Youth as Civic Actors:

High School Reform in Three Philadelphia Neighborhoods

Prepared by Research for Action

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RESEARCH FOR *ACTION*

About Research for Action

Research for Action (RFA) is a Philadelphia-based nonprofit organization. We seek to use research as the basis for the improvement of educational opportunities and outcomes for traditionally underserved students. Our work is designed to strengthen public schools and postsecondary institutions; provide research-based recommendations to policymakers, practitioners and the public at the local, state and national levels; and enrich the civic and community dialogue about public education. For more information, please visit our website at www.researchforaction.org.

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Introduction

Philadelphia unfolds out from its downtown skyline into a diverse swath of neighborhoods, each with its own story of richness and struggle—and each with its own public high school. In 2002, and still today, many of Philadelphia's neighborhood high schools were sorely in need of reform, a topic that had been discussed and debated at education tables for decades. Yet missing from those tables were those whom the reforms would impact most.

Beginning in 2003, two youth organizing groups, the Philadelphia Student Union (PSU) and Youth United for Change (YUC), embarked on campaigns to improve their large neighborhood high schools by dividing them into small schools. Their multi-year efforts extended over several School District of Philadelphia (District) administrations, and at this moment, when local and national attention is focused on persistently low-performing schools, their story has much to teach. In this article, we look at the legacy of the small schools campaigns of these two groups, including the effect they had on their neighborhood high schools, on their communities, and on adult perceptions of youth.

The School District of Philadelphia's 2009 strategic plan, *Imagine 2014*, and the Renaissance Schools turnaround initiative included in it, aim to radically overhaul low-performing elementary and secondary schools. Yet these reforms, like so many in the past, fail to alter the role of students, even middle and high school students, in the reform process. With the exception of select students, youth are largely the passive recipients of change efforts rather than participants capable of contributing to design, implementation, and sustainability. Even worse, young people are still too often regarded as the source of problems in schools and

neighborhoods—the cause of violence and crime, high absenteeism and dropout—with little of positive value to contribute.[1]

There is, however, an emergent view that contradicts this negative image of youth as the source of social problems. This view, promoted by the Social Justice Youth Development (SJYD) framework, sees social problems as a consequence of economic and political disinvestment in the communities in which many urban youth, especially low-income youth of color, are growing up. This framework, in other words, sees problems such as drugs, violence, crime, and student dropout as rooted in neglected and deteriorated communities—not in young people themselves.[2] In the SJYD framework, youth are regarded as civic actors able to analyze their environments and act collectively to change them. For youth growing up in urban neighborhoods, this often means developing an understanding of a "social ecology" characterized by racism, unemployment, violence, police brutality, and under-resourced and low-performing schools, all conditions hostile to the development of young people. Groups with whom the SJYD framework resonates, such as the youth organizing groups that are the focus of this paper, enable young people to reflect critically on their schools and neighborhoods and discuss and act on the social problems they face.

Five principles guide the work of groups that embrace the SJYD approach:

- analyzing power in social relationships,
- making identity central,
- promoting systemic social change,
- encouraging collective action, and
- embracing youth culture[3]

As we will show, PSU and YUC enacted many of these principles in their small schools campaigns. We argue that in conducting a power analysis of what it would take to transform their large, underperforming high schools, PSU and YUC developed a strategy of mobilizing adults in their neighborhoods. In doing so, they confronted longstanding social divisions within

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[1] Kim & Sherman, 2006

[2] Ginwright & James, 2002; See also, Ginwright, Cammarota, & Noguera, 2005

[3] Ginwright & James, 2002

their communities—racism, class differences, and social isolation—and, in the process, influenced neighborhood relationships, as well as promoted an image of youth as responsible, engaged and productive young citizens.

Considerable research has shown that in large urban districts like Philadelphia, the explicit involvement of low-income groups and people of color—including youth—is important to ensuring that education reforms meet the needs and aspirations of those who attend the public schools and rely on the public education system.[4] The involvement of these community-based groups can make the improvement of low performing schools more sustainable as they are likely to embed school improvement in broad, multi-sector community building agendas.[5] As this story of youth organizing will show, youth political action is especially important for school reform, as it has the potential to increase a neighborhood's capacity for working together to address shared concerns.

Research for Action (RFA), a local education research organization, has documented the youth leadership development and actions of PSU and YUC with both a *long view* that places their work in the context of nearly 20 years of research on Philadelphia school reform, and an *inside view,* having collaborated with them on action research projects, sat at the same tables with them as participant observers, and provided them with research support and technical assistance. Throughout the small schools campaigns (2003-10), we also conducted interviews with the groups' adult organizers, teachers and administrators at the high schools where they organized, students, politicians, and members of their communities.

In this paper, we use the PSU and YUC small schools campaigns to illustrate successes and challenges that youth encounter when they work within the SJYD framework. We tell the story of three chapters of high school students, who critically engaged with their educational experiences, researched small schools as a reform that might improve their education, and organized in their communities and schools to achieve them. While the three stories end with varying degrees of success in the groups' attempts to transition their schools from large to

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[4] See, e.g., Gold, Simon, & Brown, 2002; Mediratta, Shah, & Macalister, 2009

[5] Henig & Stone, 2007

small, we find that the influence of the campaigns extends beyond bricks and mortar. The influence they have had on neighborhood relationships and perceptions of youth provide the youth with a strong foundation on which to build their future work.

