

The Time Is Now: Youth Organize to Transform Philadelphia High Schools

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Abstract

Through a study of public school reform in Philadelphia, Research for Action (RFA) has focused on youth roles in civic engagement. Two local youth organizations at three high schools have turned to the "small schools" model in the hopes of drastically improving their schools. Concurrently, the School District of Philadelphia has launched an unprecedented capital campaign to renovate dilapidated buildings, and an initiative to downsize large urban high schools and increase educational choice. Organized youth recognized an important opportunity for broad-based youth-led campaigns that could influence the decisions made about their schools, yet found that civic engagement and District reforms were not well-connected. This field report presents RFA's research on the first years of the youth-led campaigns for small schools with a particular focus on how youth-driven organizing groups have helped to build civic capacity in Philadelphia.

Keywords: Philadelphia, civic engagement, youth organizing, small schools, school reform

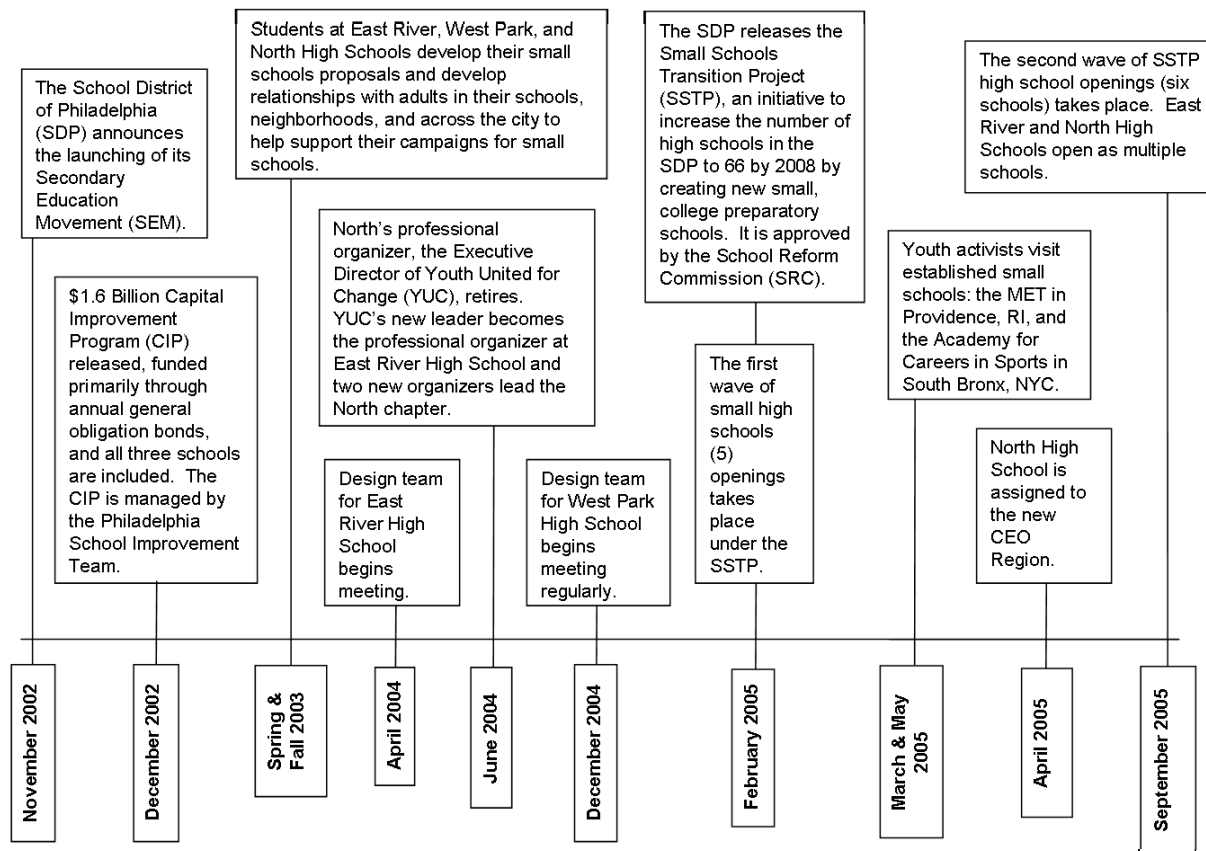
Youth leaders in three of Philadelphia's public high schools are fed up and tired. They are tired of the fact that all three of their schools made the top ten list of most dangerous schools in the city. They are tired of seeing principals come and go every year, and tired of textbooks so old that students discover their *parents'* names written inside the covers. They are tired of teachers who expect them to fail, or who pass them just for showing up, and tired of a school climate that tolerates sexual harassment. Everyone is tired of the violence that warrants the need for security guards and metal detectors. And they are all absolutely tired of knowing that none of this would be tolerated for even a single day if they lived in the suburbs or in a wealthier neighborhood of the city.

