Ask Superintendent William Hite why the Philadelphia School District started a massive planning process now, an endeavor that could reshape the landscape of schools in the city, and he presents a simple fact.

Five years ago, Mayfair Elementary School had 1,200 students. Today it has 2,400.

Once District leaders absorbed the magnitude of the upheaval going in this modest Northeast rowhouse community, they launched construction of a 10-classroom addition and are now in the process of building an entirely new school in the neighborhood. But, for the most part, the District found itself in reaction mode, unprepared for such a dramatic shift in so short a time.

“We saw how quickly the demographics changed,” Hite said. The questions arose: where else was this happening? And what should we do?

After more than a year of preparation, the District has launched its attempt at an answer: the Comprehensive School Planning Review, or CSPR. By combining community input and demographic data, the process aims to bring equity and efficiency to a sprawling system, balancing anticipated population changes, neighborhood and school histories, and the wishes of the students and families.

It sounds logical and promising, but the initiative comes at a time when trust in the administration is at a low point, fueled by what the District acknowledges has been an inadequate response to increasingly alarming reports of potentially dangerous flaking asbestos in some schools.

The Hite administration hopes to restore faith in its intentions and competence through an inclusive process that compiles reliable data and provides meaningful opportunities for school communities to help design plans for their neighborhoods.

Exactly what the plan might produce is unclear. So far, District leaders have articulated some basic goals — such as increasing access to pre-K, and refining the hodgepodge of grade configurations and feeder patterns to create “thoughtful transitions” and sensible K-12 pathways. They also want to maximize building utilization so they can “invest limited capital dollars where needed most.”

The District is prepared to consider multiple options to achieve these goals, including closures, consolidations, expansions, new construction, and catchment area changes — all of which have strong implications. Liberal transfer policies that parents have become used to — many in-demand schools have large enrollments from outside their regular catchment areas — are also likely to be tightened.

But there are minefields and questions aplenty. Redrawing catchment areas can upend property values. Issues around race and gentrification loom large.

(continued on page 19)
The need to listen

During the fall, the Philadelphia School District found itself responding to crises even as it launched a long-term, ambitious planning project.

The toxic building crisis is urgent, and the public is demanding immediate action. The strategic planning process will be long and slow; industry changes it produces—which could be dramatic, modest, or barely noticeable—won’t manifest until the fall 2021.

But in many ways, both reflect the same underlying problem: years of budget and staff cuts that have left the School District badly short of the capacity it needs to assess and respond to shortcomings, whether they’re leaky roofs, asbestos flaking off pipes, inadequate academic programs, or obsolete condition boundaries that reinforce segregation.

The strategic planning process—a multi-year effort designed to study demographic data, assess it to better fund and manage neighborhood schools—has only just begun. Officials announced the project last summer, but many of the details are being reported for the first time in this issue.

In reporting on both the ongoing school building crisis and the just-launched planning process, the Notebook has heard one thing consistently from communities: they want more than lip service.

“We understand that (the CSPR) process may cause anxiety for parents and families,” said Otis Hackney, the city’s Chief Education Officer. “But we’re confident that with consistent public engagement and proper planning, the District will ensure these concerns are addressed.”

The key here is public engagement.

Contaminated schools

Hite isn’t the first Philadelphia school leader to face parent and teacher fear of toxic buildings. But this year’s administration has had a particularly bad run: the botched co-location of Science Leadership Academy and Benjamin Franklin High School, delayed when construction dislodged asbestos fibers, displaced a thousand students; outbreaks of asbestos in the gymnasium went unaddressed for weeks. A veteran Philadelphia teacher was diagnosed with mesothelioma, a cancer connected to asbestos exposure, and her heart-attack story went unreported for a month before the board met to discuss the issue.

Much of this has been brought to light by a vigilant teachers union, especially its environmental director, Jerry Rosen, along with investigative reporting by the city’s journalists. The District has been forced to respond. Hite has overhauled a tangled bureaucratic structure that never managed to achieve rapid response to the most dangerous school building conditions. He has separated facilities management from operations and brought on as a consultant Jim Creedon, who has a long record of managing infrastructure, including for the state under Gov. Ed Rendell.

These seem like solid organizational moves, but more has to happen. It would be nice, for starters, if the administration and the teachers’ union could work more closely together on what can literally be a life-or-death issue instead of acting as adversaries.

In mid-November, Hite announced a new Environmental Safety Improvement Plan, paid for with $500 Million raised through one of the District’s largest bond issues ever.

The capital spending will pay to build three new schools and upgrade systems in 141 others. Hite said $12 million would go toward “rapid response” to asbestos abatement. The District plans to hire an outside management team in February. These all seem like good, if belated moves.

But the issues go deeper. Joyce Wilkerson, chair of the School Reform Commission who also served as the last chair of the state-imposed School Reform Commission, put it this way: “A huge price has been paid for having neglected public education for decades, not just for the last 10 to 15 years, but decades. All these issues are coming home to roost.”

The SRC, prioritizing prudent fiscal management, made “a lot of tough decisions,” Wilkerson said, concentrating funding on staffing—restoring nurses and counselors—and instructional programs rather than on building improvements.

She asked rhetorically, “Should we not have been beefing up the schools, putting coaches in classrooms to help teach literacy? I don’t know if we made the wrong decisions, I just don’t know if there was a right decision.”

CSPR

The CSPR was proposed in June, and the first meetings of school communities were held in November. But many of the details of the process, how it will work, and who will help manage it are being reported for the first time.

A few things are already clear: the CSPR is a high-stakes process, which could bring major and controversial changes to any number of city neighborhoods. Popular schools could get new enrollment rules; longstanding feeder patterns could be upended; growing neighborhoods could get critical new resources; depopulating neighborhoods could find schools contracting or shutting down.

No one knows better than parents and students that such changes can be needed; they’re the ones that face overcrowded classrooms, haphazard curricula, and understaffed academic offerings and under-equipped facilities. And more than anyone they’ve seen how the recent era of charter expansion and budget cuts has failed to address community needs.

The District will host a series of meetings in each “study area,” talking to school communities about what they want and need. But almost all of those meetings will be closed to the public. Committees will see data, but District officials confirm that they’ll be cautious about what they release to the public. And the final plans will be developed almost entirely within the District’s own walls, by the CSPR team in consultation with senior staff. The public won’t see them until a month before the board is meant to vote.

We understand that not every meeting can be open to the public. But officials can find ways to share information and data, and keep the public abreast of developing plans. So the challenge for the Hite administration is not just to develop plans that reflect community needs, but maintain a process that keeps the public informed.

Transparency now will help the Hite administration get policies approved tomorrow.
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**Commentary**

**Children deserve to learn with dignity in safe, healthy buildings**

By Vincent Hughes and Helen Gym

Prior to the Inquirer reporting on toxic schools last year, there were a number of incidents with school closures, heating and air quality, asthma-inducing conditions and more. Most notably, Christopher Trakimas, a facilities mechanic at Edmonds Elementary School in East Mount Airy, died of injuries sustained in a boiler explosion in 2016. In 2017, fourth grader Chelsea Mungo wrote a heartbreaking letter to Sen. Hughes saying she felt like she was in prison -- or a junkyard -- when she was in school at Lewis Cassidy Academics Plus School in West Philadelphia. “Why does the color of the students’ skin matter how much money we get for our school?” she asked.

Both stories are tragedies in their own right.

Even with the spotlight from that award-winning news coverage, we still had the Ben Franklin and Science Leadership Academy debacle and reports of exposed asbestos at TM Peirce School. On Good Morning America, Lea DiRusso, a teacher with 30 years of experience in Philadelphia schools, went public with her diagnosis of mesothelioma, an asbestos-related cancer.

None of this should happen, and if we continue to let incidents like these occur, they will become normalized. This is wrong. We should not be sending our children into such dangerous conditions that they deserve to learn with dignity in modern buildings.

