How Students Are Leading Us: Youth Organizing and the Fight for Public Education in Philadelphia

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Philadelphia has a rich history of high school student activism, stretching back to 1967 when 3,500 Philadelphia students walked out of their schools, marched to the Board of Education and demanded the addition of black history courses taught by black teachers, the removal of police from high schools, and an increase in the hiring of black principals. More recently, in December 2000, thousands of high school students staged a walkout, followed by a rally at City Hall and a march to the state office building to protest the state takeover of the school district as well as the state's newly signed multimillion dollar contract with Edison Schools, the for-profit education management organization that was poised to take over the running of scores of Philadelphia schools. And in the spring of 2013, on the 59th anniversary of the Brown versus Board of Education decision, thousands of Philadelphia students again organized a walkout to protest severe budget cuts to public education that would result in the closing of 23 schools and leave the remaining schools deprived of extracurricular programs, guidance counselors, librarians, and other vital resources.

Philadelphia's students have long been a major force in the battle for public education, and for the past decade and a half they have fought valiantly against the encroachment of neoliberalism, the idea that market-based logic can solve non-market problems more efficiently and effectively than governmental or public sector agencies. Leading this charge have been two prominent youth organizing groups, the Philadelphia Student Union (PSU) and Youth United for Change (YUC). Both PSU and YUC have been at the forefront of recent organizing efforts to protest and propose alternatives to the shuttering of 23 schools, the firing of 3,859 educators and support staff, and the elimination of extracurricular programs and arts education from the public schools for the 2012-2013 school year. In this commentary, we examine the ways that students have responded to and altered this and various other attempts to dismantle public education, enervate local decision-making and accountability structures, and privatize Philadelphia schools. In the context of continuing neoliberal attacks on education and the present moment of crisis in the Philadelphia School District, we show how youth have risen to the challenge of protecting and preserving the "public" in public education.

We root our discussion in our past analyses of the Philadelphia Student Union. PSU offers a vivid example of the potential for young people to respond to harmful education reform agendas and the power of youth-led struggles for social change. Founded in 1995, PSU has engaged thousands of youth in its leadership training, political education, and organizing work. Currently PSU has approximately 125-150 core members who attend monthly meetings and participate in PSU actions and mobilizations. Members range in age from 13-18 and most are African-American; a sizeable number of African immigrant student members are involved as well. PSU currently has chapters in 6 schools, two of which are magnet schools and the other four of which are neighborhood schools serving predominantly low-income students of color. In addition to specific school-level campaigns run by their school chapters, PSU members organize city, state, and national campaigns focused on promoting equity-oriented education reform. The organization has been widely credited with influencing both educational policy discourse and decision-making in the district, and it is viewed as a significant player in Philadelphia education politics (Conner, Zaino, & Scarola, 2013). The case of PSU demonstrates the importance of youth voices to current conversations about public schooling and school reform. Student voice is critical not just because students have the greatest stake in schools and school systems and not just because their first-hand experiences can help us understand the real life consequences of policies and practice, but also because students are uniquely positioned to challenge neoliberal logic. As we argue in this piece, by flipping the script, establishing broad-based alliances, and demonstrating historical vigilance on issues that matter, PSU shows how students can take on critical leadership roles in the struggle for educational equity.

The Power of Flipping the Script and Establishing Broad Alliances

PSU members work hard to "flip the script" by altering how young people are portrayed in the media and viewed by the general public. They also reframe key conflicts so that local, seemingly discrete incidents can be viewed in the context of a broader historical process of neoliberal education reform. Flipping the script empowers youth, the primary stakeholders on whose behalf reforms are implemented, to advocate an agenda that reflects their interests and the interests of their communities. Importantly, this approach also positions PSU to form strategic alliances with other crucial stakeholders.

In a society in which young people are viewed as passive social service recipients, PSU's very existence flips the script. PSU positions its youth organizers, and youth in general, as agentive, informed, and opinionated. PSU members do rigorous research into the issues that become the focus of their organizing efforts, developing complex analyses of the root causes of the problems in their schools, identifying who is responsible for these problems and who has the decision-making power to initiate changes, and proposing solutions that serve a range of interests. These articulate youth organizers speak with poise to reporters; they behave with

professionalism in meetings with elected officials, administrators, and district personnel; and they engage in a process of thoughtful deliberation as they plan rallies, marches, and other "actions."

