It's just a few miles from Overbrook High School (left) at 59th Street and Lancaster Avenue across City Avenue to the new building that houses Lower Merion High School.

Parallel worlds

At Lower Merion, students have steady support. That's hard to sustain at Overbrook.

by Bill Hangley, Jr.

The two schools are less than four miles apart. But what separates Lower Merion High from Overbrook High is more than distance.

On a balmy night in early September, the parents of new freshmen are streaming through Lower Merion’s gleaming glass doors. They file down the halls into a soaring auditorium that smells like a new car. There, Principal Sean Hughes welcomes them to a brand new building and a world of high expectations.

“There’s a pool, there’s a greenhouse, there’s a courtyard. All of the classrooms are state-of-the-art, with the kind of technology you’d expect to find at a university,” he said. Lower Merion is the region’s highest-spending district, and it shows. But tonight, Hughes and his staff spend almost no time talking about their impressive new facility.

Instead, they talk about people. For a full hour, they lay out the web of support that helps keep the school's graduation rates near 100 percent, with eight out of ten graduates going to four-year colleges.

Lower Merion is the region’s highest-spending school district, and it shows.

They describe supervised study halls, teachers’ office hours, and a battery of counselors and services. They introduce online report cards and assignment guides. They promise every child a personal counselor, scheduled guidance meetings, and a laptop computer to access the school’s digital network.

In the audience is Juanita Kerber, a new resident whose daughter just finished four happy years at a Philadelphia public school, Greenfield Elementary. Her qualms about the transition didn’t last long. “I met with her guidance counselor last week,” Kerber said. “And she said to Jasmine, ‘With your grades, have you ever considered honors classes?’ Instantly, I felt that the support was here to make you better than what you are.”

Also here are Sharon and Jerry Jacobs, who are sending their second child to Lower Merion. “The school won’t let the kids fall through the cracks,” said Sharon. “They’ve got the resources, and the expectation is for them to live up to their abilities.”

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Focus on School Funding

Parallel worlds: Two schools a short journey apart
Following the money: How Philadelphia and Pa. pay for schools
How state funding has changed since the costing-out study
Closing the adequacy gap?
District tries new weighted funding approach for equity
Rendell: Education investments ‘moved the ball forward’
Hot topic in governor’s race: State funds for private tuition
Legislators are taking issue with state’s funding formula
Despite empty coffers, state is divided on raising money
From inside and out, a push for better fiscal oversight
A friend of education funding is moving on
Web resources on funding
Quick Takes: How have you maximized resources for your school?

Our Opinion

Trouble Ahead

There’s still an appalling gap between the resources available in Philadelphia city schools and what’s offered students when you cross the city line into more affluent suburbs. That’s because, in Pennsylvania, schools are still largely funded by property taxes. Districts with a strong tax base have more to spend on the best educators, facilities, and technology.

For a whole decade though, Philadelphia’s budget was growing faster than inflations, providing opportunities for new initiatives. We’ve seen more teachers, counselors and support personnel hired, more robust interventions in low-performing schools, and expansion of services to families. And we’ve seen student achievement improve.

Now all signs point to the fact that this run of good fortune is coming to an end – or more accurately, to a cliff.

A quarter of a billion dollars in federal stimulus funds that have been available to the School District for the past two years will be gone next year. With the Tea Party movement on the rise nationally, it’s unlikely that there will be major new federal spending initiatives like the 2009 stimulus to replace them.

The news gets worse. Some big pension bills are coming due. The stagnant economy is holding down tax revenues. The governor from Philadelphia who has prioritized public education funding is leaving office – and the frontrunner to replace him opposes all tax increases.

As a result, Pennsylvania may be in for sweeping school spending cuts as have just come to pass in New Jersey.

By spring, the District could face a need to cut hundreds of millions of dollars from next year’s budget. A sober discussion of contingencies is in order.

District staff will be developing a menu of options for the School Reform Commission. But to do the least harm, we need detailed, honest assessments of these District initiatives and whether they are showing benefits. Those closest to the work – educators, parents, and students – must be given a chance to share their views.

In fact, how many students actually attended summer school and what evidence is there of academic gains? Have the additional counselors, parent ombudsmen, and other new programs had a measurable impact? Are there schools that could be closed without devastating their communities?

Advocacy for fair treatment of Philadelphia and other chronically underfunded districts is more urgent than ever. Pennsylvania’s school funding formula is finally based on need; state officials must be persuaded that cuts should also be based on need, rather than across the board.

More than ever it is important for the District staff and the SRC to be transparent and forthcoming about the realities of its budget. Building public confidence that money is being spent wisely will go a long way toward strengthening the District’s advocacy efforts.

Money may grow much tighter soon.

To cope, we must find out which District initiatives are helping.

Our News

Home-grown reform

As the new school year kicked off, a major focus was the school turnaround efforts at 13 Renaissance charters and Promise Academies that underwent radical interventions over the summer. Most of the staff were replaced at these schools. Some were turned over to outside charter management organizations.

Meanwhile, Superintendent Ackerman, the mayor, and the governor brought in the year by celebrating the achievements of 158 District schools that met their adequate yearly progress targets. This was an impressive eighth straight year of citywide test score gains.

Across this school district, there is no shortage of remarkable stories of school turnarounds. At the District’s kickoff celebration, a few of these stories were highlighted. For instance, Roosevelt Middle School in Germantown now has three-finals of its students scoring proficient in reading and math, where just two years ago proficiency rates were in the 20 percent range.

But stories of turnaround at District-run schools have not been widely told. They may not have even been closely studied.

Understanding and sharing these stories is critical. They show that a diversity of strategies can bring significant change to struggling schools. Getting rid of most of the teaching staff is not the only viable reform approach and may not be the best one. And charter organizations are not the only place to find proactive, transformational leadership.

As the District rededicated its Renaissance Schools Program last winter, there was talk of some schools using an “innovation model” – a reform approach where personnel from within the District could implement home-grown ideas on school transformation. But in evaluating the turnaround provider applications, the District shut down all the proposals to take that path.

There are precious few outside providers with track records of leading successful school turnarounds. So this year, as the District plans to tackle a second batch of low-performing schools, it would be prudent to take advantage of the existing expertise of its staff. This will take careful planning. There’s no sense in simply pulling successful leaders out of one needy school to put in another.

We should not go another year without fleshing out the innovation model. There need to be opportunities for school-based teams to contribute their wisdom and energy as the District draws up plans to revitalize more failing schools.
Military presence in high schools

To the editors:

The Granny Peace Brigade Philadelphia is responding to increased military presence and recruitment efforts in our schools with actions to support student privacy and informed decision-making.

Military presence in our schools includes access to private contact information for recruitment purposes, frequent presence of recruiters, and a growing number of JROTC programs.

There are several ways to be pro-active.

Alert students about protecting their privacy. Names, addresses and phone numbers of juniors and seniors will be released to recruiters by the District unless students sign the opt-out form “How NOT to Have Your Name and Address Released to Military Recruiters” by October 23.

Students can download the form at www.philasd.org under the student section, sign it, and give it to their advisor or school secretary.

Demand that principals use Option 8 if they give ASVAB (Armed Services Vocational Aptitude Battery) in your school. Option 8 requires that test results not be released for recruiting. Parents receive a letter telling them to inform the school if they do not want their children to take it. The military sells ASVAB to schools as a career guidance tool, but it is a recruitment tool.

Offer resources to those provided by the military, to students considering enlistment. Students considering military enlistment deserve to get balanced guidance to help them make an informed decision.

To request “Military Recruiters in High Schools? What Students Need to Know – Considerations for Counselors,” or for more information, email pauladance@aol.com or call 215-438-9319.

Paula Paul
The writer is a retired Philadelphia teacher active in the Granny Peace Brigade.

Higher standards from our public schools

To the editors:

As students head back to school, now is the time to look at public school performance and explore ways to improve.

The global economy we spoke about in the 20th century is here. Now we must create a well-educated, highly skilled workforce to enable our country to compete worldwide.

A recent Columbia University study found huge income and tax losses resulting from just one group of 18-year olds who do not complete high school. This illustrates the economic damage inflicted by poor schools and inequitable systems. We must act now!

Pennsylvania students have made significant gains in scholastic achievement. Schools have benefited from a 2008 education funding formula that makes targeted investments in districts that need it most.

These improvements are extremely encouraging, but we need to work harder. Key to that is maintaining and fully supporting a funding formula that allocates resources rationally, that reduces reliance on property taxes, and that addresses special education costs.

Improvements in the following areas can make a big difference:

• Early childhood education: Programs like Head Start and Pre-K Counts help ensure that all Pennsylvania children receive a positive educational experience.

• Teacher effectiveness: We need to ensure that every child has an effective teacher. We need to properly evaluate teacher performance, strengthen teacher training as well as evaluation, and improve standards.

• College and career readiness: By reducing the dropout rate and expanding career and technical opportunities, we can develop a workforce that can meet the challenges of the 21st century.

Fixing our public education system will require hard work, discipline, and dedication on the part of lawmakers and voters. It will not be easy, but nothing worthwhile ever is.

Susan Gobreski
The writer is the executive director of Education Voters Pennsylvania.

Reform of state’s special ed funding: Just a step away from being realized

by Daniel Dervir

A bill that would fundamentally change how state aid for special education is distributed to school districts has one more hurdle: the state Senate. The legislation, HB 704, has long been disability rights advocates’ top priority in Harrisburg. Their goal is to bring rationality and accountability to the funding distributed by the state to help districts pay for students with special needs.

Since 1992, the state has distributed special education aid under the assumption that each district had the same percentage of special education students, basing it on the statewide average, most recently 16 percent. But that average masks big differences among districts.

This procedure “wasn’t fair to many school districts and many students with disabilities,” said Sallie Lynagh, children’s team leader at the Disability Rights Network of Pennsylvania.

This bill, which passed the House, 173-24, requires state funding to be allotted based on the actual number of special education students per district, the type and severity of the disability, and local income and property tax levels. It “fixes the erroneous assumption that all districts in the state have the same number of students with disabilities, and that the needs of those students don’t vary from district to district,” Lynagh said.

Advocates are pressing the Senate, where they say it has bipartisan support, to take action on the legislation this fall.

Funding special education has always been a balancing act between giving districts what they need and discouraging them from over-identifying students to secure more money. The state switched to basing aid on the statewide average to combat overclassification.

According to a study sponsored by advocates, 391 of the 501 districts in the Commonwealth, educating nearly 195,000 students with special needs, currently lack sufficient funds to give them adequate services.

The study said Philadelphia is slightly underfunded.

HB 704 would make other important changes, strengthening state oversight of districts’ special education services and establishing a competitive grant program as an incentive to boost the inclusion of special education students in regular classrooms. And it would expand the categories of disability from two to three, adding a designation for the lowest-need students.

According to Education Law Center Director of Policy Advocacy Baruch Kintisch, the proposed accountability system is stronger than what exists now because the state can withhold funds from districts that lack adequate and updated special education plans.

To get the bill through the House, however, its sponsors and advocates had to make significant compromises. The formula applies only to new dollars, not to the more than $1 billion already being doled out, meaning that no district will lose funds it already receives. And thanks to the state budget crisis, there will be no increase in the special education line item in this year’s budget – holding it flat for the third straight year. So struggling districts will not see extra funding anytime soon.

Kintisch says the legislation will still have an immediate impact, since the formula will help districts understand their long-term funding situation and plan accordingly.

State Rep. Mike Sturla (D-Lancaster), the bill’s chief sponsor and a long-time advocate for reforming special education funding, says the budget crisis actually presents a political opportunity to push the legislation through.

“No one’s going to get any money out of this right now, so this is a time where you can rationally say, ‘It’s not going to affect my bottom line next year. Let’s actually do it based on need.’”

Daniel Dervir is a Philadelphia-based freelance writer.

About the Notebook

The Philadelphia Public School Notebook is an independent news service whose mission is to promote informed public involvement in the Philadelphia public schools and to contribute to the development of a strong, collaborative movement for positive educational change in city schools and for schools that serve all children well. The Notebook has published a newspaper since 1984. Philadelphia Public School Notebook is a project of the New Beginning Nonprofit Incubator of Resources for Human Development. Send inquiries to:

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Flush with new resources and fresh from whirlwind makeovers, the District’s 13 new Renaissance Schools opened their doors this September, carrying out Superintendent Arlene Ackerman’s plan to breathe new life into some of Philadelphia’s lowest performing schools.

Roughly 7,000 students kicked off the new school year in the District’s seven new charter-operated Renaissance Schools and six new District-operated Renaissance Promise Academies. Collectively, the schools were upgraded to the tune of several million dollars since last spring.

