

Lessons from Philadelphia about Building Civic Capacity for School Reform

Research for Action followed the complex story of civic engagement and school reform in Philadelphia between 1995-2000 as part of our evaluation of the Annenberg-supported *CHILDREN ACHIEVING* reform initiative, conducted jointly with the Consortium for Policy Research in Education (CPRE). A key part of this research involved interviews with more than forty civic leaders from government, business, civic and grass-roots organizations, the School District, higher education, and the media. This Brief summarizes the findings presented in the recently released report, *“Civic Engagement and Urban School Reform: Hard-to-Learn Lessons from Philadelphia”* by Jolley Bruce Christman and Amy Rhodes.

Many obstacles stand in the way of successful urban school reform—inadequate funding, contentious city and state politics, and ingrained patterns and dynamics within school systems, to name a few.

Overcoming these obstacles requires the sustained engagement of a broad cross section of the citizenry.

The phrase “civic capacity” has been used by education theorists to describe a community’s ability to act collectively and take public responsibility for solving shared problems; Clarence Stone, in his discussion of an eleven-city study of school reform (unpublished manuscript, 2001, available at www.bsos.umd.edu/gupt/stone/prob.html) defines “civic capacity” as

...the extent to which different sectors of the community—business, parents, educators, state and local officeholders, nonprofits, and others—act in concert around a matter of community-wide import. It involves mobilization, that is bringing different sectors together, but also developing a shared plan of action... To be lasting, civic capacity needs an

institutional foundation for interaction among elites and a “grass roots” base through which ordinary citizens are engaged.

Building resilient alliances across different sectors of the community—linking civic leaders with low-income communities and education professionals—is a daunting task. Nonetheless, public will remains a crucial factor in a reform’s success. Christman and Rhodes’ report offers some fundamental lessons about building civic engagement.

Lessons

- I** School reform plans cannot be forged in a vacuum; local context has a huge impact!
- II** Persuading civic leaders and citizens is not the same as engaging them in the development of reform plans.
- III** In a highly politicized environment, a reform’s achievements are easily overlooked and soon forgotten.
- IV** Reform leaders need to provide principals, teachers and parents with a sense of being valued and with real power to shape the reform.
- V** When civic capacity to support school reform is weak and fragmented, increasing that capacity needs to be a priority.

I School reform plans cannot be forged in a vacuum; local context has a huge impact!

Many factors in the external context of a school system—the economics of city, region, and state; city/state politics; funding for public schools; the city's traditions of civic leadership and community activism; the stance of educator unions — have a major impact on the outcomes of school reform efforts.

In Philadelphia, city and state economic, political, and social circumstances created many challenges for systemic school reform.

- The city has suffered from decades of economic decline, job and population loss, a diminishing tax base, and multiple urgent needs competing for scarce resources.
- Pennsylvania is a largely rural/suburban state, and there is little political will to assist poor urban areas, Philadelphia in particular. State politics moved further in this direction in 1994, when state government came under the control of a Republican-dominated legislature and a Republican governor who was a strong proponent of vouchers and privatization.
- Pennsylvania's system for funding public schools relies primarily on property taxes, which puts lower-income areas at a severe disadvantage. In 1993, the Pennsylvania legislature froze its formula for distribution of education funding. Since then, state funding has covered a decreasing portion of Philadelphia's school budget, although needs have increased due to greater numbers of students and more students in need of special education or English as a Second Language classes.
- Although Philadelphia's business community initially provided enthusiastic support for Hornbeck and *CHILDREN ACHIEVING*, this support evaporated, due partly to changes in the local economy (decline in local ownership; increased management by regional and multinational companies) and partly to corporate leaders' disillusionment with the reform's failure to meet business' priorities.

Clearly, *CHILDREN ACHIEVING* had many strikes against it; unfortunately, the reform plan lacked effective strategies for addressing these powerful external forces.

