

Beyond the Statistics, Beyond the Tests, Beyond the Headlines



A Closer Look at Philadelphia's Public Schools

**Philadelphia Citizens for
Children and Youth
June, 2003**





Philadelphia Citizens for Children and Youth
Seven Benjamin Franklin Parkway
Sixth Floor
Philadelphia, Pa 19103
215-563-5848 / 215-563-9442
info@pccy.org / www.pccy.org

Beyond the Statistics, Beyond the Tests, Beyond the Headlines

Philadelphia Citizens for Children and Youth

Founded in 1980, PCCY serves as the region's leading child advocacy organization, working to improve the lives and life chances of the region's children. Through thoughtful and informed advocacy, community education, targeted service projects and budget and policy analysis, PCCY seeks to watch out and speak out for children in the region.

Table of Contents

What’s Going on in Philadelphia’s Public Schools.....	Page 4
The Elementary Schools	Page 6
A Closer Look at an Elementary School	Page 10
A Closer Look at another Elementary School	Page 12
Middle Schools	Page 14
A Closer Look at a Middle School	Page 18
A Closer Look at another Middle School	Page 20
High Schools	Page 22
A Closer Look at a High School	Page 26
A Closer Look at another High School	Page 27
Conclusion	Page 29
Appendix I: Outstanding and On-Going Issues	Page 30
Appendix II: What Else We’ve Heard	Page 31
Acknowledgments	Page 32

Beyond the Statistics, Beyond the Tests, Beyond the Headlines

Children need their schools to teach them and communities need a well-educated work force and citizenry to thrive. In the last year, Philadelphia's public schools were at the center of debates about the future of public education. Often test scores and the numbers of the disruptive incidents were the only facts that the community heard about their schools. But schools are more complex and positive change in the educational system requires both commitment and recognition of the challenge and contradictions within our schools and our communities.

With all the action in the schools and all the emphasis on tests and scores, PCCY wanted to know about how the schools were doing *beyond the statistics*. With the assistance of Dennis Barnebey, our man in the schools, we visited schools across the city seeing them through the eyes of a former veteran teacher, listening to people who are on the ground every day.

What's going on in Philadelphia schools?

- There are lots of kids learning and lots of kids struggling.
- There are miracles and there are tragedies.
- There are schools that are filled with noise, with kids wandering the halls that seem out of control.
- There are schools that are filled with kids and grown ups breathing life into learning.

In school after school, we found differences and similarities. In most, we found connection and commitment - faculty connecting to each other and to the kids in the school. We found halls that proudly showed off students' work, teachers who often had to scramble to secure supplies, buildings that were kept clean in spite of difficulty, work orders that still took too long and schools that lacked staff or programs to help children with behavioral problems. Many of the schools we visited struggled with adjusting to new mandates from downtown as well as with the constancy of testing.

Over and over again, we heard about the need to reduce class size, the need for more time for staff to work together, the inadequacy of resources, and the need to provide more support and programming to deal with behavioral issues. We were interested to see that the small learning community concept had taken root in our high schools; we were concerned about this concept's future. We were impressed that many schools had been successful in maintaining a committed, collaborative and dedicated staff and often a supportive parent community. And we were disappointed when these ingredients were not present.

There were many highlights in what we saw in individual schools: the high school that reached out to know the strengths and weaknesses of the entering students and developed programs to help them; the schools that wrote grants to secure needed extra counseling and behavioral health support; and the success of one school in developing a welcoming climate in a school population with many different new cultures.

We were disappointed that there seemed little practice in leadership sharing success with colleagues, little mentoring provided by those who seemed to have figured out how to work through difficulties, little modeling for schools, principals or teachers who were floundering – little time to do the necessary work of learning from each other.

It was reassuring to see the commitment of so many to the mission of the schools, to be reminded that you can get past the blame and focus on the value of the work. There were many schools that were teaching the children well; there were others which were struggling at best to manage the confusion. If these comments seem contradictory, complex and challenging, they reflect the reality of our schools.

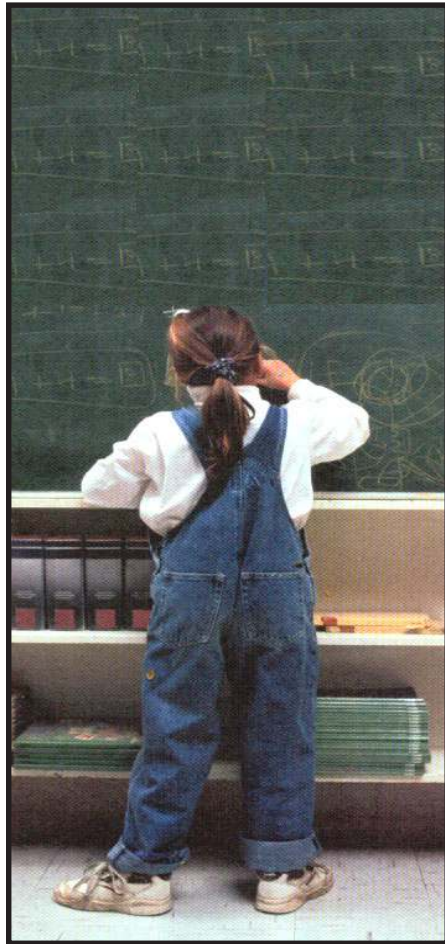
As we look to make real improvement in those things that are measured by test scores and those that are not, we need to make sure that our schools have the resources, skills and support, to teach all our children well.

“Perhaps the greatest idea America has given to the world, is the idea of education for all. The world is entitled to know whether this idea means that everybody can be educated, or that everybody must go to school.”

Robert Maynard Hutchins



The Elementary Schools



“I think it’s a civil rights issue. Students in the suburbs have new buildings with playgrounds and grass. Our building looks like a jail.”

A principal in a Philadelphia elementary school

The Elementary Schools

“We’re a state of the art facility with a leaky roof.”