To address critical school infrastructure concerns, we stood alongside Dr. William Hite as he announced financing for $500 million for school infrastructure improvements, including $12 million for asbestos remediation. During that event, and at a separate call to action at Drexel University on Nov. 22, we have called on the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania to step up for schools and a more equitable distribution of the revenue.

As of now, the program has no appropriation attached to it. This has consequences for students like Chelsea Mungo: the District has earmarked the aging Cassidy building for replacement, but the actual construction has been delayed several times due in part to a lack of capacity and funding.

Another bill, the Public School Renovation and Rehabilitation Act would establish a $6 billion fund, providing $600 million a year for 10 years to help financially struggling school districts make timely repairs. This act would give low-wealth school districts 75 percent of the available funding and establish a statewide health and safety rating system for public school buildings.

It is also worth considering a model that has been tried with some success in places like Chicago, New York City, and Washington, D.C.: separating school infrastructure management from school district operations. In addition, funds should be made available that would allow for lead testing all children, and we suggest taking the step of ensuring all students and staff are able to access regular medical monitoring.

We are at a critical junction where piecemeal solutions will not suffice. Our people are experiencing long-term problems from their school conditions. That cannot continue. We recognize this in Philadelphia, but we need Harrisburg to join in the fight, for our students, teachers and staff in our city and across Pennsylvania. We cannot, by state law, mandate that people learn and work in broken and toxic schools without providing healthy and safe conditions. It is unfair and immoral.

We cannot stop our fight to end this public health crisis.

Improving our school infrastructure is expensive, but it is nowhere near as costly as allowing these issues to continue.

Vincent Hughes is a State Senator in the 7th District, which comprises parts of Montgomery and Philadelphia counties. He is the Democratic chair of the Senate Appropriations Committee. Helen Gym is a Philadelphia Councilmember At-Large.
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Free health services for students while at school

Every student enrolled in OHIP will receive a free dental cleaning.

Many families lack access to quality health services and resources for their children for numerous reasons. Studies show that millions of insured and uninsured families who live in high-need communities experience immense barriers to obtaining needed medical and dental care because of transportation, provider availability, or language. For some parents, a routine well-child visit can be challenging to accomplish because of schedule conflicts or the potential loss of needed wages. As a result, primary care providers (PCP) find it difficult to provide care, and health conditions that could have been easily prevented, managed, or cured are too often left untreated until they become more serious.

Unfortunately, these health and wellness issues land directly on schools to triage and solve. With no linkages to preventative-based services, students either attend school in need of additional care, or miss important academic instruction due to sick days.

According to the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), there is a correlation between unhealthy students, low academic performance and chronic absenteeism. Health-related indicators such as asthma, diabetes, poor vision, and tooth decay that go untreated can adversely impact a child’s ability to excel in the classroom. Astonishingly, uncontrolled asthma contributes to nearly 14 million missed school days annually.

Once students become consistently absent, they are more likely to fall behind academically, display discipline problems, engage in risky behaviors, or drop out of school. These outcomes have negative ramifications that impact school culture, and visibly highlight the urgency for accessible health care programs for children and adolescents.

The Student Health Impact Project (SHIP) is a multidisciplinary health and wellness approach designed to support schools by providing high-quality medical, dental, vision and specialty care services like behavioral health and care coordination. The purpose of this program is to help identify, address and manage health barriers to learning by implementing and expanding access to care for all children and adolescents where they learn and play.

An integral part of the Student Health Impact Project is the Oral Health Impact Project (OHIP), which provides dental cleanings, exams and comprehensive dental care to students while at school. OHIP is excited to announce that every student enrolled in the program will receive a free dental cleaning.

Parents, sign up is easy, just text the word “CONSENT” to 41411 and enroll your child in seconds. OHIP works in collaboration with school nurses to schedule appointments, provide good oral hygiene education, and prevent decay. This mobile-model allows for convenient dental services for students while at school, or attending an after-school program.

Dr. Larry Caplin, DMD, along with a team of medical, dental and behavioral health professionals, leads the strategy of care delivery for the Student Health Impact Project and believes that prevention and collaboration are vital to the success of this initiative. “As we’ve implemented this initiative, we’ve seen a tremendous opportunity to reimagine how we deliver care to youth and collaborate with health professionals,” said Caplin. “The Student Health Impact Project is a bridge, a safety-net approach that addresses, manages, and facilitates the physical, mental and social health needs of students throughout this community.”

Data show that a school-based health model that provides enhanced health and wellness services, in collaboration with community health care providers, can help reduce absenteeism and increase availability and utilization of high-quality health care.

Social and economic conditions—such as food insecurity, housing, family support, and traumatic experiences—have a profound impact on the health, well-being, and success of students. SHIP’s safety-net approach helps students become healthier through early intervention, accessible care, reliable support services, and the promotion of age-appropriate health education.

Ultimately, school principals, teachers, parents, community partners, and health professionals share the same mission— to ensure children and adolescents are healthy, safe, and reaching their full potential. The long-term plan of this program is to help youth attend school, graduate, and experience better health.

The Student Health Impact Project desires to expand this program in schools both regionally and nationally—promoting advocacy and access to care for youth.

Some of the highlights from the campaign:
- Completion of over 100 hours of health education in Philadelphia Schools by our, which impacted over 4,000 students;
- For dental, the Oral Health Impact project screened and treated over 2,000 students;
- In High Schools, the attendance rates have increased by challenging students to be involved in the campaign and attend the school tour;
- Provided on-site sports physicals for over 300 little league football players and local high school athletes.

The Student Health Impact Project provides care to students through mobile and portable solutions that are set up directly at the school. In addition, SHIP has started to deliver care in a comprehensive manner through fixed-sites located in the school building.
Access to Care for Students

The Student Health Impact Project provides care to students through mobile and portable solutions that are setup directly at the school. In addition, SHIP has started to deliver care in a comprehensive manner through fixed-sites located in the school building.

Most recently, the Student Health Impact Project opened a comprehensive Student Health and Wellness Center at Olney Charter High School.

In expansion of the Healthy Attitude Campaign and in partnership with the Student Health Impact Project, Rodney McLeod formally opened and dedicated a state-of-the-art wellness facility aimed at keeping students in school and healthy.

Research shows a relationship between school attendance and health. Chronic absenteeism is a national issue that puts more than 6.5 million children at risk for falling behind academically, dropping out of school and serious long-term health, employment, and even financial consequences.

Olney Charter High School is home to over 2,000 students and is located in a section of Philadelphia overwhelmed with health disparities. Many children throughout the school’s catchment-area make up a significant number of what medical providers call “super-utilizers,” which are patients who overuse emergency departments and hospital inpatient services for chronic illnesses such as uncontrolled asthma and diabetes.

The Student Health Impact Project’s Health and Wellness Center features medical exam rooms, dental operatories, a vision care center, which provides access to comprehensive eye exams, glasses fittings and adjustments, and a behavioral health suite with telehealth capabilities.

The work is overseen by a medical director and staffed by a Nurse Practitioner during the day who assists with the coordination of health services with students’ primary care providers; diagnosis and treatment of acute illness or injury, and manage chronic diseases such as asthma and diabetes.

In addition to the care delivery of the Student Health Impact Project, CF Charities inspires students through implementing workforce readiness programs for high school students.

The Generation NeXT is the truest vision of connecting youth to active-learning and special projects that promote career-pathways in the Health Sciences. Generation NeXT gives youth the opportunity to experience science-related programming up close, while receiving insight from practitioners in health industries. The ultimate goal is to give youth educational experiences that prepare them for college and careers.

Generation NeXT connects students to mentoring relationships, field experience and career exposure. In addition, the program is a cross-sector partnership of both colleges and universities, hospitals and providers linking together to create a space of shared knowledge for high school students who have an interest in the health profession.

Students are eligible for scholarships, internships and special enrichment opportunities based on grades, attendance, and positive behavior.
The Board of Education voted in October to revoke the charters of two long-embattled schools, while renewing the charter of a third on the condition that it entirely revamp its special education programming and enrollment.

The board’s 8-3 vote to revoke the nonprofit ASPIRA’s charters for Olney High and Stetson Middle School followed a long session of passionate testimony from the schools’ parents, students, and staff.