Tired, but determined, youth leaders from Youth United for Change (YUC) and Philadelphia Student Union (PSU) began working to drastically improve the educational conditions of their schools. In their search for solutions, these organizations' chapter members and adult organizers at three of the city's high schools looked closely at the size of their large urban schools and saw that nearly all of their concerns could be addressed by breaking their schools into multiple, autonomous, "small" high schools.

Efforts to create smaller, more personalized, community-controlled schools in Philadelphia are not new. For many years, education advocates and practitioners have attempted to create successful small learning environments, whether they were called "charters," "small learning communities," or "academies." Other cities are also exploring "going smaller" and school districts in Washington, Baltimore, Chicago, Houston, Los Angeles and New York, just to name a few, have launched initiatives to create options to large urban schools.

Philadelphia's newest iteration in this movement of small schools began to take shape in 2002 and consists of two different efforts that sometimes work in collaboration and sometimes clash, but mostly move on parallel tracks (Figure 1). The first involves [the School District of Philadelphia](#) in a top-down effort aimed at improving high school facilities and increasing educational choice, in part by transitioning some of the larger urban schools into multiple, smaller schools. The second is a bottom-up approach led by youth leaders from YUC and PSU who are organizing campaigns to transform three large neighborhood high schools into multiple small schools. This field report is the story of how these three school chapters (two YUC chapters and one PSU chapter) organized and engendered community and city support for their campaigns as they began a multi-year fight to influence the District's decisions about their schools, and to align District and youth visions for school reform. Even though the chapter members have yet to win all of their arguments for small schools, they have clearly contributed to building civic capacity across the city by helping to sustain civic engagement efforts in support of their ongoing campaigns for small schools.

Figure 1. Chronology of small schools campaigns and related district initiatives



This field report introduces the two youth organizations and describes how discovering the small schools model inspired them to act, how three of their schools have intersected with District planning efforts, and how the chapters at these schools have organized to influence District decision-making. A vignette of each chapter's campaign details some of the successes and challenges youth leaders have faced when trying to affect school policy and the different roles they are playing in building civic capacity through their work at East River, North, and Southwest Park High Schools.¹ The report concludes with a discussion of the lessons learned across the three campaigns about intergenerational organizing, youth participation in school reform, and facing the challenge of turnover of youth leadership, school staff, and District personnel.

Youth Organize

Both [Youth United for Change \(YUC\)](#) and [Philadelphia Student Union \(PSU\)](#) embrace the philosophies and strategies of community organizing as a means of supporting and educating youth to become leaders who challenge the inequities they face in their schools, their communities, and their futures. Both organizations also build

¹ School and neighborhood names are pseudonyms.

leadership by directly confronting issues of power and discrimination embedded in assumptions about race, ethnicity, class, and gender.

YUC bloomed early in 1991 when 16 youth in Philadelphia were trained in collective action by Youth Force, a youth organization from New York. Two years later, YUC became a member of the Eastern Pennsylvania Organizing Project, a faith-based organization that focuses on community empowerment and leadership development to facilitate change. YUC is composed entirely of individual school chapters at low-income neighborhood and vocational high schools across the city, including East River and North High Schools. YUC employs adult organizers for each chapter along with adult administrative staff, but youth chapter members take on many leadership roles. Campaigns that are specific to each school and student body are formed by youth leaders and adult organizers at each chapter.

