



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

A Report by Research for Action

**EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

S E P T E M B E R 2 0 0 8



## RESEARCH for *ACTION*

Founded in 1992, Research for Action (RFA) is a Philadelphia-based, non-profit organization engaged in education research and evaluation. RFA is funded through grants from foundations and contracts for services from a range of organizations, including the School District of Philadelphia. For more information about RFA, please go to our website, [www.researchforaction.org](http://www.researchforaction.org).

### About this Report

Research for Action conducted the documentation of the two-year Blueprint planning process for secondary education. This report is a record of that process and the context in which it took place. We examine accomplishments of the process, and challenges and dilemmas the process surfaced. We suggest next steps for planning and implementation as well as recommendations for future planning initiatives.

### Mission Statement

Through research and action, Research for Action seeks to improve the education opportunities and outcomes of urban youth by strengthening public schools and enriching the civic and community dialogue about public education. We share our research with educators, parent and community leaders, students, and policy makers with the goals of building a shared critique of educational inequality and strategizing about school reform that is socially just.

A Blueprint for Secondary  
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Prepared by Research for Action

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## Introduction

In fall 2006, the Philadelphia Education Fund (the Ed Fund)<sup>1</sup> and the School District of Philadelphia (the District) began their work as co-conveners of a planning process for education reform in grades 6-12, referred to as the *Secondary Education Movement, Phase II (SEMII) – A Five-Year Blueprint*. Senior District and Ed Fund staff, the “co-conveners,” led the planning process over a two year period.<sup>2</sup> In addition to a major grant from the William Penn Foundation for the Blueprint planning process (also referred to in this document as “the planning process”), the effort was also supported by smaller grants from the Claneil Foundation and the Carnegie Corporation of New York. The objective of the planning process was to produce a Blueprint to guide District planning for secondary school improvement over five years (2008-13).

## Context for Planning

The Blueprint planning process began in 2006. District data showed elementary and middle grades making achievement gains and confidence in the system was growing. In 2002, the District had initiated a set of high school reforms under the title “Secondary Education Movement, Phase I (SEMI).” These reforms included:

- the design and implementation of a core curriculum for grades 9-11
- expanding the number of high school programs with special admissions criteria
- increased learning opportunities through improved coordination between high school and post-secondary education institutions
- increased focus on the 9th grade through 9th grade academies
- the development of small high schools
- greater emphasis on PSAT and SAT preparation and testing

Despite these reforms, 11th grade Pennsylvania System of School Assessment (PSSA) scores in Philadelphia were extremely low and had remained relatively flat. 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.<sup>3</sup> Research indicated that it was youth from the large neighborhood high schools, with the highest concentration of poverty, who faced the greatest challenges. These challenges provided a strong impetus for the Blueprint planning process. Many believed that high school improvement needed to move beyond incremental steps to a planning process that would guide deep and comprehensive changes in Philadelphia’s secondary education system.

## Participants in the Planning Process

To execute a planning process and produce a Blueprint for high school improvement, the co-conveners endeavored to bring together those in the District central and regional offices and middle and high schools with parents, students, and leaders from the non-profit, civic, community, higher ed, advocacy and business sectors. All three other non-profits with a significant history of work around improving

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<sup>1</sup> The Philadelphia Education Fund is a non-profit education intermediary organization with a mission to improve the educational outcomes of underserved youth in the Philadelphia region.

<sup>2</sup> At the District the co-conveners included, Deputy Chief Academic Officer Mr. Al Bichner, Consultant (and interim Chief Academic Officer) Dr. Cassandra Jones, Executive Director for Secondary School Reform, Ms. Naomi Housman, and Ms. Rosalind Chivas, initially from the Office of Secondary Education and then Curriculum and Instruction. At the Ed Fund the co-conveners were the Director of Middle Grades Matter, Mr. Paul Adorno, and the Director of Civic Engagement, Mr. Brian Armstead, assisted by Executive Director Dr. Carol Fixman, and consultant, Dr. Thomas Smith.

<sup>3</sup> Neild, R. & Balfanz, R. (2006). *Unfulfilled Promises: The Dimensions and Characteristics of Philadelphia’s Dropout Crisis, 2002-2005*. Philadelphia: Project U-Turn.

high schools—Philadelphia Academies, Inc., the Philadelphia Youth Network (PYN), and Communities in Schools (CIS)—participated in the planning. These groups were considered “partners” in the planning process because of their longstanding status, like the Ed Fund, of being a partner to the District in its education reform efforts.

## District Challenges

The planning process transpired over a period when the District faced substantial challenges. First, during the entire planning period the District was under financial stress, which created tensions between “dreaming big” about changes needed, and being “realistic” about what the District could afford. Second, the District’s fiscal distress contributed to unanticipated leadership changes at the highest levels, which destabilized the environment for planning. As a result, the planning process did not receive the attention and commitment from top-level District officials that was considered important to legitimize it and move forward with implementation. As one observer of the political environment noted about planning during transition, “For this Blueprint to take hold we need to get it into the muscle of politics and the city. With the churn [in leadership], it’s hard to build support.”