Parent Doris Thayer warned that removing ASPIRA would bring back the bad old days of fights, truancy, and general disorder. “If you take them out, you’re going to regret it,” she said. “Olney is going to go back to the way it used to be.”

Several board members expressed great reluctance to close a program that has drawn praise for improving school climate and boosting enrollment. But member Christopher McNulty responded with a stern warning: Leaving the schools open in the face of overwhelming evidence of poor performance, he said, would undermine the credibility of the entire charter oversight process.

“Two different teams three years apart came and said, ‘Don’t renew this charter. It’s not fiscally responsible,’” he said. “If we ignore that, I don’t know how we’d say no to any charter in the future.”

Saying that the board ignored a “dramatic turnaround” at both schools, ASPIRA with a month appealed the revocation to the state Charter Appeal Board and to Commonwealth Court, triggering a process that could last up to two years, during which the school will remain open. In the meantime, Superintendent William Hite said, the District will launch a transition process of its own, with community meetings about programming and a recruitment push to keep existing staff.

The Board approved a new charter for a third school, Mathematics, Civics & Sciences Charter School (MCSCS), but added an unusual condition designed to address its persistently low rates of special education students and English-language learners.

The charter for MCSCS includes a call for a “special master” who will oversee a “complete overhaul” of the school’s special education programming, said Christina Grant, interim head of the Charter Schools Office.

If the school doesn’t follow the special master’s requirements, the terms of the new agreement allow the District to move quickly to revoke its charter, Grant said, instead of waiting for the end of its five-year term.
The celebration at George Washington Carver High School of Engineering & Science was underway and the microphone was on, but suddenly Aziz McDaniels couldn’t continue.

He had been describing what the North Philadelphia magnet school had meant to him. “Many of you know me as a basketball player,” the slender senior had said. “But you know me as a basketball player,” McDaniels paused and his voice grew uncertain. “He gives me tons of advice, even if I don’t need it. Wait, I mean – I do need it.” McDaniels corrected himself. “He gives me tons of advice even when I don’t want it.”

McDaniels paused again. He sniffed, as if on the verge of tears. “I want it.”

For just a moment, those four words hung in the air. Then a roar of applause rose from his fellow students – the loudest, by far, on a loud day. McDaniels finished his speech to raucous cheers. Later he described what was running through his mind as he spoke. “I’m not going to have another five-year stretch like this to celebrate the honor.

At Carver, Board of Education Chair Joyce Wilkerson praised the school’s achievements. The 920-student school is 68 percent African American, and about 94 percent nonwhite. More than half of the students are from households below the poverty line, and 67 percent

“I want to salute Carver’s commitment to diversity and equity – it does it in a way no one else does. It’s unmatched in the city,” said Wilkerson.

Shawn Bird, the District’s chief of schools, told the students: “This would not have been possible if you had not all worked together.”

Principal Ted Domers likewise praised his students. “At the high school fair last weekend, I heard one student say, ‘We are a science and engineering school – but we’re more than that. We are a family,’” said Domers. “You all are involved and you are dedicated.”

Carver was founded in 1979 in partnership with Temple University and is located next to the campus. The school also won a Blue Ribbon award in 2008.

Photo by Bill Hangley, Jr.

Photo by Bill Hangley, Jr.
The State Department of Education, along with a slew of college and university partners, is putting new emphasis on recruiting teachers of color through a program that seeks to identify potential recruits as early as freshman year in high school and offer them financial help in pursuing their post-secondary degrees.

The new program, called Aspire to Educate (A2E), will be piloted in the Philadelphia School District.

“We need to strengthen the pipeline for educators, particularly educators of color,” said Donald Generals, president of Community College of Philadelphia (CCP), where the press conference was held. “I can’t say enough how important this will be for the city of Philadelphia.”

Besides CCP, partners include Drexel, Temple, Arcadia, Cheyney, West Chester, and Cabrini universities. The program hopes to attract not just high school and college students into the profession, but people with some college who now “work in schools” and career changers who have bachelor’s degrees.

Pennsylvania has what Secretary of Education Pedro Rivera described as the “least diverse” teaching force in the country, with just 4% teachers of color, most of whom are concentrated in Philadelphia and Pittsburgh. Plus, between 2013 and 2019, those teacher and principal who founded the Center for Black Educator Development (CBED). “When students have teachers who reflect the world they want to be a part of, they do better. White students typically have mirrors in front of them leading the classroom, and that reinforces their identity, their goals. Students of color often don’t have these mirrors, they have windows. And quite frequently are marginalized looking at other people and their aspirations.”

El-Mekki added that “increased teacher diversity is better for all students, not just students of color.” His center, founded this year, not only recruits new teacher students from Mastery-Shoemaker, the charter school El-Mekki led for 11 years, are now earning credits through Arcadia University.

Another pathway is for those who have college credits but haven’t earned a degree. Many of people in this category already work in schools in other capacities, or they might be attending college but not on an education track.

It also seeks to attract college graduates who may be ready for a career change. The college and university partners have agreed to provide financial assistance as an incentive to attract people to the program. One deterrent to growing the state’s teaching force has been reduced state appropriations for higher education in general, which has put a growing financial burden on students. While the higher costs affect all students, those of color and from underserved communities are more likely to drop out of college for financial reasons.

State Deputy Education Secretary Noe Ortega said the goal is to recruit 20 participants in Philadelphia this year. An advisory board will be formed to flesh out and refine the selection process, he said.

Superintendent William Hite said that A2E is “instrumental to us in solving a critical problem we are facing, making sure we have enough teachers of color who are qualified to come into our schools and represent the demographics the young people in our schools represent.”

He said that 31% of Philadelphia’s workforce is made up of teachers of color. For the cohort of new hires this year, the percentage is 36%, he said.

“We recognize this is a significant area for growth…this is what will make a difference for the young people here in the School District of Philadelphia,” he said.

Of the 4% nonwhite teachers in Pennsylvania, most work in Philadelphia. The District’s proportion of African American teachers has been declining over time and now stands about 25%, down from more than a third in the early 2000s.
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The Caucus of Working Educators plans another challenge to PFT leadership

The Philadelphia Federation of Teachers contract is set to expire in August, and in the battle for leadership of the union, incumbents and challengers alike are firing the first salvos.

“The PFT’s leadership elections will take place between January and April.”

The PFT’s leadership elections have not been formally scheduled by the union’s executive board, but will take place sometime between January and April. The Caucus of Working Educators once again are seeking to replace PFT’s veteran executive team and create “a different kind of union” – more vocal, more engaged, and more committed to racial equity and other progressive causes.

“The time is now,” said the Caucus’ candidate for president, Kathleen Melville, a teacher at the Workshop School, pledging to follow the examples of Los Angeles, Milwaukee, and Chicago. By closely aligning with other unions, advocates, and organizations, she said, the PFT can win better contracts and advance social justice at the same time.

Current PFT president Jerry Jordan and his team have countered by saying that with the end of the School Reform Commission’s 17-year reign, the PFT now has the freedom it needs to effectively negotiate. State laws restricting the union’s negotiations to wage-and-benefit issues are no longer in effect, Jordan said. PFT members can now expect a “higher level of member engagement” over contract negotiations, he said, complete with a bargaining posture that includes the threat of a strike.

“Of course it’s a possibility. We’re negotiating under new laws,” said Jordan, who was elected PFT president in 2008 and has been on its contract negotiating team since 1992.

Both the Caucus and the current leadership of the PFT, which is part of the American Federation of Teachers, say they plan to use the contract negotiations to fight not just for improved wages and benefits, but also for better working conditions, including a broad array of social support services for students. Likewise, both promise to give PFT members a greater voice in the process – something they didn’t have in the last contract negotiation.

Working Families Party wins City Council seat in historic Philly election

Working Families Party candidate Kendra Brooks, an education activist, made history in November’s elections by capturing an at-large City Council seat traditionally held by Republicans. The five Democratic nominees clinched the remaining at-large seats, with the five highest vote totals. Two of Council’s seven at-large seats are reserved for candidates from a minority political party — and it was that bottom-ticket contest that proved the most competitive.