PSU was founded in 1995 by a group of young activists in Philadelphia. The organization employs adults as directors and organizers, but also offers paid staff positions to students each year as a way of growing new leadership. The core membership of PSU is composed of students from various magnet and neighborhood schools across the city. The paid student staff positions, which include Building Representatives for each chapter, help to keep the organizing work at individual chapters connected to the main body of PSU. Some campaigns are collaborative efforts taken on by youth leaders from all of PSU's schools, while others are chapter-specific. Although PSU overall has supported the idea of small schools since 2000, the Southwest Park High School Chapter was the only chapter to become directly involved in a small schools campaign before the end of the 2004-2005 school year.

Since their inception, both groups have been working to improve educational conditions through local and citywide campaigns that galvanized adult educational advocates across the city by raising public awareness around issues of educational equity and quality. One collaborative effort of the two youth groups that gained national visibility was the 2001 anti-privatization campaign organized in response to a proposal that Edison Schools, Inc. take over the District's low-performing schools, as well as many central office functions. Relationships formed through these joint campaigns helped the youth organizations to gain legitimacy, political recognition, and win over several new allies. However, in order to see significant changes in their neighborhood high schools, they also knew they needed to gain legitimacy among, and support from, a broad range of individuals in their local communities.

Research for Action

This field report draws on data collected by [Research for Action](http://www.researchforaction.org) (www.researchforaction.org) between April 2003 and June 2005.¹ We became interested in working with PSU and YUC, which are largely made up of low-income students from poorly-resourced schools, because they have been steadily active and public with their campaigns to improve the quality of their education. By looking at the activities of these groups, we sought to determine how youth civic engagement has been generated, inhibited, supported, and sustained in the context of a Philadelphia high school reform movement. We worked closely with youth

leaders involved in the campaigns and conducted participant-observation at school-based chapter meetings, civic coalition meetings, and school design meetings. In addition, we attended public events around small schools and joined youth leaders from YUC's North chapter on a site visit to a small school in the South Bronx. In order to deepen our understanding of the ways in which youth leaders have gone about building a broad base of supporters for their small schools campaigns, we conducted semi-structured interviews with 23 individuals who have been directly involved in the reform process in a variety of ways.

Our interview pool included the executive directors of YUC and PSU, civic leaders and representatives from neighborhood associations and community-based organizations in support of small schools, school principals, central office administrators, regional superintendents, citywide coalition leaders, and funders. We also interviewed the principals from Concordia, LLC, an architecture, design, and planning organization working on community outreach with the youth groups. Our interview protocol was designed to have interviewees identify key decision-makers in the city and the school district, primary areas of concern in the city and in neighborhoods, supports and barriers to civic movement, decision-making processes in the city and the district, and the role that youth leaders have played.

What's So Great about Small Schools?

The seeds for the small schools campaigns of the two groups were planted at different times and in slightly different ways as adult organizers and youth leaders explored various educational models of high school reform. In 2002, PSU and YUC adult organizers, along with a group of youth leaders from each organization, attended a workshop on small schools in Oakland, California. Excited by what they had learned, upon their return, individual chapters explored the small schools model further by conducting research. Successive groups of chapter members participated in the research, and were impressed by findings that show small schools can (see the [Small Schools Workshop website](#)):

- Raise student achievement
- Reduce incidents of violence and disruptive behavior
- Combat student anonymity and isolation
- Increase attendance and graduation rates
- Elevate teacher satisfaction
- Improve school climate
- Be more cost effective

Between 2002 and 2005, youth leaders from two YUC and one PSU school chapters visited several small schools across the country and experienced their benefits firsthand. All the youth leaders were convinced that the intimacy and autonomy embedded within a "small schools" model (about 100 students per grade) could create a school where teaching and learning would be dramatically improved from what they were currently experiencing.

In March 2005, youth leaders and adult organizers from the East River and Southwest Park chapters, along with key community residents and several school

district administrators, traveled to Providence, Rhode Island, to visit a well-known successful small school. When they arrived at the [Met Center](#), a campus-like setting of four small schools, it was the first time many of the youth leaders had seen urban high schools where security was minimal, students wanted to be in school, and students and teachers truly respected one another. One youth leader remarked:

The school was very clean, the teachers worked with the students very closely, and they had internships based on the students' personal interests. The bathrooms were really clean and I couldn't believe that people actually picked up trash. If somebody saw a paper towel on the floor in the bathroom, they would pick it up, even if it wasn't theirs. Nobody would ever do such a thing at East River ... they actually teach very differently there too. They teach what you want to learn and they make math really exciting. And at the end of the day, they actually have to force students out of the school because they don't want to go home.