The Characters: Two Youth Organizing Groups

YUC and PSU have shown remarkable longevity. During their 20 and 15 year histories respectively, both organizations have sustained transitions in leadership when their founders left and new organizers stepped in. Both identify with the tradition of community organizing, working to support and educate youth to become leaders who understand and can challenge inequity in their schools and communities. While their models differ, YUC and PSU both organize high school students into school "chapters," which consist of an adult organizer and youth members. Each chapter recruits new members yearly and periodically conducts a "listening campaign" to solicit ideas and concerns from the larger student body. Over the years, we have observed the ways that the adult organizers in each chapter have challenged youth to discuss and research problems in their schools, and to develop organizing campaigns that confront these problems.

Beginning in 2003, three chapters developed small schools campaigns: first YUC's chapter at Kensington High School, followed not long after by their Olney High School chapter and PSU's chapter at West Philadelphia High School. All three are neighborhood high schools, drawing their students predominantly from local catchment areas, which in Philadelphia's tiered system of selective and non-selective high schools, places them at numerous disadvantages. In Philadelphia, neighborhood high schools enroll a disproportionate number of high-need students, deal with higher truancy and dropout rates, and have lower test scores than the more selective schools in the District.[6] The fact that West Philadelphia, Kensington and Olney are

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[6] Gold, Evans, Haxton, Maluk, Mitchell, Simon, & Good, 2010

neighborhood schools, though, allowed the three youth chapters to adopt a neighborhood-based organizing strategy that would not have been possible in schools whose students lived in neighborhoods throughout the city.

During RFA's studies of school reform in Philadelphia, we have witnessed the evolution of the youth organizing groups from campaigns focused on specific changes within their high schools—such as getting cleaner bathrooms or a new principal—to whole-school reform efforts. The smaller campaigns won them short-term victories that were vulnerable to reversal in subsequent years but were important to helping the groups build power and recognition. The whole-school reform efforts, like the small schools campaigns, held the promise of improving education for all students in a school for the longer term. However, working toward larger goals meant moving larger targets. In order to influence District-level decision-makers, the youth organizing groups engaged in community organizing strategies reflective of SJYD principles. They had to reach beyond the school walls and beyond their teachers and administrators to build support among education reform advocates across the city, and among parents, public officials, and other adults in their local neighborhoods. Below, we provide a brief history of the three neighborhoods in which the campaigns unfolded.

The Setting: Three Urban Neighborhoods

The West Philadelphia, Kensington and Olney neighborhoods, where the three small schools campaigns took place, reflect the trends of de-industrialization, selective revitalization, and impoverishment that have been occurring over the past 50 years. In 1991, Philadelphia urban scholars Adams and Bartelt and their colleagues described citywide challenges that have only become deeper over the past 15 years:

> *In a city of neighborhoods, the neighborhoods have been the main victims of gradual disinvestment that government policies have failed to stem. As in many other American cities,*

the shift of production southward and westward in the United States and later overseas has reverberated throughout the city's residential neighborhoods.[7]

Between 1955 and 1975 alone, Philadelphia lost three out of every four industrial jobs and population decreased dramatically.[8] As racial discrimination intensified during this period, the city became not only poorer, but also more segregated, and local politics often placed ethnic and racial groups in competition with one another in a struggle over diminishing resources.

The social cleavages stemming from economic disinvestment, racism, and the more recent gentrification patterns in the city were key to the complex context of the youth organizing groups. West Philadelphia, Kensington, and Olney had many similar characteristics, but each neighborhood also had specific social and economic dynamics that shaped the possibilities and challenges for developing powerful coalitions of youth and adults committed to improving their neighborhood schools. Figures I and II demonstrate some of the similarities and differences among these three neighborhoods and their respective high schools at the beginning of the millennium, when YUC and PSU first took on their small schools campaigns.[9]

Figure I. Demographic Characteristics of Three Urban Neighborhoods, 2000 Census data

	Kensington	Cedar Park	Olney	Citywide
Population	14,926	15,602	37,209	1,517,550
Population Change (1990-2000)	-7%	-4%	+7	-4%
Median Household Income	$25,109	$26,468	$30,616	$30,746
Households below poverty level	32.6%	22.1%	21.2%	22.2%
Adults over 25 with Bachelor's degree or higher	4.7%	32.2%	10.2%	17.9%

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[7] Adams, Bartelt, Elesh, Goldstein, Kleniewski, & Yancey, 1991, p. 15

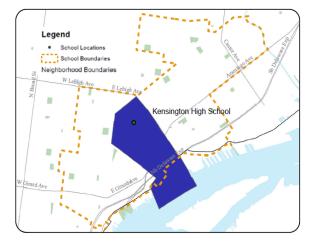[8] Adams, Bartelt, Elesh, Goldstein, Kleniewski, & Yancey, 1991

[9] We report year 2000 Census data, rather than 2010 data, in order to describe the neighborhoods shortly before YUC and PSU began their small schools campaigns. Also, because residential demographic data are not available for school catchment areas, the data reported in Figures I and II reflect the population living in each neighborhood as delineated by the University of Pennsylvania Cartographic Lab in 2000. (See: http://cml.upenn.edu)