We visited 11 elementary schools, five of which served students kindergarten through eighth grade (K-8) the other six were either kindergarten through fourth or fifth grades. They were located in seven different regions of the city, with enrollments ranging from 300 to nearly 1,000.

The schools seem to have been built in time clusters, with what seemed like one design for each time period. Those built in the seventies, the newest, generally were similar in their circular style which was designed originally for “open” classrooms, a concept that didn’t work with large classes. The schools seemed more interesting to look at than to work in and were difficult to ventilate. The next most recent group were built in the fifties, rectangular structures where the front doors were often hard to identify. Then there were the aging, creaky, older buildings which once might have been surrounded by grass, but now generally are hemmed in by cement.

Though the schools were almost always clean inside, many people we spoke with mentioned the difficulty of staying “on top of” building repairs. One of the oldest buildings had been fitted with “new” windows which had become impossibly scratched; the school had inadequate electricity, and lacked play space. Another old building that was very grey on the outside had an interior that had been painted in pleasant bright colors and decorated with murals. In all the schools we visited, work orders were slow to process, and maintenance and cleaning staff were finding it hard to keep up. Not enough or too much heat was a common complaint.

In some schools, staff spirit was low - “The pressure is unreasonable for a human being.” In others we heard, “Nobody leaves here - this is a place you choose to come to.”

Although too many elementary schools we visited lacked signs identifying the front doors or welcoming visitors, most were welcoming once inside. Nearly all had filled hallways with displays of student work, showing off reading, writing and math projects. In one school a chart showing the real-life size of a whale stretched the length of the hallway. In another, the efforts of first grade writers to describe a book they read were displayed proudly. Pictures of trips and activities filled other hallways. The schools, regardless of their size, seemed orderly and calm, though the effort required to accomplish this varied greatly among the schools. Dealing with social and mental health issues was the normal order of the day for some, but not all, schools. Some school staff spoke of the major investment of time and resources required to try to deal with behaviors of some children. Almost all the schools spoke of the growing number of students coming to school with difficult home problems. A number of schools have family centers which varied in their relationships with the schools themselves, although they typically were viewed as added resources for students having a hard time. Virtually all schools were dealing with staffing difficulties. Teachers, nurses, librarians were too often in short supply.

***“We just spent \$30,000 on new books for our library,
but now we can’t afford a librarian.”***

Libraries often had no librarians. Music and art offerings were often nonexistent. Some vacancies had been created by long term illnesses of staff; principals in small and medium-sized schools had no assistant. In one school, we found other non-instructional personnel pitching in to help lighten a secretary’s work load, while in another school staff spoke of the rigidity of rules that deprived them of a needed second counselor. Because the school was a few children short of 1,000 students, the school failed to qualify for an additional needed counselor.

There were schools that used Title I funds to reduce class size, but generally class size remained high, between 30 and 33 students. Many school staff praised the literacy intern program which provides a teacher-in-training to be paired with a teacher in many kindergarten and primary grade classrooms. While, as always, there were individual adjustment issues, the program was viewed as a major success. We heard frustration expressed about the difficulty of assisting and keeping new teachers and we saw the serious impact on schools of losing teachers in the middle of the school year. We found creative responses to staff shortages in some schools but not without their having to make difficult choices. In order to allow meeting time for staff, some schools hired an extra teacher to cover meeting time, but the trade-off usually meant larger class size. We found schools scrambling to provide basics and occasional real enrichment opportunities being delivered through extra, outside help.

***“If you want something beyond the basics, you have to write
a grant, raise your own money.”***

We found some resourceful school leadership reaching out to find outside resources or to develop strategies to use Title I funds to fill the holes in supplies and materials. Schools without significant Title I money lacked what Philadelphia schools consider “extra” but are considered basic in surrounding school districts. We heard concern that the new mandated curricula would reduce school budgets even further.

Many schools were involved in partnerships with outside groups, from mental health agencies to universities, to businesses. One school partnered with a suburban church to equip a science lab. Another found a university program to help develop an environmental center. A Saturday boat building project engaged students in one school, while a \$150,000 grant to create a micro-society involved students in every class of another. Partnering, developing and utilizing these connections seemed to be an expectation for all schools and was seen as a way to make up for other deficits. One principal referred to himself as a “hustler” to get what his students needed.

Staff in one school had no idea how supply orders were to take place due to staff changes and a new style of leadership. Computer technology was not a major part of most elementary schools. While it was usually available in schools through a lab setting, it was rare for a classroom to have more than one or two computers.

We heard about the negative impact of some central administration decisions on school resources. We heard that some programs developed “downtown” didn’t come with enough resources: the newly-mandated extended-day (after-school) program, for example, was identified as requiring more security which was not covered in the budget.

We heard: “*Parental involvement is our weak link.*”
And we heard: “*We get great support from our parents.*”

Schools were all over the map in their assessment of parental involvement. Most elementary schools we visited had a minimum core of active parents, but the staff expressed frustration that more parents did not come for report card conferences, or keep appointments, or often were angry when they came to the school about a problem. A few, however, found parental involvement high, with parents supporting school programs and assisting staff members in their workload. School staff noted that the welfare-to-work program had reduced the number of parents available to spend time in school-related activities.

We asked, “*what’s working,*” and we heard:

- Staff that “put themselves out” to make the schools work.
- The literacy intern program.
- School leadership (principal and team) who take shared-decision making seriously.
- Increased consistency across all schools.
- Small schools.
- The new emphasis on upgrading/improving facilities.
- Moving to a K-8 organization.

We asked, “*what’s needed,*” and we heard:

- Reducing class size to make a friendlier tone and a much less stressful work environment for everyone.
- Budgets which guarantee materials and personnel needed for any school to be successful: librarians, nurses, music and art teachers.
- Enough staff to offer flexibility in rostering to students’ needs.
- Funds for the materials and the added hands needed in the classroom.
- More supportive services: counselors, social workers, family therapists.
- Programs and strategies to deal with the problem of seriously disruptive students.
- Assistance with special education requirements.
- Time for on-going, meaningful professional development.
- More efficient system to help new teachers and to deal with classroom problems.
- Help, not harassment, from other administrative offices.
- Improved strategies and planning process for District changes and more consideration to the impact of change or corrections needed.
- More serious consideration of reasons for students’ not succeeding.
- Greater pride and publicity about those things that are working in the schools.