“We voted, we organized,” said Brooks at her victory party in North Philadelphia. “We did the damn thing. But that was just the beginning.”

Brooks will be one of four new faces on the 17-member legislative body next year, joining Democrats Isaiah Thomas, Katherine Gilmore-Richardson and Jamie Gauthier.

Brooks’ election signals a further leftward shift on City Council. She ran on issues like expanding affordable housing, fighting for some form of rent control and ending the 10-year property tax abatement, abolishing sheriff’s sales, and other progressive issues.

Brooks’ campaign raised more money than any third-party candidate in history, and secured influential endorsements — including many from across the aisle. Her appeal to Democratic leaders that they should leave the party trench and endorse her bid rankled many in the political establishment. She ran on television ads in the week leading up to election, and got a helping hand from politically powerful labor and progressive groups. Councilmember Helen Gym, who also began her public life as an education activist, championed Brooks.
El Departamento de Educación, junto con un grupo de universidades colaboradoras, está poniéndole un énfasis nuevo a reclutar maestros de minorías mediante un programa que busca identificar maestros potenciales tan temprano como en el noveno grado de escuela superior y les ofrece ayuda financiera para alcanzar sus diplomas universitarios.

El piloto de este programa nuevo, llamado Aspire to Educate (A2E), será en el Distrito Escolar de Filadelfia.

“Necesitamos fortalecer el banco de educadores, y en particular los estudiantes de escuela superior y universidad, sinó también a personas con estudios universitarios parciales que ahora se desempeñan en las escuelas y a profesionales con grados universitarios que están buscando cambiar de carrera,” afirmó Donald Generals, presidente del Community College of Philadelphia (CCP), donde se llevó a cabo la conferencia de prensa. “No tengo miedo de que se expresen cuán importante esto será para la ciudad de Filadelfia.”

Aparte del CCP, los demás colaboradores incluyen las universidades de Drexel, Temple, Arcadia, Cheyney, West Chester y Cabrini. El programa espera atraer a la profesión no solamente estudiantes de escuela superior y universidad, sino también a personas con estudios universitarios parciales que ahora se desempeñan en las escuelas y a profesionales con grados universitarios que están buscando cambiar de carrera.

Pensilvania tiene lo que el Secretario de Educación Pedro Rivera describió como la fuerza docente “menos diversa” del país, ya que solo un 4% son maestros de minorías, y la mayoría están concentrados en Filadelfia y Pittsburgh. Además, entre el 2013 y 2019 la cifra de personas en Pensilvania en proceso de obtener grados universitarios en pedagogía bajó 12,000 cada año, lo cual representa una reducción del 65%. A eso se le agrega que la cantidad de personas que se están matriculando actualmente en programas de preparación para maestros también es solo una fracción de la que hubo hace seis o siete años.

“Tenemos escasez de maestros,” dijo Rivera. Dijo también que, al mismo tiempo, “la calidad de los maestros es el reto más grande pero también una de las metas más importantes” para mejorar el desempeño estudiantil, “particularmente en las comunidades que tradicionalmente reciben menos servicios.”

Y cada vez más investigaciones demuestran que los estudiantes se benefician cuando tienen un maestro que se parece a ellos, aunque esto ocurra una o dos veces en sus primeros años de escuela.

“Cuando los estudiantes tienen maestros que los reflejan, ya sea en género, raza, etnicidad o experiencias culturales, su desempeño es mejor,” dijo Sharif El-Mekki, quien fue maestro y principal en Filadelfia y luego fundó el Center for Black Educator Development (CBED). “Cuando los estudiantes tienen maestros que son reflejo del mundo al que ellos quieren pertenecer, les va mejor en la escuela. Los estudiantes blancos típicamente tienen esperanzas frente a ellos dirigiendo el salón de clases, y eso refuerza su identidad, sus metas y sus aspiraciones. Los estudiantes de minorías a menudo no tienen esperanzas, es decir, se sienten marginados y mirando a otras personas y sus aspiraciones.”

El-Mekki agregó que “aumentar la diversidad de maestros es mejor para todos los estudiantes, no solamente para los estudiantes de minorías.” Su centro fue fundado este año y no solo recluta maestros nuevos sino que ofrece capacitación para todos los maestros a fin de que puedan educar, entender y responder mejor a estudiantes de todo tipo de trasfondo.

El se refirió al programa A2E como “una solución robusta y completa” para resolver este problema. “Esta ‘ruta para jóvenes’ busca dirigir a los estudiantes hacia la escuela superior a carreras en el ámbito de la enseñanza. También está colaborando con la organización El-Mekki y la Philadelphia Youth Network, que ayuda a los estudiantes a conseguir empleos de vera-
cuelas chárter que El-Mekki dirigió por 11 años, están ahora obteniendo créditos de la Arcadia University.

Otra opción disponible es para quienes tienen créditos universitarios pero no obtuvieron un diploma. Muchas de las personas en esta categoría ya se desempeñan en otros
Planning for the Future

School Planning

(continued from cover)

Other districts including New York City and San Francisco are stressing racial and socio-economic desegregation as one path to better schools. The reality of schools stratified by race and income, which continues to define most urban areas in America, has even drawn the attention of Democratic presidential contenders, several of whom have come out with plans encompassing not just educational improvement but increased investment in housing discrimination in an effort to address it.

But while the issue has been raised by some parents, most of them white, District leadership doesn’t see desegregation as a path to Hite’s bottom line – equity for all students.

“Different resources are needed for those speaking to English, those who are two to three years behind in reading, for those who tend not to attend school regularly or graduate,” Hite said. “The equity question for me is making sure we’re able to provide those resources regardless of where they attend school.”

Aiming for a more open, community-driven process

District officials promise that whatever CSPR produces will be much different from the situation that greeted Hite when he came to Philadelphia: the severe, top-down reorganization plan produced by the Boston Consultant Group (BCG), at the request of the state-run School Reform Commission. BCG, hired before Hite arrived, worked in secret, and called for dramatic changes; when details emerged after a bruising right-to-know battle, it was revealed that BCG had 88 schools on a closed list.

Hite initially recommended closing 37 schools, eventually stuttering 23. “I never used the BCG report,” he said. “We went back and did a deeper analysis.”

Regardless, the result was an unprecedented downsizing from which some neighborhoods are still reeling.

This time, Hite said, school communities would help drive the process from the start.

Right now, that process has just begun. November saw the first of a series of CSPR community meetings produced by the Boston Consultant Group (BCG), at the request of the state-run School Reform Commission. BCG, hired before Hite arrived, worked in secret, and called for dramatic changes; when details emerged after a bruising right-to-know battle, it was revealed that BCG had 88 schools on a closed list.

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Planning for the Future

The CSPR team: Consultants, staff and a familiar pattern

District staff will manage the process, and consultants will provide the expertise.

By Bill Hingsley Jr.

The Comprehensive School Planning Review (CSPR) process will be guided by District staff, with the assistance of private-sector consultants who will handle key tasks on several fronts, including data analysis, communications and strategic planning.

It’s a familiar pattern; during the years of state control and budget cuts under the School Reform Commission, the Hite administration steadily whittled down the size of its central administration. That belt-tightening earned it praise from budget hawks and financial markets, but significantly reduced the District’s capacity to manage projects and respond to problems.

Any doubt about the costs of this shrinkage was removed by this fall’s Ben Franklin High School construction fiasco, which officials now concede was due in part to poor project management. Overloaded facilities staff were unable to give the massive project the attention it needed, officials have said, and students ended up paying the price. As Chief Financial Officer Uri Monson put it this fall, “Unfortunately it’s become a bragging point how thin our administration is – but it’s too thin.”

In response, the District recently hired a host of high-profile consultants to bring expertise and manpower to bear on a range of major issues, including toxic cleanup, construction and facilities management, and teacher training. The CSPR team reflects that approach, with a small staff directing a team of specialized consultants.