Figure II. Characteristics of Three Large High Schools, 2003-04[10]

	KENSINGTON H.S.	WEST H.S.	OLNEY H.S.
Enrollment	1,666	1,763	2,335
Attendance	65%	71%	65%
4-year Graduation Rate	34%	39%	61%
% Black	25%	98%	57%
% Latino	50%	1%	30%
% White / Other	25%	1%	13%

Kensington

Kensington, one of Philadelphia's oldest industrial neighborhoods, was the lowest income of the three neighborhoods in this study. Approximately one-third of Kensington residents lived below the official poverty level in 2000, and fewer than five percent had earned a Bachelor's degree. Kensington struggled to 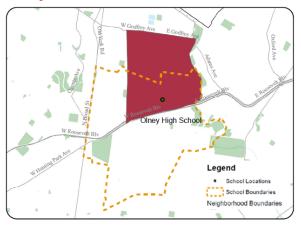overcome tensions between the white community that remained in the area even after the factories that employed them were largely closed, and the newer Latino population, which moved in alongside older and newer Black residents. At the same time, Kensington had become a desirable area for artists and young professionals, and competition for its housing stock was keen. Kensington High School was primarily African American and Latino (see Figure II), but was located in the part of the catchment area that was predominantly white, working class. Children of white, working class families were largely attending non-district schools at the time. Throughout the 1960s and 1970s, an era of dramatic transition for the area, the neighborhood, the high school, and its

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[10] Enrollment and race data were reported in Suess & Lewis, 2007. Attendance and graduation rates are the AYP calculations, retrieved January 18, 2005, from www.schoolresults.org.

feeder middle schools were characterized by racist attacks on Black and Latino families and children, as white residents defended themselves from what they described as incursions onto their traditional turf and neighborhood. While the level of racial violence had subsided by 2003, this history continued to reverberate loudly in the neighborhood. YUC's organizing in Kensington, then, had them navigating relationships between students and adults, between whites and people of color, and between the "old guard" and the newcomers. As one community leader related, "Oh yes, this [the racial tension] has been going on for years. . . . There have been meetings upon meetings for years."
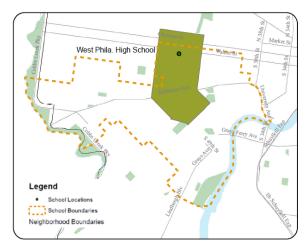
Olney

Located several miles north of Kensington High School, **Olney** was one of the most racially and ethnically diverse of Philadelphia's neighborhoods. This diversity was also reflected in the high school (see Figure II). Even though Olney residents were slightly better educated and had higher average incomes than Kensington, more than 20 percent lived below the poverty level. The neighborhood population had been growing more quickly than the rest of the city and the area had few vacant properties, but it remained outside the orbit of gentrification and the city's development efforts. According to one community leader, being a non-gentrifying neighborhood had consequences: "A lot of times, in Philadelphia, if you're not in the gentrifying part, then you're in the neglected part… You can't be cared about and not gentrified." While YUC's efforts to organize parents and community members in Olney faced obstacles, they did not confront the same tensions that gentrification created in both Kensington and West Philadelphia.

West Philadelphia

West Philadelphia High School is located in a neighborhood called **Cedar Park** that is adjacent to the Ivy League University of Pennsylvania (Penn). East of Cedar Park, where the university

sits, the median selling price for houses was $325,000 in 2007. In contrast, median prices for houses closer to and west of the high school, about ten blocks from the university, were between $30,000 and $55,000. Twenty-two percent of residents lived in poverty and the average household income of white residents was twice that of African Americans. While residents in this neighborhood represented a diverse mix, both racially and economically, West Philadelphia High School was 98 percent African American (see Figure II). Some residents in Cedar Park were hopeful about the benefits of university-influenced development, but others worried about university expansion and displacement, including the fear that West Philadelphia High School would no longer serve the children of low-income African American families who currently attended the school, but instead would become the domain of children from more affluent families. The presence of Penn and the ongoing gentrification of the neighborhood created racial tensions that influenced PSU's efforts to organize residents of West Philadelphia during their small schools campaign. In the words of one organizer:

> *The situation of West [Philadelphia High School] in the middle of a rapidly gentrifying neighborhood complicates the community relationships. On the one hand, we want Penn's resources for the benefit of West. But we don't want to change who attends the school or for the school to be transformed for the benefit of anyone other than the current students and their families.*

Despite variation among the three neighborhoods, each with its own set of challenges, West Philadelphia, Kensington and Olney each had high schools that were starkly inadequate when PSU and YUC began their campaigns. The schools were large and dilapidated, truancy was rampant, petty vandalism within and outside the schools was common, and graduation rates were stunningly low.

The Development of Three Small Schools Campaigns

In 2001, when the state took over the School District of Philadelphia and proposed that Edison Schools, Inc. run many central office functions and up to 60 low-performing schools, PSU and YUC led a citywide pushback to the plan. Their activities during this period gave them heightened visibility and earned them legitimacy as reform players. With this recognition, the moment was ripe for them to identify an approach to whole-school reform that they believed would result in deep changes in the quality of the educational environments in their high schools.

