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# The Role of District Leadership in Radical Reform

**Philadelphia's Experience  
under the State Takeover,  
2001-2006**

**July 2006**

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*An Occasional Paper*

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## Learning from Philadelphia's School Reform

Research for Action (RFA) is leading *Learning from Philadelphia's School Reform*, a comprehensive, four-year study of Philadelphia's complex and radical school reform effort. RFA researchers are working with colleagues from the University of Pennsylvania, Montclair State University, Swarthmore College, and the Consortium on Chicago School Research to examine the impact of state takeover, the efficacy of a diverse provider model, the success of district-level leadership in managing a complex set of reforms, the engagement of civic and community groups with district policy and school improvement, and the key factors influencing student outcomes under various school conditions and school management models.

*Learning from Philadelphia's School Reform* includes a multi-faceted, vigorous public awareness component that engages leaders and citizens in the process of educational change, and informs and guides the national debate on school reform. The project disseminates information broadly through public speaking, reports, research briefs, and journal articles featuring clear, timely, and credible analysis of the real impact of school improvement efforts.

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Research for Action (RFA) is a Philadelphia-based, non-profit organization engaged in education research and evaluation. Founded in 1992, RFA works with public school districts, educational institutions, and community organizations to improve the educational opportunities for those traditionally disadvantaged by race/ethnicity, class, gender, language/cultural difference, and ability/disability.

Research for Action is funded through grants from foundations and contracts for services from a range of organizations, including the School District of Philadelphia. For more information about RFA please go to our website, [www.researchforaction.org](http://www.researchforaction.org).

## Mission Statement

Through research and action, Research for Action seeks to improve the education opportunities and outcomes of urban youth by strengthening public schools and enriching the civic and community dialogue about public education. We share our research with educators, parent and community leaders, students, and policy makers with the goals of building a shared critique of educational inequality and strategizing about school reform that is socially just.

# **The Role of District Leadership in Radical Reform**

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under the State Takeover,  
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## Introduction

The most daunting challenge in educational leadership today—and probably in local or state government generally—is the reform of large urban school districts. Evidence abounds, from the widespread view that the urban school superintendency is an “impossible job” (Fuller et al., 2003) to Roy Romer’s observation that he found reforming the Los Angeles school district more difficult than being governor of Colorado. Decades of research and policy analysis are filled with reports of failed reform efforts in urban education. As for big city school boards, the prevailing images are ones of squabbling, micromanaging bodies more concerned about their districts as sources of employment and contracts than about the academic achievement of students (Fuller, et al., 2003).

The public image of urban districts is a dismal amalgam of failing and unsafe schools, students and families plagued by poverty, rigid dysfunctional bureaucracies, inadequate facilities and resources, and beleaguered, demoralized teachers inured to reform efforts. The roadblocks to urban school reform are so numerous, well known, and enmeshed that they have elicited a whole literature on how to overcome them, but with no “silver bullets” or guaranteed recipes for success (e.g., Boyd, 1991; Casserly, 2005; Comer, 1996; Hill & Celio, 1998; Hill, Campbell, & Harvey, 2000).

Recognizing the repeated failure of many conventional approaches to improving urban districts, reformers have turned to increasingly radical ideas. Since 2001, the School District of Philadelphia has served as a prime example and living laboratory for radical reform of a large urban school system. Because of a unique state takeover that sought both comprehensive district-wide reform and, simultaneously, privatization in the management of a large number of schools, educators and policy analysts nationwide are closely watching each stage of this reform. When the controversial state takeover began—in the midst of acrimonious relations between the school district and the state government and strong mayoral and grass roots opposition—the complexity and contradictions of this combination of features led many observers to fear a “train wreck.” Indeed, the

title of a previous paper we wrote conveys the difficult circumstances and challenges: “A tall order for Philadelphia’s new approach to school governance: Heal the political rifts, close the budget gap, and improve the schools” (Boyd & Christman, 2003).

The story that we tell in this paper is thus one of surprising success in healing the political rifts. Furthermore, the district’s leadership—the five-member School Reform Commission and CEO Paul Vallas—has simultaneously and creatively built legitimacy and credibility for a complex privatization scheme (the “diverse provider” model of school management), engaged in extensive outsourcing of additional functions, and made the district a national frontrunner in welcoming the spirit and accountability mechanisms of the federal No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB). Some have argued that Philadelphia’s approach is an amalgam of half-measures (Hill, 2006) and whether these accomplishments will result in better schools, improved instruction, and sustainable increases in student achievement remains to be seen. Nevertheless, the case of Philadelphia is noteworthy as an exemplar of the implementation of paradigm-breaking new reforms in the governance and delivery of urban education. The fact that student test scores have risen steadily since the onset of the reform makes it an especially important district to study.<sup>1</sup>

Clearly, leadership is key in the success of any reform, especially one as ambitious and complex as that in Philadelphia. But, a theme of this paper is that what is critical is the interplay between the actions of leaders and the contextual conditions affecting their ability to make sustainable change. Thus, this paper examines the dynamics of leadership in this changing school district by looking at the interaction of the new governance structures, the political and policy context, and the leadership styles and actions of key players. We argue that the district’s leaders,

<sup>1</sup> Thus far, Vallas and the SRC can point to solid student standardized test score gains on the state’s PSSA. In reading, students’ scores in the 5th and 8th grades rose by 14 to 15 percentile points between 2002 and 2005; in math, 5th graders’ scores went up by an impressive 27 points and by 21 points at the 8th grade level. Scores for 11th graders, however, whose experience with the reforms began only in 2004-05, remained virtually unchanged over that period. The number of schools meeting the NCLB targets for Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) has grown substantially—from 22 in 2002 to 132 in 2005.

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during the first four years of state takeover, calmed the political waters and capitalized on the national and state policy context created by the No Child Left Behind legislation, and managed an infusion of state and city dollars to Philadelphia to build legitimacy for their reform agenda. This supportive policy environment, the ability of the School Reform Commission and CEO Vallas to make radical reform politically palatable, and increased public confidence that this administration would be able to effect positive change, has provided extraordinary rein for district leadership to expand various forms of privatization and other radical interventions at a rapid clip, with little opposition from the public. The mastery over political leadership that Vallas and the SRC demonstrated in the first four years of the state takeover is particularly noteworthy since research indicates that school superintendents generally feel that politics is their main problem (Farkas et al., 2001; Fuller et al., 2003).

Yet now the top-down, shoot from the hip decision making style of Vallas increasingly chafes civic and community leaders who want a say in the content of the reform agenda, especially how the district will improve its long-neglected high schools. An important theme that emerges in this paper is the challenge for district leaders in managing the tension between the “top-down” character of the state takeover, and of their efforts to rapidly push for reform, versus desires for a democratic community voice in decision-making. With the local school board set aside, and pressures for dramatic improvements exacerbated by NCLB’s high stakes AYP deadlines—district leaders needed to take quick action while at the same time somehow eliciting some legitimacy and acceptance for both their policies and their frequently unilateral decision-making.

Still, the story of takeover continues to unfold and questions remain about whether the encouraging political conditions established by the district’s leaders will move to the next step and have a sufficiently positive effect on what happens in schools and classrooms to engender long term gains in student achievement and public confidence. And certainly the going is getting tougher as expenses mount and the structural nature of the district’s budgetary constraints is again apparent. Despite Philadelphia’s progress, new Republican state legislators bring a more

conservative agenda and less willingness to invest in the city’s schools. A looming question is whether relationships among SRC members, district and city leaders will fray in the face of funding battles and budget cuts.

The data that inform this case study come from multiple sources. A collaborating group of scholars from five institutions, led by Research for Action (RFA) in Philadelphia, has been gathering and analyzing information on Philadelphia’s reform since its inception in 2001.<sup>2</sup> For this paper, we draw on RFA’s archive of district documents and articles in the print media as well as its field notes of nearly 100 meetings of the School Reform Commission, important events and meetings of youth and grassroots groups, and regularly scheduled meetings of civic groups—the Education First Compact, the district’s University Partners, and the Campaign for Human Capital. The three authors of this paper, along with associates at RFA, conducted 13 interviews with key civic leaders and highly placed district observers and insiders during 2005 and 2006 to supplement the in-depth interviews conducted by RFA between 2002 and 2006 with 50 district administrators and 35 “local actors” (representative leaders of community, advocacy, media, business, civic, and religious organizations). We also draw on interviews with one or more locally based directors of all seven original external management organizations conducted at different points since 2002.

In writing this paper, we focus on the role of leadership in establishing legitimacy for and confidence in a reform agenda that includes radical departures from the “one best system” of public sector bureaucratic governance and management of large urban school districts. Future reports from RFA will assess outcomes of the reform.

**A looming question is whether relationships among SRC members, district and city leaders will fray in the face of funding battles and budget cuts.**

<sup>2</sup> This research and public awareness project, *Learning from Philadelphia’s School Reform*, is a multi-year multi-pronged research effort. RFA has published reports on governance, civic engagement, and teacher quality along with several other information tools that explain the reform. See [www.researchforaction.org](http://www.researchforaction.org) for an explanation of the project and links to the reports and tools.

## Background and Elements of the Reform

Philadelphia's education reform is radical in three respects: the city's school district, now 177,000 students, is the largest ever to be taken over by a state,<sup>3</sup> it is the site of the nation's largest experiment to date in creating a "diverse provider model," one in which the management of more than 50 schools has been outsourced to external organizations; and it combines both the "choice-based" and "integrated governance" models that Wong and Shen (2003) describe as the leading alternatives for reform strategies. Wong and Shen say that "school politics is likely to be shaped by the ways in which the current, largely insulated, school bureaucracy moves toward either one of the two models" (p. 92). They note that "examples of the [choice-based] innovation include charter schools and contractual arrangements, both of which may involve nontraditional service providers" (p. 92). (In Philadelphia, there are 60 public charter schools, serving 30,000 students, over which the school district provides some oversight. This represents almost 60% of the charters across the state of Pennsylvania.) In contrast to the choice-based approach, the integrated governance approach "enables the mayor or state officials to rely on system-wide standards to hold schools and students accountable for their performance" (p. 92).

This experiment began on December 21, 2001, when Governor Mark Schweiker declared the School District of Philadelphia to be academically and fiscally distressed and exercised his authority under state statutes to put the district directly under the state's control.<sup>4</sup> Passage of the federal No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act the previous month provided a further rationale for

<sup>3</sup>At the time of the takeover, the district had 200,000 students. A lower birth rate, growth in charter school enrollments, and continued population loss to the suburbs caused the decline since 2001. The district anticipates that enrollment will drop below 170,000 for the 2006-07 school year.