The CSPR team includes two firms – Bloom Planning from Philadelphia and FLO Analytics from the Pacific Northwest – along with Harris Lewin, a veteran Philadelphia educator.

The CSPR consultants have been hired at a total cost of $1.3 million through 2021. FLO will collect and analyze data, model potential outcomes, and manage facilities planning. Bloom will help manage the process, facilitating meetings and helping with planning.

Altogether, the firms will take part in a total of 49 closed-door planning committee meetings, and 14 public community engagement meetings. They’ll also be charged with helping develop data and ideas back and forth between school communities and the District’s internal advisory team.

Lewin, a former assistant superintendent who has worked on countless education projects around Greater Philadelphia, will be charged with facilitating outreach to principals, and representing their needs and perspective throughout the process.

However, in addition to making outside hires, the District has also invested in its own team. The CSPR process will be led by a newly hired deputy chief of planning, Vanessa Benton, who has three new staff members of her own, including one with experience in planning and data management.

The Hite administration has also invested in itself, recently completing a $604,000 renovation of the executive suite, replacing traditional cubicles with an “open-concept floor plan” designed to accommodate additional staff and encourage effective collaboration around all projects, including CSPR.

The District’s extensive use of consultants has always drawn fire from critics. But the latest surge of high-profile hires has some concerned not just the cost of the contracts, but the capacity shortcomings that make them necessary.

(continued on page 26)

2019-2020 STUDY AREA SCHEDULE:

November 2019:
Study Area Planning Committees test first of seven closed-door “working meetings,” learning basic information about process (complete).

December 2019:
Advisory Team provides Planning Committees with data and suggested options.

January 2020:
Each study area hosts the first of its two Community Input Forums, open to public.

January-March 2020:
Additional Planning Committee meetings. Planning Committees exchange ideas, data and information with Advisory Team.

March/April 2020:
CSPR team drafts neighborhood plans, based on Planning Committee and Advisory Team feedback.

April 2020:
Each study area hosts second and final public Community Input Forums.

April 2020:
CSPR team unveils proposed neighborhood plans at Board of Education committee and action meetings. Board will consider, but not vote.

May:
Public comment on CSPR team proposals.

June:
Board of Education votes on CSPR team proposals.

Fall 2020 and onward:
This year’s study areas (“Cycle One”) enter a one-year implementation process, and other cycles begin. Changes in Cycle One schools could be enacted by fall 2021.

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Philadelphia Public School Notebook 21
Planning for the Future

Can a diverse neighborhood now integrate its schools?
In Mount Airy, it’s happening.

Increasing numbers of catchment families are enrolling in their local District schools in this section of Northwest Philadelphia.

By Huntly Collins

For decades, Philadelphia’s liberal Mount Airy neighborhood has faced an uncomfortable truth: while the area is racially and economically integrated and proud of it, Mt. Airy’s public elementary schools are predominantly black, with large numbers of low-income students. But that is now changing at the two K-8 schools in West Mt. Airy.

At Henry W. Houston Elementary, where about 80% of the students are black and most are low-income, 22 percent of the school’s 55 kindergarten students this fall are white, up from just 6% last year. At the same time, the school is beginning to attract more middle-class families who once shied away. “What I saw was a lot of chaos,” she said as she recalled her visit to Houston in 2011.

Today it’s a different story. The school’s hallways are orderly and Terrah, now in first grade at Houston, has made huge strides, particularly in math, Gibson said. “From last year to this year, my child is learning on a level I would never have imagined,” she said. “I think the school is only going to get better.”

Slowly, one family at a time, Houston has begun to win back families like the Bryants and the Gibsons by shedding its past reputation for low student achievement, student disciplinary problems and unsafe conditions. "While it is still partially imbalanced, the lower grades are beginning to reflect the neighborhood’s demographics. That’s evident on the Houston playground where children from white and black families play together both during school and on weekends.

Incoming parents at Houston embrace racially integrated schools for their children, but they also want to support public education, avoid hefty private-school tuition and take advantage of the many educational improvements at the school in recent years under the leadership of LeRoy Hall, Jr., Houston’s dynamic principal who is now in his sixth year at the school.

“If you build it, they will come,” said Hall, 39, during an October interview in his office. He characterized himself as a “servant leader” focused on improving academics, school climate and parent engagement – actions necessary to regain the confidence of any community, whatever its makeup. “If we build a quality school, people will want to put their kids there,” he said.

While results on the state PSSA tests, given to third through eighth graders, are still well below the statewide average, Houston’s students are exceeding the state’s growth standards in both language arts and math. According to the Philadelphia School District’s own testing, reading scores in the early grades have shot up. In 2017-18, for example, 56% of students in kindergarten through second grade were reading on grade level, up from 21% the year before.

Students at all grade levels now study grammar. “Language is power,” explained teacher-leader Jennifer Mckenzie, citing the pioneering work of Brazilian educator Paulo Freire, who taught peasants to read. Every day, McKenzie makes a one-hour commute from her home in Collegeville. “I wouldn’t want to work anywhere else,” she said.

At Houston, classes are relatively small and students typically work in groups, each doing something different. In a seventh-grade math class, for instance, the teacher worked on equations with eight students on a white board, while 17 other students worked in small groups on different math skills.

Houston’s students are also reaping the benefits of an army of dedicated citizen activists for which Mt. Airy is known. Besides having dedicated teachers in a staff that is stabilizing after a period of churn, students get additional support from some 40 community volunteers, many of them retirees, who read to children, provide tutoring, and help run the school library.

“Get people out of coming here to help students pick out books,” said Maynard Seider, 76, a retired sociology professor, as he checked out books to a 3rd grade class, which visits the library twice a week.

In the cash-strapped system, Houston gets the supplies and equipment through partnerships. Home Depot donated the orange buckets used as drums in the music room. The wooden picnic tables and chairs in the new STEM garden were all built on-site in one day by Jersey Cares, a nonprofit group. The flowers in the planters in front of the school and the “eco bricks” in the STEM gardens – made of single-use plastics – all came courtesy of Weaver’s Way Co-op, a member-owned grocery begun in Mt. Airy.

Discipline at Houston, once punitive, is now restorative. Instead of being sent to detention, students go to the “centering room” of social and emotional learning, a place for reflection and restorative engagement. The flowers in the planters in front of the school and the “eco bricks” in the STEM gardens – made of single-use plastics – all came courtesy of Weaver’s Way Co-op, a member-owned grocery begun in Mt. Airy.

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The growing racial diversity at Houston doesn’t stop at the classroom door. These two first graders, who had a playdate on the Houston playground one recent Saturday, have become best friends.

Houston and Henry in West Mt. Airy are among 23 schools in Study Area 13 of the District’s Comprehensive School Planning Review. This area is one of the largest groupings in terms of both geographic area and the number of schools. It sprawls through Northwest Philadelphia from Lower Germantown to Upper Roxborough, from Manayunk to Chestnut Hill, from East Falls to East Oak Lane. These are all distinct neighborhoods with their own characters, racial composition and type of housing, but taken as a whole the area is among the city’s most dynamic and diverse. Study Area 13 is in the fourth planning cycle – meaning the formal process will start three years from now -- giving the District and the neighborhoods ample time to think about what all parties would like the school reorganization to accomplish.
Planning for the Future

room" where they learn to talk through their issues. At 10 a.m. every day, the entire student body stops what it is doing and pauses for a mindfulness moment," which helps students stay focused. Houston teachers are now being trained by volunteers in how to integrate mindfulness meditation into their regular classroom routines.

What Houston calls "The Power of Three" – take care of yourself, take care of others, take care of your school – has infused the school’s culture. Nearly every student, from kindergarten on up, can recite it and knows what it means. Among other things, the mantra has gotten students to pick up trash on the playground.

Hall, who is biracial and identifies as African-American, has watched Houston's recent success in attracting more white families. And while he’s encouraged that the student body is beginning to reflect the diversity in Mt. Airy, he wants to make certain that Houston retains its African-American families. "I want all the people who look like me to stay, and I want others to come," he said.