## Planning Objectives

For the most part, participants in the process perceived the objective of the planning process to be to “look closely at where we have come so far with high school reform and what we need to take it to the next level in terms of outcomes for kids.” The process would :

- be strategic in efforts to include a broad spectrum of perspectives reflective of the diversity of Philadelphia;
- solicit meaningful input from dialogue with stakeholders both within and outside the public schools;
- build awareness of, and “buy in” for, education renewal at the secondary level throughout the larger Philadelphia community;
- provide a blueprint for implementing substantial, realistic and sustainable reforms at the secondary level, including grades 6-12. *(Wm.Penn proposal, p. 9, 09/06)*

Overall, the District, partner, community, university, youth, and parent participants were to collaboratively create a blueprint that would communicate the direction for secondary education, set priorities for budget decisions, and guide efforts to address the needs of all students in grades 6-12.

## Lessons Learned

Important lessons emerged from the planning process, both for Philadelphia and for other cities that may undertake similar planning initiatives. These lessons are described below.

- Building trust between a school district and an external partner is always a difficult task, but taking the time to do so is critical to forming a cohesive team that can effectively co-convene a planning process. District turmoil, such as that experienced by Philadelphia during the planning process, makes this already challenging task many times harder.
- It is challenging, but important, to bring a diverse set of public education stakeholders, each with its own agenda, to agreement around a shared plan for reform, if reform is to take hold and be sustainable.

- The planning process is made more difficult by the tendency of District offices and partner organizations to operate in isolation of each other. Greater alignment requires an alteration in District culture and practice and an intentional effort to coordinate among internal departments and with external groups. It also requires external groups to work cooperatively and publicly around a shared agenda rather than negotiate “private” agreements with the District.
- Participants in the planning process must have timely access to data, as well as a shared agreement about what data and research is credible and actionable.
- Introducing new approaches and ways of thinking about instruction, professional development and school climate, which carry implications for change in the central and regional offices of the district as well as change in school normative structures, culture and practice are difficult to achieve. Constant interaction across system levels, as well as alignment of reform efforts, is necessary to transform practice to support new ideas.
- An inclusionary process is required at both the planning and implementation stages, in order to develop champions—among educators, partners, parents, youth, and community members—who understand the reform ideas embedded in the plan and who therefore can play a role in ensuring its implementation.
- Throughout the planning process, there should be clarity about when reform efforts build incrementally on the past and when they should be radical in their departure from past practice.
- It is important that the plan developed includes clear measures for accountability in the areas that matter most to improving teaching and learning. The planning process should identify mechanisms that will ensure accountability of the district and its partners for the implementation of the plan.
- It is critical to establish who will be responsible for monitoring accountability, and making progress reports to the public during the implementation of the plan.

## The Planning Process

### The Key Documents

Two documents were very important in the planning process, particularly in the early stages: the District commissioned “White Paper” and the Ed Fund’s “Claneil Report.”

*The Secondary Education Movement, Phase II: Redesigning Philadelphia’s High Schools*, referred to throughout the planning process as the “White Paper” provided the initial framework for the planning process. The White Paper identified five “anchors” as the basis for high school improvement. Table 1 shows the “anchors”, which were CEO Vallas’ priorities for high school reform.

**Table 1: Five Anchors**

Anchor	Focus
1	High Quality Instruction and Environment for Instruction
2	Effective, Accountable Leadership
3	Multiple Pathways for Out-of-School Youth and Students At Risk of Dropping Out
4	Small Supportive, Rigorous Schools and/or Communities
5	Career Pathways with Rigorous Preparation for College

The Ed Fund commissioned a study to assess gaps in resources and programming for high schools. The report, “*Advancing High School Reform: Perspectives of the Philadelphia School Community to Inform the School District of Philadelphia’s Five Year Planning Blueprint*,” also known as the “Claneil report” was based on findings from focus group interviews with teachers, principals, parents, and students; interviews with district and partner group leaders; and a student survey. The interviewees responded to questions about gaps in all five anchor areas. A few of the needs and gaps identified are: improvement of professional development for teachers and administrators; more and better information about pathways for the reentry of out of school youth to schools; positive school climates; curricular diversity; greater career related school options and counselors knowledgeable about post secondary career options; better preparation in middle school for high school level work; and greater recognition at the high school level of the value of parent and community engagement.

### The Planning Structures

The planning process as it was initially designed employed three primary structures: anchor work teams, school study groups, and the steering committee. As the planning process progressed, two additional planning structures were created: the community outreach group and partners’ group. The role of each planning structure is described in Table 2 and will be further explained in the section that follows.

