



RESEARCH for *ACTION*

## **A Philadelphia Story:**

---

**Building Civic Capacity  
for School Reform in a  
Privatizing System**

*Executive Summary*

D E C E M B E R 2 0 0 7

***“We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny.”***

—Martin Luther King, Jr.

***“Bringing about systemic education reform is like kicking a stone uphill: A swift swing of a strong leg is enough to get it going, but keeping it going may call for something else entirely.”***

—Stone, Henig, Jones & Pierannunzi

---

<sup>1</sup> Washington, J. M. (1986). *A Testament of Hope: The Essential Writings of Martin Luther King Jr.* San Francisco, CA: Harper San Francisco, 210.

<sup>2</sup> Stone, C. N., Henig, J. R., Jones, B. D., & Pierannunzi, C. (2001). *Building Civic Capacity: The Politics of Reforming Urban Schools.* Lawrence, Kansas: University Press of Kansas, 142.

# **A Philadelphia Story:**

---

## **Building Civic Capacity for School Reform in a Privatizing System**

### ***Executive Summary***

*Eva Gold*

*Elaine Simon*

*Maia Cucchiara*

*Cecily Mitchell*

*Morgan Riffer*

## Understanding Civic Capacity

In large cities like Philadelphia, school reform efforts often fail to bring about lasting benefits for students, because one reform simply replaces another and longstanding problems, such as underfunding, are never resolved.<sup>3</sup> In a comparative study of urban school reform, Stone and his colleagues found that cities with high levels of civic capacity were far more successful in designing, implementing, and sustaining meaningful reform than cities that lacked coordinated civic involvement.<sup>4</sup>

While civic capacity may take different forms in different cities, it is generally made up of three key ingredients:

- Various sectors of the community put aside individual interests to pursue the collective good of educational improvement.
- Elite and low-income constituencies collaborate as equals.
- The different actors move beyond dialogue to mobilize resources and achieve concrete goals.

Together, these three elements promote reform agendas that are equitable, that enjoy wide and deep support, and that can be sustained over time.

In Boston, for example, city government, the school district, and both elite and grassroots organizations have come together to improve instruction in the city's schools. Key civic groups facilitated and supported this work. They included the Boston Compact that procured resources and support from the city's elites, the Boston Plan for Excellence that partnered with the School District in designing and implementing key elements of the reform, and grassroots groups dedicated to equitable educational opportunity. Boston's relatively high level of civic capacity, in combination with the lengthy tenure of its superintendent and his positive relationship with the mayor, helps to explain why it, unlike so many other cities, has experienced considerable progress and stability in its efforts to improve the schools.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>3</sup> Hess, F. M. (1999). *Spinning Wheels: The Politics of Urban School Reform*. Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press; Cuban, L. & Usdan, M. (2002). *Powerful Reforms with Shallow Roots: Improving America's Urban Schools*. New York: Teachers College Press.

<sup>4</sup> Stone, C.N., Henig, J.R., Jones, B.D., and Pierannunzi, C. (2001). *Building Civic Capacity: The Politics of Reforming Urban Schools*. Lawrence, Kansas: University Press of Kansas.

<sup>5</sup> Annenberg Institute for School Reform (2006, March). *Results + Equity + Community: Smart Systems*. Annenberg Institute Emerging Knowledge Forum. St. Petersburg, FL.

## Introduction

Following the 2001 state takeover of the School District of Philadelphia, a new governance structure was established, an ambitious set of reforms went into effect, test scores began to climb, and public confidence in the city's schools rose. However, a major budget crisis in spring 2007 revealed deep cracks in the consensus about the direction of Philadelphia's schools. In this latest controversy, a number of parents, youth, community leaders, and local politicians criticized the district for its behind-closed-doors approach to decision making, its support for privatization, and its lack of accountability to tax-paying citizens. As the controversy over the budget crisis makes clear, efforts to improve Philadelphia's schools continue to be stymied by fragile public support for the reform agenda accompanied by distrust of district leadership. In essence, Philadelphia's difficulty in maintaining reform momentum can be traced to on-going challenges to civic capacity around education—the kind of district, civic, and community collaboration that promotes, supports, and sustains reform.