Alison Cohen is a white parent who lives next door to Houston. She and her wife have three children, the oldest now in first grade at Houston. The couple transferred their daughter to Houston after she spent a year in kindergarten at nearby Henry School. West Mt. Airy’s other public K-8 elementary school. "For me, it never felt right that we were sitting next to Houston and not using the school," Cohen said. "The implicit message was, "This school is not for you.""

Cohen’s change of heart developed as she came to terms with what she called her own internalized racism, a topic she explored in depth by listening to the podcast, Integrated Schools (www.integrated-schools.org). The program, which attracts a mostly white audience, discusses the importance of school integration, and helps educate parents about racism and what can be done to eliminate it. "White people need to fix the problem because we created it," said Cohen, an environmental activist who runs a business that supplies bicycles to large cities, including its well-regarded Quaker schools.

Undoubtedly, race-based stereotypes have played some role in what has amounted to white flight from Mt. Airy’s public schools in the past. But given the neighborhood’s history of standing up to blockbusting, panic selling and redlining during the 1950s and 60s, it’s likely that other factors have played a greater role in siphoning off white families.

One of those is the large number of private-school options in Philadelphia, including its well-regarded Quaker schools. Public selective-admission schools, such as Julia R. Masterman, which starts in 2nd grade. "This is home for me." she attended in kindergarten through 4th grade. "This is home for me."

Houston, which now enrolls 374 students, faces more daunting challenges. Sixty-two percent of its student body is economically disadvantaged compared to 43% at Henry, according to the state. Studies have shown that students from impoverished families often bring childhood trauma with them into the classroom, which interferes with learning and depresses scores on standardized tests.

Houston’s catchment includes parts of both West and East Mt. Airy. More than 11,000 people live within the area, about twice the number in the Henry area. Even so, only 48% of Houston’s student body came from its catchment area last year, down from 62% in 2015-16.

Houston’s catchment is fairly balanced between black and white residents, but its student body is not. In 2017, the latest year for which data are available, 48% of the people living within Houston’s boundaries were white and 44% were black. By comparison, 81% of Houston’s 345 students last year were black and just 4% were white.

“Public schools have been the great melting pot of society,” said Steve Stroinman, 75, a retired teacher and Mt. Airy resident who has long sought to mobilize Houston-area residents to support their local public school. “A strong community has a strong public school. To abandon public schools is to abandon our civic obligation.”

One rainy November night, Houston’s principal came to speak to the neighborhood town watch that Stroinman coordinates. Despite the bad weather, more than two dozen neighbors crammed into a living room to hear from Hall and three other Houston administrators.

Nantly dressed in a striped suit with a leopard-spotted pocket square, Hall settled into an armchair and talked about growing up in Pittsburgh. He is the son of a white mother and a Jamaican-American father, and was raised by both. They were poor but Hall hit on a way out of his situation. He would either become an NBA basketball player or a teacher. Education won.

He did well in school, enrolled at Indiana University of Pennsylvania, and then got a master’s degree at the University of Pittsburgh. He is now working on a doctorate in educational leadership at Drexel University.

Hall’s first job out of college was as a math teacher at a charter school in Pittsburgh that was in danger of being shut down. He was teaching there, under the leadership of a new principal, students began making significant gains and the charter was named a Blue Ribbon School by the U.S. Department of Education.

At Houston, Hall would like to see a similar turnaround. And his job, he said, is not on the numbers needed to achieve racial balance but on providing a quality education for every child. So far, Hall’s efforts have drawn rave reviews from both parents and community leaders.

Under his watch, Houston has added music to the curriculum and beefed up its STEM classes. Teachers meet in small groups every morning to break down core curricular requirements into small chunks that students can master. Hall set up a “Houston bucks” reward system for good behavior that allows students to shop in the school store. Students go on trips to local colleges and are encouraged to wear shirts bearing college logos on Fridays.

On a crisp Sunday morning, a dozen or so Houston parents and other volunteers gathered to clean and repair the playground. Sarah Wieland, whose son is in third grade, washed a paint brush up and down a wooden fence post, coating it with linseed oil to protect the wood through the winter.

Wieland, a white parent who lives a few blocks away, pulled her son out of a prestigious private school to enroll him at Houston where she said he is now getting the attention he needs. “He is a high-energy boy and his teacher makes him feel that the other high-energy boys feel good about themselves,” she said.

(continued on page 27)
Meetings begin in first cycle of CSPR, which includes 10 schools in rapidly changing, growing South Philly neighborhoods.

By Bill Hangley Jr.

It’s PTA night at George W. Nebinger School, and a dozen parents face a full agenda: the fall festival needs more face painters. The pie sale raised $1,700. The book fair needs volunteers, especially during the day.

Then, about an hour into the meeting, parent Michele Ditto rises to report on the District’s new strategic planning process—an effort that could change everything at Nebinger, or nothing.

“We don’t know what the outcome is going to be,” said Ditto, standing by the door of Nebinger’s colorful new library. “But they showed us a slide of what could be”—closures, expansion, replications, consolidations, even redrawn catchment boundaries.

“Overcrowding, enrollment, everybody has different situations,” Ditto explained.

The night before, Ditto was part of a Nebinger delegation that met with District officials to discuss the Comprehensive School Planning Review (CSPR), a multi-year project designed to better align District policy with changing city demographics. Over 40 people from 10 South Philadelphia schools gathered to learn about the coming process. Parents, teachers, and District staff spent two hours talking about how to create a comprehensive education plan for the entire community.

The whole thing is just getting started, Ditto explained. But even the initial discussion helped the Nebinger team identify an early priority.

“[Our concern was] are we going to lose choice? A lot of us are from out of catchment,” said Ditto. “That’s where we are now.”

The words “school of choice” mean a lot at Nebinger. Six years ago, the school was nearly half-empty and slated for closure. Now it’s bursting at the seams. Halls are clean, classrooms cheerful. Students are sure. Now it’s bursting at the seams. Halls were nearly half-empty and slated for closure.

But Pebel is also the kind of family that CSPR could disrupt. If Nebinger’s feeder patterns are tweaked to attract more neighborhood students, out-of-catchment families like Pebeel could be nudged out. If Nebinger is reconfigured as a K-5, a families like Pebeel’s that include elementary and middle schoolers would have to split the kids up.

Standing outside the library at Nebinger, Pebeel says that no matter what CSPR may propose, his goal will stay the same: to keep his kids where he wants them. “Let me put it this way,” he said. “Come hell or high water, my children are going to get the education they deserve.”

Considering schools as a group

It’s highly unlikely that Pebeel’s children will lose their spots in Nebinger. Changes to catchments and feeder patterns take years to implement, and District officials have said they expect to “grandfather” in affected students in order to minimize disruption.

But the West Oak Lane father’s commitment to his South Philly choice reflects a pattern seen nationwide: a few families oppose the concept of system-wide improvements. But whenever specific changes are proposed, they’ll fight hard to protect whatever advantages they already enjoy.

A case in point: Meredith Elementary in Queen Village, which like Nebinger is part of the South Philadelphia CSPR study area. Properties in the coveted Meredith catchment sell at a premium, and changing boundaries could hit homeowners in the wallet. That’s why one Philadelphia real estate developer greeted CSPR with an email blast: “This could be the mother of all battles.”

The CSPR plan seeks to avoid such paradoxical paralysis by organizing its process around groups of schools, bringing together school delegations to collectively help develop “comprehensive” plans for entire neighborhoods.

Vanessa Benton, the newly hired planning specialist in charge of the District’s CSPR team, said she’s prepared for it, some people are going to hate it, and they have every right to express that. But it didn’t deter me from taking the job, and it’s not deterring me from doing the right thing.

District officials have some basic priorities for South Philadelphia and this year’s two other “study areas” (parts of North and West Philadelphia). They want clearly defined K-12 feeder patterns, equitable distribution of programs, and full access to pre-K.

To reach those goals, officials say, all options are on the table. Schools may be closed, expanded, or reconfigured; whatever the data shows can help the entire community. “We are thinking of solving for the challenges of the entire study area — not just one school,” said Benton.