<sup>4</sup>Former Republican Governor Tom Ridge (who left the governorship to take charge of the federal homeland security efforts following the September 11 terrorist attacks) and the state's Secretary of Education, Eugene Hickok, had successfully led the effort for the legislature to pass Act 46 in 1998, a law that allowed the state to take over districts with serious fiscal and/or academic problems and to institute a broad range of radical interventions. Act 16, passed by the legislature in 2000, also allowed the state to take over 11 districts with low levels of student academic performance (Boyd & Christman, 2003; Maranto, 2005).

this action. Schweiker pointed to the district's abysmal student performance, its deep budget deficits, and its apparent inability to "right itself" as reasons for the takeover. His relationship, and that of the state legislature, with district Superintendent David W. Hornbeck had foundered over bitter disagreements about state funding for Philadelphia's schools. Hornbeck had been a passionate advocate for increased state funding to Philadelphia's schools—funding that had been steadily decreasing since 1993 despite increases in student enrollment. He went so far as to label the state funding policy as racist, enraging not only state officials but also alienating some of the city's prominent corporate leaders, who felt that a positive relationship with the state was essential to Philadelphia's economic future.

The governor and the Republican-controlled legislature maintained that the introduction of market forces—choice and competition—and the outsourcing of key functions might provide the necessary impetus for far-reaching reform in the district (Boyd & Christman, 2003; Bulkley, Mundell & Riffer, 2004; Maranto, 2005; Travers 2003; Useem, 2005). Even some of Philadelphia's most prominent African American legislators, fed up with district's lack of progress, supported the idea that a radical change in governance, along with involvement of external groups in school management, might jump-start change.

After a tumultuous autumn marked by widespread local protests against the state's privatization proposals and intense down-to-the-wire negotiations between Governor Schweiker and Philadelphia Mayor John Street, the governor's initial plan for a complete state takeover gave way to a "friendly" city-state takeover of the district. The district's nine-member School Board (all mayoral appointees) was stripped of its authority and replaced by a powerful new governing board, a five-member School Reform Commission (SRC). Along with provisions in NCLB, legislative changes in the school code that accompanied the takeover gave the SRC sweeping and unprecedented powers. The takeover also called for the governor to advance the city \$70 million in order to meet the district's December payroll, to drop his plan for the for-profit Edison Schools to assume extensive central management authority—a proposal that had infuriated the mayor and community groups—and to commit to an additional \$75

million in state funds for the city's schools.<sup>5</sup> The Mayor, for his part, committed an additional \$45 million from city coffers to the district (Boyd & Christman, 2003).

## The Leaders and Their Early Challenges

### *The SRC takes the reins*

The responsibility for steering the School Reform Commission through this turbulent time fell to SRC Chair James Nevels, who was appointed by Governor Schweiker in December 2001. Nevels, chairman of the Swarthmore Group, a multi-billion dollar investment and financial advisory firm, had served as part of a three-person control board overseeing the failing Chester-Upland (PA) School District in the 1990s. Born to teenage parents in the deep South, he frequently shares the story of his roots to make the point that education made a difference in his life and that he is committed to seeing that it makes a positive difference in the

lives of Philadelphia's children and youth.

Nevels has a humble bearing; he is soft-spoken and has proved unflappable in face of raucous community protests and tough union negotiations. His mantra during difficult times is "This is about the children." His priorities are reflected in the SRC's Declaration of Education, a statement that stresses the goals of high academic achievement for all children, a safe and orderly environment in schools, equity in opportunities in schools, community collaboration, sound fiscal practices (including a balanced budget), and efficient and effective support operations at the central office level.

Appointments of the other four SRC members were announced by February 2002. They included two highly regarded Philadelphians appointed by Governor Schweiker: James P. Gallagher, the president of Philadelphia University, and Daniel J. Whelan, an attorney and then-president of Verizon Pennsylvania, Inc.<sup>6</sup> As part of the takeover agreement, Mayor John Street was entitled to name two SRC members. He added former Board of Education members Sandra Dungee Glenn and Michael Masch. Glenn is the President of the American Cities Foundation, formerly served as Congressman Chakah Fattah's chief of staff, and has a long history in local electoral politics and community organizing. She

<sup>5</sup> Faced with the fiscal insolvency of the school district, Mayor Street was not opposed to the state takeover itself. He was, however, strongly opposed to the Governor's plan to privatize the management of up to 60 schools (with 45 going to Edison) and to give Edison Schools management authority over the school district's central office. The Governor's recommendations drew heavily from an Edison report (costing \$2.7 million), commissioned by then-Gov. Ridge, that assessed the state of the Philadelphia district and drew up a plan for its takeover.

<sup>6</sup> Whelan retired from Verizon Pennsylvania at the end of 2002 and is now a lawyer with the firm, Montgomery, McCracken, Walker and Rhoads, LLP.

## A Timeline of Philadelphia's Education Reform

### 1998

Hornbeck and city leaders "draw a line in the sand" and refuse to cut more programs—threatening to adopt an unbalanced budget.

PA legislature responds by passing Act 46, a state takeover law aimed specifically at Philadelphia.

### 1999

School District presents budget to City Council with projected \$94 million deficit for 1999-2000 school year and refuses to make further cuts.

Heated mayoral race with education as a central issue.

### 2000

Mayor Street selects a new School Board and appoints the first Secretary of Education for the city.

PA Legislature passes and Gov. Ridge signs Act 16—the Education Empowerment Act—a state reform and "takeover" bill affecting 11 school districts.

A state takeover is averted through a financial settlement reached between the School District and Gov. Ridge. Still facing a deficit, the School Board cuts the budget and Supt. Hornbeck resigns in protest.

### 2001

School Board adopts budget with \$216 million deficit, creating a new fiscal crisis with state takeover of the district possible.

Ridge hires Edison Schools, Inc. for \$2.7 million to make recommendations for state takeover.

Ongoing student and community protests against privatization of schools.

Ridge appointed Homeland Security Director, Lt. Gov. Schweiker becomes Gov.; presents takeover plan drawn heavily from Edison report calling for private management of up to 60 schools and recommends contracting out most central administration functions.

Strong community opposition prompts the governor to negotiate a new plan.

State takeover becomes "friendly takeover" negotiated between Mayor Street and Gov. Schweiker, includes additional funds—\$75 million state and \$45 million city for the District. City agrees to put on hold the federal civil rights suit against the state charging discrimination.

5-member SRC appointed to replace School Board (3 gubernatorial and 2 mayoral appointees). James Nevels, prominent suburban Philadelphia businessman appointed chair.



also hosts a local, weekly radio program on school-related issues. Masch, then Vice President for Budget and Management Analysis at the University of Pennsylvania, served for only eight months.<sup>7</sup> He was replaced in 2003 by Martin Bednarek, the CEO of Washington Savings Association, a Philadelphia community bank. This was the only commissioner position that turned over in the first four years of the SRC.

Significant questions swirled around the School Reform Commission in its early months: Would it be able to gain sufficient credibility, support, and trust among stakeholders? Would the political turbulence and protests continue? Could the SRC work as a cohesive unit, securing enough independence from both the governor and mayor so that 3-2 votes would not become the norm? At the outset, the SRC faced tough challenges: Its members had to address a \$200 million deficit, hire a CEO, and forge a workable solution to the ongoing privatization battle.

**The crucial steps the SRC took in the opening months of the state takeover were critical in establishing its legitimacy and making the takeover more acceptable in Philadelphia.**

The crucial steps the SRC took in the opening months of the state takeover were critical in establishing its legitimacy and making the takeover more acceptable in Philadelphia. It quickly established its independence from Governor Schweiker by rejecting his plan to have Edison Schools manage up to 60 schools, and instead chose to implement a model

in which multiple organizations, not just Edison, would have a crack at managing some of the district's lowest-performing middle and elementary schools.<sup>8</sup> This "diverse provider model" had been advocated by some urban school reformers, notably Paul Hill and his associates (Hill, Pierce & Guthrie, 1997; Hill, Campbell & Harvey, 2000). Thus, in April 2002, the SRC began its experiment in school privatization when it divvied up the management of 45 of the district's lowest-performing schools among seven external organizations: three national for-profit Education Management Organizations (EMOs)—Edison, Victory Schools, and Chancellor Beacon Academies; two universities—the University of Pennsylvania and Temple University; and two local non-profit organizations—Foundations, Inc., a reform support organization, and Universal Companies, a community development entity. All of these organizations were allocated additional funds for their reform efforts with the schools (Bulkley et al., 2004).<sup>9</sup>

<sup>7</sup> Masch resigned to become State Secretary of the Budget. Governor Ed Rendell, elected in November 2002, appointed Masch to the position. Masch had worked with Rendell as Budget Director when Rendell was mayor of Philadelphia.

<sup>8</sup> Edison founder and CEO, Chris Whittle, described the SRC's decision ("a late night political compromise") as a "bruising defeat" for the company in the short term. In his 2005 book, he argues that Philadelphia's implementation of a diverse provider model actually quickened the pace of acceptance of private-sector management of schools nationally, in part because the use of several different private providers in one district was more politically acceptable than contracting with a single provider (Whittle, 2005).

<sup>9</sup> The for-profit EMOs got approximately \$850 extra per pupil; the universities, which opted for lower levels of management authority, got \$450 extra per pupil; and the local non-profits got \$650 extra per pupil. The amounts for the EMOs, Universal, and Foundations, Inc. were later changed to \$750 extra per student.

## 2002

No Child Left Behind is signed into law requiring states to define Adequate Yearly Progress targets and increasingly severe interventions for failure to meet them.

Continued public opposition to extensive role of Edison in proposed reform.

SRC calls for an open process to select diverse providers and invites applications.

SRC chooses seven providers to manage 45 low-performing schools, giving each provider \$450-\$881 additional funds per pupil, beginning the diverse provider model.

## 2003

Paul Vallas hired as the CEO. District creates Office of Restructured Schools (ORS) to manage 21 schools. Contracts with providers are finalized. Vallas halts discussion of Edison assuming \$18 million role as lead consultant to the district's central office.

Ed Rendell, Democrat and former Mayor of Philadelphia, elected Gov.

22 schools meet all NCLB-mandated AYP targets.

For 2004, Vallas implements core curricula in math and literacy with increased instructional blocks. SRC terminates contract of one provider; 3 others get additional schools.

District creates Office of Development to serve as single point of contact for providers.

Rendell wages funding battle with PA legislature and delays budget passage.

58 schools meet all of their NCLB-mandated AYP targets.

## 2004

160 schools meet all of their NCLB-mandated AYP targets (the state relaxed the criteria for meeting some AYP targets during 2003-04; 30 of the 160 schools would not have met all of their AYP targets in 2004 without these relaxed criteria).