**Table 2: Primary Structures of the Planning Process**

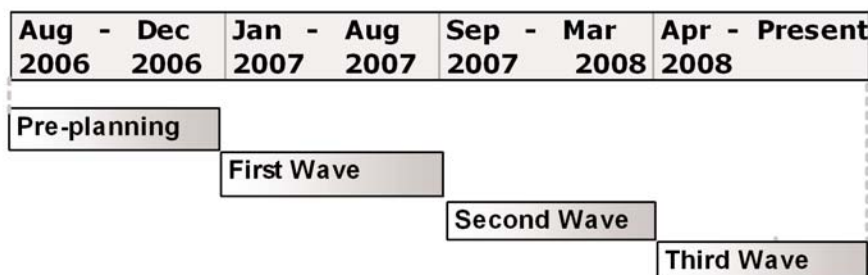
Structure	Tasks and Role in Planning Process	Participants
Steering Committee	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• provide direction and input for planning</li> <li>• coordinate communication with respective constituencies</li> <li>• engage national advisors</li> </ul>	Co-conveners, District, & partner staff, community leaders, non-profits leaders, parents, students
Anchor Work Teams (5 teams – one for each anchor)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• analyze data</li> <li>• review District policies</li> <li>• review District policies</li> <li>• produce a report (each team) with recommendations pertaining to their anchor</li> </ul>	District staff, partner, and non-profit staff. People with expertise in relevant anchor area
School Study Groups (15 high schools)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• use their experience in schools to respond to the question: “What policies, practices, programs, and resources need to be in place in every Philadelphia high school in order for each school to award all entering 9th graders a quality diploma five years later?”</li> <li>• produce a report (each group) with recommendations pertaining to Anchor 1 and another anchor of their choosing.</li> </ul>	Teachers and other school-based staff
Partners’ Group	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• provide support to co-conveners in decision-making process</li> </ul>	Co-conveners, leaders of partner organizations and District staff
Community Outreach	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• develop a plan for community engagement around the Blueprint and the District’s strategic plan</li> </ul>	Co-conveners, representatives from community based organizations, universities and the District.



## Chronology of Major Activities

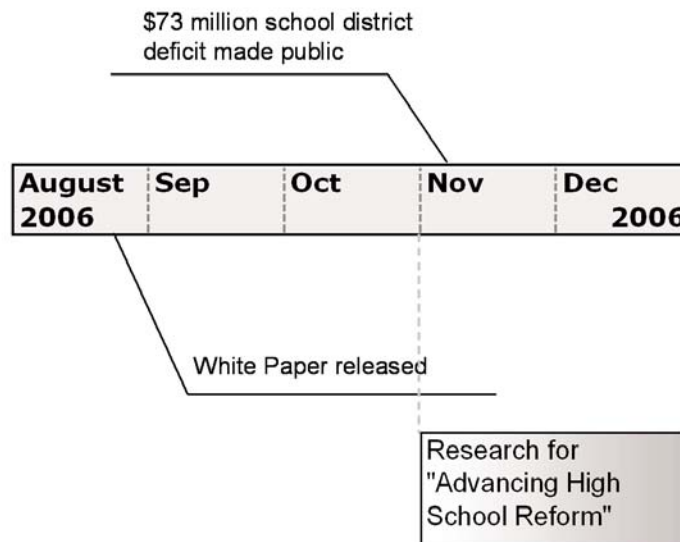
The Blueprint planning process had four phases: 1) pre-planning activities, 2) first-wave planning activities, 3) second wave planning activities, and 4) third wave planning activities (Timeline 1).

### Timeline 1: Overall Chronology of Planning Process



### Pre-Planning Phase: August 2006 – December 2006

#### Timeline 2: Preparation for Planning



What conditions within the District impacted preparation for planning?

This phase was marked by the onset of a fiscal crisis, which threw a shadow over the entire planning process. Coping with the deficit distracted District leaders, and contributed to the delay of initial planning activities.

What occurred during the pre-planning process?

During this phase the District and the Ed Fund worked on the key documents that would inform the early stages of the planning process.

