

Why Philadelphia's Public School Problems Are Bad For Business

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By Stuart Michaelson

A cursory look at the state of the Philadelphia public-school system makes it seem like an Achilles' heel in an otherwise growing, healthy City blessed by thriving businesses, bountiful universities and medical facilities, millennials happy to be in Philly...until they contemplate living here with school-aged children.

Talk to professionals involved in the lives of the 142,266 students enrolled in the Philadelphia School District's 218 schools and you hear a different story, one of cautious optimism as a new governor prepares to take office he captured partly by promising more attention to school funding, as candidates take to the streets to replace Mayor Michael Nutter, as dropout rates fall.

You hear phrases like "agents of change" (the district's 8,483 teachers), "no magic wands" (a commitment to hard facts and real programs) and "weighted funding" (to replace hold-harmless state funding, which requires at least as much money for districts one year to the next even if enrollment drops).

Mostly, you sense determination to turn things around in a school system the area's business community needs to churn out future workers...and keep young professionals here by making them believe City schools can sustain families despite 5,000 layoffs (spurred partly by Charter-school costs and pension funding) and 31 school closings, mostly over the past three years.

Lori Shorr, chief education officer to Mayor Nutter, looks back at the past year with pride at such efforts as bringing Superintendent William Hite into principal-hiring; three new high schools (U School, Building 21, the LINC); and a new focus on the City's 86 Charter schools and 67,000 students, with \$700 million targeted (and applications for new Charters). Still, she laments "time spent trying not to go under" and wishes "we had a state funding formula."



The schools' impact on the business community, she says, "is really important. We try to attract new businesses and we know that businesses are very concerned about the talent pool and the ability to hire well-educated employees." Dr. Shorr is pleased that the School Reform Commission (SRC) – representatives of which didn't return repeated interview requests for this article – last month passed a status quo financial plan forecasting a \$30 million deficit for the next fiscal year assuming efforts are successful to impose healthcare charges on teachers. The plan, she adds, "is so there aren't year-by-year fixes" and "gives funders a good picture: The status-quo budget is fiscally responsible. They tried to thread the needle."

Dr. Shorr praised the Digital Service Fellow program, run out of the district and supported by public and private dollars. The apprenticeship program for high-school grads who choose not to go straight to college trains students and places them at public schools, where they work as technicians. “This is a great program,” she says “It helps students who make this decision (to wait for college) to be well-trained and certified to go into a high-paying high-demand job.”

She praises Project U-turn, a campaign to battle the dropout crisis. The collaborative, managed by the Philadelphia Youth Network, is overseen by the Philadelphia Council for College and Career Success and has helped to increase high-school graduations by 11 percent (the City’s current four-year on-time graduation rate for district and Charter schools is 64 percent).

Dr. Shorr says the use of a cigarette tax to help fund City schools “was absolutely necessary,” though “it isn’t the best tax policy. We need the state to increase funding to the schools. Desperate times need desperate measures.”

Desperation plays into millennials’ fears that City schools may decide whether to raise families here: “It doesn’t help,” Dr. Shorr says, “that we are always worried about whether the schools will open in the fall.”

Some relief in that department could come, as Gov.-elect Tom Wolf prepares to take office, with a switch to weighted school funding, which takes into account low income and special education needs; Dr. Shorr supports weighted funding and notes that Wolf has said school funding “will be a priority” and adds that “it will be a rough road, his first year, but you have to do some bold things the first time out.”

Bold approaches are also the hallmarks of two area school professionals who focus on energizing City schools: Ina Lipman, executive director of Children’s Scholarship Fund Philadelphia (CSFP), and Ami Patel Hopkins, vice president of teaching, learning and innovation for the Philadelphia Education Fund.

Ms. Lipman’s organization provides K-8th grade scholarships to low-income families in Philadelphia, serving about 6,000 children in private and parochial schools since 2012, with typical recipients from households with an average annual income of \$29,000 for a family of four. CSFP alumni who leave the program in 8th grade graduate high school on-time at rates greater than 96 percent.

Some scholarship recipients, after 8th grade, attend City schools, though, Ms. Lipman says, 80 percent attend tuition-based, Charter schools, or City magnet schools. She says the program’s biggest impact is that students get a solid early education, and even if they re-enter City schools, they are more able to succeed, with core subjects under their belts.

CSFP, Ms. Lipman adds, stresses parental involvement: “The built-in idea is that these parents become active stakeholders in their children’s educations. Even the poorest must pay at least \$500 per year and go to school twice a year. It is tough for families to pay the \$500.”

Students, she says, “get to be in small communities that are learning centers, environments where the administrators and teachers know the children, wraparound services, nurturing learning environments.”

One surprise, Ms. Lipman adds: “The main reason children are in this program is fear of crime, safety ahead of academics.” (This despite the fact that violent incidents district-wide declined 9.9 percent, from 2,758 to 2,485 for the 2013-14 school year, though the rate of violent incidents per 100 students remained essentially unchanged, from 1.84 to 1.83 compared to the prior school year due to an enrollment decrease.)

Students returning to neighborhood schools come the 9th grade benefit from summer workshops, which, says Ms. Lipman, means “we don’t hear bad stories from kids who then go to their neighborhood schools.”

Ms. Lipman sees a “direct” impact on the business climate from City schools’ quality. Noting low proficiency levels—2014 Pennsylvania System of School Assessment results were generally flat in Philadelphia for reading and math, at 42 and 45.2 percent, respectively—she says, “We are not securing the kind of workforce that will move Philadelphia forward. We need to invest at an early stage in young lives or pay the price later on.”