A Closer Look at an Elementary School

The playground was large at this elementary school, dividing the older “main” building from its newer annex. From one end, the principal spied a first grader running at full speed toward her. While she bent down to give the boy a big hug he whispered, *“I’m sorry for what I did.”* *“I know you are, that’s what makes you a great person,”* the principal replied. He took off, catching up with his class going in from recess, the principal waving the “OK” sign to the teacher.

Moments later, another student was brought to the office by exasperated classroom assistants and a half hour negotiation began with this girl about her constant disruptive behavior. *“600 students - and every one is full of stories, problems and possibilities.”*

There was pride in this school, communicated to the students in many ways, from lunch room pep talks to reminders in the hallway of “how we do it here.” The building is older, but in good condition, decorated with student work. Every classroom has a certified teacher, active learning seems to be the norm and many classrooms are rich with materials. But there was fatigue in a number of voices: *“Too many kids with too many problems.”* The nearby shelter for temporarily homeless families brings students with multiple needs and results in a great deal of turn-over in the student population. Staff worked to provide services for these students, but they often moved away from the school before the services took effect. The need to provide options for students who disrupt the classroom was heard frequently.

The budget is tight. There are no music, art or foreign language programs, and only one counselor. New math and reading series are almost beyond their reach without enough Title I funds. Concerns about student health needs resulted in the school hiring a full time nurse, but that meant eliminating the librarian. Large class size and the pressure for improved test scores were a constant source of tension. There was also a great deal of frustration that there was no time for meeting or planning together.

“We don’t get to talk to each other about our kids anymore.”

When asked “what would make a difference,” the first response of staff members, over and over again, was, *“Smaller class size! We can’t get to everyone who needs our attention.”*



The literacy intern program was viewed as a tremendous success because it made possible the personal attention students need in the early years. It also is bringing new teachers into the school system. Some veteran teachers felt the program gave them a breath of fresh air, a chance to feel more productive and not as overwhelmed. Many parents who volunteer in the building speak positively about the school's efforts, but want to know, ***“Why can't our kids enjoy music, art and other programs?”*** They know such programs are a part of every school's program outside of Philadelphia.

PSSA Scores							
Subject	Grade	% Taking	Adv.	Prof.	Basic	Below	Trend
Math	5	99%	2%	16%	35%	47%	-0.3%
Reading	5	99%	3%	22%	23%	52%	+2.5%

A Closer Look at another Elementary School

“It’s hard to know whether to wear shorts or a winter coat in here.”

A teacher

Built in the 60’s, this K-5 elementary school is not old and run-down, but problems with the heating and cooling system persist. In fact, some staff have transferred to simply get out of the unhealthy climate. This is a school with a librarian who runs many programs engaging students and an impressive music program which produces school shows. There is a mentally gifted program, and mini-grants have helped produce beautiful murals on the walls of the school along with increasing the number of books available. But these successful initiatives are sometimes overwhelmed by the problems presented by students coming from disrupted homes and without adequate support, creating an on-going level of tension.

“A number of students present behaviors that we have no way of helping,” a teacher said sadly. In spite of many problems, the staff is fairly stable and continues to find ways to bring in extra programs to supplement the regular classroom activities. But there is real concern that discipline and classroom control issues will continue to make it difficult to create the warm, caring environment students need.

There are other problems. Long-term illnesses have forced classes to be covered by substitutes or by other staff members during their preparation period, increasing the fatigue among teachers. The two day/week services of a psychologist are sometimes cut short if there are pressing needs in other schools. Parents don’t always show up for appointments.

“The parents are in crisis themselves.”

The more immediate needs of students to be cared for, talked to, counseled in the face of angry and inappropriate outbursts often clashed with increasing demands for educational achievement. Some students who returned from intervention programs continued their same negative patterns. Staff described capable students who needed lots of help but who didn’t get the attention they needed because of other demands. In one class, a disruptive student from one group was called over by the teacher who sat the

boy next to him, put his arm around his shoulder, and asked for his help with another group, successfully relieving the growing tension.



“If you’re in a constant state of crisis all day there isn’t always time to figure how to respond to every students’ need.”

Some students come to school in dirty clothes, so the building becomes part learning center, part laundromat. ***“We have to find ways of dealing with many things that go beyond learning to read and write.”***

The school is not out of control, nor does it show signs of major disorder, but the daily pressure of addressing so many issues is a constant for everyone who works there.

There is no greater need expressed than to reduce the number of students in each class here, but there are other ideas: a team of counselors or family social workers and therapists to assist the school in dealing with the many social problems. The process of identifying student needs and finding services was referred to by one staff member as “a paper chase,” because real response seemed rare even after all the paperwork was done. There was also a high level of frustration that completing that paperwork was tying up some people who should be dealing with children in the school.

***“Maybe reading, writing, and arithmetic shouldn’t come first here.
There are too many other basic needs we have to address first.”***

<u>PSSA Scores</u>							
Subject	Grade	% Taking	Adv.	Prof.	Basic	Below	Trend
Math	5	88%	5%	28%	32%	34%	+2.3%
Reading	5	92%	1%	26%	35%	38%	+2.2%

The Middle Schools



*"I'm ok, but I know how to get around.
I feel sorry for the new teachers."*

The Middle Schools

We visited ten middle schools in five regions of the city. Some included fifth graders, the rest started in sixth grade, all went through eight grade. Enrollments varied from as small as 600 students to over 1,300 students. Some middle schools are housed in buildings originally built as junior highs in the 1920's and have a similar look regardless of where they are found in the city. The schools are large three-story rectangles with impressive marble entrances and décor which the students are prohibited from entering. The auditorium and gyms are located in the center of the rectangle with the classrooms and offices surrounding them. Some of these buildings have been well-maintained or renovated. Others show their age with original doors and woodwork looking dark and worn. Their design has made the creation of true small learning communities difficult. Rooms with "lockers" and "wood shop" stenciled on the door have been retrofitted to become classrooms for different purposes. The original "boys" and "girls" lunchrooms and gyms often do not meet the needs of today's programs.