Framing youth as empowered agents of change fundamentally contradicts the discourse of neoliberal education reform. Neoliberal ideologies view these mostly low-income, mostly Black and Brown urban youth as undeserving beneficiaries of a wasteful system. Across the U.S., neoliberal reformers have advocated defunding public services in favor of strengthening the private sector, ultimately placing the responsibility for those services in (presumably more efficient) private hands (Lipman, 2011). This shifting of resources is justified using accountability measures aimed primarily at assessing the performance and behavior of teachers and students. In this model, young people are positioned as both the cause of the problem and the objects of reform. They become spectators in a show that repeats itself with each new crisis.

Youth organizing, on the other hand, disrupts this pattern of spectatorship. Instead of remaining the objects of reform efforts, PSU members, who view themselves as organizers and leaders, force their way onto the reform stage in order to play central roles in determining what changes are made in schools and across the district. They simultaneously hold adults accountable and take leadership in implementing innovative ideas. As we have found in past studies (Conner, Zaino, & Scarola, 2013), District administrators, foundation executives, and key players in the world of Philadelphia educational reform view PSU as a legitimate ally and, at other times, as a formidable foe. In the case of this most recent and very contentious wave of struggles around school reform, students forced the School Reform Commission, Superintendent William Hite, and state lawmakers to take them seriously with a walkout that drew several thousand students out of school and into the streets to protest budget cuts. At the same time as PSU members were coordinating actions to confront these drastic budget cuts, they were also crafting flexible responses to the problems that had been created when, several months prior, Philadelphia's SRC had decided to close 23 schools and send displaced students to other already crowded schools. In anticipation of the social problems that this mass transfer of students would likely create, PSU began facilitating dialogues between current students and incoming students at one high school.

Fundamentally, neoliberalism is a set of ideas that has permeated the way we frame problems and perceive groups and individuals. While PSU's dual strategy addresses the destructive policies advocated by individual neoliberal reformers and enacted by private institutions and governmental bodies, it also undermines a more nefarious characteristic of how contemporary neoliberalism governs our lives. Neoliberal discourse extends beyond the people who are its most vocal champions; rather, it has been adopted by the general public as a grammar and vocabulary for identifying what the "problems" and "solutions" are to social ills (Cerny, 2008).

In the School District of Philadelphia, neoliberalism is manifest not only in the many reform plans that shift resources from public to charter schools, but also in the ways debates about the schools are framed by local politicians, District Administrators, and mainstream media outlets. For instance, in more than a decade of post-state takeover discussions about what is wrong with Philadelphia's public schools, the parties who are most frequently blamed for these problems are students and teachers. This perspective is so entrenched that there was little public outcry when a seven-part investigative series that appeared in *The Philadelphia Inquirer* last year (Sullivan, Snyder, Graham, et al., 2011) essentially implied that the pervasive violence across the District was a result of an already violent student population and teachers who did not have the tools or authority to control them. Instead, the series' authors won an award and received extensive praise for their work. This newspaper series became a new rallying point for the PSU-initiated Campaign for Nonviolent Schools, which pointed out that it presented a misleading, overly simplistic view of young people that would only constrain possibilities for addressing various forms of structural violence in the District's schools. PSU challenges the normative assumptions of neoliberalism by offering the public a straightforward but complex alternative analysis for the problems that plague urban public schools across the country, by brazenly taking center stage to speak out against each new wave of neoliberal reform, and by taking responsibility for addressing some of Philadelphia students' most pressing needs in the wake of failed reforms.