On two separate trips later that same spring, several youth leaders from the chapters at Southwest Park and North, along with their adult supporters, visited another, and very different, successful small school. One youth leader had this to say about the [Academy for Careers in Sports](#) in the South Bronx, NY:

It is a small school with fewer classrooms. The students seem to enjoy every minute of school. I want to enjoy every minute of my school, but I just can't. Our school is so different from this school in every way. North is going to have small schools and will be similar to this South Bronx small school ... the students will appreciate it and will want to work.

Witnessing a small school in action underscored the chapters' reasons for fighting to transform their large high schools. Youth leaders felt that project-based learning, student-specific learning plans, and learning through internships were the direct results of school-based autonomy in curriculum design and instruction. They saw the close teacher-student relationships, peer-to-peer respect, safe environments, and students' desire to stay in school as the results of a small-enough school environment in which no one can remain anonymous. Youth leaders also noted that the strong principal leadership and teacher commitments to the small schools were nurtured by the autonomy the school leadership had over decisions such as curriculum and hiring. What youth leaders observed were environments where the faculty and administrative staff could meet together, make decisions collectively, and have space to build a strong school community.

Philadelphia's Small Schools Transition Project

While chapter members were investigating the benefits of small schools, the School District of Philadelphia was in the midst of vast change. Following a state takeover of the District, Paul Vallas was recruited from Chicago in 2002 to be the District's new CEO, and immediately began to implement a wave of reforms specifically targeting the lowest-performing public schools. Within months, the District

unveiled an unprecedented nearly \$2 billion Capital Improvement Program aimed at renovating and rebuilding many of the system's aging buildings.

The two youth groups saw this moment as a grand opportunity to influence the planning for their schools and to push the District to entirely rethink the educational plans that would go with the new buildings. PSU and YUC youth leaders and their adult organizers knew that smaller school buildings alone would not result in the environments that they had observed elsewhere, but in the redesign, they saw potential to drastically improve the structures, programs, and overall cultures in their schools.

In February 2005, the District unveiled its own Small Schools Transition Project (SSTP) aimed at transitioning many of the city's schools into smaller units. While some District schools would receive only minor renovations or repairs through the Capital Improvement Program, East River, North, and Southwest Park High were slated to receive entirely new buildings by 2008. Both North and East River were included in the District's small schools project, challenging the YUC chapters at those schools with the daunting task of ensuring that the District's vision of these new small schools was in sync with theirs. Southwest Park High School was not officially in the District's plan to create small high schools, so organizers faced a bigger battle to see their school become a part of the District's plan to go "smaller."

Youth Organize and Try to Influence a Moving Target

Maintaining a campaign and keeping youth leaders at the frontlines for more than three years is a challenge for any youth organization, and YUC and PSU proved to be no exception. Because the core members who made up the chapters changed each year, sometimes with complete chapter turnover, the adult organizers became responsible for constantly replenishing their youth bases, introducing new members to the strategies and principles of collective action, and sharing the history of the chapters without blocking the innovation that new youth leaders bring with them.

Chapter members in the two youth organizations watched countless teachers and principals in their schools come and go. The transient nature of most of the adults in their schools taught the organizers to spend little effort to rebuild those faculty relationships and instead to find more permanent adults in their communities and across the city who could support the youth and help to keep the small schools campaign in motion.

As a starting point, both organizations became participants in two citywide entities made up of education advocates and veteran education reformers, the Education First Compact and the Cross City Campaign for Urban School Reform (CCC). Since both civic groups were composed entirely of adults and their meetings tended to be scheduled during the school day, YUC and PSU collectively decided that their adult executive directors would attend the meetings, but would make no concrete decisions without input from youth leaders. Both civic groups endorsed the chapter campaigns for small schools at North, East River, and Southwest Park High, and began strategizing with YUC and PSU to explore how the adults could best support the youth. When the executive director of PSU approached the civic groups to ask

for their help in developing a district-wide small schools policy paper, the civic and youth groups agreed to join forces. The groups believed that youth grassroots organizing would be best supported by the “grass tops” putting their energies and expertise into the development of a District policy around small schools.