In contrast, a number of middle schools are in "newer" buildings, built since the 1970s, designed for the creation of "houses", or the current small learning community structure. Groups of classrooms are near a common office or meeting area. These usually big schools often are equipped with pools, adequate art and music rooms, full-sized gyms and space for vocational programs; they are commonly under-used and inadequately staffed. Built without outside ventilation, they seem to be too hot or too cold, and are rarely comfortable.

There are several middle schools in beautiful new facilities, where there is great appreciation for their clean, bright appearance. Light filters into hallways and classrooms. Students comment on how nice their school looks. There is comfortable space for housing extra programs and holding meetings. Visitors are surprised that these are Philadelphia schools. While a school's academic achievement did not seem to correlate to the age or style of their building, the newest buildings seemed appreciated by staff and students.

"Smaller is better."

Some schools which had been overcrowded were finding it easier to create a healthy educational climate in their buildings due to declining population. Others remained overcrowded with classes filling up every available room, teachers "floating" and no space for small groups or parent-teacher conferences to take place. Full class rolls of 33 students were common in all schools. Regardless of size, there was a feeling that with middle schools there were *"too many adolescent kids in one place."* Some faculty applauded the idea of increasing K-8 schools as the organization of choice; others expressed concern about elementary school teachers teaching the upper grades.

Middle schools with large populations of children who were in special education felt especially beleaguered and spoke of the need for more supports. Yet there were several middle schools that were obviously managed well and were concerned that proposed changes would result in their losing some of the successes their schools had achieved.

“We know how to run a school. We just don’t have time to get to curriculum and instruction.”

Many staff felt support from the school administration for their difficult jobs, but everyone felt overwhelmed by the number of troubled students that needed special attention. Some schools have chosen to help address this issue by hiring a social worker out of their budget, always a trade-off for another position, but no one felt the efforts were adequate. A few middle schools were very proud of the healthy tone in their building and felt unrecognized and unappreciated for this turn-around. There was concern that what they have learned to do well was not being passed on to anyone else, and would be lost in the transition to K-8 schools.

“We know how to do this and no one is asking.”

Schools that had faced significant staff changes have had a harder time maintaining a positive climate. With few exceptions, we found staff turnover high in these schools and filling vacancies difficult. An EMO school chose to drop veteran support personnel who were well-known to the students. Their absence proved problematic throughout much of the year. Elementary-certified teachers tended to prefer being in an elementary setting. Apprentice and temporarily certified teachers made up as many as 40% of some middle school staffs. Retention rates of new teachers were generally low. New teachers needed more support and assistance but schools found it difficult to find the time to respond. Everyone we spoke with saw the middle school age group as more challenging than any other age group.

Most schools we visited faced the dilemma of trying to decide whether to keep music or art, a librarian or social studies teacher, so these personnel vary from school to school. Some schools chose to focus on the arts or just music, and they struggled to keep this focus as budgets get tighter and emphasis on test scores becomes heavier.

“We’ve got to show that having students involved in art and music can help guarantee their success academically.”

We heard many question whether students were being helped or harmed in the middle years by putting so much emphasis on passing standardized tests. While use of data and test scores is being used in some schools, the “over-testing” of students was a universal complaint.

“We are turning around a lot of young people’s lives here, but all they look at are our test scores.”

Some middle schools had developed creative solutions to their problems and showed effort beyond normal responsibilities. These schools roster for a variety of purposes during the week, bring in outside resources for health clinics and Saturday classes, create special groups to allow students to talk about difficulties in their lives, as well as developing new cultural and academic programs. Most felt limited by inadequate budgets, personnel shortages and were bothered by growing responsibilities and shrinking resources.

Those schools with faculty experienced in grant-writing were able to develop impressive programs, but greater dependence on grants presented difficulties in school organization.

Not surprisingly, few middle schools had strong parent organizations, a common frustration expressed by staff and administration. Yet, several schools reported good parent turnout had resulted from meetings with expert-led discussions about literacy and parenting skills. Several staff spoke of the problems of disrupted home lives often making contact with pupils' families difficult.

We asked, “*what’s working,*” and we heard:

- Where administration is experienced, trained in their job and organized, schools tended to function efficiently.
- Creative use of resources and extending school into community has improved offerings to students.
- Small Learning Communities (SLC) themes have enhanced multidisciplinary approaches and in many cases encouraged collegiality.
- Middle school concept has encouraged a focus on students' potential, not their deficits.
- Smaller middle schools work better for students with greater needs.

We asked, “*what’s needed,*” and we heard:

- Smaller classes.
- A plan for the future for middle schools from the School District so that faculty members do not have to worry about where they will be teaching from year to year and there is time to make the plan work.
- A more consistent plan for students who present serious disruptions and difficulties.
- More planning time and support for initiatives for this age group.
- Changing the School District's authoritative structure into a more collaborative cooperative one. Schools that are working effectively should be encouraged and supported.
- Greater support in special education classes, especially with the growing amount of paperwork required.
- Guaranteed services/resources for all schools: Librarian, art, music, nurse, adequate counselors.
- Greater technology access for all students.
- Increased support to deal with social and mental health issues.
- Budgeting from the bottom up: Determining what schools need first, then adding the needs of administrative offices.
- Using tests to inform instruction, not just to rank schools against each other.
- Reconsidering requiring all students, regardless of ability, to be tested on grade level.
- More secondary-certified teachers in upper middle school grades, especially for math and science classes.

A Closer Look a Middle School

At first this middle school building, housing nearly 900 students, seems remarkably well designed. The large lobby area feeds into the office on one side, with the auditorium, gym and arts wing on the other. Behind the office is the arrangement of classrooms organized in clusters, centered on the library. The design supports small learning communities, with offices and meeting spaces for each cluster of classrooms. But, ***“it would help if we had some windows that opened. The air conditioning doesn’t do much in the summer and the heat in the winter can be off the hook,”*** one teacher says.