“[The Renaissance Schools] did great. Kids were happy, they were well organized, and there was instruction going on,” said associate superintendent Diane Castelbuono, who replaced Benjamin Rayer as the head of the District’s Renaissance Schools initiative in July.

Student enrollments have climbed at several of the schools, in one case by 35 percent. Undaunted by the scope and pace of the changes already taking place, the District has its eye on an October overhaul later this year.

The District’s four new charter “turnaround teams” – ASPIRA Inc., Mastery Charter, Universal Companies, and Young Scholars Charter – had less than four months to hire and train new teachers, upgrade aging facilities, and prepare new instructional plans before welcoming 4,000-plus students back to school.

But at three schools where the Notebook interviewed parents and staff, the year appeared to get off to a solid start.

A new look

On the first day at Mastery-Smedley Elementary School in Frankford, nearly a dozen members of the entirely new school staff greeted parents as they dropped off their children outside the school.

“It’s a lot different,” remarked Walt Larson, the parent of a kindergartner and a returning 2nd grader at Smedley. “[Staff] are respectful, and they are showing that they care.”

Despite years of dismal test scores, Smedley’s enrollment is up approximately 6 percent, with about 10 neighborhood students on a waiting list to enroll. At Mastery-Harrity Elementary in West Philadelphia, enrollment has surged from 620 students to 835, with an additional 60 neighborhood students on a waiting list to enroll.

“We’ve been surprised by how many parents have come forward from the catchment area,” said Mastery CEO Scott Gordon.

Like the other Renaissance charter providers, Mastery will receive the standard per-pupil charter payment from the District while also paying the District a licensing fee for use of the school facilities and related building services.

At Smedley, Harrity, and Mann, Mastery installed new principals who had been groomed for leadership by serving as assistant principals at other Mastery schools.

Mastery has also almost entirely replaced the schools’ teaching forces and is implementing new instructional approaches. For instance, kindergarten classes have three-hour reading blocks staffed by two teachers, allowing small groups of students to rotate through different stations where they receive differentiated instruction.

Meanwhile, at Stetson Middle School, ASPIRA retained 40 percent of the staff from last year but flooded the school with new resources, including $450,000 in new furniture, 120 new computers, and 75 new security cameras.

“We are seeing the progress that ASPIRA talked about,” said Maria Ortiz, the mother of two 8th graders and vice chair of Stetson’s School Advisory Council (SAC). “Everything they told us they were going to bring – they are doing it.” Other parents on the council were equally thrilled with ASPIRA’s conversion of Stetson over the summer.

Once school started, the changes at the school were striking, said returning third-year teacher Alexandra McCoy.

One big difference, she explained, is ASPIRA’s partnership with Success Schools, an outside contractor overseeing discipline at the school and managing a self-contained “Success Academy” for students with emotional and behavioral problems.

“The classrooms are just so much calmer,” McCoy said at the end of the second week. “I think this is the first Friday in my three years of teaching (continued on page 5)
Renaissance

(continued from page 4)

where I felt I could come to work for another day this week.”

At Stetson and the other Renaissance charters, stakeholders all seem to be holding
their breath, hoping that the changes will stick. Outside observers are also keeping
a close eye on the extent to which the Renaissance charters are functioning as true
eighborhood schools – which the Mastery waiting lists in particular raise
questions about.

But overall, say District officials, the startup of the Renaissance charters
was a success. “Given the short timeframe, the turn-around teams did a great job of getting
the schools ready to provide a great educational experience,” said Thomas
Darden, the District’s deputy for process improvement and compliance.

Six Promise Academies open

Likewise, District officials were encouraged by the start of school at
the six new District-operated Promise Academies, which serve roughly 2,700
students and were provided with $7.2 million in extra funding.

“We were looking for parents and students coming back to school and realizing
that it’s a very different place,” said Francisco Duran, the assistant superintendent
in charge of the Promise Academies. “We got that from day one.”

Duran said the most immediately
evident changes were new enrichment opportunities for students and a host of
facilities improvements, including new lighting at five of the schools, a redesigned
entryway and foyer at Vaux High School, and brand new electronic whiteboards for
every classroom in grades one through six at Ethel Allen Elementary School.

Like Empowerment Schools across
the District, Promise Academies will seek to remediate students who are below grade level by using the heav-
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South Philly starts year with high hopes for change

Approaching the anniversary of the infamous attacks, students talk about moving forward.

by Daniel Denir

Duong Nghe Ly wonders whether he and other Asian students will continue to face violence at South Philadelphia High School.

Ten months after a group of mostly African American students attacked Asians on and off the Broad Street campus, students are returning to a new school year, with a new principal and hopes for improved school climate.

When asked about new Principal Otis Hackney, Ly, an 18-year-old who is from Vietnam and has become a student activist, said, “I’m very optimistic.”

“Hackney, former principal at Springfield Township High School, replaces LaGreta Brown following persistent controversy over how Brown and the District responded to the attacks. Hackney took over this summer.

Brown resigned in May after it became known that her principal credentials were not up to date. An interim principal finished out the last school year at the school, which is also called Southern.

In the days following the December 3 incident, advocates charged that the District was slow to respond. Brown and school officials initially flushed off the violence as gang-related and placed blame on Asian students.

A report issued by Judge James Giles largely absolved the District of responsibility and failed to look into the long history of violence and tensions at the school, further inciting Asian advocates to push for big changes.

They filed a civil rights complaint with the Department of Justice, which has found merit in its allegations. This likely means that any reforms will be subject to federal oversight.

Hackney, who was assistant principal at Southern four years ago, says the strategy is to transform Southern into a school where the rich diversity of its student body is honored and valued rather than a source of conflict.

The goal is to “turn around” what happened last year and “make South Philadelphia a model for a diverse school, almost an international school,” he said.

Dyana Bates, 14, said that Hackney seemed like a good fit.

“He does his job, makes sure people get to class,” she said.

One morning during the second week of school, Hackney walked into the central office with a calm but alert presence, greeting students and staff with authoritative familiarity.

Students hurrying to make the 8 a.m. bell on this morning weren’t sure what to expect in the new school year.

“I don’t know yet,” said student Myesha Hampton.

“I think there will be a lot of conflicts and stuff because people can’t keep their mouths shut [but] I think it will improve a little bit,” Superintendent Arlene Ackerman told students at an orientation assembly to put last year behind them.

“Every new school year is a fresh start,” she said. She urged the freshmen to set an example.

“We’ve implemented hard changes,” Ackerman stressed. In addition to bringing on a new principal, the District has installed over 100 cameras, which advocates and students welcome, but don’t consider a solution to preventing violence at the school, Ly said.

Ly said that tensions, mistrust, and a lack of understanding still hinder relations between Black and Asian students. According to Ly, a lot of anger is fueled by the perception that Asian students are receiving preferential treatment.

(continued on page 7)
Southern

(continued from page 6)

Southern has also opened a Newcomer Learning Academy, a new classroom for recently arrived immigrant students who may have had breaks in their schooling. Southern’s academy is run by Cheri Michean with another teacher. Students in Michean’s class have recently arrived from Burma, Thailand, China, Vietnam, Cambodia, Greece, Mali and Ethiopia.

The District opened up two other such centers at Edison and Rush High Schools.

To expand the school’s commitment to diversity, Hackney has reached out to families and the wider community, some of whom may feel shut outside the schoolhouse doors. He plans to open a parents’ lounge so that families, especially immigrant families, feel welcome.

Hackney said that improving school climate by establishing a culture of safety, punctuality, and respect is a prelude to improving academics.

“It’s not a totally broken situation. But there’s a lot of work to be done” to improve the school environment, he said, including things that “may have been in the institution so long, people may not even notice it.”

He wants to bring in programs that cultivate interaction between different students at Southern. The Asian Arts Initiative will soon be offering after-school art classes, and Philadelphia Student Union has been invited to start a chapter. The District also hired a new Asian American assistant principal, Kim-Lime Chek-Taylor, and the Main Line Chinese Cultural Center is organizing diversity trainings for teachers.

Plus, the school has begun offering Mandarin Chinese as a foreign language. Helen Gym of Asian Americans United calls Hackney “compassionate, thoughtful, and engaged in dialogue that leads to action.” But she says she’s still not sure that Ackerman’s office “understands the role of community dialogue.”

For students like 16-year old Bach Tong, the District’s efforts to improve climate have come too late. After the last school year, he decided to transfer to Science Leadership Academy, where he is now beginning his junior year.

“It’s the right place for me, both environmentally and academically,” he said.

“I needed something to prepare me for college, and a place that welcomes me. It’s really hard to do that at South Philly High even with the new administration, so I transferred.”

Hackney has a tough balance to strike, addressing real problems that culminated in last year’s violence while making sure students do not feel stigmatized. He said that some African American students might feel resentful about getting lumped in with those who were involved in the incidents. Yet he hopes the violence can be a learning experience for all.

At lunch, a student called out to Hackney, “Do you like it here?” A group of students stopped eating to hear his answer.

“What do you think?” Hackney fired back.

“Don’t you see me outside in the morning? I love it here.”

The student carefully considered his new principal’s words.

“There are people who pretend to care but don’t, and people who care but pretend not to.”

Hackney smiled, then said, “Well, we’ve got to fix that.”

Daniel Denzer is a Philadelphia-based freelance writer.

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Reports from ARC, Law Center examine alternative education

The Accountability Review Council (ARC), an independent panel that monitors District reform efforts, and the Education Law Center of Pennsylvania recently released studies that raise questions about the effectiveness of alternative and disciplinary schools. Alternative schools include accelerated programs for dropouts and over-age students with few credits as well as disciplinary schools serving students who have violated the District’s code of conduct.

Both studies call for greater accountability and results from this growing system of Philadelphia schools, which has produced disappointing low graduation rates.

According to the ARC report, one in 10 District students has attended an alternative school. Over 23 percent of over-age students attending an accelerated program earned their high school diplomas, and just 5 percent did so in a two-year period.

Things aren’t much better at the District’s disciplinary schools. Only 32 percent of students re-enter comprehensive schools. Just 41 percent of returning students actually graduate.

The law center’s report, “Alternati ve Education for Disruptive Youth Programs,” recommends that teachers in these programs not be exempt from state teacher qualification requirements. It also calls for timely public reporting on program performance and more services for English language learners and special education students.

The companies manage nearly all the District’s alternative and disciplinary schools. Ben Wright, assistant superintendent for alternative education, said that provider contracts are based on student achievement and added, “If they don’t come through, we take the kids back.”

The District recently terminated its long-standing contract with Community Education Partners, which ran disciplinary and accelerated schools.

-Monica Zaleska

Multilingual services expanded; advocates say more are needed

School officials are assuring families of English language learners that their language needs will be better met this year through an expansion of services and staffing. Organizers from immigrant communities say more support is needed.

The District has opened eight Parent and Family Resource Centers and is widely publicizing a phone line where non-English speaking families can find translation assistance.

According to Ludy Soderman, director of multilingual family support, the District printed thousands of language service request cards to make it easier for parents to get assistance in their native language.

“We have also put out a flyer intended exclusively for School District personnel so that they know how to assist families that require services in another language when no bilingual person nel is available,” Soderman said.

The Translation and Interpretation Center opened at District headquarters, and four Welcome and Enrollment Centers for Multilingual Families have also been established.

One welcome center is at District headquarters. The three others open this fall in the parent resource centers in North, Northeast, and South Philadelphia. At the centers, students will be assessed for language proficiency and academic level. Families will also receive assistance with social services.

Deborah Wei, newly appointed director of multilingual and curriculum programs, said the District is also working to address concerns around academics.

“We are hoping to bring [in] some of the practices that we developed in curriculum and instruction in how teachers both push in and pull out, and how parents’ language access needs to be addressed,” Wei said.

Zac Steele of JUNTOS, an immigrant organizing group based in the city’s Mexican community, said, “There have been improvements in the quality of delivery of services,” but added that the District needs more multilingual personnel at schools rather than relying on translation by telephone.

“It is much better for parents to connect with a person at the school, somebody they can see, when they want to talk about their kids,” Steele said.

Steele said this is especially important for non-English speaking parents when trying to help their children with their schoolwork.

-Gustavo Martínez Contreras

Under new policy, SRC allows 17 charters to add students

In June the School Reform Commission granted grade expansions to 17 charter schools for the 2010-11 school year totaling 1,042 new seats at a cost of $7.3 million. A total of 22 charters requested 1,515 seats for this year and 9,262 seats over five years.

(continued on page 11)
Community members plan for future of William Penn H.S.