[Public education] has become the flash point for societal concerns. We think we just need to come up with the right education plan and then we can make public education [and society] work. This is simplistic.
(civic leader, May 2000)

The *CHILDREN ACHIEVING* Reform Plan

The *CHILDREN ACHIEVING* initiative was a sweeping systemic reform initiative introduced in February 1995 by Superintendent David Hornbeck, who was brought to Philadelphia through the collaborative efforts of the city's civic and business leaders, mayor, and Board of Education. The ambitious plan demanded substantial new funding in an already cash-strapped District, a need which was partly met through the awarding of a \$50 million Annenberg Challenge grant, matched 2:1 through contributions from corporations, foundations, and federal grants.

The basic tenets of *CHILDREN ACHIEVING* were laid out in the "*CHILDREN ACHIEVING* 10-Point Action Design." The Action Design was a complex plan requiring simultaneous developments in: expectations for student achievement; standards, curriculum, assessment, and accountability systems; decentralization and school-based decision-making; supports for students and staff; and parent/community engagement. This plan set the agenda for the District through June 2000, when Superintendent Hornbeck resigned in protest of budget cuts which he believed would unravel his reform effort.

II

Persuading civic leaders and citizens is not the same as engaging them in the development of reform plans.

Engagement is essential for building deep understanding and active commitment.

Needed: Flexible reform plans that respond to public input and allow for mid-course corrections.

Much of *CHILDREN ACHIEVING*'s energy around engaging the public amounted to a public relations campaign to cultivate high visibility and citizen lobbying for increased state funding. Unfortunately, there was little attention given to encouraging a public dialogue about the reform's principles, assumptions, and policy decisions.

Superintendent Hornbeck's plan for fixing Philadelphia's public schools was complex, inflexible, and presented as "all-or-nothing" at a time of severe budgetary limitations. Under pressure to produce "results" (i.e., higher student test scores) which might leverage additional state funds, reform leaders missed out on a crucial piece of work: addressing public understanding of the reform and taking into account the input of stakeholders who are essential to the program's success—teachers, principals, parents, students, and the public at large.

Needed: Open and continuing dialogue about how to improve public education, so that a broadly-shared theory of action can emerge.

All reform plans are based on a "theory of action." A theory of action offers a definition of the problem(s) preventing school improvement and a plan of action for addressing those problems. Beneath every theory of action is a set of values and goals.

The theory of action a person holds determines the interpretation given to the buzz words of school reform, such as "standards," "accountability," and "decentralization." In analyzing our interviewees' views on school reform, we found a number of "theories of action" distinct from *CHILDREN ACHIEVING*'s own complex and sometimes internally contradictory systemic theory.

Even though many of the civic leaders we interviewed labeled *CHILDREN ACHIEVING* as "common sense," in fact their interpretations of the reform's common sense ideas were often quite different from each others' and from those of *CHILDREN ACHIEVING*. One case in point was the District's stated goal of "accountability" as a critical driver of change.

CHILDREN ACHIEVING instituted an accountability system with new performance measures (e.g., SAT-9 testing, Performance Responsibility Indexes for schools). Most of the participants in our study considered *CHILDREN ACHIEVING*'s accountability system to be the clearest and most important dimension of the reform. However, questions remained open as to who should be held accountable.

We found a range of ideas among our informants on the "who" of accountability, depending on an individual's theory of action for school change. For example, some respondents focused accountability on principals and teachers; others highlighted the importance of building influence and accountability for parents and community at the local school level; and still others emphasized the District's organizational chart to delineate lines of responsibility.

In reality, the more broadly accountability is extended to include all sectors of the community, both inside and outside of the school system, the more meaningful and effective it becomes. During *CHILDREN ACHIEVING*, there was no public consideration of the multiple, narrow, and conflicting views of accountability held by civic leaders and the public at large. As a result, *CHILDREN ACHIEVING* missed out on the impact that a broader and more sophisticated view of accountability would have afforded.

The completeness of his [Hornbeck's] vision wasn't amenable to questioning. You couldn't tamper with any part of it.
(civic leader, March 2000)

III In a highly politicized environment, a reform's achievements are easily overlooked and soon forgotten.

*Public education is central to improving the city...Schools are the biggest reason that people leave the city. Myself included.
(media leader, April 2000)*

Even though positive changes occurred during *CHILDREN ACHIEVING*, it was still difficult to win public support and confidence in the reform. The rates of change seemed slow to many; the standardized assessments used were not capable of showing improvement at the skill level of most middle and high school students; and politicians and the media barraged the public with repeated messages about chaotic, dysfunctional schools.