A local foundation introduced the idea that the East River and Southwest Park chapters enlist the help of the community planning, design, and architecture firm [Concordia, LLC](#). The firm proposed that they could assist with organizing broad community forums, conducting outreach in each community, and establishing formal recommendations that could be made to the District based on community input. During the summer and fall of 2004, Concordia delivered a series of presentations about their vision for schools as centers of communities to residents and school personnel in each neighborhood. During these forums, Concordia gained the approval of YUC and PSU, and the youth leaders and their allies agreed to work with the firm. Nearly a year later, in June 2005, YUC and PSU held a joint public action where they garnered the District’s support to have Concordia facilitate the planning process for the new East River and Southwest Park High Schools.

The following vignettes of the youth-led campaigns demonstrate how valuable it can be for youth to be supported and encouraged to take on leadership roles in order to build civic capacity. Regardless of outcomes—and indeed some were more successful than others—each chapter contributed to change in Philadelphia’s schools and helped to broaden civic engagement across the city. See Table 1 for a summary of the demographics of the three schools.

Table 1. High school profiles

High School and District Profiles by Race/Ethnicity and Socioeconomic Status*						
	Enrollment	%Black	%White	%Asian	%Latino	%Economically Disadvantaged
“East River”	1666	25.3	22.3	2.5	49.8	84.7
“West Park”	1763	98.2	.6	.6	.6	72.5
“North”	2335	57.1	3	9.6	30.1	78.9
District	192683	65.3	15.2	5.2	14.2	70.8

*According to 2003 – 2004 statistics posted at www.schoolmatters.org serviced by Standard and Poor’s.

High School Standing for Persistently Dangerous School Status*	
“East River”	Yes (fifth year)
“West Park”	Yes (fifth year)
“North”	Yes (fifth year)

*According to 2003 – 2004 statistics posted on the Pennsylvania Department of Education’s website.

Youth as a Steady Presence: East River High School

The struggle at East River High School provides a vivid example of how YUC youth leaders and adult organizers pushed the District to create an arena for youth and community input into decision-making by encouraging wide community participation. Youth leaders simply were unwilling to accept the District's version of a planning process that did not include students and did not encompass the full ethnic diversity that existed in the neighborhoods around East River High.

When East River High School became a part of the Capital Improvement Program in the spring of 2004, YUC youth leaders and their organizer were very vocal during design meetings and insisted that the District expand its cookie-cutter "School Planning Team" from its original makeup (principal, a school project manager, a home and school association representative, a faith-based leader, a community activist, a building representative, a building engineer, school representatives, elected officials, and the regional superintendent) to include students and more community leaders. The school had an approximate enrollment of 1,600 in 2004, with over 80 percent of the students from low-income families. In addition, the student body is ethnically diverse with 50 percent Hispanic/Latino, 25 percent African American, and 22 percent White (see Table 1).

When the District's Small Schools Transition Project was announced in February 2005, the public officially learned that East River High School was destined to become four small schools. Three new, smaller schools would be created within the current school buildings, and a fourth school would be built from the ground up. While this appeared to be a clear victory for the YUC campaign, the District's interpretation of small schools concepts and language was somewhat different from what the chapter had proposed. Further, school administrators, along with District and regional office staff, were meeting and conducting student surveys to gain consensus on themes for the new schools and priorities for a new vision of education, but with limited dialogue with YUC youth leaders.

While leaders of local organizations that had actively supported the campaign highlighted the leadership role of the youth, other adult supporters made it clear that constant changes in the District's processes angered them and weakened the chapter's support base, as is indicated in the following comment by an East River community leader:

Obviously, Youth United for Change had lots of input in everything. They certainly seemed to have a lot more than we did. You know, we recognized need, but they were out there with the students doing all sorts of research and everything. Which is really good! ... I think it [the planning process] changed in February of this year. I mean, we had been meeting and discussing small schools and looking for locations and doing all that. And then in February ... the School District came in and said, 'This is what we're doing. This is how we're doing it.'

Because of constant changes in the District's planning process, some local adult leaders felt that their entire year of work had been a waste of time and they backed out of the process. YUC saw its local power base start to break down.