Setting the Stage

Beginning in 2003, the youth members of YUC's Kensington chapter—followed within the year by their chapter at Olney and PSU's chapter at West Philadelphia—conducted research and made site visits to small schools in Oakland, California, New York City, and Providence, Rhode Island with the support of grant funding and adult staff. The youth leaders observed how small schools, while not a silver bullet, improved a school's potential for *personalization*, a word we heard again and again from the youth organizing groups. In a 2006 report, PSU students Tiffany Fogle and Lawrence Jones articulated the driving vision of the small schools effort:

> *The larger school goal [of small schools] is to create a community where everyone knows each other; this personalization will be best for the learning process. Many of the current teachers at West [Philadelphia High School] have been teaching there for many years but do not really know the students or their families.*[11]

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[11] Fogle & Jones, 2006, p.1

Buoyed by what they had seen on these school visits, the three chapters developed proposals to divide each of their large neighborhood high schools into four small schools, launching efforts that would stretch into multi-year campaigns.

RFA's "inside view" of the organizing groups has given us direct experience with their high school chapters and has provided insight into how their small schools campaigns reflected the SJYD approach. After their visits to successful small high schools in other cities, the students returned to discuss what might work in their particular situation. They read about small schools, learned how to analyze and critique their situations, and then developed proposals for what they thought their schools should look like. In order to bring about the changes they envisioned for their schools, members of the three chapters learned how to develop a campaign by leading meetings, securing allies, and advocating that adults make space for students at the tables where school reforms are discussed and decisions are made.
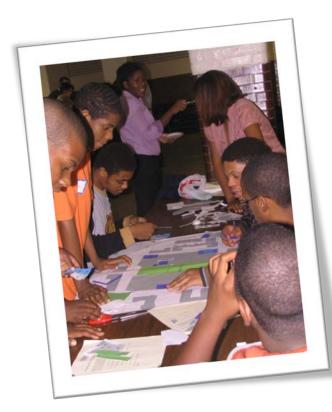
Building Momentum

Over the course of the next several years, the chapters jointly and separately formed relationships with District and public officials. On occasion, the chapters led political or district leaders on school tours to demonstrate poor conditions and lack of educational opportunity. They organized bus trips that took students and a variety of community, school district, and other adults to visit small schools in other cities year after year. They also held public actions in which an assembly of youth and their allies would target and "pin" a district official, asking for a public commitment to alter a specific policy or practice.

Our "long view" of the work of the organizing groups has revealed the uneven and halting process of community organizing to build power and influence—the two steps forward, one step back process of change. When the groups were first developing their campaigns, it was in a context that held some promise for small school reform at their three high schools. Small high schools were getting visibility nationally and District CEO Paul Vallas was committed to major facilities improvement. In December 2002, about the same time that the chapters began developing their proposals, the District announced a Capital Improvement Plan that allocated

funds for renovations and/or new buildings at Olney, Kensington, and West Philadelphia. This presented an opportunity for the three youth organizing chapters to develop coordinated strategies to influence the District's decisions about construction. In February 2005, the District adopted a new policy that aimed to increase high school options by creating new small schools and making a few existing schools smaller. According to the new District plan, Kensington would be split into four small schools, and Olney would be split in two. West Philadelphia was still slated for a new building under the Capital Improvement Plan, but was not included in the District's small schools plans.[12]

With the new policy, the three chapters were faced with the challenge of coordinating their efforts while also developing three separate strategies based on each school's position within the District reform plan. The Kensington chapter needed to hold the District accountable to its four-schools promise; the Olney chapter was disappointed that the split into two medium-sized schools might undermine their call for personalization and decided to continue pushing for four schools with fewer students in each; and the West Philadelphia chapter developed a strategy for inserting a youth-led voice into the plans for a new school building that, by District design, did not accommodate small schools.

Contributions of the SJYD Framework

The SJYD view of young people as social change actors stands in contrast to other common approaches to youth programs. One common approach treats youth as "clients" with deficits that need to be addressed. According to Ginwright, Cammarota, and Noguera, this "problem-driven perspective" often sees young

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[12] Suess & Lewis, 2007

people as the source of school and neighborhood problems such as crime, drug use and violence.[13] Accordingly, unless schools and youth agencies find ways to fix young people, so they are not such a menace, these problems are likely to degrade local communities.

A second, less noxious approach views young people as having assets to develop. This traditional youth development framework posits that the strengths of young people are too often being overlooked, and that schools and youth agencies need to find ways to develop their strengths—including their resilience in the face of hardship.[14] Many of those who have focused on youth voice in school reform align with this view.[15] Although this model of youth development is founded on a positive view of youth, it too often leaves them in the position of being consumers of services, rather than active participants who bring their own experience and critique to the table.

In contrast, groups that work within the SJYD framework aim not only to impact individual young people by emphasizing their strengths and teaching new skills, but to impact the structures that create disadvantages, particularly for urban youth of color. The small schools campaigns of YUC and PSU combated the youth-are-problems perspective by relocating the source of problems from individuals to their contexts—from students to the large and impersonal schools they attended. Beyond this, even when youth were not being overtly blamed or criticized for problems, YUC and PSU contended with adult skepticism that said the youth themselves were not capable of acting as change agents and were in fact being manipulated by their adult organizers. The SJYD framework has particular importance for those concerned with school reform because it challenges us to think about students as more than passive individual beneficiaries of reform efforts.

