Philadelphia School District Deconstruction – A Case Requiring Consideration

James H. Lytle

For almost 30 years I was a principal and central office administrator in the School District of Philadelphia. I’ve lived in Philadelphia for more than 40 years. After leaving the Philadelphia schools I went on to Trenton, NJ, to be superintendent for eight years, than came back to Philadelphia to teach educational leadership at the University of Pennsylvania. My heart and my commitment to improving urban public schools have always been centered in Philadelphia.

I came here in 1970 to be part of what was then the most significant urban school reform effort in the country. Mark Shedd was the pacesetting superintendent and former mayor, Richardson Dilworth, led a school board committed to experimentation. The recently authorized Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) provided substantial “alternative program” funding.

Since then I’ve seen the School District go through all sorts of transformations, from patronage mill to instrument for desegregation. For the past 20 years I’ve observed a succession of superintendent “saviors” imported from other parts of the U.S. come to Philadelphia with the latest recipe for salvation. And now I am watching the sell-off of what remains of the District to charter school and for-profit hustlers who claim to have discovered the grail of urban school improvement.

Last Spring the District was caught-up in a contentious battle over proposed school closings, but that battle diverted energy from the larger question – is Philadelphia headed in a direction that makes sense, one that will ensure that children are better served than they have been?

Philadelphia is operating in a federal policy environment that dates back to the Clinton and then Bush administrations. No Child Left Behind (NCLB), passed by Congress in 2001, stipulated performance standards for all public schools and a set of sanctions for those that did not meet the standards. The sanctions include closing low-performing schools, converting them to charter schools, or turning them over to for-profit or not-for-profit management companies. Performance targets are raised every two years, making it increasingly difficult for inner-city schools serving disadvantaged students to make “adequate yearly progress,” and setting the stage for “mandated” intervention.

The Obama administration, and Secretary of Education Arne Duncan, have been strong supporters of these market-based approaches to school reform, and have worked closely with major foundations, including Gates, Walton and Broad, to push this agenda. Charter schools continue to have bi-partisan support at the federal and state levels.

Coincidently, 2001 was also the year the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania took control of the School District of Philadelphia, disbanded the school board, and created the School Reform Commission (SRC), a majority of whose members are appointed by the governor. The new SRC was immediately authorized through NCLB with the power to take-over or close schools, and to authorize charter schools, as it saw fit. At intervals since 2001 the U.S. Department of Education has provided Pennsylvania and Philadelphia substantial funding for improving low-performing schools, most recently through Race-to-the-Top grants. These funds can be spent to support charter schools and other forms of intervention as state departments of education determine.

This brief account of the policy environment provides the context in which the SRC is acting, and helps explain how it has been able to move a “reform” agenda that in many respects mirrors NCLB and Race to the Top policies. In the past year the School Reform Commission has agreed to:

• Expand charter school enrollment – from 55,000/200,000 (in 2012-13) to 80,000/200,000 (in 2014-15) – which will require transferring additional and proportionate funds from the district to charters.
• Borrow $300,000,000 for operating expenses, thus ensuring a level of debt service that further erodes the district’s ability to maintain itself.
• Close as many as 60 district schools over a two-year period (most of those with high proportions of African-American students; many in areas where real estate play is a factor), and at the same time, continue to convert “low-performing” schools to charters. (The cyclical effect of increased charter enrollments will, of course, be more district school closings.)
• Privatize Head Start (i.e., eliminate the unionized teacher requirement).
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In my view the only meaningful option is to acknowledge that it is in our common interest to make equity and quality the cornerstones for educational reform. That can only happen if parents, students, and teachers band together to wrest control from the elites who are driving federal and state policy, and insist on schools they directly control. That in turn will require a social movement – Occupy Our
Schools. – which has as its goal the reinvention of schooling as engaging, demanding, responsive, accessible, timely, future-oriented.

The Chicago teacher strike in September 2012 may be a bellwether for an Occupy movement because a coalition of teachers and parents backed down Mayor Rahm Emmanuel and the city’s Business Roundtable in forcing a resolution that built from the best interests of kids.

Philadelphia is the next major test, and the prospects here are not encouraging.

Useful References


The Philadelphia Notebook (http://thenotebook.org/- for daily updates and archives)


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Lytle has been active in a number of national professional organizations, including the Council of Great City Schools and the American Educational Research Association. His teaching and research interests relate to the efficacy of urban public schools, leadership transitions, and school change.

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