

What's been tried already

10 notable efforts at school turnaround in Philadelphia, 1967 to the present

by Dale Mezzacappa and Lynne Blumberg

1. The Model School District (1967)

In order to decentralize governance and increase community participation, Superintendent Mark Shedd worked on establishing a mini-district of 31 schools in North Philadelphia and Center City. It was to be run by a semi-autonomous board called the Area Wide Council, which included representatives from the community, the District, and Temple University. Schools would have more curricular freedom, be open year-round, day and night, and run programs for adults as well as children. Amid complaints that Center City children would be bused to "ghetto schools," that this was yet another "experiment on Negro children," and that teachers and principals had no voice in the planning, the MSD never got off the ground.

4. Philadelphia Schools Collaborative (1989 - early 1990s)

Pew Charitable Trusts poured \$16 million into a reform effort at 22 neighborhood high schools to break them into what were then called "charters," now known as small learning communities. Leaders of the effort strove to make them autonomous "schools-within-schools" where teachers and students could develop deeper emotional and intellectual ties. Small learning communities survive today, but the full vision of autonomy was never realized, and at many schools they became tracked by academic achievement. Neither the union nor administration was willing to give up cherished practices regarding scheduling, teacher assignment, and school independence.

8. State takeover/diverse providers (2001 - present)

Riding the wave promoting school choice and privatization as the solution for distressed districts, the state of Pennsylvania took over the Philadelphia schools, abolishing the Board of Education and replacing it with a School Reform Commission. After outcry about plans to turn over a large chunk of the system to the for-profit firm Edison Schools, the SRC hired seven outside managers to run 45 of the lowest-performing schools. While managers could bring in their own principal, curriculum, and resources, the operators could not select their own teachers. Despite spending \$107 million extra on the private providers in the first five years of the plan, most studies showed that academic gains were no different from other low-performing District schools. Twenty-eight schools are still under outside management by Edison, Victory Schools, Universal Companies, Foundations Inc., or the University of Pennsylvania.

2. Parkway Program (began in 1969)

Superintendent Shedd and the Board of Education did succeed in establishing the Parkway Program, or "school without walls." Over several years the District set up four units of students and teachers in different neighborhoods who used the city itself as the curriculum. Because of its success, it became a radical new model for alleviating building overcrowding and providing meaningful, hands-on, community-focused high schools. Parkway survived, but by the 1980s the three remaining campuses had implemented selective admissions criteria and adopted a more traditional curriculum.

5. School-based management (early 1990s)

Superintendent Clayton and the union proposed allowing schools to adopt their own goals and strategies for achieving them, with more control of their own budgets and the ability to seek waivers from the teachers' contract and administrative rules. Each participating school would have a decision-making council including teachers and parents. Not many schools participated, and the joint teacher-administrative committee approved few waivers. Some school councils continue to operate, but their powers have waxed and waned. As a reform approach, school-based management quickly fell off the radar.

9. Small high schools (2004 - present)

CEO Paul Vallas created nearly a score of small, mostly themed high schools during his five years in Philadelphia, including ones built in partnership with Microsoft, the Constitution Center, and the Franklin Institute. He created nine schools from scratch, converted several middle schools to high schools, and divided Kensington and Olney High School into smaller units. Some had special admission requirements; others, like the new Kensingtons, were designed to improve the typical neighborhood high school experience by focusing on themes like the arts or business. A recent study of the new small high schools found improved climate and attendance, but not discernibly better academic results. Varying resources and admissions requirements for all the different schools have exacerbated inequities.

School "turnaround" is not a new concept. Faced with evidence that schools weren't working well, especially for impoverished Black and Latino students, educators here have tried many things to "turn them around."

Over the past 40 years, as racial conflict roiled and poverty deepened – and as pressure grew to turn out a better educated workforce – school leaders in Philadelphia proposed and enacted a long list of "reforms." They revamped school governance. They overhauled curricu-

lum and schedules. They created entirely new schools. They tried to start over with all new teachers in particularly problem-ridden buildings.