In the next two sections, we complete the story of the small schools campaigns of Philadelphia's two youth organizing groups. We describe the range of success students had in effecting

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[13] Ginwright, Cammarota, & Noguera, 2005, p. 27

[14] Ginwright, Cammarota, & Noguera, 2005

[15] Mitra, 2004

changes in school size, and we use the SJYD framework to assess their other notable, if less concrete, impacts.

SJYD Builds Neighborhood Power

The SJYD framework is premised on the idea that social conditions are not immutable, and that organizing to alter inequitable, unfair and oppressive conditions is at the core of any democratic process. In analyzing their situation, the PSU and YUC students realized that alone they did not have the power to bring about the extent of the change they believed was needed in their high schools. They would need the support of adults in their neighborhoods. One student leader explained that PSU decided to involve their community in the small schools organizing at West Philadelphia High School because

> *it is not just the students that get this new building. It's the whole community. It's the parents. It's the community members. It's the churches. It's the teachers and the principal. It involves everyone. . . . So in a sense it is a community school. So we wanted as many people as possible to be involved in crafting this new school.*

To win support from community adults, however, the youth needed to persuade them that the educational change they were envisioning—high quality small schools—would benefit the community as a whole, and that it was worth the adults' time and effort to push their case with the District. Perhaps even more critical to their success was the fact that the young people in two of the three neighborhoods would need to disrupt some of the social dynamics that historically had made it difficult to identify a shared interest and collective activity. Looking back on the strategy that the youth organizing groups adopted, one organizer explained that both YUC and PSU

> *understand that for schools to change, school and community have to be really connected. So I think in the last couple years, both PSU and YUC, through the small schools work, have turned a*

new corner in the kind of organizing that they do, which is not just organizing around schools isolated from community stuff, but really thinking about how do we organize communities to take back their schools.

Motivating Political and Community Leaders

In all three neighborhoods, the youth organizing chapters focused on gaining the support of community and political leaders. This was a continuous process, which required attendance meetings of neighborhood groups, face-to-face meetings with political leaders, and in some cases, organizing school tours, so neighborhood leaders could see first-hand the need for change in their high schools. One political leader saw the students as filling a civic gap in their communities: "In the wake of no parental involvement, then that's when the students stepped up. . . . They stepped up to speak up for themselves because nobody was speaking up for them." This political leader believed that the youth's activity could help her deliver needed services to her constituency, which could aid in stabilizing the community, staunching the exit of young families when their children reached school age.

The policymaker was not alone in recognizing the community benefits of the youth organizing nor in finding it inspiring that young people were speaking up and working to change schools that for too long had not served them well. Community and political leaders in all three neighborhoods spoke of being motivated to get involved in high school reform because students were asking for their involvement. One community leader, whom the students identified as among their "core" supporters, said she got "excited about youth who are excited. Not just for themselves, but those who are coming up after them. I'm just floored that they want to do something."

Calling for reform from the District posed a challenge that some adults might have chosen not to pursue if it weren't for the efforts of young people to persuade community groups to act. "It was a terrific pitch," said a leader from one of the other neighborhoods,

> *because here there were kids in high school coming around saying, 'We would like the school to be better. Help us with this.' That is a very simple and powerful request. And we honored it. But otherwise, dealing with the District is a little bit like throwing small stones at an elephant. Why*

> *bother to do that? You're only going to aggravate him, and he'll whack you, but it won't change it.*

Community and political leaders became allies of the students because they saw the link between having a good neighborhood high school and community building. As one leader explained, "If you are going to have a sort of full-fledged community, you got to have a public high school that serves the community well and I think that's part of what we're working for here." In all three neighborhoods, adults told us that they saw the youth working for the future of their communities through the small schools campaigns.

Bridging Divides in Kensington and West Philadelphia

Despite the fact that PSU and YUC persuaded many community adults to become allies in their efforts, the youth still found themselves challenged by social dynamics in their neighborhoods that threatened their newly formed alliances. The challenges were different in each neighborhood, but together reflected many of the tensions present in urban communities—racial divides, economic disparities, social isolation—that are the legacy of economic and social abandonment, gentrification and the influx of new immigrant groups.

In Kensington and West Philadelphia, student organizing and public actions led to a District commitment to an intensive community planning process around small schools, led by a New Orleans consulting firm, Concordia, LLC. YUC and PSU worked closely with Concordia staff to identify, reach out to, and engage neighborhood stakeholders, with the goal of building widespread support and buy-in for the creation of small schools in these neighborhoods. The Concordia process resulted in structures called Sustainability Circles[16] that helped to sustain the participation of neighborhood leaders, parents, and clergy, build power for YUC and PSU, and create a venue in which difficult neighborhood divides could be breached. One organizer described how Concordia's involvement helped YUC build relationships in the Kensington neighborhood:

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[16] The Sustainability Circles were later renamed the Kensington School and Community Coalition and the West Philadelphia Community Partners.

What came out of the Concordia process was 140 residents [who] came up with a list of recommendations that we can say to the District. A large number of people participated in this process. I think the other thing that came out of Concordia was some really good relationship-building with residents that we would not have traditionally built relationships with.