Ever since the District agreed to reconsider its plan to permanently shutter William Penn High School, community activists have been developing a proposal for the future development and reopening of the North Philadelphia school.

Last year, members of the Coalition for the Revitalization of William Penn surveyed alumni, community stakeholders, and residents to gauge feelings about its history and get ideas for how a new school might be able to serve students and the community.

A 10-page proposal details the school’s history, its deterioration, reasons for its reopening, and proposed future uses. It recommends restoring once-popular vocational programs and engaging the community by offering extended learning opportunities and space to incubate projects.

Supporters worked to reach a consensus around the community’s vision for a new school and continue to meet weekly to provide updates about the effort.

“We’ve brought a nice group together, gotten a lot of input, and now we’re looking to the next step of actually getting the work done,” says Darnni Samuel, who heads the coalition.

Coalition members will present the proposal to Superintendent Arlene Ackerman this fall. The District’s facilities planning committee is expected to review it and decide whether to recommend demolition, partial renovation, or total overhaul of the existing building.

Dozens of people testified before the School Reform Commission in June 2009, pleading to keep William Penn open. The District cited the cost of repairs and dwindling enrollment as reasons for its proposed closure but agreed to make the closure temporary.

“No one should be fooled into thinking that the failure of William Penn High School was a failure of the community,” said coalition member Ruth Birchett. “The enrollment has fallen because most of the unique programs that made students want to attend have been dropped. That’s a failure of the District.” -Brad Gibson

YUC surveys take hard look at zero tolerance policies

Youth United for Change (YUC), a citywide student organization, has conducted a survey of high school students about the impact of the District’s zero tolerance policy.

That policy requires school administrators to immediately suspend, with intent to expel, when there are probable grounds to suspect that a student has committed a violent offense.

Concerned that this approach is punitive and discourages troubled students rather than encouraging better behavior, YUC issued the survey at the end of last school year. Questions were designed to assess the effects of the policy and whether students think it is applied fairly by school security and administration. Results will be released in November along with a set of recommendations.

Students were surveyed about their understanding of the policy and their experiences with school security. Questions also addressed school suspensions, exploring whether certain groups were disproportionately punished.

“We’re looking to the next step of actually to provide updates about the effort. We believe we need to change the way the District is disciplining students,” said Britney White, YUC member and senior at Kensington CAPA.

“What the District is doing is not right because they are taking small issues and making them bigger than they have to be.” -Brad Gibson

PSU ties its fair funding work to campaign for safe schools

Since the state’s “costing-out” study revealed that most Pennsylvania school districts are underfunded, Philadelphia Student Union (PSU) has pushed for more dollars in these areas, enlisting districts are underfunded, Philadelphia Student Union (PSU) has pushed for more dollars in these areas, enlisting
districts are underfunded, Philadelphia Student Union (PSU) has pushed for more dollars in these areas, enlisting

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Facing sharp funding drop, District examines its options

A jobs bill supported by Obama helped balance the budget this year, but most stimulus funds will run out soon.

by Paul Socolar

Thanks to a federal education jobs bill approved in August, Philadelphia won’t have to make immediate budget cuts this year, even though it is receiving less state aid than originally expected.

But the outlook for next year is ominous.

In 2011-12, the District is faced with the loss of a quarter-billion dollars or more of federal funding. That money was allotted through the economic stimulus legislation last year and again this year, but won’t recur.

About half that federal windfall came directly to Philadelphia. The other half came via Harrisburg, which used state aid to shore up the state’s basic education subsidy during the current economic downturn.

While Chief Financial Officer Michael Masch hopes that either the state or federal government will act to fill the looming hole in the District’s $3.2 billion budget, he said his office is already planning for possible cuts.

“If we indeed lose 8 or 9 percent of our funding, we’re not going to be able to do every single thing that we do now,” Masch said. He explained that his own job has been narrowed to allow him to work full-time this fall on preparing options for coping with the pending crisis.

“We’re not waiting until the winter or the spring to do a budget,” Masch said. “What we’ve committed to the School Reform Commission is we will give them a menu of choices, a very robust menu. This will be one of those no-stone-left-unturned exercises. We’ll look at and map out every part of what we do that costs any significant money.”

As the first round of stimulus dollars comes to an end, the District’s primary revenue sources – state and local taxes – have been slow to rebound from the recession. At the same time, it is confronted with rising costs, including an increase next year in pension expenses and utility rates, and continuing growth of core expenditures such as salaries and charter school reimbursements.

Some encouraging news for the District came from the new $10 billion federal education jobs bill, a follow-up to the stimulus, which helps to fill an immediate breach caused by a $55 million decline in Philadelphia’s expected revenue from the state. The goal of the legislation was to protect jobs threatened by recession-ravaged state and local education budgets.

President Obama, in signing the (continued on page 11)
Funding drop
(continued from page 10)

bill, recognized that it is not enough to entirely avert a national wave of education budget cuts. But for now it is saving Philadelphia, where Superintendent Ackerman said it would stave off the threat of midyear cutbacks.

The District will benefit to the tune of $49 million this year and plug some of the revenue holes in the current budget, with another $49 million coming next year.

But with the jobs money expiring in 2012, this lifeline is yet another short-term infusion of non-recurring federal money that has to be replaced.

Mach isn’t making predictions as to whether the federal or state governments will take further action to fill in the void. He noted that it depends a lot on who ends up in charge in Congress when the rest of the request will be voted on,” he said.

Walter D. Palmer Leadership Learning Partners Charter’s request to expand was not even considered. In 2009, the SRC gave the charter permission to operate grades 9-12 for the 2009-10 school year only, but denied its application for permanent expansion, capping enrollment at 675 students in K-8. The decision sparked a first-day-of-school protest.

The SRC also granted 11 charter renewals in June and in August approved the delayed renewal of Philadelphia Montessori Charter.

- Monika Zaleska

News in brief
(continued from page 8)

Criteria for expansion under the District’s amended charter school policy included academic performance and a school’s ability to relieve overcrowding in neighborhood schools.

Chief Financial Officer Michael Masch said that filling the full requests would have cost the District an additional $266 million over five years. Charter schools now cost the District $390 million a year to serve 37,000 students.


Nueva Esperanza Academy Charter received only half of the 50 seats it requested. KIPP Philadelphia Charter picked up 150 of 230 slots (it had wanted to add a 9th grade to its middle school program), but CEO Marc Manella is still optimistic.

“We’re thrilled that the SRC approved a portion of our expansion request. We’re looking forward to winter

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Asunto candente en las elecciones para gobernador: Dólares estatales para matrícula en escuela privada

Candidatos han dicho poco sobre el déficit presupuestario que se avecina.

Por Rajiv Venkataramanan

La posibilidad de seleccionar la escuela para los hijos, incluyendo los vouchers para que los estudiantes asistan a escuelas privadas, ha dominado el tema de educación en la campaña electoral para la gobernación de Pensilvania.

El republicano Tom Corbett, actual fiscal estatal, ha impulsado la idea de libre selección un poco más que el demócrata Dan Onorato. Corbett dice que una de sus prioridades como gobernador será dirigir fondos estatales a las alternativas para los sistemas de escuelas públicas, tanto a las escuelas chárter como a los voucher. Para logarlo, dijo, estructuraría toda la ayuda estatal para la educación alrededor de la idea de que “el dinero siga al niño”, incluso a las escuelas privadas y parroquiales.

Onorato, el ejecutivo del Condado de Allegheny, respalda un programa más limitado de “grants de oportunidad” para familiares de alumnos en escuelas de poca desempeño. Ambos candidatos apoyan la expansión de un programa estatal de $60 millones para subsidiar las escuelas privadas como el Educational Improvement Tax Credit o EITC (Crédito tributario para mejoras educativas). El EITC les ofrece incentivos tributarios substanciales a las empresas que le den dinero a organizaciones de becas. Sin embargo, en general la educación no ha estado en el centro de la campaña, y usualmente recibe poca atención. Ninguno de los candidatos tiene una respuesta específica a lo que podría ser la solución educativa más portante que enfrentará el próximo gobernador – o que haría el próximo año cuando los fondos del estímulo federal desaparezcan y dejen al estado con un déficit de $654 millones en el presupuesto.

Ese déficit es parte de uno más grande de $5,000 millones pronosticado para el presupuesto estatal del 2011-12. Pero Corbett ha prometido no aumentar ni un solo impuesto si es elegido gobernador. Onorato ha dicho que la promesa de Corbett es irresponsable, pero también ha limitado sus opciones para aumentar los ingresos. El Demócrata ha prometido no aumentar los impuestos sobre ingresos o el impuesto de venta, aunque no ha especificado cuándo.

En general la educación no ha estado en el centro de la campaña, y usualmente recibe poca atención. En sus énfasis y prioridades en cuanto a la educación, los dos candidatos son diferentes en otros aspectos importantes. Onorato, por ejemplo, le asignaría muchos recursos a la educación en la niñez temprana mientras que Corbett casi ni la menciona. Corbett quiere sueldos en base a mérito para los maestros y favorece el sistema de certificaciones A-F en las escuelas. Onorato, que ha sido endosado por la Asociación de Educación del Estado de Pensilvania, no menciona los sueldos en base a mérito.

Más ampliamente, Onorato dice que las escuelas públicas, así como los maestros y sus uniones, son parte de la solución para aumentar la calidad educativa. Corbett, por otro lado, enfatiza constantemente que pasan por alto la burocracia de las escuelas públicas para ir a encontrar mejores maneras para llevar cuenta de cómo los distritos escolares ganan el dinero, y que pondrá el poder y la capacidad de selección en las manos de los padres.

La capacidad de seleccionar escuelas fue un asunto candente durante las primarias, cuando varios operadores de fondos de inversión adversarios le die- ron $5 millones al senador demócrata Anthony Hardy Williams porque él defiende con entusiasmo la opción de selección de escuela privada.

Williams ha introducido proyectos de ley para proveerlos lo que él llama ‘begas de oportunidad’ a los estudiantes de distritos que tengan al menos una escuela de poco desempeño. Ambos candidatos dicen que apoyan el proyecto de ley, aunque con algunos cambios que ninguno ha especificado.

En la entrevista con el Notebook, Onorato procuró aclarar su posición sobre el asunto de selección de escuela y explicar cuán diferente a Corbett es en ese tema. “Yo nunca dije que apoyaba los ‘vouchers’, dijo. “Esto es un programa limitado de grants que los estudiantes podrían usar si cumplen los requisitos de provenir de una familia de pocos ingresos y estar en una escuela que tenga problemas académicos. ... Un programa limitado de grants no se parece en nada a los ‘vouchers estatales’.”

Si aceptó que los grants “definitivamente estarían respaldados con fondos públicos”, pero que él haría todo lo posible por “asegurar que estos grants no le afectaran adversamente a las escuelas públicas”.

Rajiv Venkataramanan hizo su práctica en el Notebook este verano. Paul Jablou contribuyó con reportajes adicionales. Traducción por Mildred S. Martinez.
Los distritos varían mucho de acuerdo al nivel de riqueza y la capa-
cidad tributaria. Esto afecta cuántos fondos reciben de diferentes fuentes. Por diseño, aquellos con menos fon-
dos locales y más necesidad obtienen más dinero del estado. Los distritos más pobres también reciben fondos federales. Pero este dinero no com-
pensa las diferencias tan amplias en la habilidad de recibir más ingresos de las fuentes locales.

Los distritos más ricos cubren la mayor parte de los costos mediante el co-
bro de impuestos sobre la propiedad. Lower Merion recibe sólo 10 por cien-
to de sus fondos del estado y casi nada del gobierno federal, pero por tener tanta riqueza en propiedades, puede recaudar suficiente dinero localmente como para gastar el doble de lo que gasta Filadelfia cada año.

En los distritos de suburbanos más antiguos como William Penn en el Condado de Delaware, el cual cubre las áreas de Aldan, Colwyn, Darby, East Lansdowne, Lansdowne y Yeardon, los negocios y centros industriales están desapareciendo, el valor de la propiedad está bajando y ahora hay una mayor proporción de familias de bajos ingresos. William Penn recibe 44 por ciento de sus fondos del estado y 50 por ciento de fuentes locales. Aún así, sólo puede gastar por cada estudiante la mitad de lo que gasta Lower Merion.

