan or resolved the issue. I would argue then, that the plan for community partnerships was dropped in part because it was associated with privatization, which as a reform strategy had come under heavy fire in the city, and because it conflicted so strongly with Vallas' own efforts to recentralize and to control, as much as possible, what goes on in Philadelphia's schools.

The notion of conflicting theories of action does not tell the entire story, however. A struggle around legitimacy also helped determine the fate of the community

partnership model. According to Max Weber, legitimacy in modern societies is generally based upon legal authority—“the belief in the validity of legal statute and functional competence based on rationally created rules” (p. 79). People accept the legitimacy of an *action*—like the state takeover of the schools or the privatization of individual schools— or of an *institution*—like the School Reform Commission—when they can see that the rules have been followed rationally and in a way that is consistent with legal statute and accepted norms and procedures. In the case of the state takeover, the legitimacy of the governor’s actions, and the administrative body he established, was questioned by Philadelphians from the very beginning. Several lawsuits challenged the constitutionality of the takeover, arguing that the state lacked legal justification for its actions. Politicians, columnists, educators, and many other Philadelphians criticized Edison for, as they said, “recommending itself,” in what appeared to be a conflict of interest and a violation of standard consulting norms. In addition, the Pennsylvania Department of Education came under fire for seemingly favorable treatment of Edison from the very beginning. In fact, Pennsylvania’s Auditor General accused state officials of failing to follow routine competitive bidding procedures, and Representative Chaka Fattah initiated a federal investigation into Edison’s dealings with the state(**check that**).

Because these and other critiques called the legitimacy of the state’s actions into question, I believe that the community partner plan was, at least in part, an effort to gain legitimacy for privatization in Philadelphia. While the partnership model could not ameliorate concerns about the legality of the takeover, it did enable supporters, from the governor and the SRC to the EMOs themselves, to counter one of the most compelling challenges to the takeover plan—that it had been designed with no community input and

was being implemented against the wishes of the community. For example, at a meeting at one of the schools to be run by Edison, a company executive said Edison would ensure strong parental involvement: “In Philadelphia there will be community partners. Edison’s report says parents and community have been pushed out of schools. Edison wants to work with community groups” (Fieldnotes, 5/22/02). At another meeting, one in which SRC commissioner Daniel Whelan faced a particularly angry crowd, Whelan attempted to pacify frustration about lack of public input by referring to the partnerships: “In every case, we have asked for community partners for the 70 schools. Those community partners, we hope, will be made up—of the community group—we hope they will be made up of interested parents like yourselves” (Fieldnotes, 5/17/02). Hence the community partnership model lent legitimacy to the state’s plan because it opened up the possibility that schools would actually be more connected with, and accountable to, the community than before, despite the fact that the plan itself was developed without community involvement.

Another significant threat to the legitimacy of the proposed privatization came in July, when the city erupted into controversy over \$75 million that the state had promised the school district, money that the governor had committed when he negotiated the takeover deal with the mayor of Philadelphia. Less than two weeks after the legislature approved the allocation, a local paper discovered that the funds would actually come with particular strings attached—nearly \$55 of the \$75 million could only be used for those 45 schools (out of a total of 254 schools in the district) that would be run by outside managers. The news drew immediate reactions from the SRC and shocked the city, especially when it became apparent that the amount of additional money the state

targeted for privately run schools (\$1500 per pupil) was exactly the bonus Edison had said it needed to implement its program.

This conflict represented a major turning point in the takeover story. The School Reform Commission, which had only weeks before appeared divided on a number of issues, unanimously refused to accept the state's conditions. At public meetings, the same Philadelphia activists who had expressed such vocal opposition to the SRC suddenly rallied around the commissioners. They denounced the state, encouraged the SRC to reject the money, and chanted, "if you stand up for equity, we'll stand up with you!" At this moment, the city was united *with* the SRC *against* a common enemy, the state and, in particular, Charles Zogby, the Pennsylvania Secretary of Education. The School Reform Commission suddenly became *local*, the voice of Philadelphians standing up to the state's bullying and Zogby's apparent favoritism and possible corruption.

The controversy over the state funds coincided with Vallas' appointment. Vallas joined the SRC in refusing to accept the state's conditions for the \$55 million and demonstrated no particular enthusiasm for the privatization project. In fact, by the end of July he had rejected the plan for Edison to serve as a consultant to the district, saying there was nothing Edison could do that his team at the district could not do just as well. These moves were particularly reassuring to Philadelphians who had felt for months that the deck was stacked in favor of Edison and against the wishes of city residents. By the beginning of August, just a few weeks before schools were scheduled to open, Vallas and the SRC negotiated a compromise, so that the privately run schools did get more money per pupil than other schools, but far less than the \$1500 originally proposed. Shortly thereafter, an *Inquirer* columnist captured the feelings of many Philadelphians when he

concluded that the district was, “in a place, I’d say, that looks surprisingly good.” He noted that all five of the members of the SRC “have proven themselves to be a tough, resourceful, and semi-independent lot,” and he called Vallas’ performance so far “impressive” (Eichel, 8/2/02). Vallas’ arrival and popularity, the resolution of this crisis, and the suddenly “local” status of the SRC, had sanctioned the new arrangements in the district. At this point, the need for legitimacy that the community partnership plan had helped to meet—and perhaps had been *designed* to meet—had been satisfied in other ways. Commissioners no longer referred to the role of the community partners, and the schools opened with no new mechanism for community involvement.

The 70 schools that are presently run by for-profit companies, non-profit organizations, or a special office in the school district are still called “partnership schools.” The term, however, no longer refers to collaboration with community organizations; presumably, it now refers to whatever coordination is happening between the school district and the new managers. This shift in the term’s meaning occurred with little notice and without public discussion of the strengths of the partnership idea, its costs, or any reasons the district should or should not adopt it. I have argued here that the rise and fall of the partnership model can be traced to a combination of two processes—conflicts between various theories of action and a search for legitimacy— but, because so many of the decisions about the city’s schools over the past year were made behind closed doors, my argument is largely conjectural. While I believe the model did have some merit, particularly compared to the current arrangements, what is perhaps even more unfortunate than the loss of the plan itself is the fact that observers of school reform in Philadelphia can only speculate about why it was lost—the lack of any public

discussion of the principles guiding reform in the city will continue to impede both reform itself and our efforts to understand it.