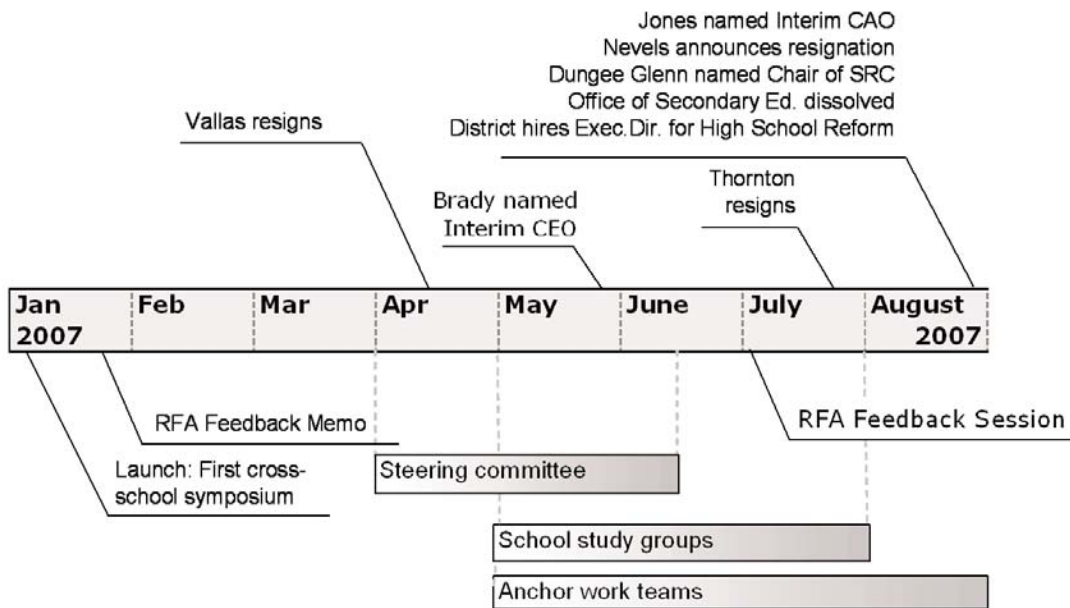
- The District’s White Paper was released.
- The Ed Fund conducted research for the Claneil Report.

### Issues / Dilemmas

The District's fiscal crisis and the resulting budget deficits caused cutbacks that affected Central office staffing and their ability to interact with the Ed Fund to start up the planning process. Limited interaction slowed the building of trust and the development of a cohesive effort.

## First Wave of Planning: January 2007 - August 2007

### Timeline 3: The First Wave of Planning



### What conditions within the District impacted the first wave of planning?

This phase was plagued with instability. There was an unanticipated cascade of top leadership resignations; as a result, the planning process was not given priority and lacked direction from top-level District staff.

- In April 2007 CEO Paul Vallas resigned.
- In May 2007 Thomas Brady was appointed interim CEO.
- In July 2007 CAO Gregory Thornton resigned.
- In August 2007 SRC Chair James Nevels announced that he would resign in September.
- In August 2007 Sandra Dungee Glenn was appointed as chair of SRC.

As a result of the deficit, staff from Office of Secondary Education were reassigned to other District departments.

### What occurred during the first wave of the planning process?

Despite the sense of crisis and District leadership transition, the planning process got underway.

- In January 2007, there was a launch event, a symposium that was attended by teachers and principals from 17 high schools, staff from the three partner groups, and others.
- In winter 2007, the Ed Fund staff participated in the District's various high school planning

meetings, providing an opportunity to learn what the District believed were the “must haves” of high school reform.

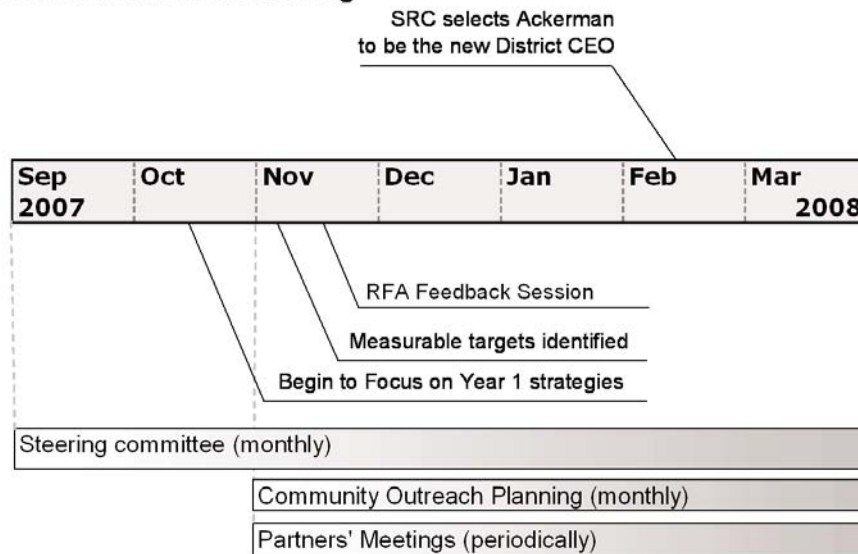
- In spring 2007, the steering committee, school study groups and anchor work teams began to meet.
- In August 2007, the District hired an Executive Director for Secondary Education, dedicated to facilitation of the planning process, a position planned for in the grant and urged by both the William Penn Foundation and the Ed Fund.
- By the end of August 2007, the anchor work teams and school study groups had completed their work and issued reports, which included recommendations for the Blueprint.
- During this period, RFA provided feedback twice. In January 2007, RFA provided feedback to the co-conveners on the launch event and the sense school teams were making of the five anchor areas. In June 2008, there was feedback on the accomplishments of building an inclusive process and the challenges of the start up including; the lack of interaction among those engaged in the various planning structures, the difficulties of team building between the District and Ed Fund conveners, and the different ideas emerging of what the Blueprint would include.