SRC publishes Declaration of Education, a blueprint of district goals to be reached by 2008.

## 2005

District announces pairing 12 high schools with private "transition managers" to assist with their conversion into smaller schools.

District disbands Office of Restructured Schools and assigns schools to regions. SRC announces Edison receives 2 more schools. 11 schools failing to meet AYP for 6 years are assigned to the newly created CEO Region where they will get intensive intervention.

The use of the private sector to manage schools expands: Microsoft Inc., the Franklin Institute, the National Constitution Center, and other partners ramp up their efforts to develop new high schools.

The SRC did not stop there. It assigned other low-performing middle and elementary schools to one of several interventions. Twenty-one schools were placed under a special district-run Office of Restructured Schools (ORS). These schools were allocated an additional \$550 per pupil to pilot a core curriculum, to undertake more intensive professional development for teachers, and to receive stronger administrative and instructional supports. Another four schools were told that they would be converted to public charter schools,<sup>10</sup> and 16 others that were already making progress were told to keep up the good work and given an additional \$650 per pupil for the 2002-03 school year (and \$100 per pupil the following year).

In all, the SRC assigned 86 of the district's schools (out of 260+ schools) to an intervention of some sort (for a graphic presentation, see Research for Action, 2005). Although the SRC held hearings on the assignment of managers to the four "conversion" charter schools and visited 70 schools whose status would change, parents and community members had no say in the assignment process, and parents were not given a choice about which model or school they would prefer for their children (Christman, Gold & Herold, 2005; Gold, Christman, Bulkley & Useem, 2005).

In the summer of 2002, Governor Schweiker and his Secretary of Education, Charles Zogby, inflamed relations with the district by promising \$55 million only if the money went exclusively to the EMOs and other external managers. The SRC bucked the state still again when it threatened to refuse additional state funds if the money came with onerous strings attached. The SRC was supported by outraged city politicians and advocacy groups. At public meetings, the same Philadelphia activists who had expressed vocal opposition to the SRC suddenly rallied around the commissioners. They denounced the state, encouraged the SRC to reject the money, and chanted, "if you stand up for equity, we'll stand up with you!"

This conflict with the state represented a major turning point in the takeover story. At this moment, the city was united *with* the SRC *against* a common enemy "and the SRC suddenly became *local*, the voice of Philadelphians standing up to the state's bullying" (Cucchiara, 2003). In reflecting on the SRC's stand against the state, Nevels explained that it was a turning point in terms of building trust among the five commissioners. Nevels also reached "across the table" to mayoral appointee Michael Masch and asked him to head up the formulation of the plan that sought an equitable allocation of resources between EMO and district schools. As Nevels put it, "What that did was fully engage the mayoral appointees on the SRC in the process. It made ownership of the process palatable for them. This helped avoid political fractures." Nevels said he felt it was "essential the SRC wasn't fragmented:"

As chair, I wanted to avoid 3-2 votes, especially significant ones.... [C]andidly, I would just lock the door and wouldn't let 3-2 votes go forward. I held out for at least 4-1 votes. I would beg and plead and ask, 'What, Commissioner X, do you need to be able to support this measure? What's your bottom line that you need?'

All of these decisions were made by the SRC—under intense time pressures to be ready for the opening of the school year—while they were simultaneously conducting a national search for a new superintendent (re-named CEO).<sup>11</sup> Nevels felt that the appointment of a nationally known education reformer from outside Philadelphia was critical to securing credibility with business and civic leaders. A bona fide search for a CEO also obviated the public's suspicion that the operation of the district would be given to an EMO or outside enterprise. No wonder, then, its members were relieved and enthused when an experienced CEO, Paul Vallas from Chicago, accepted their job offer and assumed the helm of the system in mid-July 2002.

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<sup>10</sup> In the end, only one of these schools became an independent charter. The SRC assigned another to be managed by Universal Companies and two others reverted to district control.

<sup>11</sup> The former interim superintendent, Philip Goldsmith, had resigned in protest to the Governor's actions late in 2002 and had been followed by another interim, Deirdre Farmbry, whose position, by that time, was perceived as largely ceremonial.

### *Vallas joins the team*

In contrast to James Nevels' more deliberate style, CEO Paul Vallas brought with him a reputation as a "whirlwind," a hard-charging workaholic who had established a record of substantial reforms as CEO of the Chicago Public Schools during his six-year tenure from 1995 to 2001 (Coeyman, 2002; Gammage, 2003; Pick, 1996b). He was credited with putting that system's chaotic fiscal house in order, launching a massive capital campaign for new school construction and renovation, securing labor peace, ending social promotion, reaching out to neighborhood groups, providing summer school and after-school programs for struggling students, and raising student achievement. Several of his changes provoked significant opposition, particularly the ending of social promotion, the development of a scripted curriculum, his attempts at reducing the power of the local school councils, and his focus on high-stakes testing. At the very end of his tenure, test scores flattened out. Outside of Chicago, little was known about where the Vallas agenda had fallen short—this, perhaps a testament to the CEO's ability to control the messages about his administration. But a veteran researcher of Chicago school reform enumerated the less positive aspects of Vallas's legacy:

It was clear that test scores had plateaued when Paul left. He had shaken things up and said 'We'll stand for no more excuses.' But he actually went for the easy answers not the hard stuff. He didn't move teaching. And his promotion policy resulted in higher dropout rates [for low-achieving students].<sup>12</sup> Both the dropout rate and the graduation rate have been improving since he left. But none of this seemed to stick to Paul.

Nevertheless, the SRC viewed Vallas as a glowing candidate for CEO. He brought a national reputation and, as an outsider, was a more

acceptable candidate to state officials. The SRC voted unanimously to offer him the CEO position in Philadelphia, and Gov. Schweiker encouraged the appointment as well.<sup>13</sup>

In certain respects, Philadelphia posed fewer challenges for Vallas than when he took over in Chicago. The school system was less than half the size of Chicago's; the political scene was less complex and combative; and, most importantly, Vallas and his team had already had plenty of experience implementing systemic change—albeit more at the structural than at the instructional level—in a large high-poverty, racially segregated, and under-funded urban system. Vallas also was fortunate that Philadelphia had already made progress in curriculum and instruction and in raising expectations for student achievement under the leadership of David Hornbeck (1994-2000). His comprehensive 10-point reform effort, *Children Achieving*, had led to the establishment of academic standards, a quantified system of school accountability, all-day kindergarten, extensive professional development programs for teachers, literacy initiatives in the early grades, and small learning communities within the schools (inter-disciplinary groupings of teachers). Under *Children Achieving*, test scores at the elementary level had increased (Christman & Corcoran, 2002).

Vallas and the School Reform Commission faced an extraordinarily difficult set of challenges. The first challenge was that a significant portion of the public was still deeply skeptical of the wisdom of the state's takeover of the school district and the outsourcing of school management to external organizations. The two mayoral appointees on the SRC were open in their opposition to the privatization of school management, as were a number of civic, community, and student groups. Protesters from these groups regularly voiced their opposition and outrage at SRC meetings during the first half of 2002. For example, when the SRC proposed contracting with for-profit EMOs to manage three

<sup>12</sup> The ending of social promotion for 3rd, 6th, and 8th graders did not raise achievement levels of 3rd graders who were retained in grade and, for the retained 6th graders, was associated with lower achievement growth (Roderick and Nagaoka, 2005). Results for 8th graders were more complex: the high school dropout rate went up for low achieving students but declined district-wide after the introduction of the promotional gate in 8th grade (Allensworth, 2005).

<sup>13</sup> Vallas signed a five-year contract that ends in July 2007. His base salary is \$225,000. He has received annual 10 percent performance bonuses and will receive an incentive bonus of \$300,000 for staying his first three years and will be eligible for an additional \$200,000 bonus if he stays until the end of his five-year contract. He will collect the bonus at the end of his tenure.

**Vallas also was fortunate that Philadelphia had already made progress in curriculum and instruction and in raising expectations for student achievement under the leadership of David Hornbeck (1994-2000).**

neighborhood high schools, student groups protested the proposal. At a June meeting of the Commission, they seized the microphone, causing the SRC to recess its meeting.

Second, key questions remained unanswered. The diverse provider model itself was numbingly complex and still somewhat ill-defined. What would be the terms of the contracts with the external school managers? How much authority would the latter have over school operations? How would they be held accountable for their performance as contractors? How could they be ready to open schools when their contracts remained unresolved in mid-summer? Besides that, to the public eye, Edison Schools' continued existence was in question: the company's stock price had plunged in April after the SRC's decision to award it only 20 schools, not the 60 to 80 that state leaders had proposed earlier.<sup>14</sup>

Third, Vallas and the SRC had to figure out how to develop a working relationship with the Philadelphia Federation of Teachers (PFT), long a thorn in the side of reform-minded district administrators (Boyd & Christman, 2003; Maranto, 2005; Useem, Christman, Gold & Simon, 1997). Philadelphia had a reputation as a strong union town in general, and its teachers' union was well known for its success in preserving its work rules and seniority rights. In two separate rounds of bargaining over contract renewals, Superintendent Hornbeck had been unable to win substantial changes in work rules or in contract provisions governing teacher placement and transfer, a failure that cost him the support of the city's business elite and key philanthropic leaders. His administration was marked by a bitterly hostile relationship with the PFT. The takeover of the system orchestrated by Governors Ridge and Schweiker and key state legislators was partially a result of their desire to weaken the authority of the union (Boyd and Christman, 2003). Thus, Vallas and the SRC faced the challenge of walking a fine line between courting the PFT while simultaneously paving the way for contract negotiations in 2004 that would wring concessions from the union.

Looming over all of this were continuing uncertainties about where the money was coming from to run the district, to renovate or replace crumbling school buildings, and to pay for the new reforms, including the diverse provider model. As part of the takeover deal in December 2001, Governor Schweiker had advanced the system money to meet the district's payroll and promised to come up with an additional \$75 million for the district's reforms. But six months later, that promise remained unrealized. Vallas and the School Reform Commission also had to overcome the reluctance of key philanthropic groups to give money to the district because they believed their contributions during the Hornbeck years had not yielded the results they wanted.

Vallas and the SRC had to deal not only with this immediate financial issue, they also had to build long-term credibility with state legislators about the district's budget, proving that they could lower costs and balance the budget over a number of years. This task was particularly challenging given Pennsylvania's chronic under-funding of urban and rural schools (Skinner, 2005), and the low tax base in a city where the median family income hovered around \$30,000.<sup>15</sup>

From the vantage point of the turbulent summer months of 2002, it was far from clear that Philadelphia's complex, hastily planned and radical interventions in low-performing schools could result in a smooth school opening, let alone long-term improvement in student outcomes. It was possible that this "hydra-headed" reform effort could blow up on the proverbial launch pad. The SRC and Paul Vallas had just a few weeks from the time of his appointment to make things work right.