Such investments, Ms. Lipman says, include the Pennsylvania Opportunity Scholarship Tax Credit Program (OSTC), which allows businesses to help Philadelphia children in exchange for tax benefits. She calls “fantastic” a proposal by Allan Domb, president of the Greater Philadelphia Association of Realtors, that businesses help public schools by sponsoring curriculums in grades nine through 12, with participating firms, in essence, training future employees.

Back to immediate reality, she looks at millennials’ fears about the schools and says “people need to get involved and change dynamics on any school on a local basis. Rebuild neighborhood schools. It can be done.”

Such positive thought also flows from Mrs. Hopkins, whose Philadelphia Education Fund aims to develop great teachers for every classroom and college and career-focused students. She oversees the Early Warning Response System, which identifies students at risk of dropping out and is coordinated with Project U-turn, another City effort to battle the dropout crisis and increase graduations.

She is involved in the alternate teacher education program, which focuses on science, technology, engineering and math, and she helps mayoral candidates connect with teachers.



Preparation for City teachers – 3,000 of whom have had the opportunity through the fund to gain teacher certification through alternative routes over the last eight years – includes work with Drexel University and the University of Pennsylvania.

The fund is a partner of the school district, though supported by federal grants and private donations; Early Warning gets United Way and private funding, while teacher networking gets money from private funders.

All students in Philadelphia need the skills required for post-secondary education

Looking at the big picture, Mrs. Hopkins wants the school district to become part of the City school system, under mayoral control, backs weighted funding, and says while “the SRC is doing as well as they can now, the City having control would be good for the City.” She also hopes Wolf “can show the public that education is still a priority.”

Mrs. Hopkins says “it would be nice to get to the point where every year it isn’t the same thing of how much money” and looks to the business community to step up...especially real-estate agents.

“Businesses,” she says, “should care about what is happening, since kids coming out of the school system will be working in their businesses. There is the need to get people who don’t live and breathe education every day to care about education. Real estate agents have a role. They are talking to parents who are shopping for homes. These are ways to get people involved in the local schools. And businesses people can be mentors and sponsor students who are interested in certain fields.”

Speaking personally, not in her official capacity, Mrs. Hopkins sees better things for the school system over the next three or four years. As a member of the executive committee of PhillyCORE Leaders (a group of education leaders), she helps emphasize positives in area schools.

Overall, Mrs. Hopkins says, “We need to create a positive environment and move the needle. Teachers are change agents...common denominators in the schools. And we need a fair funding formula. There is no cookie-cutter solution.”

Which brings us to another innovative approach to City school challenges, that of the 14 alternative-school programs, which, as of November, enrolled 2,319 students who had previously dropped out. The schools are run by providers with school-district contracts and involve students re-engaged through the district’s Re-Engagement Center.

One such program at the Career and Academic Development Institute draws praise from Christopher Angelini, who has been teaching English there for six years after first becoming interested in urban education during an externship in the Boston public-school system. He says some students at his school were in the juvenile justice system, some have children, and some are homeless. A few, he says, move on to college, while others attend trade schools or community colleges.

He sees genuine motivation in his pupils.

“There is the push-back you always get,” says Mr. Angelini, “but at the same time, they are there on some choice of their own. Most are motivated and realize they want and need this. These are students who weren’t successful at their own schools. Some are below level for math and literacy and have been out of school for two or three years.

“They are subject to the same high-stakes testing as they would be in neighborhood schools. Many come from schools that were closed. They see how the budget affects their textbooks and class sizes. They know what is going on.”

Unlike some schools, his has a counselor, and “students feel very safe and so does the staff, due to our size; the students who come to us find this attractive.”

Angelini looks at the school system as a whole and sees public perception of “complete chaos and danger and failure. There is a fight here, a fight there, and all the sad stuff gets picked up (by the public) but it is a matter of changing the narrative to embrace (the schools).”

Mr. Angelini thinks schools need “a local locally elected school board instead of the SRC” and is “cautiously optimistic” (“It is naïve to expect a quick fix”) and sees education in general and Charter-school growth in particular as big issues in this year’s mayoral races.

“We look for candidates who see the district as an asset,” he says. “A commitment to Philadelphia having a strong public-school district, to stopping people leaving the City because of the schools, to grow with what we have and to work with the district. To stop millennials from wanting to leave the City because of the schools we need more desirable public schools. Constantly having to fight to keep the lights on won’t be appealing to people.”

Mr. Angelini, who is involved with Teachers Lead Philly, says he is “cautiously optimistic” about the schools. “We have teachers who pay out of their pockets to support the district. With teachers like that you can’t help but be optimistic. We can’t wait for some miracle magic-wand solution.”

James Paul, education policy expert for the Commonwealth Foundation, a conservative/free-market think tank in Harrisburg, isn’t waiting for one, either.

Mr. Paul says “the drumbeat of constantly asking for more money instead of making changes in the schools isn’t the answer; it isn’t good for business when school performance isn’t right and is unacceptably low.”

Mr. Paul is no fan of the cigarette tax (“not a sustainable solution”) and doesn’t see more revenue as an answer; he is happy that new Charter-school applications are being taken, and wants reform in the pension system (“a serious cost-driver”) and supports teacher merit pay.

He and his group back weighted school funding and support more Charter schools, but he warns: “Let’s not turn this into an argument of Charters vs. district schools.”

- See more at: <http://philadelphia.regionsbusiness.com/philadelphias-public-school-problems-bad-business/#sthash.W86kZoRm.dpuf>