The large library space, staffed with a librarian who actively engages students in using the facility, includes a “listening lab” and “media center” but they are not utilized. The school is busy and there is positive talk from students about being there because “there are lots of things to do.” Programs involving students in environmental, art and other service projects are part of the life of the school. There are a few vacancies and class sizes are at or near their maximum of 33 per class.

Behavioral and mental health issues were being sent to a social worker on staff who visits homes and coordinates efforts with a team from a new intervention unit contracted with an outside agency. This new arrangement wins praise from everyone. ***“We are saving some students who would have slipped through the cracks, but we need lots more help,”*** the coordinator says. There is a music teacher, but no art teacher, in spite of the facility designed to include one...or two or three. Teachers have complaints about supply shortages requiring them to either spend their own money or write grants for equipment. ***“Why should we have to write grants to get the materials students need to make classes interesting?”*** asks a staff member.

Some have taken on the extra work of grant writing with zeal, resulting in projects such as the one which will be sending students to a conference to discuss their research and community service work this summer. There is acknowledgment from all stakeholders in the school that social issues are often in the way of improving the educational climate. ***“Conflict resolution is a major part of our work, but there’s no support for it”*** says one staff member. What would help? ***“Smaller classes would help a lot”*** is a common response. ***“Time for grade teachers to meet,”*** says another, pointing out that meeting time has almost entirely been eliminated. ***“More money for supplies,”*** is the third proposal.

While the mood of the school is positive, even optimistic, and students seem to recognize they are in a better place than many other middle school students, it is clear that the school is understaffed and underresourced. Teacher turn-over has increased recently and many speak of a growing weariness in dealing with the complex issues presented in their classrooms. ***“New teachers need help to encourage them to stay. We also need more expressive arts teachers. We should be able to use this facility completely.”***

There is a mixed review of the extended day program. It was extremely hard to get it up and running in such a short amount of time. ***“People were being trained at the same time the program was supposed to be going on.”*** Because it has been difficult to recruit enough teachers to the extended day program, class sizes have been larger than planned for. Some wonder why so much effort and expenditure is going into after school learning instead of during school learning. There is concern across the school that as resources are stretched even thinner, people will be driven away from working here. ***“It’s one of our many challenges,”*** comments one of the administrators.



<u>PSSA Scores</u>							
Subject	Grade	% Taking	Adv.	Prof.	Basic	Below	Trend
Math	8	92%	0%	3%	13%	84%	+0.7%
Reading	8	92%	1%	13%	24%	62%	+1.0%

A Closer Look at another Middle School

Walking in on a school leadership meeting at this middle school was like being part of a major operations center. Information was being shared, strategies were being debated, and decisions were being made. Some of this team has been working here for nearly their entire careers. Even the principal was once a teacher here. They are now running a school they are proud of. In spite of the many upheavals in the District and problems in the surrounding neighborhood, the school climate has improved. A creative approach to rostering classes and drawing in outside resources has complemented a budget that falls far short of meeting their needs.

School-wide projects, class meetings, and seminars to use problem solving skills are part of the school's culture. Students who have been held back are part of a special program to motivate their learning. Data on test results, attendance and grades is reviewed regularly to help determine areas of weakness as well as success. With 800 students, the number of students in the building is more manageable than when the enrollment peaked at over 1,200 students a few years ago. The 1920's era building is bright, appears newly painted and well-maintained. Student work covers the walls and helps identify the various small learning communities. An NTA monitoring the hallway praised the school as "one of the best" places to work.

Another young teacher said simply, ***"Everything's fine. I like it here."*** While there is pride in the school's accomplishments, it is often spoken with exhaustion.

"We get kids who are years behind in reading and writing and they have to take tests on their grade level."

The budget restraints here are serious. In spite of a large library, there is no librarian, nor is there a music teacher. The social worker who was on staff last year is no longer there, but a community partnership has been developed to bring in some of the same resources. There is one art teacher, but at one time they had three. To make up for staffing deficits, and improve resources, university partnerships have brought in students to work in classrooms as part of their coursework, and retired teachers have been hired to

assist students who are behind. A community center has been created in the building as a clearing house of services for mental health and social issues.



"It's hard to reach parents." "We have lots of kids with lots of problems."

The school must also face the harsh reality that one-third of the students who enter in the fifth grade are no longer there four years later. The high transiency rate makes it difficult to maintain a continuous educational plan. And the long-time negative reputation of the school in the community has been hard to turn around. To everyone's frustration, parental support and involvement is often a missing element in the school's growth.

Nevertheless, there is an intensity on the part of the school's leadership to make sure these children are not lost.

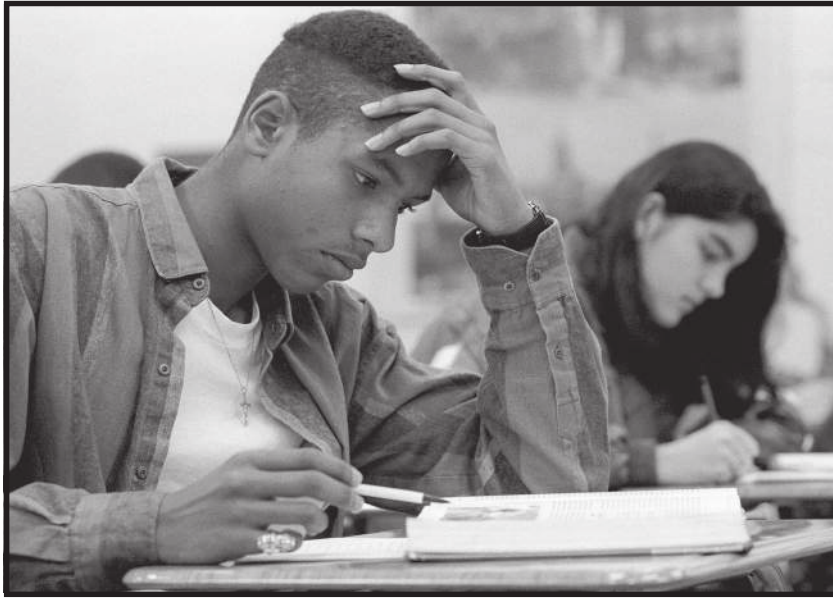
***"We've got a good thing going here.
We have to do a better marketing job."***

Problems do occur, but support for dealing with them seems organized and consistent. Nevertheless, there is frustration that test scores have not gone up as much as they would like and that the complete focus on test scores by the School District has not given them credit for improving the attitude of many young people toward going to school in the first place.