Almost all these initiatives courted controversy and left their mark. A few showed impressive results. All were limited by constantly tight budgets, and many faced either internal or external resistance.

Following is a brief history of some watershed reforms in Philadelphia that can broadly be described as having their roots in "turnaround."

3. Replicating Success/Priority One (1980s - early 1990s)

Concluding that successful schools had high expectations of all students, the administration of Constance Clayton put in place requirements to "replicate" this behavior in 24 low-income, low-achieving, and racially isolated schools. Principals met regularly with teachers to analyze academic performance child-by-child, high-achieving students were publicly rewarded, math and reading got special emphasis, and parent involvement was stressed. Later, the program was renamed Priority One and expanded to 76 schools, which functioned like a separate region and got coaching and other help from downtown. It was the first time the District analyzed academic achievement by individual classroom, a then-radical notion initially resisted by teachers. The program had little success in high schools, but data showed that many elementary schools made significant test-score gains.

6. Keystone Schools (1997)

In the 1996 contract, the administration of David Hornbeck and the PFT agreed to a provision that allowed the "reconstitution" of schools that were academically distressed, including the removal and replacement of teachers. The contract spelled out that the schools would be chosen by a joint committee after a collaborative process. The following year, Hornbeck announced that Olney and Audenried High Schools would be "keystoned," but staff protests erupted. The union filed a grievance claiming that the agreed-upon process had not been followed, and an arbitrator agreed. Many staff voluntarily left the two schools, but the District did not follow through with a reform program.

10. Mastery turnarounds (2005 - present)

CEO Vallas turned over three middle schools, two of them very low-performing, to Mastery Charter, Inc., the Philadelphia-based charter-management organization, which had opened a successful school in Center City in 2001, sought to create an urban school network based on its college-prep curriculum, strict discipline, longer hours in school, and program to develop students' interpersonal and social skills. It emphasizes high expectations of students and requires "mastery" before they can move on to the next grade. Thomas (2005), Shoemaker (2006), and Pickett (2007) became Mastery Schools and have been adding grades to serve grades 7-12. Like other charters, Mastery hires its own teachers. Unlike charters, the schools continue to give first priority to students from their catchment areas, but some opt out, and students from other neighborhoods may enter a lottery. Mastery now serves 1,500 students overall. Test scores at the conversions, especially Shoemaker, have shown dramatic improvement.

7. Charter schools (1997 - present)

One of the defining developments in education over the past half-century hit Philadelphia in 1997, when Pennsylvania passed a law allowing for independent public schools called charters. Created to give parents more choice and, theoretically, blaze trails that other schools could emulate, these schools are funded with taxpayer money. With freedom to hire and fire teachers and set their own curriculum and hours, the 67 charter schools in Philadelphia now educate about one-sixth of the public school enrollment. Research on whether students do better academically in charter schools has been controversial and mixed. While a higher proportion of charter schools reach federal learning goals, a 2008 study of Philadelphia's charters indicated that individual student gains were no greater than gains in regular public schools.

Key to photos:

- a. Story by John T. Gillespie in *Philadelphia Bulletin* about Model School District.
- b. Some of first students in the Parkway Program. *Philadelphia Inquirer* archives.
- c. Superintendent Constance Clayton. *Philadelphia Inquirer* archives.
- d. Superintendent Mark Shedd faces the press. *Philadelphia Inquirer* archives.
- e. Gratz yearbook page on the Crossroads "charter." Courtesy of Marsha Pincus.
- f. Parent meeting at the Welsh Elementary School. *Notebook* archives.
- g. Olney High School, site of "keystoning." *Notebook* archives.
- h. Chris Whittle, founder of Edison Schools, Inc. *Notebook* archives.
- i. Kensington HS after it was divided into smaller schools. *Notebook* archives.
- j. Mastery Charter School at Pickett. Photo by Dale Mezzacappa.