

Aug. 28, 2007

## **It Takes a Village**

*Partnerships enhance achievement in urban schools*

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Research on large, urban districts continues to tell the sad tale of under-qualified teachers, academic achievement gaps among African-Americans and Latinos compared to their white and Asian counterparts, and lack of adequate resources.

In 2002, the School District of Philadelphia faced a major crisis -- the takeover of its public schools by the state combined with the pressures from No Child Left Behind for increasingly higher levels of student achievement. Similar to the plight of many large, urban districts, Philadelphia faced daunting challenges spawned by high teacher turnover rates, a smaller and less-qualified hiring pool, scores of teachers operating under emergency certification, and a number of underperforming, high poverty schools.

To meet this overwhelming challenge, the School District of Philadelphia created a partnership program that captured the essence of the phrase *it takes a village* to raise teacher performance standards and student achievement in the District.

Under the leadership of former CEO Paul Vallas, the district adopted bold measures to turn the tide of low student achievement. Fully aware of the district's limited financial resources, Vallas developed a plan to reach out to large and small businesses, colleges and universities, foundations, cultural institutions and an expanding array of non-profit organizations. His ideas provided a venue for a multi-layered collaborative that would enhance urban student achievement in a manner that emphasized high quality instruction and standards of performance.

The response was overwhelming and resulted in the development of a keystone initiative involving university and cultural institution partnerships. This initiative is in its fourth year of implementation and is showing great promise in enhancing student learning and achievement in Philadelphia public schools.

### **About the Initiative**

The University/Cultural Institution Partnership Initiative is a competitive grant program that awards seed funding to support a variety of public school projects through partnerships with area universities and cultural institutions. Project proposals were conceived and written, in grant format, by each partner institution based on district goals, school needs, and expertise of the partner institution. Partnerships were approved, formalized, and executed through a legally binding Memorandum of Understanding that clearly delineates deliverables, roles, and expected outcomes.

Each public school was selected for a partnership grant based on several criteria, including:

- # Opportunities to expand and/or enhance an existing university partnership
- # Low school performance and test scores
- # Proximity to the university or cultural institution

# Clearly defined match between a school's needs and an institution's interest and ability to address those needs

Involving key groups at every stage of the development and implementation of these projects has been critical to ensuring that partnerships have shared missions, yield measurable outcomes, and add considerable value to the partner schools.

A key focus for all grants was accountability, something that is lacking in many school/university partnerships across the nation. The district required that each grant provide a quantitative means of measuring student growth and learning based on the partnership endeavors.

By the end of the 2004-05 academic year, 11 institutions were engaged in professional development projects in 22 schools. Partnerships include the Academy of Natural Sciences, Arcadia University, Chestnut Hill College, Drexel University, Holy Family University, K12, LaSalle University, Lock Haven University, Rosemont College, Saint Joseph's University, and The University of the Arts.

The elementary, middle, and high schools that partnered with these institutions served primary African-American student populations (ranging from 42 percent to 98.2 percent), low income (ranging from 46 percent to 80.7 percent) and students who score below basic in both math and reading (ranging from 40 percent to 85 percent ) as measured by the Pennsylvania State System of Assessment (PSSA).

### **What Were the Outcomes?**

By strategically engaging multiple and diverse partners, the district has managed to enhance educational programs far beyond what would be possible with existing budget dollars. All of these partnerships have clearly defined and aligned roles and were expected to show measurable outcomes.

An external evaluator was hired by the district to monitor the progress each partnership made throughout the year, and to visit each location and interview school personnel involved with each project. This process ensures that the partnerships remain focused on their respective goals. Collectively, the outcomes of these partner projects have demonstrated that they are a valuable resource for supporting the district's neediest schools and in closing the achievement gap.

Data from the 11 participating institutions and their respective schools reveal a range of positive results from small to very large gains in student achievement. Aggregate data show that 14 of 22 schools (63.6 percent) participating in the Cultural Institution/University Partnership Initiative made Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) in 2005 compared to 110 out of 273 non-partnered schools (40.2 percent). These data serve as a strong indicator that enhanced resources gained through the partnership program are a viable way to support large, urban districts' efforts to improve its neediest schools.

Given that some partnerships were more successful than others, it is especially important for an external evaluation team to monitor and hold accountable the partnerships' ability to meet their project goals. As a result of this external review and reporting process, some institutional partners will receive funding for successive years, while others will not.

The initial budget for the partnership program was essentially provided as short-term seed funding for these initiatives and projects. Partners were advised early on that they would subsequently be responsible for identifying funding to sustain their projects. Consequently, the partners have established a new, independent, and semi-autonomous unit that seeks external funding for projects.

PACE (Philadelphia Area Consortium for Education) includes representatives from various university and cultural institutions who work to sustain and expand partnerships between Philadelphia public schools and universities/cultural institutions. If this venture is successful long-term, the district can ensure that this institutional/cultural partnership project will have adequate funding to continue its work.

### **How do these partnerships work?**

Project Achieve, a partnership established between Grover Washington Jr. Middle School and La Salle University, is focused on enhancing teacher quality, student learning and performance through personalized, needs-based professional development of fifth- and eighth-grade teachers. Multiple means are used to evaluate the partnership.

We operated under the premise that increased teacher instructional expertise would significantly and positively impact student learning and achievement. Project Achieve showed excellent results at the end of the first year. Participants made significant gains in their ability to implement strategies learned through a mentoring model of professional development, which included three formal observations throughout the year as well as pre- and post-questionnaire data.

In addition, participating teachers achieved significant gains in their students' benchmark scores when compared to non-participating teachers (sixth and seventh grade benchmark results) as well as benchmark scores from the prior year. Notable gains were also made on standardized tests used by the district to measure student achievement.

With a focus on the future sustainability of this grant project, the aims of Project Achieve have changed slightly. Emphasis is now placed on the leadership team, including six teacher leaders who work directly with staff to increase teaching expertise.

The importance of having a cooperative and collaborative relationship with the school leadership team has been vital component in the success of this school-university partnership and others across Philadelphia. The district is breaking down bureaucratic barriers that have traditionally stymied efforts at urban reform by partnering with area institutions and focusing on the learning potential of urban students.

Urban districts with limited financial resources should consider the adage that *it takes a village* as they contemplate ways to improve the quality of teaching in urban schools and ensure that students are fulfilling their academic potential.

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