

## Emerging Themes from the Perspective of Principals Spring 2003

An analytic paper produced by  
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This research is part of a larger study, *Learning from Philadelphia's School Reform*, a research and public awareness project that will assess the effectiveness of key aspects of the state takeover and the multiple provider model currently in place in Philadelphia's public schools. Research for Action, a nonpartisan, nonprofit organization focused on providing sound research on school improvement efforts for a broad public, has followed school reform in Philadelphia since 1992. For this project, Research for Action has brought together a team of well-known scholars to develop a broad-based research agenda, with lead funding from the William Penn Foundation and additional support from The Pew Charitable Trusts, the Samuel S. Fels Fund and others, for the benefit of educators, policymakers, and the community.

### RESEARCH ACTIVITIES

- Interviews with a sample of 20 principals from Philadelphia's 85 lowest performing schools. Each principal will be interviewed 4 times between January and June. The following themes were drawn from the first two sets of interviews.
- Interviews with private managers and representatives from the School District of Philadelphia. Seven interviews have been conducted to date. Three more are scheduled.

### THEME ONE: PRINCIPALS VALUE ADDITIONAL MATERIALS AND RESOURCES PROVIDED THROUGH NEW MANAGERS.

- Seventeen out of 20 principals specifically mentioned the value of instructional materials or technology their schools had received.
- Principals appreciated the value of new staff positions, such as assistant principals provided by the Office of Restructured Schools (ORS).

**THEME TWO: PRINCIPALS HAVE A RANGE OF VIEWS ABOUT THE VALUE OF THE PROGRAMS AND PROCESSES BEING IMPLEMENTED BY NEW MANAGERS.**

- Nine out of 18 principals in schools with new managers (including ORS) describe strong agreement with the overall approach of their managers. They believe that the ‘package’ of curriculum, professional development, assessment, and student supports provided by their manager will lead to higher achievement by the students in their schools.
- Seven out of 18 principals in schools with new managers (including ORS) value some aspects of the program, but disagree with other aspects of the program. For example, one principal in this group appreciates the new materials, but is skeptical about the quality of professional development provided by the manager’s team of coaches.
- Two principals believe that the outside manager is either destructive or brings little of value.
- The principal of a school that received resources without additional intervention was satisfied with this approach. The principal of an emerging charter valued increased autonomy, but believed that additional operational and fundraising responsibilities interfered with the school’s focus on children and on instruction.

**THEME THREE: WITHIN EACH MODEL, THERE ARE DIFFERENCES BETWEEN THE IDEAL AND THE ENACTED MODEL**

- One issue that shapes implementation is ‘fit’ between the principal and the manager. While some principals seem to appreciate working within the structure defined by an outside manager, other principals describe a sense of conflict with managers that derives from their previous sense of successful leadership and autonomy. Within the latter category, some principals also describe a process of negotiation with managers to tailor the implementation of a given model to meet the specific needs of their school and students (e.g. addressing ELL issues).
- Other issues that shape implementation may be: strength of principal, size of school, school level, amount of support a principal and school receives from a manager, and principals’ pre-existing social and professional networks within communities, management organizations, or the school district.

#### **THEME FOUR: PRINCIPALS DESCRIBE THEMSELVES AS SERVING TWO (OR MORE) MASTERS**

- Seventeen out of 20 principals interviewed reported overlap, lack of clarity, and/or conflicting directives among various offices (EMOs, Central Office, Office of Restructured Schools, Regional Offices) for various aspects of school operations and instruction. These are conflicts that were described in January and February.
- Professional Development workshops offered by the EMO and the district often conflict, in terms of schedule or curriculum.
- Principals are faced with a barrage of tests from the EMO and the district, sometimes with overlapping purposes; they are left wondering which tests are really important.
- Principals feel overwhelmed with meetings called by the district and the EMO or ORS. Scheduling conflicts are often a problem.
- At many EMO and restructured schools, no special education materials had been ordered or had arrived by the middle of the school year. Principals are unclear who is responsible for special education.
- Five principals of privately managed schools said that they feel that the district treats EMO schools as second-class citizens, placing their staffing needs and requests for materials at the bottom of the priority list.

#### **THEME FIVE: WELL-INTENTIONED INTERVENTIONS HAVE UNINTENDED CONSEQUENCES**

- Six principals whose schools have extended day programs recognize the worthwhile intent of the program. However they identified unfortunate side effects of the program including: little time for principals to address other responsibilities after school, discontinuation of pre-existing after-school programs, teacher burn-out and lack of availability for professional development, exhaustion by students, and problems related to student safety and transportation. Several principals interviewed were also critical of the use of scripted instruction in the extended day program.
- At some privately managed schools, principals value the reduction of class size. However, many principals describe gaps in security, office support, and coverage for absent teachers due to the redeployment of staff to the classroom. Principals specifically mention problems with cutting NTAs, assistant principals, literacy interns and librarians.