

A Blueprint for Secondary Education in Philadelphia: The Planning Process, 2006-2008

Report Summary

Between fall 2006 and spring 2008, the Philadelphia Education Fund (the Ed Fund) and the School District of Philadelphia (the District) co-convened a planning process for secondary education reform. The planning process generated a five-year Blueprint to guide school improvement in grades 6-12.

In 2006, 11th grade PSSA scores in Philadelphia were extremely low and had remained relatively flat for many years. Furthermore, and equally discouraging, typically half the students in cohorts entering 9th grade between 2000 and 2005 exited high school without a diploma within 4 years.¹ Research indicated that it was youth from the large neighborhood high schools, with the highest concentration of poverty, who faced the greatest challenges. Improving neighborhood high schools, therefore, was a major focus of the planning effort.

The District and the Ed Fund brought together an array of people who worked with high schools: District central and regional office staff, teachers and principals, parents, students, and civic, higher education, and community leaders. Three other non-profits with a significant history of work around improving high schools – Communities in Schools Philadelphia (CISP), Philadelphia Academies, Inc. and the Philadelphia Youth Network (PYN) – were important partners in creating the Blueprint as well.

Accomplishments

- Brought a focus on high schools to District reform efforts; affirmed the importance of the middle grades to success in high school and beyond.
- Identified essential principles to guide secondary reform planning: Equity and access; challenging & engaging classrooms; personalized learning environments; system wide professionalism; shared leadership and accountability; and aligned academic standards
- Built a participatory process, with collaboration between the District and education stakeholders, and stronger connections between District and city efforts to improve public education.
- Introduced the idea of a new balance in control over professional development, where schools would develop autonomy overtime to determine professional development for teachers.
- Established measurable targets to assess the progress of reform
- Generated a Blueprint promoting major reforms, many of which are included in *Imagine 2014*, the District's strategic reform plan. The reforms are:
 - New supports for the transition from 8th to 9th grade and for 9th graders
 - School climates that encourage personalization
 - Curriculum, instruction and professional development geared to engage students, meet state standards, and build 21st century skills
 - Aligned programming among District departments, and between the District and external partners
 - Use of early warning indicators identifying students at risk of not graduating and the provision of supports and interventions to help students stay on track to graduation

¹ Neild, R. & Balfanz, R. (2006). *Unfulfilled Promises: The Dimensions and Characteristics of Philadelphia's Dropout Crisis, 2002-2005*. Philadelphia: Project U-Turn.

- Multiple educational pathways for youth, including programs for reengaging out-of school youth
- Improved systems for communicating with parents and students about school options
- Greater coordination with post secondary academic and career opportunities, including dual enrollment and trade certification programs

Challenges

- Further expanding participation in reform efforts to include a broad range of parents, youth and community leaders representing different geographic areas of the city and racial/ethnic groups
- Gaining timely access to District data and clarifying what data should be used for decision-making
- Establishing mechanisms for accountability: first, for implementation of reform; and second, for whether the District is reaching its reform goals
- Achieving alignment between the Blueprint and other District policies and practices
- Designing and implementing system-level change to support school-level change

Recommendations

- Take the time to build trust. Trust between school districts and external partners is critical to forming a cohesive team that can effectively design and manage a complex process.
- Form a clear work agenda, maintain strong facilitation, and regularly assess progress when working with a diverse set of public education stakeholder groups. Fostering strong relationships is vital to building a shared reform plan.
- Ensure timely access to data by providing additional supports for data retrieval to already stressed districts for data retrieval.
- Create a shared agreement about what data and research is credible and actionable.
- Interrupt bureaucratic habits of working in isolation by building interaction across different district levels and departments. Making changes in practice and culture at school and system levels is necessary to the introduction of new approaches to a complex system.
- Recognize past reform efforts and acknowledge when improvement is building on lessons learned. Recognize when a radical departure from past practice is called for.
- Include clear measures for accountability in the areas that matter most to improving teaching and learning. Develop mechanisms for public reporting.
- Take into account contextual factors that affect the environment for reform.
- Create a public process to develop a shared reform agenda. Build district and civic capacity to ensure accountability for implementation and outcomes as well as sustainability of the reform effort.

For the executive summary and the full report on the Blueprint Planning Process see
www.researchforaction.org and www.philaedfund.org.