While stressing at the same time that there were "bumps in the road," including some initial distrust of Concordia for coming in as an outside organization, one student in West Philadelphia said that the small schools work "brought together all these community organizations . . . We brought together the students and the parent organizations and the teachers and the principal. It's a really powerful thing for that to happen."

A New School for Kensington

In Kensington, YUC faced the challenge of organizing in a neighborhood characterized by long-term racial divides and a history of white racism. The students, in the eyes of one of the community leaders, kept the urgency of the need to transform Kensington High School "real." She explained how the commitment and forthright approach of the students helped to change the tenor of the community meetings, and described initial meetings where some of the white residents were "very rude and obnoxious" to the Latino/a and Black students. At one meeting

Dear YUC Supporters,
In September 2002, students from the Kensington High School chapter of Youth United for Change, took then-CEO of Philadelphia School District Paul Vallas, on a tour of their school. At the end of the tour they negotiated a New Building for Kensington. After six years of planning for the new building and small schools, Youth United for Change is proud to announce the groundbreaking ceremony for the New Kensington High School for the Creative and Performing Arts. The new school will be a state of the art facility to serve 400 students in the Kensington catchment area. We would like to invite all of our supporters to join us for the ceremony on January 9, 2009 at 9:00am at 1901 N Front Street. If you have any questions please feel free to call YUC at 215-423-9588.

Thank you,
Andi Perez, Executive Director, YUC

where somebody got up and said something really rude—it was amazing—all of the students got up en masse and walked out. It was very powerful. And everybody in that auditorium knew exactly why they did it….and it never happened again. That kind of thing I think is very powerful.

In 2005, the District divided Kensington High School into three small schools, housed in existing structures, with a commitment to construct a new school building to accommodate the fourth. The new Kensington school, a state-of-the-art, environmentally-friendly facility, would be located between sections of Kensington that had been historically divided along racial lines. The proposed building site contained a dividing wall that separated the school grounds from a recreation center in the predominantly white part of the neighborhood. Initially, long-time white residents insisted that if the school was going to be built on the edge of their neighborhood, the wall had to stay. Over the course of the planning process, the old guard leaders dropped this demand as white residents began to see the new school as an asset to their community. As construction began, a white community leader expressed that they no longer wanted the wall. "They want the wall down," she said. The architect, who had worked closely with YUC and community leadership, described the new building as

> *a school that is open and not a prison. We already have the El [elevated train] which is like a wall on either side of the two communities that have a history of not getting along. We didn't want the school to be another border, but to invite interaction and transparency between the two communities, so the school is situated so we can see through it to the two neighborhoods.*

Moving Forward in West Philadelphia

As community planning moved forward in West Philadelphia, the new high school building was removed from the capital budget in 2005-06, but the testimony of PSU members got it reinstated. Students were clear that a new building was crucial and, in the absence of a specific commitment to small schools, worked to impact the school's design to support an agenda of greater personalization, authentic small learning communities (SLCs), and theme-based learning.

The neighborhood context remained complex. Many residents suspected that the University of Pennsylvania, which lay just to the east, might continue a pattern of neighborhood gentrification and the displacement of lower-middle, working class, and poor families, with implications for the students who would ultimately benefit from changes at the neighborhood high school. Further complicating the dynamics were a very active local political leader with

her own agenda for community development, and an association of West Philadelphia alumni whose loyalties to the school were awakened when change was being proposed.

Despite these challenges, the campaign made important steps forward. Because the new building was not slated to open until the fall of 2011, students saw the time in the old building as a chance to model what they wanted the new school to be like and, as one student explained, "to make sure that people knew we didn't just want a brand-new, shiny building; we wanted a better education." In 2007, members of PSU and the Sustainability Circle (now called the Community Partners) were on the hiring committee that brought on a new and dynamic principal, who proved to be a partner in improving the school. PSU surveyed students about their academic and career interests and then, following a staff vote, successfully advocated that SLCs be revived in the school based on four themes they identified in their student survey: business, creative and performing arts, automotive engineering, and urban leadership. One SLC in particular – the Urban Leadership Academy - fulfilled students' dream of an education grounded in community concerns and issues.

Through their efforts to organize and build communities in their Philadelphia neighborhoods, PSU and YUC disrupted negative dynamics that had stood in the way of collective action. Adults in their neighborhoods responded to their passion to improve the conditions in their schools for themselves and for the long-term benefit of their communities.

SJYD Challenges Negative Images of Youth

In order to work together with adults in their neighborhood and influence the adult targets of their campaigns, the youth groups had to overcome distinct stereotypes. Like the SJYD approach, the small schools campaigns combated the all-too-common view that youth are apathetic, ineffectual, and even trouble-makers. The adult organizers who worked closely with YUC and PSU members knew that high school students are often more motivated, capable, and engaged than they are given credit for. One adult organizer described the passion of the students in response to problems at their high school: "Some of our students in there now, juniors, have been through a lot of things with [their school] and now are just amazing thinkers

and speakers and organizers, and they were just really upset. And they were like, 'We got to do something.'"