Nonetheless, during the spring of 2005, YUC East River chapter succeeded in gaining community and District approval to have Concordia help coordinate a process for eliciting community input into decisions that would be made about the small schools. When the District confirmed in February 2005 that three of the four new small high schools in East River would open their doors in September—a mere seven months away—decisions began to be made very quickly. Youth leaders, school staff, local adult supporters, city advocacy groups, and Concordia all grappled with how to insert the chapter's proposals into the District's decision-making process since the "District train" had already left the station. YUC youth leaders and adult organizers began meeting with representatives from the two remaining community organizations that were still actively supporting their campaign to strategize how they could still push forward their vision for small schools. In April 2005, community organizers involved in one of the citywide advocacy coalitions also started attending the design meetings. The presence of adult advocates amplified the voice of youth leaders at the meetings and lent support for the adoption of the chapter's small schools proposal. In the remaining months of the school year, the executive director of YUC also began to strategize more aggressively with other citywide education advocates for how youth and community input could become a part of District planning.

Despite repeated frustrations, the YUC youth leaders remained a constant presence and never stopped pushing for what they wanted to see their new schools become. By the end of the 2004-2005 school year, YUC had successfully established a place for youth voices in the planning meetings and gained local and District support to have Concordia take over the design process during the summer. Since then, chapter members have continued to meet with their neighborhood supporters, formed new relationships with individuals who can influence decisions made about their schools, reestablished strong alliances with several teachers in their schools, and shared their informative research and experiences with others to remind them that establishing good "small schools" requires more than just making schools physically smaller.

Youth Keeping Adults Engaged: Southwest Park High School

The PSU Southwest Park chapter experienced a roller-coaster ride in the first years of its effort to build a power base to support its campaign for small schools. The school had an enrollment of approximately 1,700 students in 2004, with 98 percent of them African American and more than two-thirds from low-income families (see Table 1). During the first year of their campaign, 2003-2004, PSU chapter members focused on building alliances with school staff. They worked hard to strengthen relationships with teachers by visiting classrooms and sharing their ideas about small schools for Southwest Park. Unfortunately, at the end of that year, Southwest Park High School suffered from yet another principal turnover along with many staff transfers, and PSU lost the majority of the campaign's power base within the school. Undaunted, the chapter members assessed that their

campaign could thrive only with the support of the local community. Youth leaders spent the 2004-2005 school year forging many new relationships with community associations and organizations outside the school through personal visits and long conversations. By sharing what they had learned and experienced by visiting other small schools, they worked to persuade some, at times very cynical, adults to confront the District and its decision-making process.

PSU's youth leaders and adult organizers also grappled with the additional challenge of concerns over the rapid gentrification taking place in Southwest Park, and the racial and economic divides beginning to separate many neighborhoods. Fueling this fear was the opening of a new K-8 public elementary school in the fall of 2002 as part of a public-private partnership with the nearby University of Pennsylvania. The opening of the Penn-assisted school made the area more attractive to middle-class families with young children, and the University began negotiations with the District for construction of a new high school. Youth in PSU's Southwest Park chapter feared that they, along with other low-income students, might be eventually pushed out of the proposed small Southwest Park High School's catchment area and their families would not be able to benefit from their many years of hard work on the small schools campaign. One youth leader from the PSU Southwest Park chapter said,

Eventually, probably five to ten years from now, that [area around the school] will be a heavily white, middle-class populated area and then the students who attend Southwest Park now,... the people who would have lived in that area and the students who need that school won't be able to have the accommodations.

Displacement was only one concern. Students also had to strategize around competition for resources. Sensing that Southwest Park High School would be in direct competition with the University and their new high school for educational resources and public attention, the PSU chapter began to build their political clout by gaining broader community support among neighborhood groups and religious congregations.

Neighborhood groups and religious leaders responded enthusiastically to the chapter's vision of their new schools and were moved by the passion and dedication the PSU youth leaders demonstrated, as represented in the following statements from two different adult supporters:

I think the Student Union has high expectations for students. It's one of the things that impressed me immediately when they came to visit, and every time they presented. [The Executive Director] deals with the students with a great deal of respect, plays to their strengths. I think the Student Union demonstrates a faith in the ability of these young people, and the potential of these young people, and for me that comes right across. I think that the School District is cynical ... the difference between the Student Union's attitude towards students,

and what students might achieve, and that of the school district is night and day.