Filadelfia, el distrito más grande del estado, está literalmente en una clase por sí solo cuando Harrisburg calcula cuánta ayuda estatal debe recibir. Aunque está afectado por po-
brezza, Filadelfia también tiene benefi-
cios que los distritos más pequeños no tienen. Pero también tiene que pagar por su propio sistema de tribunales, servicios sociales y otras ventajas con los impuestos locales. Cuánto dinero Filadelfia debe aportar para su propio sistema de educación es un punto de con-
tención continua en Harrisburg. En el 2008-09, recibió 56 por ciento de sus gas-
tos de educación del estado y cubrió una tercera parte de sus costos localmente.

Desde el 2008-09, los dólares del estímulo federal han sido una por-
ción importante de los ingresos del Distrito — reforzando la ayuda fe-

deral a más o menos 23 por ciento. El estado usó algunos de estos dólares para reemplazar parte de lo que hu-
biese sido su propia aportación. La mayoría de los fondos de estí-
mulo se acabarán después de este año. A menos que los ingresos estatales au-

mente para el 2011-12, Filadelfia esta-
rá enfrentando una fuerte reducción en su presupuesto. El Direc-
tor Ejecutivo de Fi-
nanzas Michael Masch calculó en una presen-
tación del presupuesto que el déficit de Fi-

ladelphia en el año fiscal 2012 podría alcanzar $247 millones.

Las porciones aportadas por el estado y las fuentes locales en Philadel-

fia se han reducido desde el 2008-09 con la introducción de los fondos de estímulo federal.

Traducción por Mildred S. Martinez.

Se necesitan más fondos estatales para las escuelas, dijo estudio del 2008

En el 2008, la legislatura estatal de Pensilvania adoptó una fórmula nueva para distribuirles dinero a los distritos escolares en base a un estudio de costos que había pedido el año anterior. El estudio determinó que 474 de los 501 distritos — aún muchos de los que tienen una alta tasa de impuestos — no gastan lo suficien-
to para lograr que todos los estudiantes logren dominio académico. Fi-

ladelfia misma necesitaría gastar $1,000 mi-

lones adicionales cada año, dijo el estudio.

El estudio deter-

minó la cantidad que cada distrito debe gastar considerando las necesidades de los estudiantes, in-

cluyendo el nivel de pobreza y el do-

mino del idioma inglés. En total, el estudio indicó que Pen-
silvania debería gastar $4,400 millo-

nes adicionales cada año para darle una educación adecuada a cada estudiante. El Gobernador Rendell determinó que el estado necesitaba aumentarle $2,600 mi-

lones a su aportación anual para el año 2014, y el resto del dinero adicional debe ser recaudado localmente.

En el 2008-09, la legislatura le au-

mentó $275 millones a los fondos para educación básica.

Pero cuando ocurrió la recesión el año después, la legislatura de-

pendió de $654 millones en estímulo federal para continuar fomentando lo que se gasta por estudiante. A la misma vez, le redujo drásticamente $354 millones a la aportación del estado a la educación básica. El efecto neto para el 2009-10 fue un aumento de $300 millones para la educación básica en el presupuesto del estado. En el 2010-11, Harrisburg le aumentó $200 millones al total que el estado gastará para la educación bás-

cica. Sin embargo, una vez más usará el dinero del estímulo federal para pagar por $654 millones de su propia contribución.

En este tercer año de estar asign-

ando los fondos bajo la fórmula nue-

va, los fondos del estado sólo han lo-

grado aumentar una tercera parte de la meta de $2,600 millones para el 2014. Si no se cuentan los dólares del estímulo federal, que se terminan este año, entonces la aportación estatal del estado para la educación es apenas un poco más que en el 2007-08.

Además, el compromiso con la meta y con la fórmula misma dependerá de la nueva administración y legislatura que empezarán el próximo año.

Traducción por Mildred S. Martinez.
Profile of the Rev. LeRoi Simmons, Notebook member

A history of involvement for more than two decades

by Benjamin Herold

Why become a Notebook member?
“I love the paper, the information, and the people,” explained the Rev. LeRoi Simmons.
“It is great reporting that you’re not going to see anywhere else.”

Simmons, 63, first came across the Notebook when a co-worker arranged for the paper to be distributed at the Central Germantown Council, where Simmons is the executive director.

“I would see the paper there and say, ‘That looks nice.’ But then I read it and said, ‘I didn’t know this!’ It started giving me insight into the stuff that’s really going on behind the veil,” he said.

At the time, Simmons was heavily involved at Germantown High School, where his daughter Najah Purnell, now 29, graduated in 1999. Following a deadly shooting on Germantown Avenue, Simmons and other members of the Germantown Clergy Initiative organized 1,000 men to hold hands in prayer around the school. Quickly, the effort evolved into a safe corridors program that is still in operation.

“I would read the Notebook and it started informing my moves, especially the [data] centerfolds.”

Simmons’ first taste of education advocacy came 24 years ago, when his daughter attended Kelly Elementary School.

“Holding her hand, standing in the schoolyard, it was a rude awakening for me because there was not a lot of men there. … We would kind of organize the schoolyard so there wouldn’t be so much roughhousing,” Simmons said.

From that beginning, Simmons quickly became more involved in protesting poor conditions at the school.

“One of the biggest issues that came up was that Kelly was overcrowded. They put trailers out in the yard and put the kindergartners in the trailer. But there were no bathrooms, so in the wintertime, they were walking back and forth to go to the bathroom. It didn’t make sense, so we began to protest.”

Eventually, the group worked with the District to relocate the kindergarten program to a nearby Boys and Girls Club, in the process helping the struggling club to stay afloat by arranging the lease of its classroom space to the District.

From Kelly, Simmons followed his daughter to Pickett Middle School, where he took a job as the school and community coordinator.

There Simmons helped to create a parent room, get Pickett’s pool re-opened, and organize professional development sessions for teachers and curricular programs for students.

“We got [Temple professor and renowned Afrocentric education expert] Molefi Asante to come and teach a two-day class [for teachers] for free. I started organizing Black History Month programs, showed [students] Eyes on the Prize and all the stuff about the Black Panthers, and then the next day, I brought in Bobby Seale,” he said.

“I told the children, ‘You have acres of diamonds around here, and you ought to be conscious of that.’”

Now in his third decade of fighting to improve Germantown’s schools, Simmons said he is glad to have the Notebook as a resource.

“I can trust the Notebook because I know where its heart is,” Simmons concluded. “If you’re serious about the education of children in public schools in Philadelphia, you ought to be involved with the Notebook.”

Benjamin Herold is a freelance writer and member of the Notebook Editorial Board. To join the Notebook, use the form on p. 31. To learn more about membership, go to www.thenotebook.org/membership.
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Districts get different shares of their budgets from the state

The stimulus is now a big chunk in Philadelphia

Philadelphia gets its revenue from three major sources: local, state and federal. Traditionally, the federal share was always the smallest, usually between 10 and 12 percent.

However, for the past two years federal stimulus dollars have become a major part of the District's revenue – boosting the total federal share to about 23 percent. The state has used some of these dollars to replace part of what would have been its own contribution.

Taxing capacity, local tax burden vary greatly

A mill is $1 in property tax levied per thousand dollars in assessed value. In districts where property values are relatively low, residents must tax themselves at a much higher rate to raise the same amount of money.

William Penn is emblematic of a widespread phenomenon across Pennsylvania: rural and urban districts with high tax efforts, high poverty levels, and underfunded public schools. Such districts risk pushing out residents and businesses if they increase their already-high property taxes, and therefore opt to let their expenditures on education stagnate.

The school funding terrain is drastically different in districts like Lower Merion, a wealthy, suburban district with a robust local tax base. In 2008-09 Lower Merion took in only 10 percent of its public school money from the state, maintained a slim millage rate of 13.8, less than half the rate in William Penn School District, and still was able to spend much more – $5,000 more per student than the levels recommended by the costing-out study.

Philadelphia's property tax millage rate is higher than Lower Merion’s but nowhere near that of William Penn. Only 55 percent of what is raised through property taxes in Philadelphia goes to fund education. But Philadelphia also uses a variety of other local taxes to help pay for schools.

The state share of education spending in Lower Merion, for example, was 33.5 percent in fiscal year 2008-09, compared to 44 percent in William Penn. The state share of education spending in Lower Merion was 8 percent, compared to 4.2 percent in William Penn. The state share of education spending in Lower Merion was 5 percent, compared to 4 percent in William Penn.

Compared to other districts, Lower Merion's per pupil spending was $25,981, Philadelphia's was $12,677, and William Penn's was $13,956.

Philadelphia's funding mix has changed with the arrival of stimulus dollars

Most of the stimulus money is scheduled to go away after this year. Unless state revenue soars for 2011-12, Philadelphia will be facing deep revenue declines. Chief Business Officer Michael Masch estimated in a budget presentation that the shortfall for Philadelphia in 2011-12 could reach $2.47 billion.

With the introduction of federal stimulus dollars, the state and local shares have dropped sharply since 2008-09. In 2010-11, the local funding share was down to only 27 percent, state funding to 47 percent, recurring federal 12 percent, and the federal stimulus another 11 percent.

Beyond 2011-12, Philadelphia does not know how much its funding might drop. But it does know how much more it needs to cut: $342 million over the next three years, the city's officials estimate.

The state share of school funding in Philadelphia has increased, but only slightly. In 2007-08, the state's share was 15 percent. In 2008-09, it increased to 16.8 percent, and in 2009-10, it increased to 18.6 percent.

The state share of school funding in Lower Merion has remained stable, at 47 percent in 2007-08, 47 percent in 2008-09, and 47 percent in 2009-10.

William Penn's state share has increased, from 47 percent in 2007-08 to 50 percent in 2008-09, and 51 percent in 2009-10.

The state share of school funding in Philadelphia is lower than the state, whose relative contribution remains among the lowest of any state in the country. It wasn’t always so.

In 1966, the legislature amended the Public School Code to specify that the state share of education spending would never fall below 50 percent. Until 1977, it kept to that requirement, reaching a peak of 55 percent. That year, however, during an economic downturn, the commitment began to wane. In 1985, the legislature officially ended its 50 percent commitment. And in 1991, it abandoned altogether the aid formula that distributed state funds to districts based on poverty levels, enrollment, local taxing capacity and other factors. For the next 17 years, the rules for distributing state education aid changed from year to year. And the Commonwealth's total contribution dipped as low as 36 percent, putting the burden on localities.

According to a recent U.S. Census report, that's where the state's share stood in 2007-08. Only three states – Nebraska, South Dakota, and Illinois – fund a smaller percentage of the costs for public educ
In 2008, Pennsylvania’s state legislature adopted a new formula for driving out dollars to school districts based on a "costing-out" study completed the year before.

The study said that 474 of the 501 districts – even many that tax themselves heavily – do not spend enough to bring all their students to academic proficiency. Philadelphia alone would need to spend about an additional $1 billion a year, the study said.

The study determined the amount each district should spend by weighting student needs, including poverty and English language status.

In total, the study said that Pennsylvania should be spending an additional $4.4 billion a year to provide every student with an adequate education. Gov. Rendell determined that the state should increase its contribution by $2.6 billion a year by 2014, with the rest of the additional money raised locally.

In 2008-09, the legislature increased basic education funding by $275 million.

But when the recession took hold the following year, the legislature relied on $654 million in federal stimulus dollars to continue to boost spending. At the same time it sharply reduced the state’s own contribution to basic education by $354 million. The net effect for 2009-10 was a $300 million increase to the state basic education line item.

In 2010-11, Harrisburg increased state basic education spending by another $200 million. However, it again used federal stimulus money to pay for $654 million of its total contribution.

In the third year under the new funding formula, state funding is less than one-third of the way toward the goal of a $2.6 billion increase by 2014.

If you don’t count federal stimulus dollars, which are used up this year, the state’s own contribution to spending on education is barely higher than it was in 2007-08. And the commitment to the goal, and to the formula itself, is dependent on a new administration and legislature that will take office next year.

Upper states, Pennsylvania’s share of education spending is low

Despite Gov. Rendell’s and the state’s recent efforts to bring districts closer to their adequacy targets, the wide disparities in spending among districts have not closed very much since the new formula was adopted, although some districts, like Philadelphia and William Penn, are seeing their state share relative to local property taxes increase.

Districts with lower tax bases continue to tax themselves heavily but have made little progress in reaching their adequacy targets.

Closing the adequacy gap?

In adopting the formula based on the costing-out study, Gov. Rendell set a goal of increasing the state share to 44 percent by 2014.

(Adequacy targets vary by district, depending on student characteristics.)
Parallel worlds: Two schools a short journey apart

(continued from page 1)

The school is worth its price, says Jerry. “Nobody likes paying taxes,” he said. But the school’s high quality draws people, and “the property values more than compensate for the investments.”