In South Philadelphia, that means the assembled school communities must work with the CSPR team to craft a proposal that deals simultaneously with issues at overcrowded, high-performing schools like Jackson and Meredith, and less popular, struggling schools such as Childs and Key.

They must grapple with the needs of newcomers and long-time residents, working class and professional families, college-bound and workforce-bound students. They must account for the needs of every race, gender identity, language and life condition. Pregnant students, home-less students, transferred students, high-achieving students — the South Philadelphia study area plan must accommodate them all.

Joan Fanwick, a third-year special education teacher at Nebinger, said the opportunity is long overdue. “What I really like about the process is that it’s bringing the schools together,” she said.

The South Philadelphia study area is varied and representative, she said, including prosperous professionals, working-middle class families, public housing residents and immigrants. “We have a diverse slice of socioeconomics,” she said.

But South Philadelphia has a challenge too, Fanwick said: catchment boundaries have remained unchanged for so long that some residents feel “entitled” to their spots in the choicest schools. CSPR could force the Board of Education to consider some very unpopular decisions, she said.

“Catchments are something that has to be rethought,” Fanwick said. “It’s going to make a lot of parents unhappy, but we have to think about all of our kids.”

Nonetheless, Fanwick is optimistic, and so is Catin-St. Louis, the Nebinger principal. Now in her third year, she welcomes the chance to address South Philadelphia’s needs in a comprehensive way.

“We’re looking forward to the opportunity to work through obstacles, not isolated, but with neighbors,” she said.

“Because we do have great ideas we can share.”

The demographic data that the District promises to make available may prove helpful, Catin-St. Louis said. “It depends on what the CSPR team to craft a proposal that deals simultaneously with issues at overcrowded, high-performing schools like Jackson and Meredith, and less popular, struggling schools such as Childs and Key.”

But the wisdom of the community will be invaluable, she said. Nebinger’s parents and staff are ready to work, she said, and they’ll deserve to see their contributions taken seriously.

Schools in Study

- Arthur
- Childs
- Jackson
- Kirkbride
- McDaniell
- Meredith
- Nebinger
- Southwark
- Stanton, EM
- Vare-Washington

People are passionate about educating their children, and they should be. I was passionate about raising mine,” said Benton. “Some people are going to love it, some people are going to hate it, and they have every right to express that. But it didn’t deter me from taking the job, and it’s not deterring me from doing the right thing.”

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A narrow window, a closed door process

Louis has dealt with her share of thorny neighborhood issues: spillover from overcrowded Meredith, for example, cost some Nebinger families their kindergarten spots. She and other principals have some idea about how to improve the situation, and CSPR could be their opportunity.

But with the District aiming to finalize its neighborhood proposals by early April, Catin-St. Louis will have just a few months to bring her ideas into the CSPR conversation.

And while District officials promise a “transparent” process, most of this winter’s discussions will take place behind closed doors.

Each study area “planning committee” – the group that comprises delegations from all the individual schools - will meet a total of seven times between November and March. These planning meetings will be closed to the public. School delegations will be free to discuss the proceedings with their school communities, Benton said, but the District will be “very careful” about what it releases.

“It’s not that we don’t want to share the data … but it’s complicated,” Benton said. “We don’t want to put something out that might trigger a reaction, when it’s incomplete … we don’t want to jeopardize success by sharing data prematurely.”

Benton said that if participants like Catin-St. Louis bring proposals, the CSPR team will test them to see how they might affect the entire study area.

“They bring that plan, we look at the data,” said Benton. “We can test that hypothesis and run it through the models.”

But specific proposals will also come from CSPRs “advisory team” of senior District educators and department heads – a group of a few dozen people that will feed data and options to the planning committees and review their responses, “volleying” ideas and information back and forth throughout the process, Benton said.

Each of this year’s study areas will also have two public meetings; one in January, as the process gets going, and a second in April.

By that month, Benton expects her team to have drafted neighborhood proposals for consideration by the Board of Education. Those plans will be publicly unveiled in April, and the month of May will be set aside for public comment and debate.

The Board’s final vote on all three study area plans is expected in June.

Benton hopes the combination of useful data and an inclusive process will result in policies popular enough to withstand public scrutiny. But she said she’s ready for what could be a contentious spring.

“I accepted this [job] with the understanding that it was going to be a challenging role,” she said.

Cautious optimism, quiet concerns

In South Philadelphia, many parents are cautiously optimistic about CSPR. They see the need for planning and welcome the opportunity to contribute, even if the process doesn’t promise immediate results.

“I am happy to see that the District is finally working toward a long-term plan to address overcrowding in our South Philly schools,” said Sarah Klos, a parent at Jackson Elementary who’ll be part of the planning committee. “The study won’t address some of our short-term issues, like the annual scramble to see if next year will be the year we need that additional classroom … but it could be a step in the right direction.”

But skepticism is out there, too. “It’s going to be a nightmare,” said another Jackson parent, Aaron Edelman.

Edelman said that it’s clear that a better plan is needed for South Philadelphia and Jackson, a K-8 near the Italian Market. “When I moved in here, it was all Italian grandmothers,” he said. Now, he said, it’s full of young families who are likely to stay.

But Edelman has little confidence in the District’s ability to make good on promises, or the Board of Education’s ability to challenge the status quo. “Politically, it’s not going to happen,” he said. “Too little, too late.”

Benton knows there’s only one way for her and her team to defeat such concerns: by doing “what we say we’re going to do.”

At Nebinger, members of the School Advisory Council (SAC) greeted news of the CSPR with cautious optimism, and a few quiet concerns.

One reason for hope: the recent toxic-cleanup effort. After years of neglect, SAC members said, Nebinger has developed a productive working relationship with District facilities staff. Problems are getting reported and fixed. Fanwick said she’s eager to carry lessons from that partnership into the CSPR process.

“We finally feel heard,” Fanwick said. “It’s reassuring and empowering.”

But the Nebinger SAC also had questions: how candid will the committee meetings be? What data will be available and when? Once final proposals are drafted, will Nebinger and other schools get any more chances to weigh in?

Many of the answers remain unknown. Benton said that much of next year’s process is still being developed. Study area committees like South Philadelphia’s will continue to play a role, but exactly how she can’t yet say.

“We are looking at building the administrative procedures,” she said. “We’ll figure out how that works in the second year.”

That leaves parents and staff at Nebinger focused on the positive. As November’s PTA meeting came to a close, Michelle Ditto said she’s excited by the possibilities CSPR offers, like replicating popular magnet school programs. She didn’t want to dwell on the pitfalls; she knows there’s a long way to go. “It’s so early!” said Ditto with a smile, as children streamed past her into the library. “I’m just excited about the process.”
Planning for the Future

School Planning (continued from page 19)

which begins to present a problem when a school becomes more popular within its neighborhood. One school where this is the case is at Nethinge, which is in the South Philadelphia study group. (See story E24)

“I have raised this concern in public about having a method in place to moni-

tor students transferring in from outside the community,” he said.

For many years “principals have been allowed to let students in if a school is less than 90 percent full” without clear guide-

lines. Among other potential results of such an ad hoc transfer policy, “perpetuat-

ing segregation is a concern of mine,” Mc-

Ginley said.

The District has a long history of al-

lowing – in fact, encouraging – transfers to create more schools defined as desegre-

gated. The practice was one response to a Pennsylvania Human Relations Com-

mittee report that stated the District was undertaking a similar process and has

directly. San Francisco, Frankenberg said,

extricably linked, said Erica Frankenberg,

a black school, and the District doesn’t do

ny-Adaire transfers have the opposite re-

siciones for being declared desegregated.

-- satisfied the state’s court-ordered guide-

lines for being declared desegregated.

San Francisco, Frankenberg said, "I can’t get over the fact that I live in

a dense area where a lot of white students were bused away from their often all-black neighborhood schools to others that were very close to reaching a threshold of 25 percent white. Those parameters – at least 40 percent black, at least 25 percent white – satisfied the state’s court-ordered guidelines for being declared desegregated."