### *Taking charge*

Within days, Vallas tackled some of the nettlesome problems that had angered the

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<sup>14</sup> The company converted to private ownership in 2003 when it was bought out from the state of Florida's pension fund, thus ending its status as a publicly traded company. Its stock reached a high point of \$38 a share in 2001 but dropped below a dollar a share in June 2002. Shareholders received \$1.76 a share when the company was bought out.

<sup>15</sup> According to the U.S. Census Bureau, 25 percent of Philadelphia's residents fell below the federal poverty line in 2004 (\$23,497 for a family of five) as did 35 percent of the city's children, an increase from 28 percent the previous year (Ginsberg, Kanaley & Kummer, 2005).

district and its stakeholders. With the SRC's support, he worked out the details of the SRC's deal with the state that allowed for \$55 million of the additional aid to be allocated not just to EMO-run schools but to schools across the district, and he arranged for another \$27 million in state budget support.<sup>16</sup> Vallas also scotched the plan to have EMOs manage three neighborhood high schools, and he supported the SRC's decision to drop the contract with Edison Schools as a "lead district adviser." ("That's what *I'm* here for" said Vallas to the *Philadelphia Daily News*).<sup>17</sup> He also finalized contracts with the seven external organizations to manage 45 low-performing schools identified the preceding April. These actions by Vallas and the SRC drew praise from community groups, civic leaders, and the media.

While willingly cooperating in the diverse provider experiment, Vallas also let it be known that the EMO-run schools were "his schools" and that alternative school management was "not a silver bullet" (Dean, 2002a). "I'm for what works whether it's private or non-private," Vallas asserted on the day his appointment was announced. He projected a similar attitude toward public charter schools in the district—i.e., their existence was fine, but the district would insure that they were held accountable for results. Most important, Vallas projected a "can-do" optimism, injecting a sense of both hope and urgency into the district's efforts. Parachuting into a city often accused of having a defeatist civic mentality, he appeared to relish the challenges before him.

Within 30 days of his appointment, Vallas announced a high-speed change effort modeled on his work in Chicago. In the words of a *Philadelphia Inquirer* editorial (2002), he immediately changed the "tone and substance of the conversation" on the city's schools.

Another news profile noted that he "hit the district like a tornado, seeming to be everywhere at

once, in the schools, before the legislature, beside the mayor. ... [and he argued that] to reform the system, you've got to do 20 things at once, like it or not" (Gammage, 2003, p. 12). In Philadelphia, where Superintendent Hornbeck's ambitious 10-point plan for change had drawn accusations of "reform overload," Vallas' efforts were breathtakingly bold—a testament to the confidence that SRC members placed in their new CEO. Indeed, his own initiatives drew attention away from the rollout of the diverse provider model in the lowest-performing schools. His actions in Philadelphia replicated his style in Chicago, as described by an administrator in that system:

In the first couple of years, everything happened unbelievably quickly. An idea in Paul's brain could blossom into a funded, complex program within a few weeks or months. Kids can't learn because they can't see the chalkboard? Within months, Paul got tens of thousands of pairs of eyeglasses donated to the district and distributed to children. Teachers line the halls every payday because the antiquated computer system can't calculate their checks right? Within weeks, a special payroll service center went up outside the building to help employees resolve pay issues quickly (Brandhorst, 2004, p. 121).

Like the SRC, Vallas took the spirit of NCLB to heart and stressed the importance of school efforts to raise standardized test scores and achieve Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) as defined by the federal and state governments. With this in mind, he implemented a "managed instruction" system, one that included a common core curriculum in the major subjects, a system of formative benchmark tests (given every six weeks to assess student mastery of the curriculum), and new textbooks and materials aligned with the curriculum. He also introduced an electronic Instructional Management System (IMS), SchoolNet, that enables teachers to access information on their students, the curriculum, lesson plans, and curriculum resources (Gehring, 2005). School Assistance Teams supported efforts to raise student achievement by assessing the performance of low-performing schools and assisting them in planning and monitoring change.

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<sup>16</sup> Vallas revealed his political skill early on in negotiating the use of the \$55 million. Although he essentially won the dispute with Secretary of Education Charles Zogby, he told the press, "I don't think anyone backed down. I think it was a fair compromise" (Brennan & Dean, 2002).

<sup>17</sup> R. Polaneczky, *Philadelphia Daily News*, August 13, 2002.

In addition to these changes in curriculum and instruction, Vallas' initial efforts were devoted to the following:

- *Financial initiatives*: the creation of a balanced budget that reduced waste and re-directed money to the classroom along with aggressive efforts to secure additional funding from the state, the federal government, and private sources. In addition, the district passed a \$300 million bond issue to cover the prior deficit and help pay for new programs.
- *School construction and renovation*: an extensive (\$1.7 billion) capital campaign to build a number of new high schools and modernize existing schools and classrooms;<sup>18</sup>
- *School climate*: a uniform discipline code; more accurate reporting of infractions; a zero-tolerance policy for serious behavioral infractions, followed by placement in disciplinary schools and programs rather than transfers to other schools; a streamlining of the disciplinary process; and a crackdown on truancy;
- *School restructuring*: the conversion of most of the district's 42 middle schools to K-8 schools; high school initiatives that included building new, smaller high schools, reconfiguring several large high schools into separate smaller schools, reducing enrollments in existing high schools, expanding magnet schools and programs, and adding Advanced Placement and International Baccalaureate programs in many more high schools;
- *Class Size*: reduced class sizes in grades K-3;<sup>19</sup>
- *Pre-school programs*: expansion of the number of pre-school slots by nearly 50 percent;<sup>20</sup>
- *Student supports*: additional time for student learning, including mandatory extended-day and summer school programs for low-performing students;

- *Human resources*: a radically stepped up teacher recruitment and retention effort.

By June 2006, nearly four years after his appointment, all of these initial priorities, with the notable exception of the high school efforts, had either been substantially enacted or were far along on their implementation timeline.

### *Reaching goals, adapting to realities*

New waves of change have ensued, marked by an interest on the part of the SRC, Vallas, and state legislators in expanding school choice and in harnessing the talent and resources of for-profit and non-profit organizations to accelerate and deepen reform efforts. Most notably, the district has embraced charter schools. While the number of charter schools had grown rapidly under Hornbeck—to 39 by the time Vallas arrived—Hornbeck and his associates reluctantly tolerated them, partly because charters drew revenues away from regular district schools. The SRC supported charters, and Vallas smartly integrated his plans for school development with those of charter school organizers. Vallas and the SRC are using charter expansion (now 60 schools) in a strategic way to reduce overcrowding and assist with the depopulation of large high schools. In this, they have been aided by more generous state support to cover the cost to the district of charter schools.

The Vallas administration has also introduced its roadmap for the creation of 28 smaller high schools.<sup>21</sup> By Fall 2006, 22 additional high schools will be in operation; by 2008, Vallas plans to have 66 high schools in all, up from 38 when he arrived in 2002. All but four of these new schools will have 500 or fewer students. High school students themselves have played an important role in stimulating public support and pressure on the district to create small schools. Two student organizing groups, the Philadelphia Student Union and Youth

<sup>18</sup> In an interview with *Philadelphia Daily News* reporter, Mensah Dean, in 2002, Vallas admitted that the poor condition of the school buildings in the city was the thing that had surprised him most about Philadelphia's schools (Dean, 2002b).

<sup>19</sup> As of Fall 2006, there has been some slippage in this area due to budget austerity.

<sup>20</sup> The number of students in district-sponsored pre-school rose from 6700 in 2001 to a projected 9800 in 2006-07.

<sup>21</sup> This effort is part of the Small Schools Transition Project approved by the SRC in early 2005. The creation of smaller schools is being achieved by dividing up some of the larger schools, converting selected middle schools to high schools, designating existing annexes as separate high schools, and building new high schools. For a year and a half, the district contracted with four national private firms to assist with the transition of 12 high schools to smaller ones. These contracts were not renewed as part of budget cuts in June 2006.

United for Change, made small schools the focus of their organizing and attracted foundation funding for a small high school planning effort. Vallas's administration has also expanded sports and activities, particularly marching bands and chess teams, and is creating four regional "Super-Site" playing field/sports complexes around the city.<sup>22</sup>

The original diverse provider model underwent substantive modifications. Edison was assigned two more schools and Foundations, Inc., took over management of a comprehensive high school. The Office of Restructured Schools, the district-run entry in the diverse provider model, was disbanded after a three-year run and a new sub-district, the CEO Region (modeled on the successful Chancellor's District in New York City), has been created to support 11 chronically underperforming schools.

**The Vallas-led centralized changes across the district have existed alongside the decentralized diverse provider model of school change.**

The number of private companies working with the system in instructional areas (e.g., curriculum development, some after-school programs) and in school management was expanded; by Fall 2005, all seven of the district's disciplinary schools had been turned over to private management, a process that had begun under the Hornbeck administration. Vallas converted a middle school to a charter high school managed by an external non-profit group and made plans to convert two more.

Formal partnerships with universities and non-profit organizations have grown in number and scope as well. As plans for high school development have proceeded, five new high-profile partners have been recruited to develop and help run new or restructured high schools in conjunction with the district. These include the Microsoft Corporation, the Franklin Institute (the city's science museum), the National Constitution Center, the College Board, and the University of Pennsylvania. A local advocacy organization, the Philadelphia Citizens for Children and Youth (PCCY), has helped with the development of a new small high school focused on peace and justice issues.

The Vallas-led centralized changes across the district have existed alongside the decentralized diverse provider model of school change. But because final negotiations with EMOs and partners over their management contracts resulted in agreements for "thin management" that limited partners' authority over several key aspects of school functioning, and because most partners have essentially agreed with the substance of many of the Vallas reforms, these changes have, to varying degrees, also penetrated the outsourced schools (Christman, Gold & Herold, 2005; Gold et al., 2005).

### *Establishing communications*

The early months of state takeover were extremely rocky with regular protests at SRC meetings, continuing questions about whether the state and city would ante up on needed funding, and even accusations of cronyism against SRC Chairman Nevels on a construction contract. Working to build the necessary relationships internally, the SRC was not able to get a handle on its messages to the public. Aside from evening information sessions held by an SRC member at each of the schools where interventions were designated, there was little contact with Philadelphia's citizenry. The SRC's rules further dampened communication: speakers had to give district staff prior notification that they would speak, had to provide 10 copies of their comments, and were limited to three minutes of speaking time. Speakers often came away frustrated, feeling as though their comments had fallen on deaf ears, especially since SRC members usually listened to their comments impassively without giving a reply. The *Philadelphia Daily News*, in its June 20, 2002, "report card" on the reform, gave the SRC an "F" in "Communication."