In nearby Ardmore, Alicia Goff lives with her mother and twin brother, a modest twin on a quiet street. The Lower Merion senior is happy in school and excited about her prospects. But she says her story could have been much different if she hadn’t intervened in middle school, when her family problems emerged. Her teachers steered her into a special class. “I hated it,” she said. “But it worked. I’m really grateful for that.”

Once in high school, focused attention and a carefully constructed curriculum got her past her academic problems. “They do consistency,” said her father, Roger. “And they can afford to sustain it, where other schools would just let it fall apart.”

Alicia knows she’s fortunate. “I have friends in the Philly system,” she said. “My friend was telling me about the cafeteria in her school. A bunch of the stools were broken, and there was nowhere to sit. The school would say, ‘We had to spend the money on textbooks.’

“It’s a whole different world,” said Alicia – just a few minutes away.

Marketa Hudgens agrees. “Lower Merion is not far from Overbrook High School – not far at all,” she said. “How can you be not even 10 minutes away from another school, and have so much less?”

Hudgens, who graduated from Overbrook last June, is asking a profound question.

Wealthy, White suburban school districts abut poor ones serving students of color all over the country, and it’s common to see stark differences in their property values and their ability to raise taxes to pay for schools.

Years of government policies at all levels played a role in those divides, though the forces most important, the State Certified Teachers

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OVERBROOK vs LOWER MERION

1,595 Student Enrollment 1,542
98% % African American 10%
1% % White 82%
0% % Asian 6%
1% % Latino 2%
83% % Low Income 7%
47% Graduation rate 98%
22% Average daily absenteeism 6%
16% PSSA Math - % proficient 84%
25% PSSA Reading - % proficient 92%


“Know how can you be not even 10 minutes away from another school, and have so much less?”
- Marketa Hudgens, Overbrook graduate

It’s like not even being in the competition at all.”

At Cheyney, she already feels like she’s playing catch-up. “I don’t feel like I’m prepared like I should be,” she said. “Other kids are more advanced. They have more knowledge.”

She says she won’t give up. But she can’t say the same of most Overbrook students. “We’re not trained to push,” she said. “We’re trained to let it flow. That’s the culture. People become numb. You don’t react.”

On a bright sunny day in mid-September, Overbrook’s principal is standing at a lectern in the library, saying the school can’t solve that problem alone.

“I’ve got a group of kids that’s going to go to college. Their parents have already sown that seed,” said Ethelyn West Philadelphia. Bill Hangley, Jr. is a freelance writer based in West Philadelphia.

A family like the Goffs can count on them not just for a year or two, but for an educational lifetime.

At Overbrook, it’s the opposite story. “There’s no longevity to anything,” said Young. “We’re just now getting [the Success Center] up and running. We have this year, and all of next year. Then I think that’s it.

“I’ll keep the computers. But who’s going to staff it? I don’t have the staff,” she said. “I’ve got to figure out how to sustain these things. Because the kids keep coming.”
District tries new weighted funding approach for equity

by Daniel Denvir

In an attempt to address inequities, Philadelphia is moving to implement “weighted student funding,” a budgeting process that allocates funds to schools based on students’ needs, rather than primarily on school size. Examples of weighted factors would be poverty and lack of English proficiency.

The approach also aims to give schools more freedom to decide how to spend their money.

Superintendent Arlene Ackerman, who has implemented a version of this policy in three prior districts, says the goal is to make sure that funds reach the students who need them most.

“All schools don’t have the same population, all schools don’t have the same needs,” Ackerman said in introducing the plan. “And I believe that schools, and the people who work there, know best what their students need.”

A citywide planning committee has held meetings since April to develop a new formula for distributing the funds and is scheduled to make its recommendations to the School Reform Commission this fall. Districtwide implementation is planned for the 2011-12 school year.

The committee “is trying to bring up all aspects, all components: what will be given, what will be controlled centrally, what the actual weights are,” said David Weiner, the District’s chief academic officer.

Deciding what characteristics to give extra weight to is a politically tricky issue that will determine which schools may benefit or lose out on dollars. If the overall pie is fixed or shrinking next year, the new system could be painful for schools all pie is fixed or shrinking next year, the benefit or lose out on dollars. If the over-

weights are,” said David Weiner, the District’s chief academic officer.

One leading proponent of weighted student funding, however, disagrees.

William Ouchi, a professor of management at UCLA, says that schools must “earn” autonomy by first demonstrating academic gains.

A citywide committee that is developing a new funding approach for equity paints an uneven picture.

In the 1970s, the Edmonton, Alberta, school system was the first to enact weighted student funding, and it has since been implemented around the U.S., including in Seattle, San Francisco, and Washington D.C., where Ackerman previously worked. Districts have implemented it in diverse ways, with different amounts of extra funding, different weights for different student characteristics, and various degrees of school-based management.

The idea has gained some traction among liberals as well as among free-market advocates who say that San Francisco’s plan boosted spending on high-poverty middle and high schools and “showed progress toward closing the [teacher] experience gap.”

But Rutgers University professor Bruce Baker found that in the two weighted student funding districts he examined – Houston and Cincinnati – the distribution of funds to schools was not significantly more directed at student need than in other large urban districts in the same states.

Seattle has abandoned weighted student funding, citing complaints that it was too complex, cumbersome, and decentralized.

Michael Rebell, executive director of the Campaign for Educational Equality at Teachers College in New York, worries that weighted student funding can be a smoke screen to distract from the question of adequacy: whether urban districts like Philadelphia have enough money to begin with. That’s a potential pitfall here, where school funding levels per student fall $5,000 below the adequacy target set by the state.

“If you don’t have enough basic revenue in the system, by weighting, even if it’s a fair weight for concentrations of poverty – and a fair weight would be a pretty heavy one in my mind – there’s a concern that you’re fighting over the scraps at the table,” said Rebell.

On the other hand, conservatives often argue that troubled urban schools are poorly managed rather than under-funded. Ouchi, a scholar of management whose focus has shifted to education in recent years, maintains that greater efficiency is the key to successful schools.

Rebell and Baker expressed concern that weighted-funding formulas are often politically driven and not based on research. Cincinnati, for example, has added a weight for gifted and talented students.

Philadelphia Federation of Teachers President Jerry Jordan has not yet taken a position on weighted student funding but shares Rebell’s concerns about adequacy. The PFT has two representatives on the citywide planning committee.

“What I have a problem with is when schools are blamed: it’s your choice, you closed the library,” said Jordan.

On the other hand, conservatives often argue that troubled urban schools need more freedom to decide how to spend their money.

A citywide committee that is developing a new formula for distributing the funds will make its recommendations this fall.

“Given the freedom to make budget decisions if they are going to be held responsible for meeting performance benchmarks. He says that autonomy can lead to academic improvement.

“There’s very little to be gained by only choosing the high-performing schools [for autonomy],” he said. “The students and teachers will do best if they custom-design the curriculum and staffing to their needs. And they need control over the budget to do that.”

One champion, Ackerman has said she may not pursue is to use actual teacher salaries in the budget. Teacher payroll is the largest expense for schools.

Currently, schools are charged the districtwide average teacher salary for each teacher on staff, regardless of whether the District actually pays the teacher. This salary-averaging system provides a hidden subsidy to low-poverty schools that tend to have more experienced teachers and thus higher actual payrolls. Many high-poverty schools are more inexperienced teachers, costing the District less.

Started in Canada

In the 1970s, the Edmonton, Alberta, school system was the first to enact weighted student funding, and it has since been implemented around the U.S., including in Seattle, San Francisco, and Washington D.C., where Ackerman previously worked. Districts have implemented it in diverse ways, with different amounts of extra funding, different weights for different student characteristics, and various degrees of school-based management. The idea has gained some traction among liberals as well as among free-market advocates who say "the money should follow the child." But research on whether it leads to more efficiency paints an uneven picture.

An October 2008 study by the American Institutes for Research found that San Francisco’s plan boosted spending on high-poverty middle and high schools and “showed progress toward
Rendell: Education investments ‘moved the ball forward’

The departing governor thinks his targeted spending increases will live on, but worries about survival of the school funding formula.

by Dale Mezzacappa and Rajiv Venkataramanan

Gov. Ed Rendell will leave office in a few months confident that he “dramatically moved the ball forward” to improve education in Pennsylvania.

He cites a new funding formula more closely based on student need, rising test scores, more early childhood education, expanded full-day kindergarten, tutoring for more than 100,000 students, and programs to improve schools’ use of technology.

At the same time, he is worried that a Republican takeover of the governorship and both houses of the General Assembly could put the legacy of his eight years at risk.

“If the Republicans have both the governorship and both chambers of the legislature, then I think education funding is in real jeopardy,” he said.

The former Philadelphia mayor is confident, though, that there are some things Republicans won’t be able to reverse. One is the investment in pre-kindergarten and other targeted initiatives like science education and tutoring, distributed to districts each year through Accountability Block Grants rather than through the basic education formula.

“Targeted funding … is probably where we had the most impact,” Rendell said. Before his administration, he said, “We were one of only nine states that did not put a dime into pre-K education, which was just insane.”

Today early childhood education is more available, and there is a state quality-rating system called Keystone STARS. Seventy percent of districts have full-day kindergarten, up from 33 percent.

He points to rising scores on the state PSSA test as evidence of the effectiveness of his initiatives, including the additional dollars, the targeted approach, and the focus on early childhood. According to data compiled by his office, the districts in the state that received the biggest dollar increases showed the greatest reduction in students scoring “below basic” on state tests, especially in math.

This contradicts those who believe funding doesn’t matter, the governor said.

A report by the Center on Education Policy, a research group in Washington, DC, concluded last year that Pennsylvania was the only state where scores on state tests improved in both reading and math at all grade levels between 2002 and 2008.

No second-guessing

During an hour-long interview with the Notebook about his education policy and achievements, Rendell was his blunt and colorful self, free of any second-guessing about where his priorities might have fallen short or gone awry.

He said he fully agrees with the Obama education agenda, which relies heavily on promoting charter schools and holding teachers accountable for results, including through the use of student test scores in their evaluations.

“I think it’s a good agenda,” he said. Providing some federal dollars through competitive grants to states that show willingness to adopt certain favored reforms, Rendell said, “is a good idea.” Pennsylvania, however, lost out on getting the biggest of these grants, called Race to the Top.

At the same time, Rendell lambasted school vouchers, which have been endorsed in different degrees by both men running to succeed him, Republican Tom Corbett and Democrat Dan Onorato. Giving taxpayer money to families for use in private schools was also the top education initiative by his predecessor as governor, Republican Tom Ridge.

“The problem with vouchers is not that they don’t work, but they only work for a small percentage of students,” Rendell said. “And if you had the voucher system, you’d be taking the kids with the most focused parents out of the system, and then ignoring the other 92 percent of kids in public education.”

By contrast, he said, his administration “set out to value public education.”

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Rendell called legislators “scared little rabbits” for failing to consider anything that could be construed as a tax increase.

Rendell said education advocates should consider it a “victory” next year if state education aid stays the same, because that means the governor and the legislature will have plugged the hole left by the departing federal stimulus money.

Revenue strategies

Rendell has proposed various ways to raise revenues to avoid a catalytic shortfall in the state budget next year. He said Corbett “should have his head examined” for.vowing not to raise taxes and also criticized Onorato for declaring that the state’s two biggest revenue raisers, the personal income tax and the sales tax, were off limits. As for legislators, he called them “scared little rabbits” for failing to consider anything that could be construed as a tax increase — refusing even to close some archaic sales tax loopholes or enact a natural gas severance tax, as he had proposed.

And while he himself is a seasoned political player and not above rewarding his friends, he blamed special interest groups and lobbyists for stalling any meaningful tax reform or revenue bills. The list of arbitrary exemptions from the sales tax costs the state tens of millions of dollars, he said.

“The reason that we are the only state not to tax either smokeless tobacco or cigars is because in a key Republican senator’s district, there is a cigar manufacturer,” he said.

Such sales tax exemptions, he said, “make absolutely no sense. For example, if you go to the movies and you buy candy and gum, you don’t pay sales tax, because someone has convinced the legislature that candy and gum are food. But if you go to the movies and buy popcorn, you do pay a sales tax. … The popcorn industry did not have a very good lobbyist.”

Rendell said that advocacy groups stood behind him in fighting for an increased state investment in education and made some headway with Democrats, but not with Republicans.

But he added that he was “particularly disappointed in the corporate leaders.”

He said these leaders would “give lip service, saying that education is the most important issue for them, because they wanted to have an educated workforce. And then when Republicans in the Senate turned them down, they continued to write checks to them.”