The small schools campaigns gave young people positive visibility through testimony at School Reform Commission meetings or media coverage of collective actions, and had an impact on adult perceptions, both in the District and in their communities. The campaigns also created opportunities for youth-adult interactions through community outreach and collaboration, which were sometimes transformative. "When [a community member] saw the students interacting and when he heard them speak from their own hearts, speaking just as articulate as adults, that's what turns people around," said one organizer. Another described it this way:

> *I definitely think that that perception [that youth are problems] has shifted within the community—after all the community presentations that we've done—that people say, 'There are some kids who actually do care, who are working to create these changes in their schools.' So I definitely think there has been that shift. . . . And I think that's something the District sees. I think the District knows that if they do something that we don't like, there is going to be a sea of red [tee shirts], students testifying, being articulate, strong young people sitting there saying, 'This is not what we want.' And coming to them with very clear: 'This is what we want, this is how we think it should happen, and this is why, and that's it.'*

In Olney there was evidence that the youth organizing changed some adult minds about the role young people can take in society. As one politician related, he was "impressed … with many of the members. They are 9th, 10th and 11th graders who are very passionate about their neighborhood, very passionate about the quality of their education…. [They] are trying to figure out how to be effective advocates for themselves and also for those that are behind them, and that's particularly inspiring." The politician went on to observe that the activity of the YUC chapter at Olney was not only changing adults' view of youth but also that of other students, making civic engagement "cool" among their peers.

> *One of the things I'm starting to see is that the kids from YUC … the things that they're doing are becoming what's cool and becoming what's normal, rather than being sort of, you now, disengaged or laissez faire about everything. … being involved has become sort of popular among some of the kids at Olney. … A lot of the kids were extremely interested in participating in civic things, whereas before it's like, 'Uhhh, you know, I'm sort of into whatever else.' And I think*

that's been the biggest impact is the impact that they've had on their peers, which is what we need.

In addition, through media coverage, the reach of the small schools campaigns' impact on perceptions of youth sometimes stretched citywide. In 2008 and 2009, when both the Kensington and West Philadelphia chapters celebrated the groundbreaking of new school buildings, students were among the speakers at the events, and adult speakers attributed the new buildings, in part, to the work of the youth organizing groups. Both the *Philadelphia Inquirer* and the *Philadelphia Daily News* quoted PSU senior Khalif Dobson in their reports of the West Philadelphia groundbreaking. In the one, he stated, "The building is a testament to the power of young people. We wanted community involvement and the students to reclaim their education."[17]

Changing the limited views of students' capacity to care and to act, however, takes time and persistence. At the District level, turnover in leadership created added challenges for the groups, who worked hard under former CEO Paul Vallas to gain respect and be perceived as real players. In the words of one organizer, "When a brand new administration comes, whatever you've built up to with the old administration, you're all of a sudden starting from scratch."

In 2006, Vallas left the District and while the search for a new CEO was on, implementation of plans for changes at the three high schools ground to a halt. During the interim period, the youth organizing groups participated at District roundtables where ideas for high school reform were being discussed—thus keeping their presence and ideas part of the high school reform agenda. When Dr. Arlene Ackerman was hired as CEO in 2008, priorities shifted and small schools largely disappeared from the District's reform plans, although plans that were already in motion for a new building at West Philadelphia and the fourth and final small school at Kensington would still be carried out. "When we approached Dr. Ackerman," explained a PSU member, "she told us that she believed small schools are inequitable. We told her that they

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[17] Tales, 2009, October 27

definitely had been introduced into Philadelphia in a very inequitable way, and that we were trying to change that by transforming a neighborhood high school into small schools."

Transitions and Transformations

Through shifts in context and political will, the youth organizing groups have played a unique role in speaking to the day-to-day experiences of students. As organizations of students, they were uniquely positioned to mobilize adults in their communities to propose reforms they thought would work when implemented, and to challenge those that would not. They brought a real-life authenticity to the table as they reminded adults in their communities, schools, and the District that their needs should be the focus of school reform. One community member explained why students should be part of bringing change:

> *Because it's their education. Who more than them to have a voice in what happens to them? . . . We can talk all day as adults, but they're actually in the midst of the mess, going to a school that's having different issues and wondering, "Is anyone going to listen to me?"*

We found evidence that in Philadelphia's small schools campaigns, groups of organized, young civic actors mobilized their communities and held the District accountable to their needs. In Kensington, YUC students staged a protest against overcrowding, even after the school had been split in three. At the groundbreaking of the fourth, a speaker from the School District himself acknowledged YUC's role in holding the District accountable to what students need, and said they should continue. At the ribbon cutting for the new building, the principal, YUC students, past and present, and community supporters stood together celebrating a new and innovative green building, and pledging to continue working to take the school the next leg, making it high quality and one that graduated students ready for college or employment.

Conclusion

The story of the small schools campaigns of two youth organizing groups in Philadelphia demonstrated their capacity to carry on their efforts over time and through changing administrations, local and national priorities, as well as to change strategic direction when necessary. We show that the small schools campaigns of YUC and PSU were sustained over multiple years in part because the youth were able to catalyze the adults in their communities around a vision for improving their high schools, both for the students who attended the schools, and for the overall health of the local community. They were able to leverage this mobilization through a flexible strategic approach, which allowed them both to gain the advantage and power of a joint campaign, but when necessary, to fall back and pursue at each of the three sites separate and distinct goals. In this way, they kept their efforts going, and were able to continually renew and bring a range of political players to the table. We suggest that in addition to the direct influence the small schools campaigns had on changing the three schools, PSU also succeeded in building relationships in their neighborhoods and challenging the common views of urban youth as apathetic or as troublemakers, accomplishments which have

the potential to bolster their future organizing, and to make an impact on their schools, even in the current turnaround era.