In the words of one civic leader we interviewed:

*They [schools] have improved incrementally, at least the grade schools are doing better...But there has not been much improvement in the high schools...I worry that the students from the grade schools who have made progress will go to these same old high schools...and that they will lose what they have gained. They will drop out and we will be no better off.
(business leader, August 2000)*

Although *CHILDREN ACHIEVING* was publicly discredited by many local and state leaders, others acknowledged significant forward movement during Hornbeck's tenure.

As one civic leader explained,

*Philadelphia made a remarkable amount of progress masked by political turmoil in the District, city, and state...There were demonstrable results in improvements on the accountability index. Attendance increased, showing greater student engagement. There was an increase in performance at lower levels of progress—with the students [testing] below basic and basic.
(civic leader, October 2000)*

As the *CHILDREN ACHIEVING* era quickly recedes into the past, it is crucial to capture the lessons to be learned both from its accomplishments and its missed opportunities.

*The superintendent has been relentless in his focus on achievement. That's the good side. The bad side is that the schools are not improving enough—fast enough or across the board enough.
(media leader, January 2000)*



IV Reform leaders need to provide principals, teachers and parents with a sense of being valued and with real power to shape the reform.

During the years of *CHILDREN ACHIEVING*, teachers and principals often felt undervalued by reform leaders and overwhelmed by the many mandates of the reform. This undercut *CHILDREN ACHIEVING*'s ability to realize its vision in the classrooms, contributing to a sense of disempowerment among the frontline educators most closely responsible for improving schools.

Needed: To build trust and collaboration with school staff

- **Acknowledge** and build on the work of previous reforms, current successful practices, active teacher networks, and experienced educators' knowledge of the communities in which they serve
- **Engage** educators in the design and modification of reforms
- **Identify** and focus on a small number of achievable priorities for teachers and students
- **Find** creative ways to develop a working relationship with the teachers union and principals association and persist in the face of disagreements

Needed: To open up authentic teacher/principal/parent dialogue

Given the ingrained nature of power relations in school bureaucracies, any plans to change the roles of different constituencies in decision-making inevitably bring visibility to conflicts and turf battles. If there are to be meaningful roles for teachers and parents, these conflicts must be discussed openly and differences negotiated. This is especially challenging when groups need to meet across class, race and professional status.

Creating a role for parents as "decision-making partners" was a tenet of *CHILDREN ACHIEVING*'s 10-Point Action Plan. Although the initiative created new structures that might have promoted parent/community participation in decision-making, such as local school councils, these efforts were undercut by opposition to sharing decision-making power from teachers, principals, and their unions.

As Gold and fellow authors wrote in an RFA/CPRE *CHILDREN ACHIEVING* evaluation report on parents' roles in school reform,

The reform did not take account of how deeply unsettling the shift of power among schools, parents, and community would be to many principals and teachers. Reform planners underestimated what it would take for schools, especially in low-income, racially-isolated neighborhoods, to... work with parents as collaborators in school reform.

The problem is that we made some structural changes but we did not change the power or authority relationships in schools and between school people and the community. (civic leader, March 2000)

V When civic capacity to support school reform is weak and fragmented, increasing that capacity needs to be a priority.

In 1994, disillusioned with the weaknesses of previous reform efforts, civic elites—business, political, and foundation leaders—joined forces to recruit Superintendent Hornbeck. However, this initial collaboration did not endure, let alone expand into a more broadly-based coalition of support.

Hornbeck and other reform leaders do deserve credit for several significant contributions to building public engagement, including:

- **Supporting** the formation and activity of the Alliance Organizing Project, a new entity dedicated to building parent leadership teams in schools
- **Outreach** to involve communities of faith in the school reform movement and in the political movement to win adequate funding for public schools
- **Publicizing** detailed school-by-school performance data, which made possible the dramatic increase in media coverage of public education that occurred during *CHILDREN ACHIEVING*.

However, during Hornbeck's reign, Philadelphia never developed the kinds of alliances among business, political, union, and grassroots community sectors that could have contributed to firing up and sustaining reform, especially crucial in Philadelphia's context of perpetual school funding crises.

