

Testimony

Public Citizens for Children and Youth

Before

City Council of Philadelphia, Committee on Education

Per Resolution # 150672

October 21, 2015

Public Citizens for Children and Youth commends the Committee on Education Chair, Councilwoman Blackwell, and her committee members for holding this important hearing today. We agree with the basic tenant of the purpose of this hearing that every child deserves a high quality education.

The student body of the District is nearly 80% very poor, 8.5% ELL students and 14% special education. In addition, 17% of students were involved with the child welfare system at some point in their lives. Given the life experiences of our students, we have to be much more intentional than the average school district in the state or the nation about the ways the schools operate and the tools they have for operation. The research is clear that our students require very specific approaches and more resources than we currently have.

In fact, I point to the extraordinary bi-partisan agreement by the state legislative Basic Education Funding Commission which, after days and days of hearings and reviewing the latest research, found that to educate very poor children, meaning those living below 100% of the federal poverty level, it takes 90% more funding than to educate the average student. For the students living in families with incomes at 100-185% of the federal poverty level, 60% more funding needs to be in place. The same level of additional funding is needed for students who are English Language Learners. The Commission also found that where schools have more than 30% of their students living in extreme poverty (or less than 100% of the federal poverty level), an additional 30% more must be spent to ensure academic progress. We know that across the District that one third of our students meet this threshold. As a result, many of our schools would need to spend at least 120% more per student to help our students meet academic standards.

The good news is that the state is poised to adopt a formula to distribute new state funds to school districts across the commonwealth. It would make sense for the state to use this new formula to distribute the full \$5.7 billion in state funds for basic education funding. But at this point, we are pleased that going forward state funds for schools will return to the practice of following need.

Per the purpose of this Committee in seeking greater student accountability, it is useful for Council to explore with the District a similar approach that ensures that new City funds follow need more carefully. Such an approach might pave the way for an in-district weighted student funding approach that would mirror many of the good aspects of the newly adopted state school funding formula.

Short of adopting that approach, as Council considers how best to tie accountability to its funding of the District, I would recommend two other bright-line approaches. First, require the District to create a plan to boost the reading level of district-run schools as measured by the share of students entering fourth grade reading proficiently.

In preparing the strategy for the city's READ by 4th Campaign, we learned that about 40 elementary schools have less than 25% of their students reading on grade level by the end of third grade. The children in these schools are exponentially more likely to drop out, end up in prison or worse. City Council could explore ways with the District to restore funding cuts in these elementary schools first and require that the District accelerate its investment in proven reading strategies that will get children to grade level. For this to work, the Superintendent must adopt a principal evaluation system that ensures principals are on board with doing what's necessary in kindergarten, first, second and third grades to get higher shares of students who are proficient readers. We cannot wait till third grade to address this problem.

Some principals are already on board, and they responded to the District's well designed and inspired proposal to do what research says must happen to raise 3rd grade reading levels. These schools participated last summer in the District's weeklong boot camp to show teachers how to teach reading, especially for children who struggle as early readers. Seven hundred kindergarten to third grade teachers, principals and school support staff participated, and to the teacher, they were grateful they did. In addition, each of the K-3 classrooms started school with a well stocked classroom library and instructional support coaches assigned to help the teacher teach in ways so that students who struggle can learn to read.

This extraordinary effort was led by Bill Hite and Diane Castelbouno and happened because private foundations, the William Penn Foundation and Lenfest Foundation, stepped up to the plate. They made all this possible for one third of our k-3 teachers and over the next two summers. Hopefully, the District can complete this important capacity building effort for the rest of our elementary schools.

But it will take more than this. It will take the restoration of counselors, nurses, librarians, arts teachers, assistant principals and reading specialists to boost the performance of these elementary schools. Some cynics will say that even when these buildings had all these supports that they were still failing. I don't know about you, but in my memory of the last 25 years, our poverty rate has continued to rise and we've never put the full compliment of staff and resources in place. The assertion that failure is inevitable simply doesn't hold water.

Others claim that the problems in these schools can be solved by charter schools. Here's what we found in 2013 when 16 charters sought renewals for another five years of operation. The data showed that their performance is all over the map in spite of the fact that they enroll a student population that is less at-risk than the District's student body. For instance, two of the charter schools had Special Education enrollment rates that were less than half the district average and five others have special education rates that are significantly less than the district average. Thirteen of the charter schools have fewer than 2 percent English Language Learners compared to the district average of 8 percent. Nine of the charter schools serve fewer low income students than the district average.

In 2015, 20 charters sought to create new charter schools. Of these charters, nearly half of schools of the applicants had less than 50% of their students on grade level for reading or math in spite of the fact that much education a smaller share of at-risk students than the typical district school educates.

It's certainly worth pointing out that there is very small group of charter operators who have a track record of successfully educating students when their schools look like the average district school. I am a strong believer that these operators have something to teach us. Council may want to meet these operators and specifically seek their input into practices that should be adopted District-wide.

My second bright-line recommendation is that Council explores ways to turn our attention and focus on building vibrant and successful neighborhood high schools.

Nearly a third of Philadelphia's high school students are enrolled in charter schools, and elected officials have only a limited influence on these private operators. The Mayor and Council have greater ability to directly affect District-run schools. Focusing on these schools will not be for naught. In fact, of the 36,000 students enrolled in district-run high schools, a majority or about 19,000 are in our neighborhood high schools.

Compared to the city-wide special admission schools or magnet high schools, our neighborhood schools have anywhere to two to ten times the share of English Language Learners enrolled, almost two to three times the share of students who at one point in their lives were served by the Philadelphia Department of Human Services and the share of students living in poverty is on average 95% compared to the average among magnet high schools of 65%.

Meanwhile as a result of state budget cuts neighborhood high schools have suffered deep staff cuts and have experienced the highest level of principal and teacher turnover. In a few weeks Public Citizens for Children and Youth will be releasing a detailed report showing the impact of these cuts.

Here again, Council can play an especially effective role by ensuring that as new funds become available they are spent to restore counselors, arts teachers and assistant principals at these schools and to ensure that class sizes are reasonable by hiring the requisite number of teachers.

Earlier this week the Philadelphia Inquirer ran an article about the Senate Republican plan to create turnaround districts run by private operators. Julie Corbett, a consultant who specializes in turnaround strategies, said that high school turnarounds especially need more than a new curriculum and

higher expectations. She said: "Educators need to be thinking about dental care, health care, weekend jobs, and child care for young moms and the list goes on. It is key to figure out early on all the wraparound supports the school needs." These are the words of someone who has worked with private charter operators to turn around schools and school districts.

Unfortunately for the believers, privatizing the operation of schools has not been a silver bullet.

However, if we think that the District can do this alone we are fooling ourselves. That's why PCCY asked every Mayoral candidate to sign a pledge indicating that they would "lean in" to help the District by increasing the partnership and integration of city services with the schools. That pledge was endorsed by dozens of our city's most respected organizations and signed by all but one candidate (Milton Street). It describes what we mean by "leaning in" to ensure schools success.

It begins with the City taking the lead to make sure every child starts school ready to learn by rolling out high quality universal pre-K. Councilwoman Blackwell has that initiative moving already.

It means building a community school model that delivers the extraordinary array of city and city-funded services in our most challenged schools.

And, quite frankly, it means finding permanent solutions to youth and family homelessness and youth unemployment. These basic city responsibilities are ambitious and some might say daunting. In my estimation, if the city is going to have any credibility in holding the school district accountable for its results, it must attend to these essential city activities as well.