Until these leaders stop writing checks to legislators who don’t support education funding and tell them why, “we’re not getting anything done. … I’ve attempted to tell corporate leaders that their politics have to have consequences.”

Politics aside, the economy ultimately will determine the future of education funding in the Commonwealth, he said.

“We have to hope that economic growth returns in a fulsome way by the second year of the new governor. That growth, which I believe will happen, will then be the key for education spending.”

Notebook contributing editor Dale Mezzacappa can be contacted at dalem@thenotebook.org.
Candidates have less to say about looming budget gaps than about taxpayer-funded vouchers.

by Rajiv Venkataramanan

School choice, including taxpayer-funded vouchers for students to attend non-public schools, has dominated the education discussion in the Pennsylvania campaign for governor.

Republican Tom Corbett, the state attorney general, goes further than Democrat Dan Onorato in pushing a choice agenda. He says one of his first priorities as governor would be to direct state funds to alternatives to public school systems – both for charters and for vouchers. He said he would move to structure all state education aid around the idea that “the money follows the child,” including to private and parochial schools.

Onorato, the Allegheny County executive, backs a more limited program of “opportunity grants” for low-income families in underperforming schools.

Both candidates support expansion of a $60 million state program that subsidizes private schools, the Educational Improvement Tax Credit (EITC) program. EITC gives huge tax breaks to businesses for donating to scholarship organizations.

In general, however, education has hardly been front and center in the campaign, generally receiving scant attention. Neither candidate has a specific response on what might be the biggest education issue confronting the next governor – what he would do next year when most federal stimulus dollars disappear, leaving the state with a $654 million hole in the basic education subsidy.

That gap is piece of a much bigger predicted $5 billion deficit in the 2011-12 state budget.

Yet Corbett has vowed not to raise a single tax if he becomes governor. Onorato has called Corbett’s pledge irresponsible, but he has also limited his revenue-raising options. The Democrat has vowed not to increase the rate for either the personal income tax or the sales tax, which together provide most of the state’s revenue.

Gov. Rendell has criticized the po- licies that you just can’t raise, like the income tax or the sales tax. The political reality is that the pub- lic does not believe Harrisburg is available
disappear, leaving the state with a $654 million hole in the basic education subsidy.

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Gov. Rendell has criticized the po-
licies that you just can’t raise, like the income tax or the sales tax. The political reality is that the public does not believe Harrisburg is available
Corbett declined numerous requests for an interview with the Notebook. Onorato did grant an interview.

Governor’s race
(continued from page 22)

properly using money …. You have to spend what you currently have wisely before you look at additional revenues.” He said he was open to scaling back pensions to bring them in line with “fiscal realities.”

Onorato has come out firmly behind the new education funding formula based on the 2007 “costing-out” study that determined what it would take to adequately educate all the state’s students. It drives dollars to districts based on student needs such as poverty and English-language status.

But he doubts it can be fully funded.

While agreeing with Rendell’s attempts to increase the state share of education spending and reduce the burden on the property tax, he said that “the financial realities prevent that from happening.” He agrees with the adequacy targets for each district identified by the costing-out study and wants to use the formula to drive dollars to school districts “even if we can’t meet the timeline.”

In his position paper on education on his website, Corbett calls the formula “a step in the right direction” because it is based on “individual student need.”

Still, the Republican’s primary emphasis is on finding ways to send more state dollars directly to parents. According to his position paper, “funding dollars should be unbundled so that decisions can be made in the hands of students and their families. This is especially critical for students in failing schools.”

He also wants to more closely track how districts spend state education dollars and drive more money “directly to the classroom.”

Both men talk about increasing accountability for charter schools. Corbett says he would establish an independent state charter school board to provide greater oversight for charters.

In their emphases and priorities for education, the two candidates do differ in other important ways. Onorato, for instance, would put significant resources into early childhood education, while Corbett hardly mentions it. Corbett wants merit pay for teachers and favors an A-F grading system for schools. Onorato, who has been endorsed by the Pennsylvania State Education Association, does not mention merit pay.

More broadly, Onorato talks about public schools, as well as teachers and their unions, as part of the solution to increasing educational quality. Corbett, on the other hand, constantly emphasizes getting around public school bureaucracies, finding better ways to track how school districts spend money, and putting power and choice in the hands of parents.

School choice became the hot issue during the primary, when several wealthy hedge fund operators gave Democratic State Sen. Anthony Hardy Williams $5 million because he enthusiastically promotes private school choice.

Williams has introduced legislation to provide what he calls opportunity scholarships to all students in districts that have at least one failing school. Both candidates say they support the bill, although with some changes neither has specified.

In the Notebook interview, Onorato sought to clarify his position on school choice and stake out how he differs considerably from Corbett on the issue.

“I never said I supported vouchers,” he said. “This is a limited grant program that kids could use if they meet the requirements of being in a low-income family and if they are in a school that is academically challenged. … A limited grant program is not at all like statewide vouchers.”

He conceded that the grants “would definitely be supported by public money,” but that he will do his all to “make sure that these grants don’t hurt public schools.”

Rajiv Venkataramanan interned at the Notebook this summer. Paul Jablow contributed additional reporting.
Legislators are taking issue with state’s funding formula

by Rajiv Venkataramanan

A mere three years after the “costing-out” study declared that it would take $4.4 billion more to adequately educate all the Commonwealth’s students, Pennsylvania legislators are growing restless about the state’s commitment to an increased funding formula.

Many are questioning the new funding formula that is designed to address stark spending inequities among districts.

The recession and tight state funding have worn away much of the consensus around school funding that existed in 2008. Still, legislative concerns around education spending and policy are complex and don’t easily break down along party lines.

Democrats are more likely to be concerned about the equity and adequacy goals embodied in the formula, but in increasing numbers they are also supporting school choice, including vouchers.

“Look, when we’re pouring tens of billions of dollars into our education system, I worry that they are and are still unable to provide the basic civil right of education for our students, there is something fundamentally wrong,” said Sen. Anthony Dinniman of Chester County, Democratic chair of the Education Committee. “Republicans and Democrats alike understand that.”

Some, mostly Republicans, have long been firmly convinced that more money will not increase student achievement and inequities are still unable to be addressed by huge spending gaps among districts.

But even some of those concerned about the gaps question whether the formula, which allocates money to districts based on enrollment and student needs including poverty and English-language status, can or should be maintained. In this camp are several Philadelphia Democrats.

“Simply throwing money at education doesn’t solve the problem, and there are a number of studies which reveal that, unfortunately,” said Sen. Anthony Williams of Philadelphia, who ran for governor in the Democratic primary with a war chest largely provided by wealthy school choice advocates. “As much as I’m proud to say I’m sending an increased amount of money to schools in Philadelphia and Delaware County, the question is, Will it be effective in … providing a quality education for the child?”

Rep. Dwight Evans, another Philadelphia Democrat, is one of the architects of the new formula. He acknowledges that fully funding it is not a priority for legislators.

“Education policy is always subject to the state of the economy at any given time,” said John Ackerman, the House Appropriations Committee, which Evans heads. “We had a six-year plan to meet the funding target, and that is always a goal … Unfortunately, the economy sank.”

Rep. James Roebuck, another Philadelphia Democrat, defended the formula and would like to see it fully funded. But he said it is in jeopardy if Republican Tom Corbett is elected governor and Republicans take the Pennsylvania House along with the Senate.

“The current governor has been very committed to that formula. I’m not sure that … the next governor will be, especially in a recession,” he said.

Gov. Ed Rendell is also concerned.

He considers the adequacy and equity formula, and increasing the state share of education spending, to be among his most important legacies.

But is he confident that, despite some disagreement among them, Democrats will fight for the formula.

“If Democrats retain the House, [Republicans] can’t strip the education formula,” he said. “It won’t happen.”

That’s why my major effort this year will be to help the Democrats retain a majority in the House.”

Differing views of equity

Some Republicans go beyond questioning the correlation between funding and results. They argue that their constituents are shortchanged when their money is sent to districts like Philadelphia, where, despite steady gains, overall achievement levels remain low. They define equity as spreading state money more evenly, not using aid to make up for shortfalls in impoverished districts.

“I would change the formula so that school districts like mine would get a fairer share of the dollars,” said Rep. Paul Clymer, Republican of Bucks County. He noted that half of Philadelphia’s education dollars come from the state, compared to 26 percent in his district, Penn Ridge. “We need to bring about some equity.”

He said that recent headlines bolster his position that Philadelphia is not a good investment.

“When I read news articles about the salaries provided for Superintendent [Arlene] Ackerman, and all these other positions with big salaries, it seems like … there is no financial crisis facing the School District,” he said. In Penn Ridge, “we have said we are not going to make any pay increases and are looking for ways to cut back.”

He called Philadelphia’s administrative salaries “unconscionable” in tight times. Ackerman makes $338,000, and just received a $65,000 bonus.

Dinniman, while committed to the formula’s premise, said that a tough economy changes the political equation. Even though his constituents are relatively well-off, the recession is causing distress, he said.

“Suburban senators and representatives are saying we are one among a majority of what goes into the state [through income tax] … but we’re not getting any of it back,” he said. With suburban districts facing cuts, “we’re not going to be as enthusiastic about education funding going to other areas.”

Dinniman also noted how heavily the state has relied on federal stimulus dollars to keep up state aid levels. When those disappear next year, “we’re going to have … to really address the fact that there is … no money in the system,” he said.

Sen. Education Chairman and Dauphin County Republican Jeffrey Piccola declined several requests for an interview. But he frequently emphasizes that he doesn’t think increased funding improves student outcomes and commissioned a study that recently drew that conclusion. Conducted by Joseph Merlino of the 21st Century Partnership for Math and Science, it studied 11th grade PSSA and SAT scores in 498 districts between 2007 and 2009.

The report said that the biggest predictors of better achievement are whether districts have a high percentage of adults with college degrees, a high percentage of White students, and a low percentage of students in poverty, not how much was spent per pupil. It concludes that what’s important is not how much money is sent to districts but how districts use the money, and urges more research on what specific investments produce the most gains.

Shift of focus

Williams has introduced legislation that would give students in low-performing districts state-funded “scholarships” to use in private or parochial schools. The legislation has become a lightning rod in the gubernatorial race, with both candidates supporting it.

“Options should be available where they are desired,” Williams said. “People should not be limited [in their school choices] based on their income. That’s not fair.”

Williams, however, said he is not anti-public education: “I’m not the guy who wants to cut education funding; I’m just the guy who wants to examine what it’s used for.”

Dinniman, the Democratic education chair, doesn’t discount the importance of adequate funding either, but he said that fiscal limitations require a different way of thinking. A charter proponents, he wants unions and educational bureaucrats – who he calls the educational-industrial complex – to “rethink some of the work rules, manners of effective teaching, teacher evaluations … and be part of the long-term solution.”

The fiscal crisis, he said, “gives us the opportunity to change the face of education, compromise and innovate.”

Rajiv Venkataramanan was the Feb graduate intern at the Notebook this summer.
Despite empty coffers, state is divided on raising money

Education aid in Pa. increased this year, but without new revenues, the bottom will fall out next year.
by Rajiv Verkatarasan

Pennsylvania, like many states, faces a budget crisis caused by dwindling tax receipts, ballooning pension obligations, the end of federal stimulus money, and a decline in other federal aid.

Even so, Harrisburg lawmakers passed a state budget this summer without a single new source of recurring revenue. They declined to enact any new taxes, raise existing taxes, or close loopholes—even making deep cuts in early childhood, health and human services, and environmental protection.

“The budget overwhelmingly relied on cuts and did not enact revenue measures, which will be required for the budget to be balanced going forward,” said Sharon Ward, executive director of the Pennsylvania Budget and Policy Center, an advocacy group. “Without these additional revenues, we might be able to stumble through this year, but next year will be very, very bad.”

State Sen. Vincent Hughes of Philadelphia said that without hard choices, “Pennsylvania will be looking at a budget situation similar to New Jersey, which is facing an $11 billion budget gap in 2011.”

Through a contentious budget process this year, Gov. Ed Rendell fought to maintain increases in basic education aid that have marked his administration.

But he encountered opposition from legislators, mostly Republicans, who are not committed to the formula adopted in 2008, designed to increase the state share of education spending and help districts reach educational adequacy for all their students. At $5.7 billion, basic education aid now consumes 20 percent of the $28 billion state budget, and is a prime target for cuts.

Discounting the educational adequacy targets, Senate Republican leader Dominic Pileggi called Rendell’s proposed increases in education aid “purely discretionary.”