"Our students are leaving here better people."
An Administrator

<u>PSSA Scores</u>							
Subject	Grade	% Taking	Adv.	Prof.	Basic	Below	Trend
Math	8	95%	0%	14%	26%	60%	+2.8%
Reading	8	93%	1%	17%	29%	54%	+0.6%

The High Schools



“We can’t get to curriculum and instruction because we are dealing with so many other problems.”

The High Schools

We visited nine high schools - six comprehensive neighborhood schools, one disciplinary school, one special admission school and one vocational technical school. They were big - one had more than 3,000 students. They were small - one was under 300. Many were built in the twenties with almost identical designs; several were built in the fifties with their own similar architecture. One of the newer schools had a neat, green campus while another built at the same time had a paved parking lot littered with trash instead. Some of the schools were over-crowded; others were only partially in use. The main entrances for students and faculty in many of the older buildings were in the back of the buildings - not through the grand, inspiring entrances. Few had signs announcing their names or their entrances.

Many of the buildings had too many doors to the outside to keep track of students' or strangers' comings and goings. Most of the buildings were often too hot or too cold, difficult to keep clean or provide security. Some of the schools had bright interesting student work on the hallway walls, others had neat plain walls and a few other hallways like the schools themselves seemed to have no attention being paid to the "niceties" of education.

Most of the schools we visited had stable, committed faculties who had been working together for awhile and who seemed to work well with the individual school administration; yet several of the schools had endured several changes in leadership in the last several years which have had a disruptive impact on the schools.

Some of the schools had all their teaching positions filled with certified teachers from day-one of the year, some had a few vacancies up through the Christmas holidays, while others were continually inadequately staffed, always needing more or better coverage. Getting ahold of and keeping enough books and supplies for the students was a challenge to almost all the teachers as was providing adequate library resources in most of the schools.

As one administrator noted, ***"We have an \$11,000 budget for the library for more than 2400 students. In Phoenixville, they have \$25,000 for a school with one-third the number of students."***

The sense of unfairness was echoed in other schools by different staff. One teacher described the impact of the inequities between the city and suburban per pupil expenditure:

"Our children are the neediest of the needy and they have half as much spent on them as on the children of the suburbs but they have to take the same tests that the suburban children take."

The differences were many. Several of the schools had remarkably successful “homegrown” programs that were sources of pride to the schools, most did not. Several had strong parent or community involvement, but most of the schools did not. Indeed, one of the comprehensive high schools was almost a stranger to its community, attracting students mainly from other neighborhoods. Another school was strongly supported by its community although there was friction between the neighborhood students and those who traveled far to get to school each day. While those schools that drew most of their student body from outside the neighborhood could be expected to have fewer involved parent community activists, the traditional neighborhood high schools did not achieve much more parent attendance at school meetings.

Some of the schools, both big and small, had a strong staff and principal working things out consistently with a sense of pride, professionalism and commitment, others did not. Some schools had art and music programs that supported other pathways to teaching children. Some had technology focused learning centers with extra supplies provided through vocational technical or Title 1 funds. Other schools with students who were just as poor did not receive any extra funds. Some schools were striving for excellence while others were just striving. Some faculty felt the pressure of testing was distorting their work; ***“They don’t even test the same kids every year; how can they be a judge of success?”***

In one of the high schools we visited you could smell smoke from a small fire that had been set in a waste can. In another, we were told that the fires were no longer a routine part of the school day. Most of the schools had small learning communities with varying degrees of attachment from the students and staff. Their ability to create a sense of togetherness was often limited by the building design. In one of the high schools that seemed most troubled, with principal changes, staff vacancies and students acting out, you could hear beautiful harmonies from the students’ glee club through the halls.

“We’ve had pretty good success in keeping teachers.”

In most of the high schools we visited, there were core groups of teachers who were committed to the school and to the work. They spoke with some pride about not transferring out. But they were nearing retirement and there was worry about who would take their place.

Most of the high schools we visited needed more help in dealing with student behavior and other concerns. Several had been able to secure a social worker and extra nursing through special efforts.

Most limped along generally frustrated by their inability to deal with the kids who hung out in the schools or who seemed to need much more family support or mental health care than they were receiving. The relationship between the high schools and the disciplinary schools was inconsistent at best. Some disruptive students were being processed quickly; others remained at their home schools for months following serious incidents. Roads to and from the alternative high schools at times seemed unknown or unknowable to the comprehensive high schools.

There were many similarities in what the faculty told us worked and didn't work and was needed. Here's some of what we heard:

We asked, “*what’s working,*” and we heard:

- In the larger schools, larger budgets created more opportunities to respond to diverse needs.
- In the smaller schools, staff and students valued the chance to get to know each other.
- Stable staffs had helped provide consistency even while major changes were occurring district wide.
- Racially diverse schools were proud of their mix.
- Small learning communities in some schools have become the base of activities and collegial support. Some SLC's have developed programs of excellence in schools that were otherwise in great difficulty.
- Supportive, not critical, school administrations had allowed more focus on student need.

We asked, “*what’s needed,*” and we heard:

- Streamlined approach to dealing with disruptive students. Understandable and consistent procedures for programming extra services and supports, as well as admission to and return from alternative schools.
- Leadership that is less top-down, with fewer mandates.
- More idea exchange between those on-the-ground with each other and with the district leadership.
- Major repairs to old buildings.
- More supports and resources.