In this report, we see promise in the activities of city, district, non-profit, community, university, philanthropic, and business players for generating civic capacity in Philadelphia. We point out that many individuals and organizations are involved with the schools—involvement that could lay the groundwork for more comprehensive and coordinated mobilization. In the current city and district environment, however, the prevalence of market ideas as solutions to urban and educational problems presents unique challenges to the development of civic capacity.

Despite these challenges, there are many reasons to be optimistic about Philadelphians' ability to come together in new ways in support of school reform. New city and district leadership, as well as growing public awareness and activism, have opened up an important opportunity. The city is ready for explicit and strong interventions that will build the civic capacity necessary to create and sustain genuine educational change.

## Obstacles to Civic Capacity in Philadelphia

### 1. Equity vs. Economic Growth

The city's struggle to find a niche in the global economy has intensified existing tensions between the goals of equity and economic growth. The resulting divisiveness (and emphasis on group self-interest) interferes with coalition building and the development of civic capacity.

### 2. Lack of Transparency

The School District of Philadelphia's adoption of a business style of management, including top-down decision making, paired with the School Reform Commission's closed-door policies, limits the potential for collaboration. The district's lack of transparency is particularly problematic in a privatizing system. If the public is to hold the district (and the organizations with which it contracts) accountable for meeting standards of performance and equity, decision-making criteria must be open and public.

### 3. Hierarchical Relationships

While new contracts and partnerships have brought many outside players into the district, these relationships tend to be structured hierarchically (e.g., district-to-vendor or district-to-partner). This discourages the formation of the multi-sectoral, cross-group collaboration important to civic capacity.

### 4. Lack of Inclusiveness

Groups that have prestige and resources to offer are advantaged in their relations with the district over groups representing low-income constituencies. This inhibits the inclusiveness necessary to ensure that reform is equitable. In large urban districts like Philadelphia it is especially important to have everyone at the table in order to craft an agenda that serves diverse interests.

## The Political and Economic Context for School Reform in Philadelphia

Philadelphia school reform is taking place against the backdrop of a city that is at once experiencing a remarkable resurgence and, at the same time, struggling with population decline, poverty, and high levels of violence and crime. To understand how this context shapes work around education in the city, we interviewed dozens of civic and community actors about the schools and the city's future. Our interviews revealed the extent to which market models now dominate local thinking about education and urban policy. Our interviews also showed concerns about equity and the impact of market forces on low-income communities.

### Markets on the Rise

Echoing national thinking about the ways cities can reinvent themselves in the postindustrial era, civic and community leaders have embraced market models of urban development, including

attracting knowledge workers and creating a business-friendly climate. The majority of people interviewed stressed the need to attract and retain middle-class residents to the city, believing that reversing middle-class flight was critical to the city's long-term revitalization. Business and civic elites focused particularly on attracting highly educated knowledge workers to the city, whereas grassroots leaders defined middle class as working or young families who would create or restore economic diversity to Philadelphia's neighborhoods. Respondents also spoke frequently of "markets of choice"—areas that potential businesses would find attractive and in which they would feel confident investing. These areas would then become sites for middle-class residence and recreation. Further, while respondents were overwhelmingly favorable about school choice, many spoke of it as a way of, again, attracting and retaining middle-class families to the city.

**"I don't think there's any doubt that Philadelphia needs to retain middle-class people. If anything, the '70s and '80s have shown that economic isolation is deadly for any kind of community."**

—Community-Based Advocate, July 2005

## Alternative Perspectives

Though market thinking has come to dominate Philadelphia's political and economic sectors, some respondents expressed a social welfare vision for social change. These respondents, mostly representatives of advocacy and community-based groups, argued that government has a key role to play in assuring equity. To them, citizen participation is necessary to the creation of effective social policy and, particularly, to improving schools. Favoring neighborhood-based economic development rather than a focus on attracting knowledge workers, they believed that their voices were not being heard by city decision makers and that their communities generally were not benefiting from city development policy. With respect to schools, they argued for an emphasis on equity, for using schools to build neighborhood-based assets, and for a greater openness to citizen participation.