The response to speakers changed on July 10, the day that Paul Vallas was introduced as the SRC's choice to be CEO. During the public comment session, a parent of a student with severe special needs described his inability to get a response on his son's program placement from the special education office of the district.

<sup>22</sup> Vallas has introduced suburban style sports—ice hockey and lacrosse—to hundreds of elementary and middle school students which will grow to become high school sports. He has plans to introduce crew (and a district boathouse as well) at the high school level (McLane, 2006).

An RFA researcher's field notes described what happened next:

{The father} finishes and starts to walk away from the microphone. Vallas stops him and asks if anyone from the special education office is here. No one is, so Vallas asks the father to wait around after the meeting, and he will talk to him about the problem. He says it sounds like something that could be resolved today, and that these public commentaries are designed to expedite problem solving. You can almost hear the collective gasp in the audience as people look at one another with lifted brows or whisper surprised comments. Someone behind me [a community activist] says, 'Good start, Paul. Good start.'

This type of personal response—listening to speakers, talking with them, taking notes on their comments, and arranging for follow-up meetings either on the spot with other administrators or with him—has become a Vallas trademark as it was in Chicago (Pick, 1996). When speakers register in advance to speak at meetings, district staffers often contact them to try to resolve their problem prior to the meeting. After Vallas' arrival, regular angry protests at SRC meetings dropped off precipitously.

Vallas' personal outreach to individual parents and community members extends far beyond these meetings. He has developed an efficient system of responding to emails, with assistance from his wife and his staff, and other personal communications. As one staffer put it in an interview, "The notion used to be that the school district kept everyone at bay ... Now, it's very much that we have to respond to community concerns, complaints, issues, and there is a big machine set up to do that." Vallas regularly attends evening and weekend meetings in the community, immediately visits victims of violence, and goes to events and funerals.<sup>23</sup> The fact that he personally responds to citizens helps explain why Vallas has been successful in cultivating allies from many corners of the city.

Over time, as SRC members grew more comfortable with one another and with their governance role, their communications with the public

improved. Observers of SRC meetings couldn't help but be impressed with Nevels' unflappability, with the level of respect that the commissioners demonstrated toward one another, and with their propensity to vote unanimously on the proposals before them. A funder noted, "I was very impressed when we spoke with the SRC. They've gelled as a group—joking and cross talk. They were immensely honest with us and we could see their disagreements." Certainly, a turning point in the SRC was their work on a "Declaration of Education." SRC members hammered out the Declaration at a governance leadership retreat. The Commission made the rollout of the Declaration in August 2004 a media event and strategically tied it to championing the district's stand on site-selection of teachers in ongoing contract negotiations with the Philadelphia Federation of Teachers. This event was part of a larger marketing campaign that involved community outreach, a media campaign, and direct negotiations.<sup>24</sup> One observer noted that Nevels became "the public face of site-based selection, even more than [Paul] Vallas [the Superintendent]." Another said, "I heard him [Nevels] on Radio Times. He made the pitch [for site-based selection]. He was the visible spokesperson" (Foley, 2006).

Nevels was also the key change agent in negotiating a breakthrough agreement between the district and the Building and Construction Trades Council of Philadelphia in 2006. Using the leverage provided the district's massive school construction program, Nevels personally brokered a deal that provides for up to 425 new apprenticeships to district graduates over a four-year period in the building trades unions that had historically shut out African Americans from their ranks. Similar agreements with other agencies are reportedly in the works. "... What made the agreement unprecedented [was that] it marked the first time that the building construction trades had so widely opened the doors to nonwhite applicants" (Moore, 2006). SRC members and media commentators credited Nevels' tenacity and diplomacy over more than a two-year period in getting the "historic" agreement completed (Jackson, 2006; Moore, 2006; *Philadelphia Inquirer*, 2006; Russ, 2006; Snyder 2006a).

**Certainly, a turning point in the SRC was their work on a "Declaration of Education."**

<sup>23</sup> According to one press account, Vallas' "popularity as Chicago's superintendent derived in part from returning just about anyone's phone call" (Dean and Brennan, 2002).

<sup>24</sup> Interestingly, site-based selection, though a key issue for the SRC, was not a topic of any votes of the Commission. Their role was primarily advocacy, not setting policy in this area.



## Relationships with Constituencies

The success of a reform effort as complex and bold as the one the SRC and Vallas rolled out in Philadelphia depended on their skill at building relationships with a range of constituencies — civic leaders and community groups, parents, elected officials, the teachers’ union, the Education Management Organizations and other partner groups, and administrators inside the district. In this section, we examine those relationships.

### *Engaging parents and the community*

When it came to decisions about the reform plan itself, the SRC and CEO Vallas made little effort to seek parent and community involvement in deliberations and decisions. Governor Schweiker’s takeover plan called for community organizations to serve as partners to the external

school managers in their work with low-performing schools. When the SRC curtailed Edison’s role in favor of the diverse provider model, it also abandoned the idea of community partners. Likewise, the SRC’s original plan to have regional and citywide parent/community councils to review policies and make recommendations fell by the wayside during the first year of the reform. In the months following the state takeover, the SRC did not develop meaningful channels for parents, students, and the general public to voice their concerns and suggestions about the rollout of the reform. The only formal venue where individuals could regularly register a protest or ask questions of the SRC was at the twice-monthly SRC meetings or at annual budget hearings. Citizens could also weigh in with district officials at one of hundreds of district-sponsored public meetings on the location of new schools or closures of existing schools.

At the same time, Vallas and the SRC incorporated dozens of community groups into the reform by contracting with them to carry out pieces of the district’s work, including efforts to improve school and community safety, to combat truancy, and to provide after-school services for children.<sup>25</sup> Leaders of some of the groups have

been hired as district employees, a move that taps their expertise but that may also have had the effect of dampening their protests against district policies and subduing their voices for educational equity (Gold, Cucchiara, Simon & Riffer, 2005; Useem, 2005). Vallas has been particularly active in including faith-based groups in change initiatives, arguing that the mobilization of churches and other religious groups helps with the provision of needed services for children and reduces the isolation of schools in their own communities. This effort has led to the creation of The Faith and Community School Partnership, Inc., a group that fosters links between community organizations and individual schools.

District leaders also communicate with civic elites—political, university and business leaders—on a regular basis and have drawn them into a wide array of partnership arrangements with the system in order to tap their talents and resources. Business leaders, for example, played a major role in the district’s successful Campaign for Human Capital that succeeded in re-engineering the teacher recruitment process, hiring more certified and/or “highly qualified” teachers, and increasing the retention of new teachers (Thomas and Akinola, 2004; Neild, Useem, Travers & Lesnick, 2003; Neild, Useem & Farley, 2005; Useem & Neild, 2005). Several central office administrators interviewed for this study, however, said that the business sector had not been major players in the reform effort.

Still, the most obvious gap in outreach efforts by Vallas and the SRC is that they have not developed regular vehicles for citizen input into many major decisions (Gold et al., 2005). In one key decision after another, the public has been shut out of systematic and substantive input. These decisions include the selection of schools for radical interventions; assignment of schools to external managers; and the formulation of policies on student discipline, retention, and promotion. Vallas and the SRC often do not present detailed rationales for decisions, nor have they made contracts with school managers and others readily available for public scrutiny.

Community, student, and advocacy groups have been especially at odds with Vallas and the SRC over several issues related to high schools. The Vallas team chose, for example, to discontinue support for the existing Talent Development High School comprehensive school reform model

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<sup>25</sup> In Chicago, Vallas received considerable support from grassroots groups who liked his sense of urgency in attacking schools’ failures (Talbot, 2004; Ayers, 2004).

that was designed at Johns Hopkins University and implemented with the assistance of the Philadelphia Education Fund. The model had been adopted in about a third of the district's neighborhood high schools and a rigorous external evaluation had documented improvement in student outcomes (Kemple, Herlihy & Smith, 2005). And rather than contracting with experienced school reform organizations such as Hopkins, the SRC contracted for a time with four private firms to act as "transition managers" to assist with the reconfiguration of large high schools into smaller units or separate schools, even though these firms had little experience in that field. Further, the district was slow to warm up to proposals from student and advocacy groups to create large numbers of small high schools and to include these groups in the school development planning process. In early 2005, however, the Vallas team embraced a small schools initiative and began a more collaborative planning effort with the interested parties (Simmons, 2005a). But as the new schools have begun opening up, the SRC and Vallas have not solicited systematic public input into the establishment of admissions policies for them. These policies inevitably involve painful tradeoffs between student access citywide versus preferential admissions by neighborhood or achievement criteria (Simmons, 2005d).

The district's zero-tolerance policy toward student discipline—considered "draconian" by the Education Law Center in Philadelphia<sup>26</sup>—is another area where advocacy groups have felt excluded from the decision-making process. One advocate for students put it this way:

While [the district] has reduced expulsions, they've transferred kids to disciplinary schools who don't need to be there. ... The policy is too uncompromising... There has been a lack of a pro-active effort to talk to others about a discipline policy. They needed to talk to students about it or talk to us.

<sup>26</sup> A state-appointed "safe schools advocate" who, among other things, advocates for victims of school violence, has lambasted the district for not addressing school violence aggressively enough (Snyder, 2005c). Other observers have noted that the overall insufficiency of the district's resources has meant that there are not enough in-school supports (e.g. enough counselors, administrators, and "teachers with a spare minute" or in-school suspension programs) to prevent disciplinary problems from escalating (Mesa, 2005).

Failure to establish consultative processes appears to be driven both by district leaders' sense of urgency to implement change and by Vallas' belief that community support will follow once he and his team deliver solid results. As one top administrator in both the Hornbeck and Vallas administrations put it, Vallas' view is "I'm not going to pretend to ask you for your input when I know how to run this." She argued that "if we had done surveys and focus groups and ... gotten feedback, we wouldn't have moved ahead with [the core curriculum, the Benchmark tests, and the extended learning opportunities after school and in the summer.]"

#### *Creating alliances with elected officials*

In an effective use of their talents and connections, School Reform Commission members have worked quietly behind the scenes to build support for the district among their respective constituencies and allies, whether among city political groups, the business community, or the higher education community. James Nevels has reached out to national and to local groups that could be of assistance in funding, public relations, or strategic counsel, leaving it to Paul Vallas to do the more open political lobbying at the city, state, and federal levels.