When discussing basic education aid to school districts increased by $200 million, or 3.6 percent. The state is not on pace to get all districts to an “adequacy” by 2014. Legislative support for keeping the education formula intact appeared to erode.

Rendell met with resistance to revenue increases, such as eliminating an anachronistic sales tax discount and immediately taxing natural gas extraction from Marcellus Shale.

“Legislators are scared little rabbits,” he told the Notebook. “They don’t like to raise taxes.”

Throughout September, the lame-duck governor and the legislature were still battling over imposing a tax on the gas extraction that they had promised to enact by Oct. 1.

Basic education aid, up or down?

The state’s contribution to basic education over the past two years has actually gone down. For the 2010 and 2011 budgets, the legislature used $654 million in federal stimulus funds to underwrite education aid increases. But it used most of that infusion of federal money to supplant state dollars.

In 2011-12, the stimulus disappears. The $654 million needs to be replaced by state dollars, or basic aid will plummet.

Harrisburg also faces soaring pension obligations for state and public school employees that could total a whopping $6 billion per year. The General Assembly approved legislation that spreads the increased obligations over 30 years, but that will still cost an extra $915 million starting in 2011.

Meanwhile, with the economy struggling, revenue from the personal income tax and sales tax has declined $1.4 billion since 2008.

Though confronting this onslaught of budget challenges, legislators have declined to re-examine loopholes in the state’s tax structure.

For instance, 71 percent of multisate corporations do not pay any state income tax at all. Most file through out-of-state entities in tax-haven states including Delaware. Nearly half the states have plugged this loophole in their own tax codes. If the Commonwealth did so, it could bring in $67 million this year.

Reforming corporate taxes could bring in as much $500 million annually down the road, according to State Sen. Andrew Dinniman, Democratic chair of the Education Committee.

Big corporations benefit from the current system, he said. “By closing the loopholes they’re exploiting, you’re not only adding to your tax base but also leveling the ground for small businesses.”

Also, Pennsylvania is one of only two states that don’t tax smokeless tobacco or cigars. An effort to change that failed in the General Assembly, forsting a $43 million. And the Commonwealth is one of the few states that retains an archaic provision called a “vendor discount” on its sales tax. That costs $74 million a year.

With the opening of the Marcellus Shale, the legislature has been slow to tax natural gas drilling, even though every other mineral-rich state does so. Ward said the tax could ultimately bring in as much as $600 million a year.

Legislation introduced this summer by Rep. Dwight Evans, chair of the House Appropriations Committee, that would have closed some corporate loopholes and levied taxes on smokeless tobacco and cigars died a quick death.

Dinniman said that legislators are swayed by “gas interests, corporate interests, and parochial interests” in their districts.

Flat tax gives the wealthy a break

The peculiarities of Pennsylvania’s tax code are not limited to its treatment of corporations. Pennsylvania is one of only six states with a flat income tax, meaning that people of all income levels are taxed at the same rate. The Pennsylvania Supreme Court has ruled that a progressive tax, in which people with higher incomes pay a higher rate, is unconstitutional.

The flat income tax, combined with relatively high sales and property taxes, gives the Commonwealth one of the most regressive tax systems in the country. In 2007, for example, the poorest 20 percent of Pennsylvanians paid 11 percent of their incomes in taxes, whereas the wealthiest 1 percent paid less than 3 percent.

Ward’s organization has floated three proposals that could boost tax rates while exempting the poorest households and would raise an additional $1.65 billion.

The lion’s share would come from an investment income tax increase, levied on types of income (dividends, capital gains) primarily earned by wealthier citizens.

State Rep. James Roebuck, a Philadelphia Democrat, rates the chances of any such measures making it through the General Assembly as slim to none. “Many people simply don’t want to see any taxes raised,” he said.

Advocates like Ward, who believes that legislators will have no choice but to raise broad-based taxes over the next few years, say there is a need to communicate that taxes are investments. “The investments Pennsylvania has made in education, green energy, and infrastructure have paid off,” she said. “What people want is a successful and accountable government. If you give them that, and communicate that properly, they will be willing to pay for it.”

But making that case can be tricky. “Legislators and the public want to know that schools are investing money wisely,” said Baruch Kintisch, director of policy and advocacy at the Education Law Center (ELC). “The challenge is to go beyond anecdotes.”

Kintisch also said that it may be a battle to save the fair funding formula. This formula distributes dollars by taking into account the needs of students in each district, but it has caused some backlash. Because of heavy reliance on the property tax to pay for education, Pennsylvania has some of the biggest (continued on page 30)
Focus on School Funding

From inside and out, a push for better fiscal oversight

by Paul Socolar

Philadelphia has no shortage of critics, particularly in the Pennsylvania legislature, who are eager to argue that city schools don’t deserve additional funds. The last thing that District officials want to do is to give these critics ammunition. That makes the job of overseeing Philadelphia’s $3.2 billion schools budget a high-stakes task.

A fiscal like the “surprise” $73 million deficit of 2006 can undermine years of persuasion that putting additional funds into Philadelphia schools is a wise investment.

School Reform Commission members and District Chief Financial Officer Michael Masch say they have been building stronger systems for oversight (see box). A finance committee consisting of commissioners Johnny Irizarry, Denise McGregor Armbrister, and SRC chair Robert Anchie now meets monthly with staff for in-depth budget discussions.

But this summer, the District struggled to respond to news reports raising questions about its financial management.

A July 29 Daily News column by former District CEO Phil Goldsmith pointed to rising salaries for top officials, including Superintendent Arlene Ackerman’s $338,000 annual rate, and triggered stories questioning District compensation practices. District officials responded that the staff changes at top levels would be “tone-deaf to taxpayers” and that “in the current economic climate, “budget-neutral” won’t do the trick.”

Then in a September post, Notebook blogger Helen Gym questioned a million-dollar SRC resolution for new security turnstiles and call boxes at District headquarters – pointing out that in this case and many others, the commission doesn’t vote on contracts until after the work is underway or done.

A District statement said that these after-the-fact resolutions are “rare exceptions” and usually occur due to an “immediate need.” But Gym identified more than two dozen examples from last year and wondered why the installation of turnstiles was urgent.

At a September SRC meeting, Commissioner Joseph Dworetzky asked District staff to add to these so-called “ratification resolutions” an explanation of why they were being submitted after the fact. Ackerman and Masch indicated they would.

Masch said the Notebook that Ackerman “has made it clear to senior managers that she would prefer that we have zero ratification resolutions and gives us a hard time about them.”

Butkovitz is concerned that the District’s Statement of Local Fauna

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A friend of education funding is moving on

As Chamber chair, Cohen rallied business leaders around the adequacy formula. Now he’s stepping down.

by Bill Hangley, Jr.

David L. Cohen is a realist about the politics of education funding. “It’s always been a highly partisan debate,” he said. “Education is the largest discretionary budget line in Pennsylvania. For 30 years it has been a political football for Republicans advocating reductions, and Democrats advocating increases.”

But if Cohen, executive vice president of Comcast, helped Gov. Rendell move the ball toward the end zone, he insists it has nothing to do with politics, and everything to do with the social and economic future of greater Philadelphia.

“It’s not a Republican or Democratic issue,” he said. “It is ultimately something that will make the difference between our region being successful or not being successful.”

This fall, just weeks before voters elect a new governor, Cohen steps down from his position as board chair of the Greater Philadelphia Chamber of Commerce. He took the job vowing to make “adequate school funding” the Chamber’s top priority. At a crucial moment, he helped organize business leaders in support of Rendell’s education investment plans.

“When David Cohen made [funding] his major focus … it educated us in a sense as to why this is … worth supporting,” said Tony Bartolomeo, CEO of the engineering firm Pennoni Associates, and a Chamber board member. “It gave us an appreciation for how the entire system really works.”

But as Cohen prepares to move on, with state revenues dropping, legislative proposals to increase them stalled, and a new administration yet to arrive, the Chamber appears poised to focus less on the push for broad funding increases and more on local efforts to help students join the workforce.

“Money has gotten much tighter,” said Dan Fitzpatrick, president of Citizens Bank and a Chamber board member. “What we can do in the meantime is take what we are doing and really customize and target it.”

Fitzpatrick says that means stepping up Chamber support for internships and other workforce development projects – worthy goals, but modest compared to those Cohen articulated in his inaugural speech as Chamber chairman.

“Philadelphia remains a ‘tale of two cities,’” Cohen said in October 2008. “One populated by a majority White middle and upper class – and the other by persons of color still waiting for the opportunity to participate in all that Philadelphia and this nation have to offer. … We must elevate funding for education to a place at least equal to, if not above, such core Chamber priorities as tax reductions.”

Cohen made that speech having already helped assemble a team of business leaders to support Rendell’s most ambitious education budget. In late 2007, the legislature’s costing-out study identified a $4.4 billion shortfall in state funding for schools. Rendell followed with a proposal for a major K-12 spending increase, a formula for funding individual districts, and a six-year plan to close the spending gap. As the legislature took up the budget, Cohen and a group of Chamber members backed it.

Many of those executives had already been working with Lisa Nutter at Philadelphia Academies Inc., supporting career-related high school projects. She and Cohen helped turn the group, dubbed the “CEO Ambassadors for 21st Century Skills,” into the Chamber’s unofficial education advocacy arm.

“We needed industry leaders who could become true advocates for education,” said Lisa Nutter. The group included Bartolomeo, Fitzpatrick, Rosemary Turner of UPS, Joe Frick of Independence Blue Cross, and others. “There was a lot of talk about, ‘What do we want to do? How do we want to align our resources to support things that work?’ David was part of those conversations,” Nutter said.

Their first activity was legislative lobbying with Mayor Michael Nutter around Rendell’s education budget, she said.

Cohen served on the front lines, doing “every one of our visits with us” to Harrisburg, recalled Lori Shorr, the mayor’s chief education officer.

“The pitch was carefully crafted. “It wasn’t about a moral obligation,” Lisa Nutter said. “The industry leaders were able to talk with very hard facts about what it means when, as a system, we produce 17-year-olds who are not ready for work.”

That was the spring of 2008, and Cohen and the executives were just one of many groups supporting Rendell’s plans. Unions, student activists, and school districts large and small took up the same task. That summer, Rendell signed a bill that included $274 million in new dollars, a funding formula that factored in local need, and a promise of increases to come.

Cohen won’t take any credit. “We were sort of the new player in the coalition, and I would hope that we did have an impact, but I can’t claim credit for the Chamber,” he said. “The costing-out study made a compelling case … and a number of public education advocates fought hand-to-hand combat.”

Others say Cohen’s support was critical. “Our legislature is fundamentally a business community,” said Carol Foxman of the Philadelphia Education Fund. “And they listened especially well to leaders as significant as David Cohen.”

Joan Berko, head of Pennsylvania Partnerships for Children in Harrisburg, says the business advocates helped convince legislators that the funding shortfall did real economic injury to the state. “Far too often, policymakers say, ‘They just want more money so they can pay teachers more money,’” she said.

Since then, the Chamber has lobbied each year for increases in education funding. Cohen calls it “the number one item on our Harrisburg agenda.”

But the coordinated advocacy of 2008 has not been repeated. Mayor Nutter and the Chamber have made their lobbying visits separately. This year, while legislators battle over K-12 funding in Rendell’s waning days, the CEO Ambassadors for 21st Century Skills, the group Cohen founded, has focused on their local initiatives.

Bartolomeo says the next governor can count on hearing from the Ambassadors. The minimum goal will be to protect the gains already made. “We as a business community don’t want any backsliding,” he said.

But Fitzpatrick cautions that the Chamber will have to consider the state’s limited resources when it comes to education funding. “We know there will be some steps backwards, given how severe this economy has been,” he said, adding that the Chamber has other costly priorities, most notably transportation upgrades.

In Harrisburg, Joan Berko says the business community’s support has helped give traction to the core ideas from Rendell’s plan. But she expects the political football of education to remain very much in play. “We’re in grave financial circumstances,” she said. “It’s going to be a tough fight.”

The funding formula is vulnerable, Berko noted. “The legislature revisits its law on an annual basis. They could choose to blow it up.” There is no groundswell in the legislature – nor a push from the Chamber – for new taxes to sustain the funding increases, which so far have largely come from federal stimulus dollars that are about to expire.

In the face of all this, Cohen says that both he and the Chamber will remain committed to supporting “adequate funding” for schools, in keeping with the recommendations of the costing-out study.

But as he steps down, he can’t say that the Chamber will commit to a particular formula or dollar targets. “We don’t have our plans yet for the next budget,” he said. “There’s going to be a new governor, and a whole new discussion.”