In addition to altering how young people are perceived, PSU flips the script by reframing crises in educational reform. Budget cuts, school closings, teacher lay-offs, and charter expansion tend to be discussed in the mainstream media as discrete, localized issues. Rather than mounting resistance within this narrow framework, PSU points to the ways in which each of these crises is part of a broader neoliberal agenda to defund and then privatize public education while deregulating private service providers. For instance, beginning in 2012, PSU and a number of other organizations mounted a campaign against a plan proposed by the Boston Consulting Group (BCG), a private firm that had been hired by the School District of Philadelphia to evaluate how resources were used and distributed in the district and suggest cost-cutting measures. BCG's plan involved such drastic measures as closing existing public schools, creating more charter schools, significantly narrowing public school curricula, and reducing and weakening the teaching force. Further, the District's dealings with BCG were done largely behind closed doors, offering little transparency to the process, and BCG's suggestions were not implemented all at once, making each change appear to the general public to be distinct from other reforms that were being imposed on the city's public schools. In this way, neoliberalism manifested as both the lens through which reformers narrowed the possibilities for district-wide change (by hiring a private, for-profit firm to make recommendations) *and* the mechanism by which reformers attempted to dismantle what was left of Philadelphia's public education infrastructure (by closing public schools and laying off teachers and staff while leaving charter schools untouched by the budget cuts). Here, then, neoliberalism served as an organizing framework for thinking about the problems with Philadelphia's public schools and emerged in the form of concrete reform initiatives.

As soon as the BCG plans became clear, PSU joined with other organizations to form the Philadelphia Coalition Advocating for Public Schools (PCAPS), which laid out a coherent response to this plan with suggestions for alternative approaches to addressing the anticipated budget shortfall. Importantly, the document produced by PCAPS deconstructed the neoliberal premises of the BCG plan, revealing the fallacies on which they were based and framing the entire plan as a unified approach at undermining public education. It stated,

The central premise of the BCG Plan—that the school district suffers from a fiscal crisis that necessitates these radical structural changes—is deeply flawed. In fact, were it not for the deliberate underinvestment and disinvestment in Philadelphia schools by the state, and the misguided investment in an oversized and exceptionally costly charter school sector by the SRC, the district could easily be enjoying a multibillion-dollar surplus instead of a deficit. Indeed, the supposed fiscal "crisis" is largely a fallacy. The real crisis we face is one of misplaced priorities: Philadelphia's traditional public schools are being unnecessarily starved of resources, and our children and youth are suffering the consequences. (Philadelphia Coalition Advocating for Public Schools, 2013, p. 3)

This analysis was echoed consistently in PSU's messaging throughout rallies, marches, and student walkout in the months that followed. When the SRC met to vote on the closing of dozens of Philadelphia public schools, youth organizers highlighted the relationship between school closings and charter school expansion. When the SRC adopted a "doomsday budget" that essentially cut all art, music, athletic, and extracurricular programs across the district, youth organizers questioned whether or not what remained could be called "school" and pointed out that such cuts would drive families away from public schools and into charter schools. When the District fired 3,859 teachers, counselors, and support staff, youth organizers made it clear that the result would be overcrowded classrooms and students would flock to the city's charter schools.

Moreover, in all of these responses, PSU's analysis drew connections between the neoliberal attack on public education in Philadelphia and similar reform efforts in other cities, such as Chicago and Los Angeles. In particular, PSU has been quick to point out the many parallels between manifestations of neoliberalism in Chicago and in Philadelphia. Not only have these two cities served as stages for some of the same educational leaders (such as former District CEOs Paul Vallas), but also these cities have witnessed similar reforms, often at almost the same time. PSU organizers have been incorporating this critique into their work for years. PSU member Sharron Snyder traveled to Chicago in May 2013 to speak at a rally against the closing of 49 Chicago public schools. Later, she appeared on an MSNBC news program alongside a student activist from Chicago, further solidifying the linkages between these two seemingly distinct contexts.

This complex analysis that identifies the root causes of educational inequity and unpacks the strategies of neoliberal education reformers buttresses PSU's larger goal of ending poverty. Besides pointing out the problematic nature of neoliberal reforms, PSU's messaging reflects the organization's nuanced analysis of the ways in which race and class figure into the politics of school reform. Members do not hesitate to draw attention to the fact that their schools, which serve largely low income, Black and Brown communities, are particularly vulnerable to the most aggressive defunding efforts. PSU's membership in the New York City-based Poverty Initiative offers members resources and training to make these bigger conceptual connections between education reform, race, and poverty. This is one of many ways PSU has chosen to engage in alliance-building.