A Closer Look at a High School

There are too many students in this school. The many hallways are full...and busy. Nevertheless, the more “modern” facility was built at the end of World War II, ***“mostly works for us, not against us.”*** To the discouragement of the administration, students are able to come and go “more than they should” through the innumerable outside entrances. The school is not anxious to hide its problems, and has initiated a very public effort to be proactive in dealing with students who present disruptive behaviors or are in trouble academically.

The school has implemented creative efforts using Twilight and Saturday programs in combination with regular school programs to keep “problem” students in school. Incoming middle school students who have repeated a grade are interviewed during the summer by the social worker on staff. ***“He’s like an air traffic controller for mental health.”*** The student is then paired in another program to follow-up during the school year. For repeating ninth graders, parents are asked to come in for interviews so that an intervention plan can be developed. There is frustration over the disjointed efforts of placing students in alternative programs and the lack of a clear policy on their return.

Beyond the efforts to deal with students having difficulties, the large school is full of programs involving students in many different ways, including such things as chess club, robotics, debate, Odyssey of the Mind, and many others. The successful music program maintains ensembles that meet regularly and includes the production of a musical program each year. The student government is very active and there is pride that the school competes successfully with the academic magnet schools. This is a neighborhood high school, but the diverse student body manages to find its way here from many other neighborhoods around the city. In fact, at the beginning of each year the school is overwhelmed with hundreds of walk in registrations, tying up the entire administrative staff at the beginning of school, and making it difficult to monitor data, especially relating to repeating and failing students.

For the staff, it tends to be a “destination school.” Few leave before they retire. Staff members tend to speak positively about the school and its students. Some worried about “changes” in the student body. New staff to the building are happy to be there, but find the large size daunting and more difficult to establish camaraderie with colleagues. While the size of the school presents problems, it also allows budgeting flexibility that smaller schools cannot afford. It is from this larger pool that resources can be found to do such things as bring in university students to maintain computer software and hire tutors to help failing students. A conscious effort is being made to develop state-of-the-art computer technology in the building. Unlike many high schools, this one has active parent participation. A core of dedicated parents works for the good of the school in cooperation with the administration and staff. The school also enjoys the support of an active alumni association with an office in the building, staffed by volunteers.

PSSA Scores							
Subject	Grade	% Taking	Adv.	Prof.	Basic	Below	Trend
Math	11	96%	7%	24%	32%	38%	+1.1%
Reading	11	94%	7%	41%	27%	25%	+1.2%

A Closer Look at another High School

The large building is old, worn down and seems uncared for. There is nothing welcoming the 2,000 students, just the usual scanning machine. In spite of many proud alums, the school radiates not pride, but neglect. Broken windows, an ill-equipped library, and problems with the heating system are constants for everyone who attends and works here. Other problems, such as wiring a computer room for the internet but providing only one electrical outlet, seemed too common. Areas of the building have been reworked so many times that the pieces seem disjointed from the whole. While small learning communities have existed here for many years, the building's layout inhibits keeping all the students in the same space throughout the day. The idea of creating community in large schools then is effectively defeated by the building itself. Back stairways are gathering places for those not interested in going to class. Nevertheless, the positive sounds of school continue, as early morning chorus and band can be heard in the hallway.

With many administrative and support positions changing frequently in recent years, consistent school-wide planning has been difficult. There is no regular staff meeting time, leaving the SLC's as the reference point for survival and growth. Some have done well, including a voc-tech program that has won national awards. Others have not. There are a variety of impressive academic, sports and arts programs, but overall the school has high drop out rates and low test scores, inadequate programming for special education students and continuing disruptions.

“Students are not coming prepared for high school.”

Like many high schools in the city, this one has gone to a “block roster”, with four ninety minute classes a day each semester. Some students think the periods are long and boring while others think it's ***“OK,”*** because there aren't as many classes to go to each day. Some judge block rostering ***“as good for management but not for instruction.”*** The lack of enthusiasm about being in school, about the school itself, is clearly evident among the students. While they don't blame their teachers, they do say there's just ***“not enough happening.”*** Some teachers wonder why, when activities are offered, students

don't take advantage of them. Others simply wonder ***“What happened?”***



Some place blame on the burgeoning magnet programs of a decade or more ago which drew many students away from the neighborhood high schools, leaving them the schools of last choice.

Others look at the cut-backs which have removed once-dynamic programs from the

school, though music and art are still taught here. Many staff, students and parents are working to improve the situation but there was an underlying tension that things could get out of control.

A core of long-term hard-working teachers are here who are appreciated for their effort to keep the school moving forward, but the general malfunctioning of the school as a whole makes their job more difficult. New teachers tend to have a difficult time, though some have been successful at bringing new energy into the building. Even at mid-year, there continue to be teacher and support personnel vacancies.

There was a great deal of frustration at the lack of attention in recent years to older neighborhood high schools. ***“Lots of team visits and sympathetic ears, but no action.”*** But there is hope that the new administration will be able to follow through on its promise to bring attention to them. One proposal in this school was to ***“close the facility for a year, fix it up, then open it new, rather than try to create something better piecemeal.”*** Other suggestions included investing in simple things like electronic access to doors to prevent major thefts due to duplicated keys, and making sure that there was adequate training for budgeting and rostering. There was also concern that the high school could not afford to offer Advanced Placement and other advanced classes because their numbers were too low, “but how else do you get these things started?” And finally, ***“We need to be able to meet and talk to each other. The elimination of meeting time has been a disaster. It makes no sense to say that teachers should be working together then not allow it to happen.”***

“Obviously, there are some real strengths here, but how long can good people bail out the boat with a strainer before they too collapse into status quo? In the triage model, we’ve made moves to stabilize (at least in the district’s eyes), but in reality, it becomes a disservice because we fall from view and therefore miss out on resources we need.”