Vallas came to Philadelphia with considerable experience working in political circles under his belt. His entire career in Illinois had been spent in the public sector, including a stint as budget director of the city of Chicago, and he had navigated the treacherous world of Chicago city politics for six years as school district CEO. He had also come close to winning the 2002 Democratic gubernatorial primary in Illinois shortly before he was offered the CEO position in Philadelphia, an offer that rested partly on the promise of his political skills. Vallas did not leave Chicago with his reputation unscathed: some commentators saw him as a self-promoting grandstander who would sometimes overstep his authority (Ayers, 2004; Gammage, 2003; Russo, 2004), and he alienated school reform advocacy organizations who, among other things, objected to what they saw as combative steamrolling tactics (Talbot, 2004).

Vallas' familiarity with moving in politically

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fractious environments contrasted sharply with the lack of political skill of his predecessor, David Hornbeck, whose falling out with Republican state legislative leaders over budgetary and fiscal matters helped provoke the passage of state takeover legislation (Boyd & Christman, 2003).<sup>27</sup> It also didn't help that Hornbeck refused to focus on school violence—a priority concern among politicians—without first addressing the social ills underlying them (Mezzacappa, 2002). One civic leader interviewed for this paper noted that the SRC and state leaders wanted a CEO with an entirely different style than Hornbeck:

I think part of David Hornbeck's legacy was a backlash against scholars and... missionaries. ... So I think that the takeover and the establishment of the School Reform Commission and then the subsequent search for a new CEO was really in response to anti-David sentiment: 'That we got to get someone in here who's a politician who is not one of these do-gooder civil rights people; we just got to get someone who can deal with politicians and establish a relationship with Harrisburg.' So I think part of it was the reaction to David's missionary zeal. ... [His] people, in my estimation, had this very strong internal commitment to principles of equity and justice, and that was the lens through which they viewed everything ...

Vallas went out of his way to call or meet privately with local politicians and state leaders soon after his arrival. He has lobbied actively in Washington, D.C., and in Harrisburg with the administration of Democratic Governor Ed Rendell (elected in 2002) and the Republican legislature to raise dollars for the district. He produced balanced operating budgets—aided by a \$300 million bond issue—within two years of his arrival.<sup>28</sup> His response to school violence has also helped establish his credibility with legisla-

tors (Snyder, 2004a). Vallas' non-partisan pragmatism, his no-nonsense candor, and his willingness to compromise have stood him in good stead in political circles. "The truce between the Philadelphia schools and state officials has been mighty nice these last five years," commented a *Philadelphia Inquirer* editorial (June 1, 2006, p. A14). Even when Pennsylvania House members cut a \$25 million allocation for Philadelphia in the spring of 2006 that had been included in the budget since the takeover, Vallas hesitated to criticize them openly: "I lobby quietly for resources I think we deserve, and then we take the resources we're allocated and we do the best we can with it" (Snyder, 2006b). In the end, the \$25 million was restored to the budget.

The change in the school district's attitude about public charter schools during Vallas' time in the city is indicative of his willingness to accommodate to the political winds from Harrisburg and the SRC. The Republican state leadership, along with some minority groups in Philadelphia, wanted an aggressive expansion of charter schools, following a failed attempt to get school voucher legislation (Boyd & Christman, 2003).

Vallas' success in taking on tough issues by doing his political homework could be seen when the SRC voted in spring 2005 to close down the district's Comprehensive Early Learning Centers (CELCs), a day care and pre-school program that served a comparatively small number of parents at a prohibitively high cost per pupil. In previous years, the School Board had backed down to parental pressures when it tried to close the centers. Anticipating what proved to be vociferous opposition from parents, Vallas met privately with political leaders before the SRC vote, explaining that the expansion of pre-school programs to a much larger cohort of students depended on cost savings from closing down the CELCs. He also noted that projects these leaders wanted for their own neighborhoods—such as a new school—would not be possible if the CELCs remained

<sup>27</sup> Maranto (2005, p. 164) notes that "Hornbeck's personality was not completely to blame: the sheer number of players in the state and in the city whom Hornbeck needed to please was overwhelming, making his situation highly complicated." Mezzacappa (2002), writing in the *Philadelphia Inquirer*, commented on the differing leadership styles of Hornbeck and Vallas: "Even though, arguably, Philadelphia schools under Hornbeck made as much academic progress as those in Chicago under Vallas—test scores in both districts increased but remained way below national averages—the impression lingered that Chicago was succeeding while Philadelphia was not. The stylistic differences in leadership had a lot to do with the differing impressions."

<sup>28</sup> Higher energy costs, charter school expenses, debt service and the shifting of some special education expenses from the state to the localities, among other reasons, caused Vallas and the SRC early in 2006 to impose a hiring freeze in central and regional offices and to carry out district-wide cost cutting for the remainder of the 2005-06 school year and into the 2006-07 school year. The dwindling of the funds from the bond issue passed early in his administration is also contributing to budgetary austerity.

open. Thus, when SRC members voted to shut down the centers in the face of parental protest, they did so knowing that there would be no political blowup as a consequence of their vote.

Thus far, Vallas has maintained a cordial but not particularly close working relationship with city Mayor John Street, who appoints two members of the SRC and who has called for the return of school governance to the city. These two strong-willed figures had only one open disagreement in the first four years of the reform effort, one that involved whether city police officers should be placed in the district's high schools. Tensions, however, between Vallas and city officials over the level of the city's contribution to the school system's budget surfaced during budget discussions in the spring of 2006, with Vallas urging the city to contribute a higher proportion of its budget to the schools.

#### *Working things out with the EMOs and partner groups*

The diverse provider model of school management has been implemented in Philadelphia much more smoothly than expected. In part this is due to Vallas' clear signals that he was calling the shots and his non-ideological pragmatism. In interviews for this paper, a long-time central office administrator described it this way:

It is amazing to me when you watch the process of how upset everybody was with Edison when it first came, and Victory and Foundations, etc. ... I mean it was hate, it was competition, and slowly it is like it is not a big deal anymore. And to the credit of Paul Vallas, he has changed the whole tone about that. It is not terrible, it is like so what, they are still our kids. ... I think the new administration is doing a good job of keeping options open.

The district exercised its authority over the providers when it terminated the contract of Chancellor Beacon Schools after one year "for convenience." Two schools in the Temple University partnership that had shown insufficient progress were placed in a new CEO region in 2005, although Temple continued to have some managerial authority with the two schools.

What looked initially like a quasi-decentralized system of externally managed schools actually became part of the more centralized system in practice. The state's accountability system,

based primarily on standardized PSSA test scores, applied to schools run by providers, so their innovations with curriculum and instruction could not diverge greatly from district practices. Several of the providers adopted all or parts of the district's core curriculum.

And what appeared on the surface to be a radical experiment with privatization ended up looking more like a public-private partnership or "hybrid model" of school governance (Christman et al., 2005; Gold et al., 2005). From the start, the SRC devised a system of "thin management" whereby the district and the providers shared responsibility for different aspects of schools' functioning. Providers' most important area of control was curriculum and instruction and professional development. The district formally hired principals but providers played the key role in their selection. Teacher hiring followed the regulations established by the teachers' union contract which limited the role of the provider in personnel decisions, particularly prior to the renegotiation of the teachers' union contract in 2004 (Bulkley et al., 2004; Rhim, 2005). Decisions about school closings and reconfigurations of grades remained in the hands of the district.

Vallas and the SRC actively supported the work of the external management groups. They made certain that the providers would not face endless bureaucratic hurdles as they carved out their work in the district. Vallas created the Office of Development to coordinate and oversee the work of the EMOs and the expanding number of partner groups. Staffed by experienced and highly competent professionals, the office cleared away barriers to successful EMO functioning and, through regular meetings of the providers, also developed collegial relations among them (Christman et al., 2005; Gold et al., 2005; Rhim, 2005; Useem, 2005). In 2005 the Office of Development was replaced by a new sub-district, the EMO region.

District officials made sure that disagreements and partners' mistakes were kept behind closed doors, thus minimizing controversy about the diverse provider model. Further, they never played partners off against each other or made disparaging comments about their work in public. The standards of accountability built into the contract helped formalize and regularize

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the relationship between the providers and the schools. Reflecting on Philadelphia's experiment with a "thin management model," Chris Whittle, CEO of Edison Schools, noted the importance of this kind of cooperation:

...Philadelphia has shown that the public and private sector can engage on more flexible terms than initially imagined . . . . We were extremely reluctant to agree to conditions that diminished our authority within the schools we were assigned. . . . What Philadelphia has shown us is that it can work. We attribute that to the fact that the district administration has acted as our partner. It supported our work and didn't try to undermine it. If that kind of cooperation can be replicated, the thin management model would have legs elsewhere (Whittle, 2005, p. 87).

Vallas and the SRC are deferring judgment on the success of the diverse provider model until the fall and winter of 2006-07 as they face the decision on the renewal of the EMOs' five-year contracts that end in July 2007. By then, longitudinal research data on student outcomes by provider will be available. Researchers thus far have not been able to identify definitive patterns of gains when test score results are broken out by provider organization or by type of intervention (MacIver and MacIver, 2005, 2006; Useem, 2005).<sup>29</sup> The administration and the SRC will have to factor in new budget constraints facing the system as it makes the decision about whether to renew the contracts. Open opposition to the model in the district has fallen off among some civic and community groups since Vallas assumed office, but discontent with it still simmers. When the SRC awarded two additional schools to Edison in 2005, no one from the public spoke against the resolution. The two mayoral-appointed SRC members, however, expressed their continued objection to the outsourcing of school management and voted against the resolution.

Many more people inside and outside the district, however, appear to have changed their

thinking about diversified school management and public charter schools. An interview with a key figure in the district's administration, a holdover from the Hornbeck years, described this shift in thinking among central office staff:

I think the way people thought about EMOs, and the way they thought about charters really has undergone a massive sea change in the three years I have been here, because rather than being a sort of necessary evil, suddenly there's opportunities. You can do things [such as] making high schools smaller by using these different structures. So I think that certainly at a top management level, the benefit of these new structures has been seen and seized.

### *Building a relationship with teachers and their union*

Prior to Paul Vallas' arrival in Philadelphia, some seasoned observers predicted he would have difficulty replicating the reasonably harmonious relationship he had had with the Chicago Teachers Union (Lenz, 2004). His predecessor, David Hornbeck, had clashed repeatedly with the PFT (as captured vividly in John Merrow's PBS documentaries about Hornbeck's reform efforts) and had not been successful in winning changes in the contract, which he and civic leaders considered vital to reform. Yet Vallas, from the start, forged a good working relationship with PFT leaders, one that has not frayed even during the period of the contract negotiations in 2004. "He has restored a belief in public schools," said Jerry Jordan, Vice President of the PFT and chief negotiator in contract talks (Dobbs, 2004).