PSU members understand that they are not alone in their frustration with recent public education reforms, and they strategically ally themselves not just with activists in other cities, but also with a variety of other stakeholders as a means of resisting attempts to isolate and ignore youth. Locally, young people are uniquely positioned to establish alliances because they sit at the nexus of school reform discussions. As youth, they are in direct, almost daily, contact with parents, teachers, and administrators. PSU has a history of partnering with these groups around their common interest of creating healthy learning environments for young people.

PSU's alliances, however, have extended even beyond the groups with obvious overlapping interests. In the context of PSU's larger goal of ending poverty, members are able to demonstrate how budget cuts for public schools, anti-union measures, and growing privatization of the district are harmful across the board for students, teachers, administrators, parents, local unions, and other community groups. In recent years, PSU has been vocal about the PA state government's culpability in Philadelphia's funding shortfalls. PSU's ongoing school funding campaign has been devoted to getting the state government to update its outdated and inequitable school funding formulas. More recently, that campaign has taken center stage as members organize to fight the massive state budget cuts to education, cuts that were made even as money was devoted to building several new, privately run prisons. Throughout the duration of these campaigns, PSU's main target has been the State of Pennsylvania, with the central message that defunding schools while increasing funding for prisons creates a school-to-prison pipeline. This lens, which highlights the ways in which good, well-resourced schools keep whole communities safe, appeals to a vast array of individuals and organizations. Such thinking has helped PSU reach beyond the limits of the education reform community to form new, cross-issue alliances.

PSU has also remained flexible, sometimes engaging in alliances with seemingly disparate groups. Though PSU articulates a clear critique of plans that rely on the private sector to take responsibility for public education, the organization has found common ground with charter management organizations around efforts to secure increased funding and less crowded schools. Further, like

many other youth organizing groups, PSU has rooted itself in strong national alliances such as Journey for Justice (J4J) and the Alliance for Educational Justice (AEJ).

Such broad-based alliances have a strong impact on struggles around education reform, because they contradict neoliberal efforts to divide and conquer by appealing to the specific interests of particular groups. With broad-based alliances, groups can identify a common target and coordinate their actions to make meaningful demands of those with the most institutionalized power. Youth are able to amplify their voices by standing alongside adults who are making the same demands. The power derived from and expressed through these alliances was evident in the case of PCAPS, which included both PSU and Youth United for Change (YUC), Philadelphia's other longstanding youth organizing group. The platform released by PCAPS in December 2012 focused on solutions as well as problems, presenting a united front from a wide range of stakeholders.

The Power of Perseverance

Just as the youth of PSU draw connections across diverse stakeholder interests and across local and national contexts, so too, they make linkages across time, connecting what is happening now in Philadelphia education reform to what has happened in the past. They can make these links in part because they have been involved in these reform debates for more than 18 years. Much of the power of their voice derives from their longstanding presence and the perspective that such perseverance brings.

Simply by holding fast in the face of constant churn in Philadelphia education politics and policy, PSU has demonstrated the stability and depth of its commitment to equity-oriented school reform. Over the past 18 years, Philadelphia has seen seven superintendents, including several interims, take the helm; it has seen the state mount a takeover of the District, dissolving the locally elected school board and replacing it with a politically appointed School Reform Commission; and it has seen three major strategic reform initiatives launch and flounder - David Hornbeck's *Children Achieving*; Paul Vallas's so-called diverse provider model, which marked the initial foray into privatization (Christman, Gold, & Harold, 2006) and the so-called "contracting regime" (Bulkley, 2007); and Arlene Ackerman's *Imagine 2014* - all amidst waves of budget cuts, scandal, and controversy.