Bill Hangley, Jr., is a freelance writer based in West Philadelphia.
Coach’s summer game plan: SAT prep

He made sure the Imhotep boys’ basketball team got ready for more than just defending their Public League crown.

by Benjamin Herold

Senior forward Ameen Tanksley has big plans for the Imhotep Institute Charter High School boys’ basketball team this year.

“I want to be nationally ranked, and I want to win the city [title], the Public League, and states,” says Tanksley.

“I want to win it all.”

All of those goals are within reach for the two-time defending Public League champion Panthers, who also won the PIAA class AA crown in 2009 and made it to the state semifinals last year.

In 2010, Imhotep will return its top eight players, including senior center Erik Copes, who has already committed to George Washington University, and senior Division I prospects Tanksley, David Appolon, Earl Brown, and Tyhiem Perrin.

But no matter how lofty the expectations may become, the Panthers play- ers are constantly reminded that their most important test this year won’t come on the basketball court.

“I have never had a varsity basketball player who has not gone on to college,” says Noble proudly.

“Those are the things that make you feel good as a coach.”

Key to eligibility

For the Panthers’ seniors, maintaining that track record of post-secondary success means that this summer has been as much about preparing for the SAT college admission exam as about getting ready for the upcoming season.

“Since the first week in August, we’ve been coming in [to Imhotep] every day from like 9:30 to 2:30,” Tanksley explains.

“I took my SATs [for the first time] in June. My score was not quite enough to be [academically] eligible [for college.] This is the only thing that is stopping me from going to college for free. I think test prep will help me get the score that I need.”

Over the summer, Tanksley and his teammates have been reviewing coursework that they struggled with during the past academic year and working with Imhotep’s Peterson SAT prep software, which provides exposure to sample SAT questions, timed practice tests, and individualized help with areas of weakness.

“We make sure that [players] are doing what they are supposed to academically during the school year. But the SAT is a variable that I really can’t control,” Noble says.

“The reality of it is that they don’t generally handle [the SAT] well, and it’s because the PSSA is so different from the SAT. You can be advanced or proficient on the PSSA and still get a poor score on the SAT. You’ve got to prepare for them separately,” he explains.

To be eligible to compete in Division I NCAA athletics as a freshman, student athletes must successfully complete 16 core courses during high school, as well as achieve a minimum score on either the SAT or the ACT.

(continued on page 29)
The required test scores are determined on a sliding scale based on the GPA they earn in their core high school courses. A student with a 2.5 GPA, for example, must score either a 820 on the SAT verbal and math sections or 68 on the ACT in order to be eligible.

The NCAA most recently adjusted its eligibility requirements in 2008, at least partly in response to the dogged persistence of a “Black-White test score gap” and the acrimonious debates that those disparities in standardized test score performance have long provoked.

Committed to the future

Academic and policy debates aside, Imhotep’s basketball players had a razor-sharp focus on their all-important senior year. One Wednesday afternoon in August, Tanksley was one of five Panthers players working under Noble’s supervision in Imhotep’s computer lab. 

“Imhotep’s basketball players had a razor-sharp focus on their all-important senior year. One Wednesday afternoon in August, Tanksley was one of five Panthers players working under Noble’s supervision in Imhotep’s computer lab. 

“It was real frustrating to see everyone on the TV, playing ball, and to know that I could do that. I [was] home, no job, no income, no nothing,” remembers Adams. “[But] Andre was just there, talking to me. His support gave me what I needed.”

With his cancer now in remission, Adams is preparing for a year at a prep school in North Carolina to regain his strength before claiming his scholarship at Towson. In the meantime, he has been living with Noble, counting his blessings, and focusing on his future.

“When you come [to Imhotep], people do so much for you,” Adams says. “When I came here, I thought I was better than everybody. I wasn’t big on following rules. I would come to school when I wanted, not be on time, just not come. I had to stop that. Andre is real serious when it comes to grades. When the team started playing games, and I was on the side, [that made me] want to do the right thing. I came a long way.”

His players aren’t the only ones who gush over Noble.

“Brother Andre is the most phenomenal young man I have ever had the grace of meeting,” says Imhotep founder and CEO Christine Wiggins.

“He is the father to these young men. The entire time that [Adams] went through his chemo, Andre was the person making sure his benefits were in order. And that’s only one story. He does that for all of his young people.”

Noble, who started Imhotep’s basketball program and has been the team’s only coach, deflates credit to his players, his fellow staff members, and to Wiggins.

“It’s just what we do,” he says.

“When a kid is [on the Imhotep basketball team], I can honestly say to his college application plan, visit http://sat.collegeboard.com/register/when-to-take-sat

Test Day Checklist

On the day of the test, bring the following:

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• Extra batteries
• A bag or backpack
• A drink or snack for breaks

Items to leave at home:

• Cell phone, pager, personal digital assistant, iPod

For a test-taking schedule based on your college application plan, visit http://sat.collegeboard.com/register/when-to-take-sat

Getting ready for the SAT?

Dates and tips for handling the big day: This fall, the SAT is given Nov. 6 and Dec. 4. Registration deadlines are about a month in advance. To see all registration dates, visit http://sat.collegeboard.com/register/sat-dates

When’s the best time to take the SAT? The SAT and SAT Subject Tests are offered several times a year. Most students take the SAT for the first time during the spring of their junior year and a second time during the fall of their senior year. For a test-taking schedule based on your college application plan, visit http://sat.collegeboard.com/register/when-to-take-sat

Source: The College Board
Confessions of a fifth-year teacher

by Molly Thacker

As I completed my fifth year of teaching, it occurred to me that I had survived the curse and beaten the statistic that half of all new teachers quit within their first five years. Although I find it much more honorable to recognize teachers who have made education their life’s work, I breathed a sigh of relief at five years and reflected on what I have learned that will sustain me in the next 25.

Confession #1: I have sat at a blank computer screen after midnight searching for inspiration for lesson plans. This is the kind of flashback from year one that turns my stomach. It is painful to recollect the anxiety and stress of that first year, but doing so also reminds me how far I’ve come.

I realize that I was creative and willing to take risks my first year, but I also had poor time management and basically worked around the clock. Quality lesson planning takes time, but it’s also a process that gets easier. Since that first year, I’ve learned the benefit of consulting other resources (primarily teachers with great ideas).

Confession #2: I have entered into power struggles with children—and lost. I have handled that much better.” I say this because I believe it’s important to resist the teacher-hero archetype and realize that most good teachers fail. The process of becoming a better teacher is sometimes painful. Still, it’s comforting to know that I don’t have all the answers yet, and there is time to become the teacher I want to be.

Confession #3: I drive home most days feeling like a crappy teacher. Teaching is an incredibly taxing job. Friends have taken higher-paying jobs with less stress and continued education required, and it can be discouraging. While others remind me of the perks of having summers off, there really is little to no financial gain.

For me, feeling like I am a part of something bigger than myself and knowing that I am using my talents to hopefully shape someone else keeps me coming back. Of everyone I know who has left teaching, not a single person attributes his decision to students. They miss their students terribly, but do not miss the lack of predictability or professional growth in their schools.

Confession #5: I worry about how I will sustain this career over a lifetime. I entered teaching expecting to be here for the long haul, but most days I get home physically and emotionally exhausted. I marvel at how teachers with families manage both full-time jobs. I’m worried that at a certain point, the cons will outweigh the pros and I will take rank with the thousands of other ex-teachers who wistfully remember their time in the classroom, yet in the same breath recognize why they no longer are.

Molly Thacker, a Philadelphia teacher, blogs regularly at thenotebook.org/blog. A team of Notebook bloggers publishes fresh content every weekday on this page. Comments are welcome.

From the Notebook blog

Empty coffers

(continued from page 25)

gaps among rich and poor districts of any state.

“If you don’t have the distribution formula intact, the gaps will never be closed,” he said.

The best strategy, according to Susan Gobreski, executive director of Education Voters Pennsylvania, is to focus on education’s long-term benefits. For instance, a study sponsored by ELC estimated that the state could save nearly $300 million a year in spending on prisons and other crime-related activities if graduation rates among males were to increase just 5 percent.

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Web resources on funding

Education Voters of Pennsylvania
www.educationvoterspa.org
News and voting recommendations from a nonpartisan advocacy group

Education Law Center
www.elc-pa.org
News, fact sheets, and analyses on topics including school funding. Includes – PA School Talk www.paschooltalk.org

Education Policy and Leadership Center
www.epic.org
E-newsletter with Harrisburg news; reports and publications. Includes – PA Education Advocacy Network www.epic.org/advocacy/network.html

First Steps Pennsylvania
www.firststepspa.org
Registering voters to ensure early education is a priority for next governor.

Good Schools Pennsylvania
www.goodschoolspa.org
E-updates, legislative news, and info about education finance.

Govern for Kids
governforkids.org
Take action to ensure next governor prioritizes children’s issues.

Pennsylvania Budget and Policy Center
www.pennbpc.org
Media center; subscribe for email updates.

Pennsylvania School Funding Campaign
www.paschoalfunding.org
News and resources including talking points and a legislative toolkit.

Philadelphia Student Union
home.phillystudentunion.org
Student campaign for equitable school funding.

Public Citizens for Children and Youth
www.pccy.org
Student campaign for equitable school funding.

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Expect to be disappointed if you attempt to confront a student who is trying to save face, defend a friend, or exercise their right to be an angry teenager. The more I learn about the social, developmental, and emotional needs of adolescents, the less I find myself in absurd arguments over pencils.

Confession #3: I drive home most days feeling like a crappy teacher.

There is at least one thing each day that makes me think, “Well, I screwed that up big time” or “I could have handled that much better.” I say this because I believe it’s important to resist the teacher-hero archetype and realize that most good teachers fail.

The process of becoming a better teacher is sometimes painful. Still, it’s comforting to know that I don’t have all the answers yet, and there is time to become the teacher I want to be.

Confession #4: I have thought about quitting.

Teaching is an incredibly taxing job. Friends have taken higher-paying jobs with less stress and continued education required, and it can be discouraging. While others remind me of the perks of having summers off, there really is little to no financial gain.

For me, feeling like I am a part of something bigger than myself and knowing that I am using my talents to hopefully shape someone else keeps me coming back. Of everyone I know who has left teaching, not a single person attributes his decision to students. They miss their students terribly, but do not miss the lack of predictability or professional growth in their schools.

Confession #5: I worry about how I will sustain this career over a lifetime.

I entered teaching expecting to be here for the long haul, but most days I get home physically and emotionally exhausted. I marvel at how teachers with families manage both full-time jobs. I’m worried that at a certain point, the cons will outweigh the pros and I will take rank with the thousands of other ex-teachers who wistfully remember their time in the classroom, yet in the same breath recognize why they no longer are.

Molly Thacker, a Philadelphia teacher, blogs regularly at thenotebook.org/blog. A team of Notebook bloggers publishes fresh content every weekday on this page. Comments are welcome.
How have you creatively maximized resources for your school?  

**Angelo Hilicia**  
Principal, Girard Academic Music Program  
(When our new addition was being built), my Home & School Association sought donations from alumni so that we could extend our school and capital budgets. That brought us a lot of the extra that we wanted. We never make it look like an administrative mandate. We say, “Come be a part of who we are.”

**Yolanda Armstrong & Susan Heintze**  
Principal & Assistant Principal, Pepper MS  
We have a Sunshine Committee that seeks donations from local businesses. Teachers (on the committee) organize things like Pepper Day, a breakfast for new teachers, ice cream socials, and pizza parties as incentives for students. Most businesses really want to give back. It’s a plus-plus-for everybody.

**Deborah Jumpp**  
Principal, Lamberton HS  
Grant money. When I was at Beeber MS, people called me “The Million Dollar Lady.” The largest grants I had were with Arnold Schwarzenegger’s foundation for inner-city games. The keys are to have a team to scout what money is out there and then find community-based organizations who will work with you in substantive ways.

**Dave Hardy**  
CEO, Boys’ Latin of Phila. Charter  
Everything starts with our board…not just giving and helping find contributors, but also helping find partners, like Summer Search and Outward Bound, which allow our guys to be involved in college preparatory programming and summer trips. (Partnerships) give us a chance to have students get opportunities that are paid for by somebody else.

**Ayeshia Imani**  
CEO/Elder Servant Leader, Sankofa Freedom Academy Charter  
We’ve created a position called instructional support specialist. They do lunchtime and dismissals, but because they are bachelor’s or master’s-level people looking to be in the classroom, an ISS can also be the teacher who covers a class. So we have no subs, and lead teachers never lose a prep. ISSs can use this as a training ground to become the teachers we need as we add grades.

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