Issues / Dilemmas

The Ed Fund and District co-conveners operated as two entities, not yet having built themselves into a team. The school study groups and the anchor work teams ran on parallel tracks, directed by the Ed Fund and the District respectively. During this first wave of planning, the co-conveners worked without great success to get the School Reform Commission (SRC) to formally endorse the planning process.<sup>4</sup>

**Second Wave of Planning: September 2007 – March 2008**

**Timeline 4: Second Wave of Planning**



<sup>4</sup>The School Reform Commission is the five member governance board of the School District of Philadelphia, set up during the 2001 state takeover of the District.

What conditions within the District impacted the second wave of planning?

The fiscal crisis continued. The co-conveners received little support from the SRC as its members focused on the budget and the CEO search.

- In February 2008, Dr. Arlene Ackerman was selected to lead the District.

What occurred during the second wave of the planning process?

The District and Ed Fund co-conveners began to gel as a team.

- The hiring of an Executive Director for Secondary Education boosted the planning process by enabling greater coordination between the District and Ed Fund to develop.

The co-conveners decided to keep steering committee meetings open, to encourage participation and transparency.

- The steering committee became a forum for public feedback on the emerging plan.

With the assistance of a national consultant on high school reform, the co-conveners, partner groups, and other planning participants identified a set of seven measurable targets (see Table 3) that would be used to assess progress toward better outcomes for youth.

The co-conveners used the anchor work team and school study group recommendations to develop a set of strategies and actions for reaching the targets.

The co-conveners began to work with the District's Office of Family, Community and Faith-Based Initiatives and partner group Community In Schools to plan public outreach with both the Blueprint and the District's Strategic plan.

The co-conveners decided to focus on strategies for Year 1 so that they would be developed in time to be included in the 2008-09 budget. They decided that the Year 1 focus would be the transition from 8th to 9th grades and the 9th grade experience. (Targets 1 and 2)

RFA provided feedback during this period on ideas being generated for improving teaching and learning and introduced a portfolio of schools model as way of thinking about the system of schools being created in Philadelphia.

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**Table 3: Blueprint Measurable Targets**

Target 1	Improve the on-time promotion rate grades 6-12
Target 2	Improve the 9th grade on-time promotion rate
Target 3	Increase PSSA achievement at proficient and advanced
Target 4	Increase the high school graduation rate
Target 5	Re-Engage out of school youth
Target 6	Increase readiness and success for postsecondary and career pathways
Target 7	Improve school climate

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Issues / Dilemmas

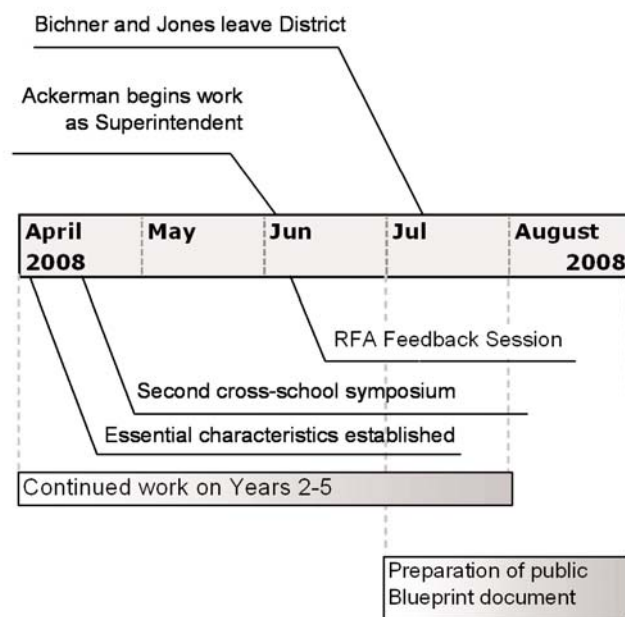
Although the conveners intended to do public outreach with the Blueprint, the District's need to hold public hearings about proposed budget cuts and the CEO search superseded their plans—as well as plans for public outreach with the Strategic plan.

During this period, students participating in the Steering Committee meetings expressed concern that too little attention was given to improving instruction. On several other occasions over the course of the planning process, concerns about the strength of recommendations for improving instruction and student engagement re-surfaced.

In Steering Committee meetings (as in some of the earlier Anchor Work Group meetings) questions arose about access to data that could inform planning decisions. There were also questions about what constituted legitimate data and research.

### Third Wave of Planning: April 2008 – August 2008

**Timeline 5: Third Wave of Planning**



#### What conditions within the district impacted the third wave of planning?

The period of transition continued as the District adjusted to new leadership. Soon after the new Superintendent was hired she began her assessment of the District.<sup>5</sup> Upon her arrival in June 2008, Dr. Ackerman made major structural and personnel changes. District staff who were central to the process left the District.

- In summer 2007, Mr. Al Bichner, Deputy Chief Academic Officer, and Dr. Cassandra Jones, interim Chief Academic Officer, left the District

#### What occurred during the third wave of the planning process?

During the third planning phase, a draft of the Blueprint workplan was completed and the co-conveners started writing a document for the public.