Philadelphia has, in general, not been known for the dynamism and coherence of its civic leadership. Basil Whiting's 1999 report to the Pew Charitable Trusts on Philadelphia's prospects at the end of the decade characterized the city's civic leadership as "weak, inadequate, and disengaged." Philadelphia's grassroots community organizations have been, in general, similarly small-scale, isolated, and minimally involved with public education issues.

Philadelphia lacked the building blocks for developing high "civic capacity" around public school reform. Given the many aspects of the city/state context and education establishment that obstructed funding and interfered with implementing *CHILDREN ACHIEVING*, the absence of coalitions of public support reduced still further the plan's chances of success.

Philadelphia doesn't have the intermediary organizations that other cities do... There's potential capacity in the higher education community, but it's applied sporadically. It's very frustrating, especially when contrasting it with Boston, which has so much support in organizations and people, and a much better economic situation.
(foundation leader, November 2000)

Not building the support for the program was problematic. I think he [Hornbeck] tried, but he could have done more. But then I don't think the business community or the PFT [Philadelphia Federation of Teachers] tried to help either.
(*CHILDREN ACHIEVING* Challenge staff member, August 2000)

Conclusion

At the end of the five-year Annenberg grant and *CHILDREN ACHIEVING*, attitudes toward the public schools in Philadelphia were generally pessimistic. The rates of improvement in terms of academic achievement and school climate fell far short of expectations for both civic leaders and the general public.

As the budget crisis worsened, Hornbeck deepened the polarization between city and state with lawsuits and accusations of racism. There was little connection among various sectors concerned with school reform. The teachers union and principals association were isolated from other concerned sectors, the city's changed economic climate had reduced the ranks of engaged business leaders, the efforts of grassroots groups remained sporadic and fragmentary, and civic elites were left confused and anxious by the disappointments of *CHILDREN ACHIEVING*.

By December 2001, Mayor John Street, faced with the risk of an insolvent school district and the potential for "hostile" state take-over, negotiated a compromise agreement for joint state-city management, which brought promises of additional state money. As a consequence of this takeover, the management of Philadelphia public schools has shifted to a multiple provider model, with the School District only one among a set of management providers that includes corporations, nonprofits, and institutions of higher education.

Through studying the patterns of civic engagement during *CHILDREN ACHIEVING*, we have uncovered a series of specific lessons about the kinds of attitudes and contextual factors that can impact the building of civic capacity to support school reform. This study has also made visible the importance of civic engagement and coalition building in sustaining a school reform plan over the long haul. As Research for Action continues to document the next round of change in Philadelphia schools under state takeover and the new multiple provider model, the nature and impact of civic engagement will remain a key focus of our research. The insights we have drawn from *CHILDREN ACHIEVING* about building civic engagement may also be of great interest for cities across the nation, regardless of the specific governance structure and school reform plan in place.



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Sources

This *RFA Policy Brief* is based on the reports *Civic Engagement and Urban School Improvement: Hard-to-Learn Lessons from Philadelphia* by Jolley Bruce Christman (jchristman@researchforaction.org) and Amy Rhodes (amyr@thenotebook.org) and *The Limits and Contradictions of Systemic Reform: The Philadelphia Story* by Tom Corcoran (cpre@gse.upenn.edu) and Jolley Bruce Christman.

Announcement

Research for Action (RFA) is the lead organization in a collaborative, multi-year research project to document changes in Philadelphia's public school system under state takeover and to disseminate our findings and recommendations to the general public.

Related publications

- *Clients, Consumers, or Collaborators? Parents and their Roles in School Reform during CHILDREN ACHIEVING, 1995-2000*, by Eva Gold, Amy Rhodes, Shirley Brown, Susan Lytle, and Diane Waff
- *Powerful Ideas, Modest Gains: Five Years of Systemic Reform in Philadelphia Middle Schools*, by Jolley Bruce Christman
- *Strong Neighborhoods, Strong Schools*, a report from the Education Organizing Indicators Project (a collaboration between RFA and the Cross City Campaign for Urban School Reform) Principal investigators - Eva Gold, Elaine Simon, and Chris Brown (from Cross City) Additional report authors - Sukey Blanc and Marcine Pickron-Davis

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