## What Does This Mean for Civic Capacity?

Philadelphia's resurgence, the rise of market thinking, and on-going tensions between growth and equity have a number of implications for the development of civic capacity for school reform.

### *The good news:*

- There is a new sense of energy and optimism in the city. The influx of affluent residents bolsters the local economy and tax base.
- A new generation of young leaders has emerged in the city.<sup>6</sup> There is greater potential for collaboration between civic leaders and the new mayoral administration.

### *The bad news:*

- Believing they and their constituents have been excluded from key decisions, a key portion of Philadelphia's leadership—namely, representatives of low-income communities—express skepticism about prevailing policy and distrust of city and district leaders. Until decision-making processes become more inclusive, these factors will continue to undercut the ability of groups to collaborate across divisions of race and class.
- The dominance of market approaches among city leaders has directed investments to revitalizing areas. The result has been a tension between growth and equity that positions neighborhoods in opposition to one another and makes it difficult for groups to work together.

---

<sup>6</sup> Whiting, B.J. & Proscio, T. (2007, February). *Philadelphia 2007: Prospects and Challenges*. Brooklyn, NY: Pew Charitable Trust.



## **The District Context and Civic Capacity**

The School District of Philadelphia has also been shaped by the dominance of market models for improvement. With the state takeover, district policies and practices came into closer alignment with the business world, core educational functions were privatized, and external relations were structured according to a vision of the public as vendors, consumers, and/or audiences. These practices have led to increased district attention to the needs of individual families and have opened the district to deeper and greater involvement with both not-for-profit and for-profit actors. They have also created unique obstacles to civic capacity.

### **Institutional Changes**

The state takeover of the schools replaced the mayoral-appointed School Board with a School Reform Commission (SRC) consisting of three gubernatorial and two mayoral appointees. Under a new leadership with extensive business and management experience, the district, bolstered by No Child Left Behind (NCLB) legislation, adopted specific practices rooted in the business world:

- Centralizing decision making to enhance efficiency,
- Replacing the superintendent with a CEO,
- Privatizing dozens of schools and outsourcing a range of services,
- Emphasizing performance accountability measures.

### **Obstacles to Civic Capacity**

School districts have a responsibility to collaborate with parents, community groups, and civic organizations to foster, rather than obstruct, the development of civic capacity. Interviews with district administrators, however, indicated that the district's market orientation makes this collaboration difficult. The result has been more constrained relationships with parents, members of the community, and local organizations.

Several aspects of the district's management discourage the development of civic capacity:

- **Centralized, behind-closed-doors decision making**

From its first days in power, the SRC has made important decisions in private, with minimal public input. Paul Vallas, the district CEO from 2002-2007, shared the SRC's top-down managerial style. Under this leadership, decision making became the province of a select few, with the public left in the dark about how or why certain choices were made.

**“I know we have been guilty of trying to be heavy-handed with groups, because now we give you a contract and... we expect... you're not going to be critical of us anymore; you're going to do this or else you won't get this contract. And that's wrong.”**

*—Education Program Specialist,  
School District of Philadelphia, Nov. 2006*

- **Contracting out**

In addition to the privatization of 45 schools, the district outsources the provision of a host of services to many local and national for-profit and not-for-profit organizations. Additionally, it has created “partnerships” (formalized relationships that do not involve the exchange of funds) with a number of other organizations. A contracted group can easily be discouraged from criticizing the district. Furthermore, by structuring relationships as district-to-partner or district-to-contractor, this process makes genuine collaboration and collective action more difficult.

- **Choice**

The district has fully embraced charters and school choice as a way to enhance educational markets. Individual charter schools do offer opportunities for parent involvement. The district's focus on choice and charters, however, channels parent and community involvement towards individual schools rather than to improving the district as a whole.