In April 2008, the co-conveners organized a second cross-school symposium of teams (administrators and teachers) from 46 high schools and middle schools. They were asked to provide feedback on what would be needed to implement Year 1 strategies and actions.

The partners' group and the steering committee participants worked to identify six "essential characteristics" (Table 4) of a quality secondary education that would drive the implementation of the plan.

The co-conveners decided to delay the public "roll out" of the Blueprint until after the new Superintendent had the opportunity to review and modify it so that it would be in alignment with her reform plan.

The co-conveners decided that they would delay presentation of the Blueprint to the SRC and the pub-

<sup>5</sup>The title of the previous two District leaders had been CEO, but Dr. Arlene Ackerman preferred to be called Superintendent.

lic until the new superintendent reviewed it. The public presentations would mark the end of planning process and the beginning of the implementation phase.

The co-conveners and steering committee fleshed out strategies and actions for Years 2 through 5 as well as identified two cross-cutting strategies that were considered essential to the realization of the entire plan. These are: 1) building District capacity through strategies that nurture professional learning communities at multiple District levels; and 2) building civic capacity through strategies that create shared community ownership for the plan and for improving secondary education.

**Table 4: Essential Characteristics**

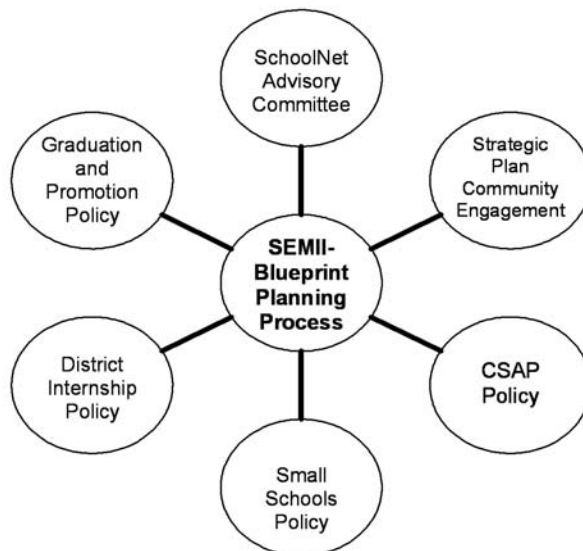
◆ Equity and Access
◆ Challenging & engaging classrooms
◆ Personalized Learning Environments
◆ System wide Professionalism
◆ Shared leadership and accountability
◆ Aligned academic standards

For a more detailed list, see [http://philaedfund.org/sec\\_ed/files/ess\\_char.pdf](http://philaedfund.org/sec_ed/files/ess_char.pdf)

Issues / Dilemmas

Many steering committee members as well as the co-conveners were concerned that the Blueprint might not be fully aligned with other high school initiatives in the district, including facilities, plans for schools in Correction Action II, etc. During this period the co-conveners focused intently on trying to bring alignment of the planning process with other projects, initiatives, and planning operations that were simultaneously occurring throughout the District.

**District High School Initiatives**



In response to ongoing fiscal distress, the co-conveners decided to prioritize four strategies that they deemed “cost neutral” in their budget requests to the SRC for Year 1, rather than propose the original nine that had been developed by the steering committee. (Table 5)

**Table 5: Year 1 Strategies**

<b>ORIGINAL YEAR 1 STRATEGIES</b>	<b>PRIORITIZED YEAR 1 STRATEGIES</b>
Conduct summer academy for rising ninth grade students	Orientation for rising 9th grade students
Conduct orientation sessions for parents of incoming ninth grade students	Create online graduation tool
Develop individualized graduation/transition plans for all rising ninth grade students	Create conditions for personalization
Create an early warning system for grades six through nine	Infrastructure for coordinated, strategic supports for success through and beyond high school
Establish four-year advisories for all high school students	
Establish student success centers to provide coordinated strategic supports for all high school students	
Pilot small schools conversion at neighborhood high schools	
Intensify instructional focus on literacy skill development across the ninth grade curriculum	
Establish a re-engagement center for out-of-school youth	

Source: [http://philaedfund.org/sec\\_ed/files/Year\\_one\\_timeline.pdf](http://philaedfund.org/sec_ed/files/Year_one_timeline.pdf)

## Accomplishments of the Blueprint Planning Process

### Created a Participatory Process

This most agreed-upon achievement of the process is important because:

- the plan itself benefits from different perspectives on how to improve secondary education;
- broad participation could lead to wide public support and advocacy for the resources needed to sustain reform;
- the involvement of so many could help create acceptance among a broad set of stakeholders and promote implementation; and
- it connected District-wide and citywide efforts to improve public education.

### Focused on High Schools and Ninth Grade

The process brought an overdue focus on high schools to District reform efforts.

### Established a Base for Future District and High School Reform

The planning process identified the pre-requisites for reform, including: articulation of the essential characteristics of high quality secondary education and increased collaboration within the District and between the District and its partners.