It's an inspiration to see young people so involved in bettering their education system, not just for the betterment of themselves but for others. Anyone working in the community should applaud that kind of effort and lend a hand whenever possible.

With representatives from several community associations and places of worship by their side, PSU youth leaders began attending the school planning meetings in the 2004-2005 school year with many local, although mostly white, adults advocating for their campaign.

Despite their successful drive to build community support, chapter members were disheartened to learn that the District's plans for their school were not as ambitious as the community's. Although in May 2004 CEO Vallas had told a city coalition of education advocates that Southwest Park might be split into two schools, when the District's Small Schools Transition Project was released in February 2005, Southwest Park was not slated to be transitioned into small schools. Instead, it was designated to become a "medium-sized" school with approximately 800 students. Youth leaders and their new local adult allies were not fazed by this setback and, with District support, agreed to work with Concordia to help gain even broader community input into their small schools proposal. After nearly two years of intensive planning with community and school leaders, the youths' vision of Southwest Park High School reconstructed as multiple small schools (no more than 400 students in each) for neighborhood youth was finally blessed by the District. Although chapter members and adults alike learned that while they may not get all they ask for, they were willing to try.

It's a Harder Fight without Strong Supports: North High School

While North High School's campaign for small schools was no less committed or vigorous, youth leaders and organizers did not generate the same civic momentum that flourished in East River and Southwest Park for three main reasons: the absence of strong community organizations, the changeover and inexperience of new adult organizers, and the challenges of navigating the rapidly changing District initiatives.

North High School is situated in an ethnically diverse and demographically changing community. In 2003–2004, enrollment was approximately 2300 students with nearly 10 percent Asian, a third Hispanic/Latino, and 57 percent African American. Seventy-nine percent of the students were from low-income families (see Table 1). While the school was composed of students from the surrounding community, a significant number of students did not live in the immediate vicinity of the school. This created a distinct separation between the neighborhood and the school, with the result that North High School existed at the nexus of several communities without many clear ties to any. In addition, population turnover in some of the neighborhoods surrounding North contributed to the absence of politically-strong community organizations. This combination of factors posed an added challenge for

youth leaders and organizers as they tried to identify and forge relationships and networks with adult community organizations that could support their vision of small schools reform for North.

During 2003-2004, YUC chapter members at North High School began building support for small schools reform, culminating with a rally in May where youth leaders staged a protest that raised awareness about conditions within the school. One month later, youth leaders at the forefront of the protest graduated, and the adult organizer (and then-executive director of YUC) responsible for carefully laying the campaign's foundation retired. When school started in fall 2004, North had two young adult YUC organizers who were new to organizing. In addition, the majority of chapter members who had been involved in the previous year's efforts did not return to the chapter. As a result, North's small schools campaign lost its continuity and momentum. Despite these disruptions, the new organizers and remaining chapter members quickly developed a strong commitment to small schools.

In February 2005, the District announced plans to create a new "CEO region" that would include schools with chronic low performance. North was assigned to this region and slated to be divided into two schools. Unlike East River and Southwest Park that had devised mechanisms to include community input, North did not enter into a public community design or planning process. Without a formal design process or the presence of a strong community power base to advocate for North, youth leaders did not have direct venues to influence the District's decision-making process.

Upon learning of North's new CEO Region assignment, the youth leaders were discouraged and dispirited. They felt that it could nullify their struggle for small schools. During a chapter meeting following the announcement, several youth leaders voiced their frustration:

It's a waste of time. They [District officials] made it seem like we're doing something [when they told us in public that our school would become small schools,] but [they] went on and did their own thing.

I do want to change the school. But now they [District officials] are changing the school without us.

Unwilling to admit defeat, two youth leaders and adult organizers of the North YUC chapter met with the Superintendent of the new region and members of her staff to learn about the Superintendent's vision for North High School and to introduce her to the chapter and its proposal for small schools. During this meeting, the Superintendent shared her background, educational philosophy, and observations from her recent visits to North. She connected with the youth leaders when she discussed the problems in their school (such as inadequate bathroom facilities) and promised to address serious problems immediately. Borrowing language from the small schools literature, she outlined the plan for dividing the school into two smaller schools in the 2005-2006 school year. She explained that she was forming a coalition to design the schools and that student representatives would be a part of

that coalition. The youth leaders were impressed, but felt that her initial ideas were still short of their vision for small schools.