Other cities are confronting this more

Benton, who most recently worked for

McGinley, who has family from the

McGinley, who has family from the neighborhood, said the post-war neighbor-

hood was for decades heavily Catho-

lic. The Catholic school, St. Matthew’s, was zoned to the neighborhood, said she and her family members experienced discrimina-

tion and low expectations in mostly white schools.

“Now that the state is collecting in-

formation on subgroups, we’re going to

see evidence on whether or not minority and poor kids get the benefits of being in an integrated community,” she said.

At the same time, “We’ve got schools that are racially isolated where the kids really are achieving.”

However, she emphasized that this is her personal opinion, and the board as a whole might feel differently.

Neighborhood transformation in Mayfair

There are a number of reasons why Mayfair is undertakings a similar process.

McGinley, who has family from the neighborhood, said the post-war neighbor-

hood was for decades heavily Catho-

lic. The Catholic school, St. Matthew’s, was zoned to the neighborhood, said she and her fellow parents “hope the exer-

cise equips and empowers the School

District with a repeatable process to

maintain the forecast models in future years.”

And Benton’s team has already shown an ability to adjust on the fly; when members of the Alliance for Philadelphia Public Schools (APPS), a volunteer watchdog group, showed up uninvited at South Philadelphia’s first planning committee meeting, Benton

and his fellow parents “hope the exer-

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and finally Frankford High School. Her asc-

signed neighborhood schools would have

some hope the CSPR process perma-

nently upgrades the District’s capacity to

collect and assess data. At Meredith

Cheltenham School District, and the

Philadelphia charters, Carver High

McGinley said with the demise of Catholic schools, the rise of charter schools, and all the other moving parts, “nobody is going to have to figure this all out.”

The person in charge of that effort is

Benton.

She grew up in Philadelphia. She re-
mained going to schools that were in her neighborhood, which was Logan. She attended Logan Elementary through grade 4, then she was bused to Pennell for grades 5-6, followed by Wagner Middle School, and finally Frankford High School. Her as-

signed neighborhood schools would have been Jay Cooke and Grits High School.

She doesn’t remember why she didn’t go to her neighborhood schools – “you’d have to ask my mother,” she said. Clearly, her mother took advantage of what even then was a complex system.

Today, when a neighborhood school worked for the Mastery Charter network, is the take-

charge type, and no stranger to having

fingers wagged at her by unhappy parents. This happened while she was director of academic services in the Charlotte-McKe-

lenburg, N.C. school district during a reor-

ganization process there. She is ready for

whatever controversies may arise.

“Believe this is the right thing to do,”

she said. “I’m not as concerned about me

taking this personally, as I am about mak-

ing sure this process runs so at the end of

the day we have recommendations based on sound education research that are best for the students in the district.”

Meet the team

District staff: The CSPR team is led by Benton, a Philadelphia native who spent 20 years in finance and bank-

ing before moving into school adminis-

tration. A graduate of the Broad Center for the Management of School Systems, she spent four years as the director of ac-

ademics for the Charlotte-McMecklenburg

School District in North Carolina, and a year handling “external strategy” for Mastery Charter Schools in Philadel-

phia.

She’ll be supported by a staff of four, including senior project manager Kathy
cueva, a fellow Broad Academy gradu-

ate, and others having specific academic plans for charter and district-run

schools. Based until recently in Massa-

chusetts, Cueva was recently honored as an “Aspiring Latino Leader Fellow” by the

group Latinos LEAD for Education.

Benton says that Cueva will play a

critical role in the CSPR process, facili-

tating exchanges between consultants, school staff, members of APPS and the

public. “She, more than anyone, is responsible for getting the data and in-

terpreting it, and making sure that we can share it effectively,” Benton said.

FLO Analytics: Based in Portland, Ore., and Seattle, Wash., FLO Analyt-

ics is an employee-owned firm whose specialty is providing demographic data to inform administrative changes. One recent project was to develop an app that enables school districts to quickly model the outcomes of various redis-

tricting proposals, which lets planners “create boundary scenarios on-the-fly during meetings and receive answers al-

most instantaneously.”

Unlike the District’s last strategic planner, Boucher, Benton said FLO does not focus on internal manage-

ment reforms or privatization schemes; the firm is not likely to recommend, as BCG did, that the District carve itself into privately managed “achievement districts.” Instead FLO seeks to help dis-

tricts refine traditional administrative practices, providing detailed data about students and families in order to help leaders make decisions about enrollment, feeder patterns and programming.

FLO has led boundary projects with a number of small districts out West, in-

cluding Hood, North Clackamas in Oregon; it recently began work in Portland, that state’s largest school district. While that project has yet to propose any major changes, one former Portland school board member, Paul Anthony, said the firm brought an open-minded approach, and didn’t hide their limitations. “They came in with a real willingness to listen,” Anthony said. “They also came in knowing next to nothing about the history of the dis-

trict.”

Bloom Planning: Based in Phila-

delphia, Bloom is a “strategic planner” specializing in a range of organizational assessments, marketing and outreach

practices. It has worked with a long list of regional schools, districts, and educa-

tors. Past clients include a number of Philadelphia charters, Carver High School of Engineering and Science, the

Chester High School District, and the

Mayor’s Office of Education. Little is

available publicly about the firm’s work, but one client was Boys’ Latin Charter School, which told the

firm for a series of “thoughtful and help-

ful” focus groups with students.

The firm was founded by Ingrid

Boucher, a Teach for America alum who later handled strategic planning for KIPP Philadelphia Schools, and who promises to help school communities make informed decisions about how to address changing needs. “We want to get drawn into something flashy, new and different,” said Boucher in a recent story about one client’s effort to upgrade its science labs, “but if it’s not strategically selected, it can end up being a waste and a loss.”
Mt. Airy Schools
(portions from page 23)

Nearby, Claire Murphy, another parent, tended to the “kindergarden,” planter boxes filled with lettuce, carrots, broccoli, kale, rosemary and other herbs, all planted by kindergarden students. A playground just for them has pint-high basketball nets and hop-scotch designs that teach the alphabet, numbers and geometric shapes. The older children have their own playground with climbing equipment and lots of space to run.

On the west side of the school, Christine Bush, Houston’s STEM teacher who lives a few blocks away, was busy mulching the STEM garden, where students from kindergarden through 8th grade study sciences. The garden is filled with native plants, including those that attract bees, butterflies and hummingbirds so students can learn about pollination. “Students basically practice the art of being scientists by asking questions and wondering about the natural world,” Bush explained.

While many Mt. Airy families make use of the school’s playground, it’s been frustrating to Hall that few of those same families have set foot in the school. Hall’s new marketing challenge is to make parents feel welcomed. “I want them to come,” she said. “It’s our job to encourage their participation.”

As more white families join the Houston community, the school is wrestling with a difficult question: How do white parents avoid the impression that they have come to “rescue” the school from being poor and black?

Monique Smith, an African-American parent and the other co-chair, met Pugliese because both their sons attended Houston’s after-school program. An experienced teacher who is now an administrator in the Mastery Charter School network, Smith jumped at the opportunity to share leadership of the HSA. “We wanted the leadership to look like the building,” she said.

While efforts to diversify Houston are now showing results in the lower grades, the big question is whether the diversity will hold as students progress to higher grade levels. At both Henry and Houston, the proportion of white students sharply declines by middle school.

At Houston last year, for instance, there were 13 white children in the 4th grade, but just four 5th through 7th grades and none in 8th.

White parents such as the Bryants are well aware of the pattern. They hope to keep their daughter Alice at Houston as she moves to higher grades and vow to do so if “she is thriving,” Kate said.

Houston is just one school, but the drive to integrate it mirrors the challenge the entire country faces as it confronts growing economic inequality, re-segregation of public schools, a demographic shift to non-white majority populations and a deepening political divide. As Shutnews puts it: “Public schools are either going to be a part of our future or not. They are either going to save our democracy or just become repositories for the poor.”
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