### Set the Stage for Advancing Professional Development

The planning process identified the need for a new balance in control over professional development that would allow for more school-based autonomy in determining what would be offered for teachers.

### Established Measurable Targets

This accomplishment will be important in the implementation stage because:

- consensus on a clear set of measurable targets will make it possible for stakeholders to assess progress, and
- the targets unite a diverse set of District reform efforts around a shared set of measurable objectives.



## Challenges Identified From the Planning Process

### Expanding and Sustaining an Inclusive and Participatory Process

The co-conveners successfully brought together a range of stakeholders. However, some key groups including parents, community leaders and youth were underrepresented in the process. Co-conveners need to consider how to engage these constituencies and ensure participation of people representing different regions of the city, racial and ethnic groups, and socioeconomic status.

### Making Data Accessible and Clarifying What Constitutes Data for Decision-making

Questions and concerns were raised by multiple planning participants about the availability and use of data and research in the planning process. Among these concerns, there were two major themes:

- first, quantitative data about District programs and student outcomes was difficult to access and was not always available when requested by the steering committee, the anchor work teams, or the school study groups, and
- second, participants had different ideas about what could be considered reliable data or research. In other words, participants had varying views of District-provided quantitative data, professional expertise offered in anchor work teams and school study group reports, and the “national perspectives” that were articulated in research reports, policy documents, or by consultants.

### Establishing Mechanisms for Accountability

During the planning process two different needs for accountability emerged that often were not fully distinguished from each other:

- first, there was a need for accountability that would ensure that the Blueprint was implemented, and
- second, there was the need to develop an accountability system that could be used to measure whether the implementation of the Blueprint is effective in helping the District reach the targets.

### Achieving Alignment

As the planning process progressed, the co-conveners intensified their efforts to ensure that the Blueprint planning process did not operate in isolation from other District initiatives, but instead was supported by District policies and practices. However, the co-conveners found this to be a difficult task because District offices tend to function in separate, disconnected silos.

### Ensuring Sustainability

A great deal of time and effort of many individuals and groups have been dedicated to the planning process and if the plan is never implemented many engaged stakeholders will walk away from the process disillusioned by its outcome and likely reluctant to participate in future reform initiatives. A major challenge is to secure the endorsement of the new Superintendent and the SRC so that the plan will be funded and implemented. The co-conveners hoped that the participatory and inclusive planning process would create champions who would work to ensure implementation of the Blueprint, but whether such a group has been created has yet to be tested.

## Dilemmas Arising From the Planning Process

### The Tension Between Improvement and Redesign

The title of the White Paper, *The Secondary Education Movement, Phase II: Redesigning Philadelphia's High Schools* suggested that the Blueprint planning process might lead to some “radical departures” from the traditional thinking about high schools as organizations. However, while the tension between improvement and redesign was present throughout the planning process, it focused largely on improving upon past initiatives and conserved past conceptualizations of high schools. Throughout the planning, a recurring theme was that high schools must radically change because traditional high schools had failed to engage students and meet the needs of the 21st century economy. If the Blueprint is to address these concerns, there must be clarity about the extent to which schools are expected to fully redesign or incrementally improve.

### Connecting the Middle Grades to High Schools

The *Secondary Education Blueprint Planning Process* was so titled in recognition of the importance of the middle grades to success in high school and beyond. Yet, issues concerning middle grades were left under-addressed by the planning process. Looking forward, it will be important to clarify how the middle grades will impact successful implementation of the Blueprint and the goal of substantially improving secondary education.

### The Locus for Improvement: System Level Change and School Level Change

Participants in the planning process were asked to consider what policies, practices, programs and resources would be needed *in every school* in order to award all students entering ninth graders a quality diploma four years later. Therefore, the planning focused on school-level improvement. Missing from the dialogue was the recognition that Philadelphia high schools are diverse in size, admissions criteria, organization and governance. The planning process did not address how the implementation of the Blueprint would help the different types of schools work together to form a viable system of high schools that meet the needs of a diversity of students. In addition, the planning did not attend to how the District's central and regional offices would need to change in order to effectively support a system of diverse high schools.

## The Blueprint

The Blueprint document is a work plan for the District and its partners. It identifies the data or research that supports the claim that each of the seven targets is important for improving secondary education. It outlines strategies and action steps for reaching the targets over five years and names sources of data that should be used to monitor progress toward each target. It communicates the next steps for refining the strategies that would be used to reach each target.

The Blueprint includes strategies that address:

- 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,
- alignment in programming among District departments, and between the District and external partners, to improve educational opportunities for all young people,
- use of early warning predictors of students at risk of not graduating and the provision of supports and interventions to help students stay on track to graduation,
- multiple educational pathways for youth, including programs for reengaging out-of-school youth, and improved systems for communicating with parents and students about school options,
- and greater coordination with post secondary academic and career opportunities, including dual enrollment and trade certification programs

## Remaining Questions

The next tasks the co-conveners set for themselves were to establish a group to monitor implementation and to familiarize parents and the broader Philadelphia community with the plan with the hope of engaging them in advocating for its implementation and in providing input for its continuous refinement.