Things got off to a good start when PFT President Ted Kirsch and Vice President Jerry Jordan flew to Chicago prior to Vallas' selection to get to know him. In a luncheon meeting that went on, to his surprise, for about four hours, Kirsch told us that there was an amazing meeting of the minds:

"We were agreeing on everything. It was mind-boggling. We agreed on magnet schools, a standardized curriculum, things that Hornbeck opposed. Class size, making schools safe, we agreed about all this. I said at the end to Jerry, 'We can't tell anyone we like him, because he'll never get the job if they know the union likes him!'"

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<sup>29</sup> Separate teams of researchers from the School District, Johns Hopkins University, and Research for Action (in concert with the RAND Corporation and the Consortium on Chicago School Research) will be conducting longitudinal value-added analyses of student achievement during 2006 and 2007.

Indeed, there appeared to be a genuine meeting of the minds since both Vallas and PFT leaders believed in the importance of implementing a core curriculum, improving student discipline and school safety, and reducing class size. Once in Philadelphia, Vallas followed up on these mutual concerns and proceeded to develop a core curriculum, institute a range of policies aimed at improving school climate and safety (e.g. expansion of the number of alternative schools and programs with the number of enrollees going from 900 in 2002 to 3200 in 2005-06; more reliable reporting of incidents, and zero tolerance for more serious infractions),<sup>30</sup> and reducing class size in grades K-3 (Simmons, 2005c; Snyder, 2004a; Snyder 2005b; Snyder and Woodall, 2006). Their similar views on the need to expand the number of magnet schools and programs and on the efficacy of the state takeover further buttressed their working relationship.

Vallas makes a point of talking with PFT leaders on a regular basis, seeking out their counsel, informing them in advance of changes in policies or practice, and involving them in the rollout of various pieces of the reform. He goes out of his way to regularly praise the PFT as indispensable partners in the reform effort. Kirsch described for us that positive relationship and contrasted it with his dealings with the Hornbeck administration:

It's been a 180-degree change from Hornbeck to Vallas. Hornbeck never talked to us. Vallas and I must talk every day. When I meet with Vallas we don't talk about grievances, etc., we talk about how to make the system better. I've been through 5-6 superintendents in my career. He's very smart and listens to people. One thing Vallas says is that I've never given him bad advice. I don't have all the answers, but I know the system from the perspective of the teachers.

<sup>30</sup> The number of violent incidents declined by 14 percent in the 2005-06 school year compared to the previous year. The rate had been rising the three previous years (Snyder and Woodall, 2006). The safety of students within schools—while less of a problem than their safety on the streets going to and from school—remains a problem. The district has rolled out a number of initiatives to address the issue, including facilitating transfers of victimized students to other schools and investing in behavioral health initiatives.

The teacher contract negotiations in Fall 2004 represented a real test of the leadership of the SRC and of Vallas. The administration had more statutory tools at its disposal as a result of the state takeover legislation and NCLB. Teachers had lost the right to strike. The SRC could have imposed a contract—and Nevels threatened to do so—but, in the end, the leadership chose not to use all the weapons at hand, thereby avoiding a teacher job action. The compromise the parties reached on the final issues that divided them, including school-based selection of teachers (rather than their centralized assignment to schools) and the trimming of teachers' seniority-based transfer rights, preserved labor peace. Vallas had withdrawn from direct involvement in the negotiations some months earlier, leaving the job to the SRC which had the legal responsibility for working out the contract. In effect, he was able to play the “good cop” role with the union and leave the “bad cop” job to SRC Chairman James Nevels. From the beginning, the SRC had decided that school-based selection of teachers was their “line in the sand.” One commissioner described their thinking:

Early on we had established as a principle that principals were the linchpin and we felt that the principal needed to control or select her staff, otherwise they had divided responsibility [in their building]. We sat in a planning session, in the summer or early fall of '03 and asked ourselves, ‘What are the critical things in the negotiations?’ And the system that allowed the most senior teachers to opt to those schools that were less in need of them, didn't make sense.

The development of a good working relationship between Paul Vallas and the leadership of the PFT, one that appears to be based on shared goals and strategies, cannot be stressed enough as a key factor in the success of the reform effort thus far. The momentum for change could easily have been lost if labor strife had enveloped the district in Fall 2004. And if district and union leaders had engaged in debilitating daily conflicts, it would have diverted administrative energies away from the urgent work at hand and would have undercut teacher morale.

The personal touch that Vallas extends to parents and community members is also evident

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in his individual dealings with teachers. He responds to their emails and visits their schools during crises. At T.M. Pierce School, following a shootout next to the school that killed a third grader and wounded a crossing guard, he went from classroom to classroom, talking with each teacher. He sends out emails to all the staff on a periodic basis that inform teachers of new initiatives or the status of old ones and that also touch on day-to-day issues that matter to teachers such as new copiers that don't work or materials that are late arriving.

This is not to say that all is well in the relationship between Vallas and teachers, particularly reform-minded veterans who feel constrained by a structured curriculum and what they see as "scripted" professional development. (Vallas concedes that professional development needs improvement.) Many of these teachers yearn for the days in the 1980s and early 1990s when organized curriculum networks of teachers and interdisciplinary teams of teachers in high schools had a role in district improvement and garnered respect and national attention (Christman & Macpherson, 1996; Fine, 1994; Useem, Buchanan, Meyers, and Maule-Schmidt, 1995; Useem, Buchanan & Culbertson, 1997). These groups were generally supported by external foundation funds or federal money, and were often created by or backed by the Philadelphia Schools Collaborative and PATHS/PRISM, two reform-support non-profits that merged in 1995 to form the Philadelphia Education Fund (Useem & Neild, 1995).

Neither the Hornbeck nor Vallas administrations cultivated the support of the teacher networks, most of which fell victim to this administrative inattention and to the shifting priorities of private foundations.<sup>31</sup> One longtime reformer, speaking in Fall 2005 as part of a panel of teachers at a Education First Compact meeting, said "no one has asked me to speak for ten years. ... I am not invited to anything about literacy and learning." The other two panelists concurred.

<sup>31</sup> The Philadelphia Writing Project (PhilWP), the hardest and oldest of the networks, continues to be a strong organization, due in part to the skill of its internal leadership, succession planning, federal funding, and a long-term relationship with the University of Pennsylvania where it is based. PhilWP's success also derives from its membership in the National Writing Project.

### *Building a team inside the bureaucracy*

As an outsider with a reputation as a top-down manager, Vallas had his work cut out for him in developing a loyal team among inside veterans as he set up his administrative apparatus in the central office of the school district. In order to get off the ground quickly, he brought in a dozen trusted lieutenants from Chicago to serve as a transition team, serving in key positions including Chief of Staff, Chief Financial Officer, the Office of Secondary Education, and Chief Operating Officer. Tensions between the Chicago people and the veterans in central office were predictably apparent at first, but then dissipated and eventually became moot as the Chicagoans left their district positions.

Observers speculate that an apparent expansion of in-house leadership capacity has increased the possibility that the reform will outlast the present administration. The commonly expressed view that "all roads lead to Vallas" has subsided a bit. Most notably, in 2004 Vallas brought in a new Chief Academic Officer, Philadelphia-native Gregory Thornton, who had served in a similar role in the Montgomery County, Maryland, schools. Thornton lost no time in exerting his own authority and launching his own initiatives. Among other things, he implemented accountability processes for administrators, including displays of school and regional district data ("SchoolStat")<sup>32</sup> used at regular gatherings of Regional Superintendents with their principals and at meetings of the Regional Superintendents as a group with Dr. Thornton. These processes obviously put pressure on regional and building-level leaders to improve climate and achievement indicators at their schools and to implement centralized improvement initiatives, a departure from the more decentralized approach administrators were used to under the Hornbeck administration.<sup>33</sup>

<sup>32</sup> SchoolStat is based on the much-hailed CompStat system, the system developed by the New York City Police Department to motivate and hold accountable middle-management officers in order to fight crime more effectively. The Fels Institute of Government at the University of Pennsylvania helped develop the SchoolStat system

<sup>33</sup> Thornton's reputation was tarnished when a *Philadelphia Inquirer* story in June 2006 reported that in 2004 he had signed off on a major no-bid contract to a software firm that had subsidized an excursion taken by him and other educators to South Africa a few months earlier (Dilanian, 2006).

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Some tensions have existed between Vallas and the inside staffers, many of whom had proved their worth over the years as competent, hard-working administrators. Unlike some other urban district central offices, Philadelphia's was not known to be corrupt or to be a patronage haven (Boyd & Christman, 2003; Christman & Rhodes, 2002). Soon after his arrival, Vallas dismissed, demoted, or re-assigned selected managers, including people in the offices of human resources, curriculum, and professional development, some of whom were highly regarded throughout the district (Snyder, 2005a). He sometimes accompanied these actions by publicly disparaging the individuals involved, moves which, in the short term, set back the process of building a loyal team inside district headquarters and in regional offices.

As in Chicago, Philadelphia administrators had to adapt to Vallas' frenetic pace, his temperamental personality, his shoot-from-the-hip decision-making, and his aversion to working within an organizational chart (Pick, 1996b). For those who like working in a more free-wheeling atmosphere with tight timelines and rapid-fire judgments, Vallas' style has been refreshing and appropriate given the urgency of the task before them. For administrators who prefer to work within a disciplined organizational environment, the Vallas style has been hard to deal with. Staff have had to "manage up," figuring out ways to curb (or cope with) the CEO's "craving for control,"<sup>34</sup> his instinct to say "yes" to too many people<sup>35</sup> and to assign tasks to administrators without regard for their formal portfolio of work.

For now, it appears that Vallas has impressed his staff with his energy, vision, and commitment, his ability to problem solve, and his command of detail. Even among those who have been critical of aspects of his work style, nearly all thought his leadership overall had been good for the school district. A top administrator interviewed

for this study who has served under several superintendents described his strengths as follows:

Vallas is incredible how he knows budgets. He has this natural talent for budgets and a unique creative mind. I've been in meetings where someone was stuck on something and he'll give 10 suggestions this quick [snaps fingers]. ... He just rattles it off. He has the details of the budget in his head, and his knowledge is not just at a surface level.

#### *Leadership on the line*

Paul Vallas and James Nevels exemplify what management-guru Jim Collins describes as "legislative leadership," a style that "relies more upon persuasion, political currency, and shared interests to create the conditions for the right decisions to happen." This type of leadership, Collins writes, is crucial in non-profit and government sectors where leaders "do not have enough concentrated power to simply make the right decisions" (Collins, p. 11).