The activist community has also experienced considerable turnover and flux. Various intergenerational and parent organizing groups have come and gone. For example, the Eastern Pennsylvania Organizing Project, an organization that at its height encompassed 25 congregations, parent associations and neighborhood institutions, was active in the early years of the Hornbeck administration, but has since lapsed in its activity; similarly, the Parents Union for Public Schools, also active during the Hornbeck administration, has vanished from the organizing scene. Parents United for Public Education, a vocal parent organizing group in the city now, was founded in 2005, ten years after the two youth organizing groups, PSU and YUC, gained traction. Within the activism space, PSU and YUC have shown tremendous staying power, which contributes to their strong reputation for leadership.

Because PSU has outlasted such change and upheaval within the School District, it can exercise a historical perspective that might elude many newer organizing groups. Over time, PSU members have fought budget cuts under several different governors and mayors. They have analyzed and responded to various efforts to privatize Philadelphia schools. And they have collectively borne witness to the slow but steady erosion of public education in the city as the neoliberal agenda continues to be pushed forward. Indeed, the current moment in Philadelphia education represents for PSU the convergence of several key issues with which they have engaged over the years: school funding; privatization; and governance, transparency, and control in local decision-making.

As noted above, PSU has long fought for increased funding for public education. Alumni from the late 1990s recall annual trips to Harrisburg, where they would rally and "storm the capitol" to demand greater revenue for schools from the state legislators. The first issue of PSU's newsletter, published in 1996, contains a story about a PSU-led student walkout to protest tax cuts that cost the city's schools millions of dollars. It also includes an article about the effects of the cuts on students and a series of recommendations for how the state and city could go about securing more money for public education (see *Youth Voice*, 2001/2002). Virtually every issue of the newsletter since then has contained at least one article about PSU's work to lobby the state and the city for increased investments in education. In their testimonies, actions, and written commentary, PSU students have consistently critiqued state and local spending priorities, chronicling how money is drained from schools and pumped into the expansion of prisons. Archival images on the PSU website show students holding signs that say "Fund Schools, Not Prisons" and "More Classmates, Less Inmates" (see www.phillystudentunion.org). Older PSU members transmit these institutional memories to new members through workshops in which they analyze the history of school funding in the state. Workshops on the causes and effects of school funding inequities were integral to the group's recent effort to organize students from across the state to call for increases to the education budget, which included a Valentine's Day rally in Harrisburg, with 500 students and parents encouraging Governor Corbett and his administration to fall back in love with public education. PSU's vigilance on this issue, combined with its members' awareness of the long history of disinvestment from public education on the state and local levels, makes students' voices particularly potent now as the community contends with the "doomsday," "bare bones" budget that the SRC has approved.

PSU's long-standing commitment to school funding issues is matched by its enduring opposition to neoliberal privatization efforts. In 2001, PSU rose to national prominence when students linked arms and blocked access to the school district headquarters on a day when the administration was negotiating with Edison Learning (formerly Edison Schools), a for-profit educational management organization, which had signed a $2.7 million contract with the state and was set to take over the running of a

considerable proportion of the district's schools. The students' actions, which also included a rally with other organizers in New York outside the Edison headquarters and a takeover of the Mayor's Office, resulted in Edison being granted a contract to run only 20 Philadelphia schools, none of them high schools. Furthermore, those schools retained unionized employees. These efforts were highlighted in many national newspapers at the time and chronicled in a PBS Frontline documentary, which offered a sympathetic portrayal of Chris Whittle, the CEO of Edison, and depicted the students as obstructionists to well-intentioned reforms. Since then, PSU has continued to fight against the incursion of private educational management organizations (EMOs) and charter management organizations (CMOs), and it has resisted various superintendents' efforts to expand charter schools in the district. For example, PSU was critical of Arlene Ackerman's strategic initiative, *Imagine 2014*, which included provisions for CMOs and EMOs to takeover some schools that had been "failing" to make Adequate Yearly Progress for four or more years. This provision of *Imagine 2014* foreshadowed turnaround policies and sanctions that would become prominent in the federal Race to the Top legislation as well. In meetings with Ackerman and other high-level district administrators, PSU students insisted that schools converted to charters must continue to accept all students who were previously enrolled so that no students would be "pushed out" of school during or after the conversion process. PSU members also reminded various stakeholders about the research on charter schools in Philadelphia, which up to that point did not show that charters were outperforming traditional public schools (e.g., Zimmer, Blanc, Gill, & Christman, 2008). They cited this research when questioning the grounds on which schools were being turned over to private providers with limited if any track record of success.