This next phase of planning will raise a new set of questions about the Blueprint:

- What kinds of human and financial supports are needed for the District to implement the Blueprint?
- What are the implications of the Blueprint for the way central office, regional offices and high schools relate to one another?
- How will the implementation phase reflect the need for school-level improvement as well as the need for an efficient system of schools that is capable of meeting the needs of a diverse student body?
- To what extent are the “essential characteristics” of quality secondary education agreed upon by a range of stakeholders that is broader than those represented on the steering committee?
- To what extent has the process built the shared District, political, and civic commitment to the Blueprint that is needed for the Blueprint to be sustainable?

- Are the strategies and actions in the Blueprint robust enough to bring about change and improvement at the scale and scope that planning participants hoped for?
- Was the process successful in fostering the relationships and building the infrastructure needed to hold the District and its partners accountable, including making adjustments to the Blueprint when warranted?
- Did the planning process strengthen the collaborative skills of planners and partners who will need to coordinate throughout the implementation process?
- Do the targets prove to be sufficient measures of progress? What are the benchmarks, or intermediate measures, that will be used to assess progress toward improvement?

## Recommendations

The recommendations below are pertinent to future planning processes in Philadelphia or in other districts.

- The Philadelphia Blueprint experience, although particular to circumstances in this city, had broader lessons embedded in it. *In particular, Philadelphia's experience indicates the importance of giving attention to the contextual factors that affect the environment for reform.* Although other districts might not share the same fiscal crisis or leadership transition that characterized Philadelphia during its planning process, every district will have particular contextual conditions which need to be taken into account. Other large districts will also share many of the bureaucratic qualities that made it difficult in Philadelphia to build an “inside-outside” team and to bring about system and partner alignment. Countering these bureaucratic characteristics will be of concern to other planning processes, just as it was a concern in the Philadelphia Blueprint planning process.
- In the current age of standards-based accountability, Philadelphia offers a cautionary tale. Districts have been stressed by the need to produce data that indicates compliance with federal and state mandates, including reporting on Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP), the achievement gap, and other indicators key to the No Child Left Behind legislation. *They have not necessarily developed the capacity to respond to data requests from those who are engaged in developing district reform plans.* This needs to be taken into account as “plans for planning” get underway. Perhaps additional supports should be provided to districts to help them retrieve and analyze data as requested and appropriate. Ironically, in Philadelphia – and perhaps elsewhere – the standards-based accountability environment has led to the production and management of more data, just as fiscal constraints have reduced the District’s capacity to respond to data requests. Those involved in planning must clarify how they will ensure that data will be accessible and timely. In addition, for the credibility of any planning process, it is important to achieve a shared notion of what constitutes credible data and research.
- Finally, other cities, like Philadelphia, do not lack for reform ideas, but lack the public will necessary to implement reform.<sup>6</sup> *Like Philadelphia, other cities will need to design a public process which engages a broad swath of public school stakeholders, each of whom has distinct interests, in the creation of a shared reform agenda, and in developing the district and civic capacity to ensure accountability for implementation and outcomes, as well as sustainability of the reform effort.* Importantly, sooner rather than later, political, civic and business leaders need to expend political and financial capital in the name of a strong public school system, building connections between the future of the schools and the future of urban areas.

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<sup>6</sup>Stone, C.N., Henig, J.R., Jones, B. D., and Pierannunzi, C. (2001). *Building Civic Capacity: The Politics of Reforming Urban Schools*. Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas.

## Research Activities

Research for Action conducted a qualitative study in order to understand the dynamics of the planning process. The documentation of the Blueprint planning process included interviews and focus groups, observations of program activities and review of relevant program documents and the website over a nearly two year period, beginning October 2006 and ending in June 2008. The qualitative data analysis focused on identification of important themes and on examination of the multiple perspectives of participants. Data collection included the following:

### Observations

RFA staff observed all major components of the Blueprint planning process, including:

- Selected anchor work team meetings (5)
- Selected school study group meetings (5)
- All steering committee meetings (13)
- Community engagement planning committee meetings (4)
- Cross-school symposiums (2)
- City Council public hearing on education (1)
- Blueprint presentations to Cross City Campaign, Home and School, and Education First Compact
- Partners' group meetings (4)

### Interviews

In total, RFA conducted 35 interviews (including focus groups) with 45 of the stakeholders (some twice) including:

- Co-conveners, and other District and Ed Fund staff
- Partners
- Anchor facilitators
- Principals
- Steering committee participants

### Document Review

- Proposal to William Penn Foundation
- Claniel report
- White paper
- Recommendation reports from anchor work teams and school study groups
- Documents distributed at steering committee, anchor work team, school study group, and community engagement committee meetings
- Secondary Education Blueprint website

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