In a 2005 interview with *Fortune* magazine, Collins talked about his research into how some executives prevail in "brutally turbulent environments when others do not," ... environments where they are "statistically destined to fail." One of the things he said he has learned is that:

You can make mistakes, even some big mistakes, and still prevail. ... You don't need a perfect hit rate. You might need to go four out of five on the really big ones, and there are some killer gotcha mistakes from which you can't recover, but you don't have to go five out of five."<sup>36</sup>

Thinking about Paul Vallas' and James Nevels' leadership of an organization where the possibility of failure is ever-present and even likely, the pair have thus far avoided the "killer" mistakes. Vallas has succeeded in winning allies in all sectors—the PFT, the politicians, parents and civic leaders, and partner organizations. It is interesting that so far in Philadelphia, he has not polarized groups into supporters and opponents as he eventually did in Chicago. By his own admis-

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<sup>34</sup>Gold, E., Cucchiara, M., Simon, E. L., and Riffer, M. (2005, September).

<sup>35</sup>Massell, D. (2000). *The district role in building capacity: Four strategies* (Rep. No. RB-32). Philadelphia: Consortium for Policy Research in Education; Newmann, F. M., King, B., and Youngs, P. (2002, August). Professional development that addresses school capacity: Lessons from urban elementary schools. *American Journal of Education*, 108; O'Day, J., Goertz, M., and Floden, R. E. (1995). *Building capacity for education reform*. New Brunswick, NJ: Consortium for Policy Research in Education.

<sup>36</sup>This interview of Jim Collins appeared in *Fortune* magazine in its 75th Anniversary Issue published in June, 2005, pp. 89-94.



sion, he learned from his experiences during his six years as CEO in Chicago. Although still described as thin-skinned and control-oriented,<sup>37</sup> he has muted and fine-tuned his style in Philadelphia, exhibiting greater flexibility on issues such as promotion and retention policies and on the amount of guidance needed for teachers in a core curriculum. He has sought extensive input from the teachers' union and has avoided over-reaching in political arenas. One civic leader put it this way:

I think he has had a positive impact on the city. I think there would have been few other people who could have come in and calmed the waters the way he did around privatization ... When Paul came in, from the first [SRC] meeting, he was in charge.

James Nevels has also exhibited "legislative leadership," evidenced by his success in wringing concessions from the teachers' union on the issue of school-based selection of teachers and in crafting an agreement with the city's Building and Construction Trades Council that created new job opportunities for minority graduates in skilled construction work. His quiet behind-the-scenes efforts to build political and fiscal support

for the district have been important contributions. Most importantly, he has kept internal SRC conflicts and its disagreements with the administration from boiling over into disruptive public displays.

The policy context has also provided a supportive ground upon which Nevels and Vallas could operate to solidify their support. The conditions created by the state takeover, the passage of NCLB with its strong accountability provisions and tools for intervention, and the creation of an organizationally messy diverse provider model called for strong leaders who could take charge without hesitation.

As we write this, new perils present themselves that will require extraordinary leadership on the part of the district's leaders. Budget austerity, caused by increased expenses and the depletion of funds from the \$300 million bond issue that helped fund the

reforms, has forced hard choices, leading to tensions between the SRC and Vallas. The unity within the SRC now appears shaken by differences about whether to extend Vallas' contract. Overt support among many important civic and political leaders for Vallas will make it difficult for the SRC to replace him (Dean, 2006; *Philadelphia Inquirer*, 2006c; Snyder & Woodall, 2006b).

## Conclusion

**I thought it was going to be the biggest disaster ever and instead it really has turned out to be a grand experiment that turned out to the advantage of our kids. We would have been going along the same old route. We could never have come up with this ourselves. Sometimes being forced into something works out better. People are looking at us [now] as the model.**

—official in the Vallas administration

Philadelphia's complex and radical education reform under the controversial state takeover was clearly a high-risk enterprise that many people expected to "crash and burn." That it has so far escaped this fate is due, we believe, to a fortunate combination of skilled district-level leadership, important enabling conditions associated with the takeover, and the requirements brought on by NCLB. The provisions of the takeover, which included extra funds to support and lubricate change, replaced the school board with the powerful SRC and prohibited teacher strikes, both of which shielded both Vallas and the SRC from much of the volatile politics and pressures that bedevil urban school district leaders. NCLB brought new forms of external accountability for student achievement that have forced acceptance of measures that would have been strongly resisted in the past.

Even with the favorable enabling conditions, the takeover could have disintegrated on many occasions, especially near the outset. As we noted earlier, during these critical opening months of the state takeover, the SRC, under Nevels' leadership, took vital steps that not only established its legitimacy locally, but made the takeover

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<sup>37</sup> A July 23, 2006 (p.E6) editorial in the *Philadelphia Inquirer*, largely laudatory of Vallas, described his flaws: "His thin skin, hyperactivity, and craving for control can be annoying—though some of these traits have helped propel him."

more palatable in Philadelphia. They did this by limiting the huge role the state had proposed for Edison Schools, by hiring a nationally recognized education reformer as CEO, and by refusing to accept the state's conditions on funding that required all the new state funds to go to Edison or other outside providers. By these and other measures they began the transformation of the takeover from a "hostile" to "friendly" one, gained legitimacy, and created conditions that gave Paul Vallas an opportunity to gradually gain acceptance, even though he was an outsider. These conditions, together with the effective partnership that quickly developed between Vallas and the SRC, laid the groundwork for successful district-level leadership in the reform effort.

The key elements of this story, we think, were the leadership's success in establishing the legitimacy of the new governance structures, of the leaders themselves, and of their reforms. The SRC and Vallas were able to:

- make the takeover acceptable and seem like a partnership;
- make the radical reforms seem commonsense and politically acceptable;
- make the contradictory, competing approaches seem balanced and pragmatic;
- make a rapid-fire, scatter-shot approach seem comprehensive and responsive to the urgency of the situation.

The leadership and management accomplishments of Nevels and the SRC in the period from January to July 2002, when Vallas came on board, were extraordinary. They managed the explosive privatization issue, leading the transformation of the outsourcing of school management from a scheme that was to have relied heavily on Edison Schools to the "diverse provider" model that ultimately divided up the management of 45 of the lowest performing schools among seven external organizations. Moreover, at the same time they had to deal with a \$200 million deficit and conduct the CEO search that led to the hiring of Vallas. And from his arrival to the present, Vallas has been a whirlwind of tireless energy and leadership, as he tackled a never-ending succession of challenges and problems.

The leadership and management tasks the SRC and Vallas faced were daunting because, as we have noted, Philadelphia's education reform was radical in three respects: it is the largest district ever taken over by a state; it has involved the largest experiment so far in outsourcing school management via a "diverse provider" model; and it has combined, rather than chosen between, the "choice-based" and "integrated governance" models described by Wong and Shen (2003). The pragmatic ways these three models have been combined and implemented in Philadelphia have produced some amalgams that have blurred the boundaries between the public and private sectors in outsourcing, and have led to new insights about how "thin management" and new kinds of partnerships can lead to productive new kinds of relationships (Gold et al., 2005), a development that even Chris Whittle (2005) acknowledged.

Fairly assessing the outcomes of these efforts is difficult because multiple goals and values are involved and much work remains to be done. Student achievement gains, as noted earlier, have been encouraging, but less dramatic than many desire. Indeed, Vallas and the SRC themselves stress that while improvement has occurred, there is still a very long way to go before they are satisfied with student outcome measures. Educational reformers who favor choice-based models are disappointed because the diverse providers scheme has been implemented in a way that minimizes choice among the providers' schools (Hill, 2006). However, the large and growing charter school sector in Philadelphia, which the district has embraced and tried to leverage strategically, provides a significant range of choice for students and parents.

However, there are pitfalls and areas where work has barely begun. A list of these would include, at a minimum, the following: still no system-wide plan for high school reform that offers a robust strategy for improving neighborhood comprehensive high schools; weak leadership in schools; a teaching force that may not be up to the job of teaching to high standards, with scant attention thus far to content-based professional development; and new financial problems that have forced deep cut-

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backs to maintain a balanced budget. Each of these shortcomings is significant. Taken together, they will undoubtedly undermine long-term, substantive education improvement, if not addressed.

So, how should we assess the district's leadership? It has steered the district through perilous waters, both political and financial; brought peace, stability, and progress; balanced budgets; implemented a core curriculum; and launched new programs and new small high schools.

**If the leadership of Nevels and Vallas has not been perfect—who would expect that it could be—it nevertheless has been extraordinary in managing what many have called an “impossible job.”**

But it has limited public input into policy decisions, so the top leadership does not get high marks on democracy. Whether district leaders will respond to requests for greater transparency and openness in decision making remains unanswered at this time. The lack of public participation is worrisome because a shared agenda that has broad public support is critical to sustaining reform through future changes in district leadership (Stone, Henig, Jones, & Pierannunzi, 2001; Christman & Rhodes, 2002; Gold, Simon & Brown, 2002).

In the Anglo-American world, the scholarly literature on educational leadership increasingly emphasizes the importance of democratic, shared leadership (Boyd, 2001). In other parts of the world with more hierarchical traditions, such as Asia, more directive leadership is expected and the priority is getting effective results (Walker & Hallinger, forthcoming). Of course, we want both democracy and effective results. Yet, because the frequently abysmal results being produced in our large urban school districts have become a national disgrace, many are now embracing radical reform measures that challenge both democratic norms about governance and conventional thinking about how public schools should be organized and managed.

Clearly, the state did not take over the district and replace its school board with a more powerful, more insulated, and less accessible SRC in order to promote democracy in Philadelphia. Nor did the SRC hire Vallas primarily to promote democracy. There was a compelling and overriding need to get better educational results. And the SRC and Vallas faced this dilemma: Which should receive priority, achieving desirable results quickly or making sure the public was involved and heard?

Of course, it is easy to say they should have found a way to achieve both quick action and democratic input and consensus. But those who would require such a standard need to think about the chronic and pathological patterns typical of big urban school districts: dysfunctional revolving doors on the superintendency, rapid spinning wheels of inconsistent policies, and warring factions on the school board and in the community (Hess, 1999; Hill & Celio, 1998).

If the leadership of Nevels and Vallas has not been perfect—who would expect that it could be—it nevertheless has been extraordinary in managing what many have called an “impossible job.” The first phase of the takeover, however, is ending amidst funding problems and a chilling of the relationship between Vallas and the SRC. Close observers of Philadelphia's takeover agree that the district is entering a second phase of the takeover process in which more community involvement and participation will be necessary for the legitimacy and support required to sustain the bold reform effort and to obtain needed funding. The future of Philadelphia's education reform will depend heavily upon the daunting task of finding adequate replacements for Nevels and Vallas when they leave their current roles. Whatever the makeup of Philadelphia's leadership team, they will continue to face steep challenges.



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