The youth leaders elected a chapter member to serve on the Superintendent's design coalition—but they have also continued their efforts to reorganize North High School as four small schools with enrollment of 400 students each. While they have accepted the plan to divide North into two medium-sized schools of 800 students each as a step in the right direction, chapter members at North have set their sights on influencing the policies and practices of the District as they take the lead in organizing a broad-based community school planning process with the goal of smaller schools.

Lessons Learned: Youth and Civic Capacity

We who believe in freedom cannot rest.

—Sweet Honey in the Rock, "Ella's Song" (1981)

Tired yet determined and undeterred, the youth leaders at East River, Southwest Park, and North High Schools are proud of the victories achieved along the way and are resilient in the face of challenges to their small schools campaigns. The experiences of the three campaigns offer important lessons about persistence in the midst of turnover, the impact of intergenerational organizing, and the significance of youth involvement in school reform.

First, turnover is a challenge with any long-term effort, and these three campaigns have endured despite fast-paced and constant change in their school chapters, their schools, and the District. As seniors graduated and ninth graders entered the youth organizations, the chapters faced the challenge of simultaneously losing wisdom, knowledge, and skills while needing to embrace new passions, new ideas, and undeveloped talents. In addition to addressing the challenges of changing youth leadership, the campaigns also contended with changes in District leadership and school policy during a time of systemic school reform. Despite these obstacles and frustrations, youth in these organizations continue to carry on the campaigns of their predecessors.

Second, youth leaders have directed the efforts of adult education advocates across the city to support the youth campaigns "at the grass tops" while youth leaders organize "at the grassroots." At the "grass tops," adult civic coalitions designed policy papers at the behest of YUC and PSU. At the "grassroots," youth leaders and their organizers worked with other students and adult community leaders at their school design meetings. The youth leaders have shared their experiences with adults and in doing so, have reminded them that shiny new buildings or simply "smaller" schools will not tackle the severe inequities that are embedded throughout their school district. The tireless work of the youth has inspired adults to support the transformation of their neighborhood high schools and has acted as a constant reminder for those adults to not give up. The culmination of these experiences shows that youth work and civic efforts are strengthened

immeasurably when strong, supportive relationships are formed with adults who work in concert with youth.

Finally, these three campaigns demonstrate the importance of youth organizing for school reform. Many school reforms are implemented without extensive input or direction from the youth and community. The youth leaders of YUC and PSU, however, have insisted that the District rethink how it integrates community and youth input into decision-making. These youth leaders are learning through their campaign experiences that youth are far more valuable and powerful than their school environments and educational experiences would otherwise indicate.

Have the chapters won their campaigns? Not yet, but they have certainly come a long way and they are contributing to building the city's civic capacity to address reform issues as they push forward. Many youth leaders stay actively involved in the small schools campaign for multiple years and even though the graduating seniors know that they will not be able to reap the rewards of their hard work, they stay motivated by the knowledge that younger siblings, neighbors, and their own future children might experience a better education. As one PSU youth leader and Class of 2005 graduate said,

I'll come back to Southwest Park and have a family ... I'd like my kid to go and be able to say that I helped design that and make that school happen.

Endnote

- i. Research for Action has worked closely with youth in this project and others, which we wrote about for [the fall 2005 issue of *Evaluation Exchange*](#). We hope that through this work we have helped to support the youth leaders and their campaigns for small schools. Although we remain an independent research organization as we investigate the contributions of youth organizing in building the city's civic capacity around public school reform, our research team provided the youth leaders additional relationships with supportive adults who share a vision of equity in Philadelphia's public schools.

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Relevant Websites

Research for Action- www.researchforaction.org

Academy for Careers in Sports- <http://www.academyforcareersinsports.org/>

Concordia, LLC- <http://www.concordia.com/home/>

Met Center- <http://www.metcenter.org/>

Philadelphia Student Union (PSU)-
<http://www.phillystudentunion.org/main.html>

School District of Philadelphia- <http://www.phila.k12.pa.us/>

Small Schools Workshop- <http://www.smallschools.com/info3.html>

Youth United for Change (YUC)- <http://yuc.home.mindspring.com/>