An Administrator

PSSA Scores							
Subject	Grade	% Taking	Adv.	Prof.	Basic	Below	Trend
Math	11	63%	1%	6%	9%	88%	+1.3%
Reading	11	55%	0%	12%	17%	71%	+0.3%

Conclusion

We hear over and over how beleaguered the Philadelphia schools are. And they are. But we also saw from our visits that in spite of the difficulties, many, if not most schools, are struggling successfully to set a positive tone and a healthy climate for children to grow and mature. The many heartfelt conversations with adults who spoke well of the students and with frustration about lack of services, the warmth of comments from students who liked their school and their teachers, the parents, who could see the difficulties of the job, were moving. There is no one broad brush to describe our schools and there is no one action that will improve them. Nevertheless, improving our schools is perhaps the most critical challenge we have in our society.

“The best way to predict the future is to create it.”

Peter Drucker



Appendix I: Outstanding and On-Going Issues

- √ Class size
- √ Behavioral health and social service support issues
- √ Time for staff - staff work
- √ Time for staff - student work
- √ Time and process for modeling and mentoring
- √ Use of title 1 funds - should money follow child? Who decides use?
- √ Overuse of testing
- √ Alternative school process
- √ Special education paper work and process
- √ Overcrowding
- √ Building repair process
- √ Ventilation of buildings
- √ More collaborative decision making
- √ More encouragement of work at the school level
- √ Recognition of improvement
- √ Looking at things other than test scores

Appendix II: What Else We've Heard

“New teachers need help to encourage them to stay. We need more expressive arts teachers. We should use this facility completely.”

“A number of students present behaviors that we have no way of helping.”

“I don't know how we'd run this school without Title I funds. It's our only chance to get more people into this building.”

“There's too much paperwork and the process of finding help for a kid takes too long.”

“What's the major problem? The budget. The Library sits empty because we had to choose between a librarian and a nurse. I hate that.”

“Why can't our kids enjoy music, art and other programs?”

“We must find a way to reduce class size. It's been talked about for 25 years with no change and we all know it's the key.”

“No one's talking to teachers with experience, good teachers who have knowledge. We have a lot to offer. We're in the classroom everyday. But now, we are just waiting to be told what worked in Chicago, without regard for what has been working here.”

“Middle school is a tough age. This is the least-chosen land for elementary-certified teachers.”

“We know how to manage a school. There is just too much to do without enough time or resources to get it all done.”

“We need a unified curriculum, but also a unified behavior program. Five rules is all any school needs.”

“There's a sense that the tone of the building has improved. Teachers are working hard, but there's not a lot to brag about.”

Acknowledgements

On behalf of all the children for whom we speak and work, we would like to take this opportunity to thank our many contributors, including: 1957 Charity Trusts; The AMJ Foundation; Aetna Services; The Austin Community Foundation; The Barra Foundation; The Binswanger Company; The Butler Family Fund; The Alpin J & Alpin W. Cameron Memorial Trust; The Claneil Foundation, Inc; The Annie E. Casey Foundation; The Cohn Family; The Connolly Foundation; The Conservation Company; The Dolfinger/McMahon Foundation; The Dyson Foundation; The Eagles Youth Partnership; Emergency Aid Society of Pennsylvania; Samuel S. Fels Fund; The William Goldman Foundation; The Goldsmith-Greenfield Foundation; The Phoebe Haas Charitable Trust; The Thomas Skelton Harrison Foundation; The Independence Foundation; The Kaplan Fund; McKesson Foundation, Inc.; Merck & Co.; The Nelson Foundation; The November Fund; NovaCare, Inc.; PECO Energy; The Pennsylvania Health Law Project/Natham Cummings Foundation; The Pew Charitable Trusts; The Philadelphia Foundation; The Prudential Foundation; The Robert Wood Johnson Foundation The Shefa Fund; GlaxoSmithKline; The Tabitha Foundation; Target Stores; Teleflex, Inc.; The Tuttleman Family Foundation; The United Way of Southeastern Pennsylvania; United Way/Glaxo SmithKline Foundation; The Peggy and Ellis Wachs Family Foundation; The William Penn Foundation; The Wolf Family Foundation; The Henrietta Tower Wurts Memorial Fund and hundreds of individuals and organizations throughout the region.

Special thanks to the principals, teachers and other staff who took the time to talk with us about this report. Thanks also to PCCY's Education Committee, Debra Weiner, Chair.

PCCY Board of Directors and Staff

Patricia West, President
Shelly D. Yanoff, Executive Director
Project Leadership: Dennis Barnebey
Project Staff: Aldustus Jordan, Steven Fynes

Amelia Belardo-Cox
Judith Borie
David W. Brown
David Camp
Ellen Cavanaugh
Helen Dennis
Penny Ettinger
Lindsay Forgash
Heather Forkey
Richard Frazier
Philip Ray Gordon
Sister Nancy Hagenbach
Thomas Henry
Judith Hyman
Lillian Jackson
Stephanie Kallen
Nancy Kolb
Carleton Lee
Robert Listenbee

Keith Look
Yucynthia A. Jean-Louis
Beth McDaId
Lorraine Ballard Morrill
Nicole Napson
Miguel Ramirez
John E. Riggan
Allener (Sissy) Rogers
Donald Schwarz
Marni Sweet
Fasaha Traylor
Cheryl Weiss
Laval Miller-Wilson
Wendy C. Wolf
Lois Yampolsky

Honorary Board Members

Christie W. Hastings
Lucy M. Sayre

PCCY Staff Members

Laurel Barnes
Bobbie Dunham
Tom Elkinton
Kathy Fisher
Steven E. Fynes
Aldustus Jordan
Bill Madeira
Colleen McCauley
Bonnie Raines
Alisa Simon
Gail Smith
Barbara Torregrossa
Sharon Ward
Claire Yoo

All photos provided by Harvey Finkel



Philadelphia Citizens for Children and Youth
Seven Benjamin Franklin Parkway
Sixth Floor
Philadelphia, Pa 19103
215-563-5848 / 215-563-9442
info@pccy.org / www.pccy.org