- **Communicating**

Public relations has been an important focus of this administration, which has gone to great lengths to ensure that Philadelphians and state officials are informed about progress on school improvement. Though this emphasis has helped create a more positive public image for the district, its effect has also been to position Philadelphians almost exclusively as audience rather than as participants in reform.

- **Customer Service**

In what one administrator called a “paradigm shift,” the district has prioritized customer service for parents and students. While a strong customer service orientation is important and increases the responsiveness of the system, it also channels parent-district interactions into individualistic, rather than collective, directions. The district has been much less proactive about engaging with groups than it has been about resolving concerns of individual parents.

- **Outreach and Involvement**

Not all of the district’s initiatives fit into market-oriented categories. But even those programs that were designed to increase involvement in the schools gave parents few opportunities to work collaboratively, as equals, with educators. The district’s efforts to involve parents and community members in more substantive processes (such as planning for capital improvements) have been short-lived. In many cases, the district has simply failed to follow through on its promises to create vehicles for community participation and input.

***In other words...***

Despite the myriad ways Philadelphians can now be involved with schools, more substantive vehicles for agenda setting and collaboration are needed, along with the funds to support these activities. The lack of transparent decision making is especially troubling in a privatizing environment in which local citizens need information to hold the district and its vendors accountable for efficiency, efficacy,

and fairness.<sup>7</sup> The district’s modes of interaction need to be expanded to include forums for debate, clear channels for public input, and protection from retribution for those who speak out. With these changes, the district could more effectively play its role in helping to build civic capacity.

**“In terms of getting folks to the table and talking about policy... I would say it has been the communities [who have] had to stand up and say, ‘We want a voice here,’ and there hasn’t been a pro-active organizing of groups to give input.”**

*Education Program Specialist,  
School District of Philadelphia, July 2006*

---

<sup>7</sup>Minow, M. (2003, January 30). Public and Private Partnerships: Accounting for the New Religion. *Harvard Law Review*, 116(1).

## Case Studies of Educational Engagement in Philadelphia

To understand what is actually happening as groups operate within this new city and district context, we conducted case studies of organizations active in education in Philadelphia. These cases were chosen to represent a variety of types of involvement, a range of positions on the market-social welfare continuum, and different constituencies and parts of the city. Though the cases are important educational efforts and, in some instances, have the potential to help build civic capacity, the overall story continues to be one of ongoing and unresolved tensions, power differentials, limited networks, and minimal cross-sector dialogue and cooperation.

- **The Center City Schools Initiative (CCSI)**

In 2004, the Center City District, a business improvement district in Philadelphia's downtown, formed a partnership with the School District of Philadelphia. CCSI was designed to contribute to the revitalization of Center City by making it an attractive residence for middle- and upper-middle-class families with school age children. In order to attract "knowledge workers" to the downtown public schools, the initiative gives downtown students priority over other students in admission to Center City elementary schools and includes a marketing campaign and improvements to some Center City schools.

- **Youth Organizing**

Youth United for Change (YUC) and Philadelphia Student Union (PSU) are two of the oldest youth organizing groups in the country. In the past several years, the groups have worked separately and together to push the district to replace the underperforming large high schools in their communities with new, small schools and to involve students and community members in the planning process. Operating in schools that serve predominantly low-income neighborhoods, they are trying to keep their schools high on the district's radar screen and, as a result, draw resources to them and their surrounding communities.

- **Black Alliance for Educational Options (BAEO)**

The Black Alliance for Educational Options is a national organization promoting school choice for Black students. The Philadelphia branch is one of its most active, focusing primarily on expanding charter school options and championing state-sponsored corporate tax credits for private schools. Nationally, BAEO has pushed for enhanced school choice as a matter of equity, as a way of giving low-income urban students additional educational options. Local supporters share this analysis, but also argue that school choice will ensure neighborhood stability by retaining those working- and middle-class families who cannot afford private schools and might otherwise move to the suburbs. BAEO also trains parents to advocate for their children in the choice process and mobilizes them for political action in support of favored policies.