The campaigns for small schools required the youth organizing groups to make a substantial change in strategic approach to school reform. In contrast to earlier, short-term victories, the small schools campaigns focused on whole-school change, and the District became their target. In order to build the influence and power necessary to affect policy at the District level, the groups developed a strategy connecting the improvement of their local high schools to their communities, and made their neighborhoods a primary focus of their organizing. They galvanized the energy of community leaders and local politicians, many of whom had not been focused on school issues, at least in the recent past. These leaders were motivated by the students' commitment and passion in their efforts to bring about change.

In connecting the need for change in their local high schools to the health of local neighborhoods, the youth organizing groups stirred the pot of neighborhood relations. The SJYD framework makes it possible to see how when young people study their situation, critique their reality, and engage in social action, they can become citizens and agents of change in their own communities. In Kensington and West Philadelphia, the youth organizing groups found themselves working across long-standing racial and economic divides in their efforts to bring local leaders and residents together around a shared vision and agenda for high school change. In Olney, fragmentation among multiple immigrant and language groups, in combination with the absence of the kind of external resources, specifically the support of Concordia, LLC, that the other two sites had, which helped youth and organizers cross boundaries and bring traditionally dissonant groups together, made the task of building power doubly difficult. The Olney chapter remained challenged by the need for a strategy for building neighborhood and parent involvement.

The moment is good for reflection on the PSU's and YUC's small schools campaigns. It is important that we not let their efforts fade without an appreciation of their legacy. The youth organizing groups emerged from this campaign with a wider base of support in their

communities, and with recognition as civic actors that can strengthen school reform efforts in the future. Perhaps most importantly, they emerged with recognition for their efforts to make a positive contribution to public life in their communities.

Epilogue: Persistence in the Face of Challenges

Situated in neighborhoods and schools that face serious disadvantages, the young people driving the small schools campaigns, and those they have mobilized in their neighborhoods, worked persistently to keep decision-makers and administrators accountable to their need for an adequate education. The task was rarely straightforward, and each group had to continually change course to navigate changes within their organizations and in the larger District context. In order to sustain their multi-year campaigns, YUC and PSU adopted intentional strategies that allowed senior students to educate and animate younger students about the benefits of small schools. The small schools campaign lasted eight years – from 2003-10 - through more than one generation of high school students, and through ebbs and flows, transitions, and difficult fiscal circumstances.

Today, of the three campaigns for smaller high schools, YUC's Kensington chapter has achieved the clearest victories. First, following the initial transition of their one large high school into three small schools, attendance and test scores improved.[18] They also witnessed the opening of a fourth small school, Kensington Urban Education Academy, and a new building for Kensington Creative and Performing Arts High School, which in 2010-11 met its Adequate Yearly Progress targets on the state standardized exam. Finally, in partnership with the Philadelphia Education Fund and other community groups, they have instituted an educational planning process to enhance instruction in ways that capitalize on the schools' small size.

YUC's Olney chapter claimed a partial win in the school's division in 2005-06 into East and West, two medium-sized schools. With more than 1,000 students in each school, however, YUC's goal of creating a more personalized educational environment was far from actualized. In 2010, under the District's Renaissance Schools Initiative, Olney East and West were identified by the District to be "turned around" by an outside charter manager due to persistently low performance, and were again combined as one school. It remains yet to be seen the effects this

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[18] McAlister, Mediratta, & Shah, 2009

will have on the school.

The story in West Philadelphia is perhaps the most complicated. In the fall of 2011, PSU celebrated the opening of a brand new building for West Philadelphia High School. The strides that PSU and its community allies had made in bringing about a community-driven, whole-school change with a focus on personalization, however, met an obstacle a year and a half earlier when the school was identified to be "turned around" as a Renaissance School. At that point, many of the members of the Community Partners became involved with the District's newly-formed School Advisory Council (SAC) – a component of the Renaissance Initiative - as a way to stay engaged with the school. The Community Partners had acted as a training ground of sorts for parents, students, and community members who then took on formalized leadership roles through the SAC. There was dissention between the SAC and District over the turnaround model (charter-managed or District-run Promise Academy) to be implemented at West, and, in the end, the District postponed turnaround interventions for a year, but not before the principal was removed. That school year saw the dismantling of many of the in-school reforms that had been instituted over the past three years, two more principals, and the Community Partners ceased to have an independent existence. In 2010, the District announced that, in year two of the Renaissance Initiative, West would become one of its Promise Academies, a turnaround model that places the school under the close supervision of the superintendent, and in 2011 the principal turned over again. PSU, along with many of its community allies, now part of the school SAC, have remained active, despite setbacks and an uncertain future.

In Philadelphia and nationally, "school turnaround" interventions have taken the spotlight as strategies for improving low-performing schools. The national discourse on educational reform may turn its gaze favorably to small-schools approaches again in the future, but both PSU and YUC have made strategic decisions to give priority to campaigns with other focuses for the time being, ones in which they can create more synergy with the District, and are more likely to make gains.

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