Although not as concrete a campaign as either school funding or privatization, issues of governance, transparency, and accountability for decision-making have also long been concerns for PSU. And just as PSU understands how years of budget cuts and the gradual expansion of charter schools have led to the present moment of crisis in Philadelphia public education, so too it has been able to track the long-term, devastating effects of a state takeover and a School Reform Commission that cannot be held to account for its decisions because it is composed of appointed managers rather than democratically elected representatives. Nonetheless, PSU students remain a constant presence at SRC meetings, where they testify with regularity. They continue to request and hold meetings with high-level School District administrators, public officials, and school reform commissioners; and they stage public actions that draw attention to closed-door decision-making processes and their consequences. They also continue to apply pressure and target the Governor, aware that because he controls the purse strings and appoints three of the five SRC members, he can steer decision-making in Philadelphia from his seat in Harrisburg.

In summary, because it has endured in the face of so much change, PSU has established a strong reputation for leadership in the city. Not only has it earned the credibility that comes with a long-term presence, but also it has developed the perspective to recognize and respond to the trajectory of the neoliberal policies in Philadelphia. PSU's analysis of decreasing funding colliding with increasing charterization to produce the catastrophic closing of 23 schools, the displacement of 14,000 students, and the firing of 3,859 educators and school employees has particular resonance because it is rooted in nearly two decades of student witnessing, experiencing, critiquing, and calling for something better.

Conclusion

This past May, MSNBC host Melissa Harris-Perry invited PSU member Sharron Snyder and a youth activist from Chicago to appear on her news discussion program along with a panel of journalists and one public official. After showing footage from the 2013 student walkout in Philadelphia and interviewing the student guests, Harris-Perry asked the adult panelists, "How is it that the children are leading us on this? How is it that they get it and we don't?" We contend that the youth "get it" because they see through the shallow rhetoric and false promises of neoliberal logic. Rather than accepting an image of themselves as consumers in the educational marketplace, the youth of PSU embrace identities as critical thinkers, creative problem-solvers, and perhaps most importantly, concerned members of their community. As such, they have emerged as important leaders in the fight against neoliberalism in public education.

PSU has drawn on the power of flipping the script, establishing broad alliances, and persevering to advance alternatives to the neoliberal solutions of privatization, deregulation, and competition. PSU members contradict neoliberal constructions of youth and reframe policy problems and solutions, as they call for greater investments in public education, more opportunities for participation in decision making, and increased accountability for charter schools, District administrators, and public officials alike. They are uniquely positioned to bring diverse stakeholders together to fight for common interests and priorities. And they make powerful connections not only across geographic contexts and issue areas, but also across points in time, as their longevity allows them to root their analysis in an historical understanding. Together, their analysis and actions mount a robust challenge to the neoliberal reform agenda and point the way towards a more democratic vision for public education.

When traditional public schools are stripped of the few resources they can claim, deprived of librarians, guidance counselors, arts educators, and sports programs, and when they are merged so that classrooms become larger, hallways more crowded, and the lines to pass through metal detectors longer, it is easy to see why some students might choose to enter their names into a charter school lottery. Students who value education and care about their own futures cannot be faulted for looking to CMOs as an alternative to their beleaguered traditional schools; however, the youth of PSU start from a different premise. Certainly, they care about themselves and their futures, but they also care deeply about one another and about their community. Advancing beyond their own self-interest not only negates neoliberal rhetoric that isolates individuals and valorizes personal responsibility over collective action, it also prefigures an alternative vision of what it means to live in community with others, one that takes seriously the voices of

those who are at the center of the educational system. Even as their members "age out" of their status as youth organizers, then, groups like PSU and YUC will always occupy this central position, thus ensuring their continued relevance and effectiveness. Certainly, these might be the most important reasons to follow their lead.[i]

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