- **The Education First Compact**

Established in 2002, the Compact brings together civic, advocacy, and community leaders from across the city on a monthly basis to discuss education issues in order to foster cross-sectoral cooperation and momentum for reform. The Philadelphia Education Fund (PEF), one of the city's major school reform support organizations, convenes the Compact. Many Compact member organizations have partnership or contracting relationships with the district, and its meetings are frequently devoted to presentations by district officials about forthcoming policies or programs.

**“The primary obstacles to systemic school reform are not a lack of clever ideas, indifference to education, or a lack of willingness to try new things. The primary obstacles are political in nature: they are rooted in the fact that various groups have distinct interests that often lead them to work against each other in ways that dissipate energies and blunt reform efforts”**

—Stone et al, 2001

## Challenges to Civic Capacity

Each organization performs important work and each, in its own way, attempts to deal with the challenges facing the city and its schools. Promising as these efforts are, however, they are not building the collaboration and mobilization the city so badly needs.

The case studies provide insight into the challenges of building civic capacity in Philadelphia:

- **Each group works in considerable isolation from the other.** Consistent with Philadelphia's long-documented tendency towards parochialism in civic life, each group focuses on discrete organization or neighborhood agendas rather than broad, citywide issues. As a result, their efforts are not coalescing to generate widespread resolve or action.
- **Each group holds positions near one end or the other of the growth-equity continuum.** Therefore, there is little discussion among players of the ways in which both growth and equity are important and how to move towards a shared vision of civic well being.
- **Some groups are better positioned than others to pursue their agendas.** Groups that—like the CCD and BAEO—have political or material resources to offer to the district, or who can bring the district status or prestige, have increased access to district leaders. Groups that do not have such resources—the youth groups and, to a lesser extent, the Compact—must struggle to be treated as equal partners. Thus, there is an imbalance in the voices that contribute to setting the educational agenda.
- **The expansion of contracting out district functions has narrowed the role of many groups to those specified in contracting agreements.** This complicates collective action to reform education policy.

## **Conclusion: Obstacles and Opportunities**

School reform in Philadelphia is currently at a crossroads. On the one hand, the state takeover of the district and the resulting flurry of reforms have focused civic attention on education, generated a sense of optimism about the schools, and opened up new avenues for involvement. On the other hand, this progress is vulnerable due, at least in part, to the absence of civic capacity to support and sustain the reform agenda in the face of fiscal crises and changes in leadership. Philadelphia must capitalize on the potential sources of civic capacity evident in the case studies and in the recent calls of parents, youth, and community members for greater input into key district decisions. The city and the school district will not be able to overcome the obstacles described here without a deliberate effort on the part of local leaders and without greater involvement from parents, youth, civic, and community leaders and adequate resources to accomplish these tasks.

### **Four guiding principles for building civic capacity in Philadelphia**

#### ***1. Transparency***

In order for Philadelphians to work effectively with one another and with the district on educational improvement, information about district plans and decisions need to be publicly available.

- **The district** should provide clear, timely information to the public.
- **The media** should press for adequate information about district processes and, when necessary, perform investigative work to ensure the public is being properly informed.
- **Local advocacy and community groups** should continue to push for greater transparency and enlist others in their efforts to keep lines of communication open.

## 2. Collaboration

Various sectors of the city must identify shared interests and be ready to compromise in pursuit of the greater good.

- **The new mayor** should provide leadership in bringing together actors from different sectors to devise a broad-based agenda for revitalizing the city and its public education system. This agenda should explicitly address the tensions between growth and equity and the ways policy can both promote economic development and benefit struggling communities.
- **The district** should develop new vehicles for increased collaboration with Philadelphians. Its leadership should be more open to interactions with external entities that go beyond public relations and customer service. The district should also participate more fully in forums about issues affecting the city's future, such as housing and neighborhood development.
- **The city's school reform coalitions** need to expand to include leaders of sectors concerned with economic growth as well as educational equity.

## 3. Inclusiveness

Groups representing low-income communities, parents, and youth must be involved in setting the educational agenda. When these groups are left out, resulting policies are less likely to be equitable and to garner wide support.

- **The School District** must ensure that low-income and otherwise marginalized communities are “at the table” and that their issues and concerns are taken seriously.
- **More powerful groups** must adjust their agendas to incorporate the goals of these communities.
- **Community-based groups** that have advocated successfully around issues like housing and community development need to include public education in their agendas.



#### **4. Mobilization**

Civic capacity depends on moving beyond planning and holding summits to taking actual steps to bring a particular vision to fruition.

- **The mayor and other city leaders** must get involved in school reform and stay involved—even after the latest crisis or controversy has passed.
- **District, city, civic, youth, and community leaders** must develop on-going vehicles for involving citizens in educational improvement and maintaining reform momentum.

As we have shown in the report, Philadelphia faces unique challenges to building civic capacity. Yet without civic capacity it will be difficult—if not impossible—for the School District of Philadelphia to achieve and fund genuine reform, assure the stability of the schools, sustain reform gains, and guarantee that all students have access to high-quality teachers and programs.

**The mayor and other city leaders must move beyond crisis mode when dealing with the public schools and concern themselves with education as a long-term endeavor. Efforts to bring people together around a common table need to include follow-through.**

## About the Report

This study is part of *Learning from Philadelphia's School Reform*, a multi-year research and public awareness project that has assessed the effectiveness of school improvement in Philadelphia since Pennsylvania's takeover of the School District of Philadelphia in December 2001. The project is supported with lead funding from the William Penn Foundation and related grants from Carnegie Corporation of New York, The Samuel S. Fels Fund, the Edward Hazen Foundation, the Charles Stewart Mott Foundation, The Pew Charitable Trusts, The Philadelphia Foundation, the Spencer Foundation, Surdna Foundation, and others.

## To Order

Copies of the full report and the executive summary may be obtained for \$5 shipping and handling by contacting: Research for Action, 3701 Chestnut Street, Philadelphia, PA 19104, 215-823-2500, ext. 508, or [info@researchforaction.org](mailto:info@researchforaction.org) or may be downloaded from the RFA website:

**[www.researchforaction.org](http://www.researchforaction.org)**



## RESEARCH for *ACTION*

Research for Action (RFA) is a Philadelphia-based, nonprofit organization engaged in education research and evaluation. Founded in 1992, RFA works with public school districts, educational institutions, and community organizations to improve the educational opportunities for those traditionally disadvantaged by race/ethnicity, class, gender, language/ cultural difference, and ability/disability.

## About the Authors

**Eva Gold, Ph.D.** is a Principal of Research for Action and a Director of the *Learning from Philadelphia's School Reform* project. She has conducted local and national studies in the areas of parent, community, school relations, community and youth organizing for urban school reform, civic capacity and school reform, and home and school literacy and numeracy.

**Elaine Simon, Ph.D.** is a Senior Research Consultant at RFA, Co-Director of the Urban Studies Program and adjunct Associate Professor in the Graduate School of Education at the University of Pennsylvania. She is an urban anthropologist who has conducted ethnographic research and evaluation, locally and nationally, in the fields of education, employment and training, and community development.

**Maia Cucchiara, Ph.D.** is a Consultant to RFA. Her doctoral dissertation, *Marketing Schools, Marketing Cities: Urban Revitalization, Public Education, and Social Inequality*, examined the link between urban revitalization and school reform.

**Cecily Mitchell** is a Research Assistant with RFA. She is interested in school interventions to improve the educational experiences and outcomes for students who have been marginalized within the educational system. Her work includes the *Learning from Philadelphia's School Reform* project and evaluations of several parent involvement programs.

**Morgan Riffer** is a Research and Technology Assistant at RFA. Her work includes the *Learning from Philadelphia's School Reform* project and evaluations of the New Jersey Graduate Teaching Fellows Program and the Pennsylvania High School Coaching Initiative.



**RESEARCH for *ACTION***

3701 Chestnut Street  
Philadelphia, PA 19104

Tel: (215) 823-2500

Fax: (215) 823-2510

E-mail: [info@researchforaction.org](mailto:info@researchforaction.org)

Web: [www.researchforaction.org](http://www.researchforaction.org)