Philadelphia's Renaissance Schools Initiative after Four Years

Kati Stratos, The School District of Philadelphia

Tonya Wolford, Ph.D., The School District of Philadelphia

Adrienne Reitano, The School District of Philadelphia

In 2010-2011, the School District of Philadelphia (the District) launched its Renaissance Schools Initiative, a program designed to dramatically improve student achievement in the District's lowest performing schools. Some schools became Promise Academies, based on the federal turnaround model, and remained District-operated neighborhood schools. Other schools became Renaissance Charters, based on the federal restart model, and shifted management to external charter providers while remaining neighborhood schools. The District has added new Renaissance Schools each year from 2010-2011 through 2013-2014 and, to date, converted 20 schools to Renaissance Charters and 15 to Promise Academies. Three of those 15 Promise Academies have since closed.

Early research showed improved student outcomes in Cohort One [1] Promise Academies initially (Gold, Norton, Good, & Levin, 2012), but after three years, the majority of Promise Academies had not achieved rapid or dramatic increases in student achievement (Wolford, Stratos, & Reitano, 2013). Meanwhile, Renaissance Charters, which were showing improvements on par with Promise Academies after Year One, demonstrated rapid growth in student achievement in more than half of the schools after Year Three (Gold et al., 2012; Wolford et al., 2013). This article will explore the implementation of the Promise Academy model over the first four years of the initiative and, in particular, examine why the model has floundered compared to the relative success of the Renaissance Charters.

The Renaissance Charter restart model has remained mostly unchanged since Year One (2010-2011). When schools are turned over to a charter operator, they receive nearly full autonomy from the District in exchange for increased accountability. All or most of the staff is usually replaced, and new policies, procedures, and academics are implemented according to the goals and missions of the provider (Wolford et al., 2013). In contrast, the Promise Academy model has changed significantly since 2010. As initially conceived and implemented, Promise Academies operated with minimal autonomy under a District-defined model that included extended school time, uniforms for students and staff, enrichment and world language studies, prescribed intervention programs, and community collaborations. Originally, the District maintained Promise Academy staff in the central office to provide leadership and oversight, and schools followed the *Promise Academy Way,* a "leadership handbook" that specified certain school-wide expectations related to mission and vision, climate and culture, systems and procedures, academic programs, and parental partnerships (Gold et al., 2012).

Between 2010 and 2014, unprecedented budget shortfalls led to a reduction in funding across the District. For Promise Academies in particular, many defining aspects of the model were eliminated, including Saturday School, Summer Academy, and eventually, the extended school day. The District eliminated central office staff dedicated to Promise Academies and shifted oversight of the Promise Academies to division superintendents. District Superintendent Arlene Ackerman, who spearheaded the Renaissance Schools Initiative as a defining component of her *Imagine 2014* agenda (The School District of Philadelphia, 2010), resigned in August 2011. Interim Superintendent Lee Nunery led the District through January 2012 followed by Chief Recovery Officer Tom Knudsen, and Superintendent William Hite took over the position in October 2012. Going into the 2012-2013 school year, there was "a general lack of clarity about what distinguished Promise Academies from other schools" (Wolford et al., 2013).

As recently as a July 2013 meeting of the School Reform Commission [2] (SRC), commissioners articulated a lack of clarity about the current status of the Promise Academy initiative and acknowledged the need to "rigorously discuss" the model that was inherited and redefine it under the District's new leadership (Mezzacappa, 2013a). Despite the financial and conceptual uncertainty, the District announced in February 2013 that six additional schools would become Promise Academies in the 2013-2014 school year. The list included two high schools that would use 2013-2014 as a planning year to develop a vision for turnaround and instructional programming. This strategy was intended to improve the Promise Academy model, which had previously shown minimal evidence of effectiveness at the high school level (Gold et al., 2012).

The failure of the Promise Academy model appears to be due in large part to changes in leadership, slashed budgets and unstable funding. However, this explanation ignores the opportunity to reflect on the past four years of school turnaround in Philadelphia, to

identify lessons learned, and use them constructively moving forward.

Methods

Multiple data sources and analytical techniques were utilized to craft this report, including document analysis, direct observations, interviews, and focus groups. The primary method of data collection for this research consisted of full and half-day site visits to 13 of the 15 Promise Academies over a three-month period from March through May 2014. Each site visit was conducted by a team of two researchers and included a pre-visit survey, interviews with school leadership and staff, and one or more classroom observations. In total, the research team completed over 70 interviews and focus groups with Promise Academy staff. Participants were informed that their interviews would be recorded and transcribed and that identifying information would be deleted from the transcripts. Interviews were semi-structured based on the *School District of Philadelphia High Performing School Practices*, which articulate the District's baseline expectations for school practices aligned to seven categories (Vision for Learning, School Safety, High Quality Instruction, Positive Environment, Talent Development, Data, and Family and Community Relationships (School District of Philadelphia, 2014). The researchers analyzed data through multiple readings and used narrative analysis and grounded theory approaches to determine themes that represented the experience of turnaround in Promise Academy schools. To portray these themes, quotations are included from the participants, who are identified only by their job function and the school's turnaround cohort. Program documents and artifacts such as news articles and press releases were also used to triangulate the data.

Findings: The Promise Academy Model From 2010 Through 2014

After four years of implementation, the District is not implementing a designated, uniform, Promise Academy model. The model began to disintegrate after the first year due to slashed funding and changes in District leadership. Although some aspects of the model did indeed survive after the first year, there was great variability in implementation among the schools. As originally conceived, the Promise Academy schools were to receive additional supports but minimal autonomy. This is in contrast to the Renaissance Charter schools, which receive almost complete autonomy from the District in exchange for a high degree of accountability.

The District reported that the cost of operating the six Cohort One Promise Academies during the 2010-2011 school year was approximately $5.9 million, or nearly $1 million per school per year (Leach, 2014). Some reporting suggests that the first-year investment in the six Promise Academies was even as high as $9.7 million due to increased staff compensation for the longer school day and year (Herold, 2011a). The most recent reports indicate that the District spent or intended to spend more than $7 million in 2013-2014 on 12 Promise Academies, including the six that were new (Leach, 2014; Mezzacappa, 2013a).

Year One (2010-2011)

Prior to the start of the 2010-2011 school year, the first cohort of Promise Academies received a staffing overhaul, including a new principal for most schools and partial replacement of school staff. Unless the principal had been at the school for less than two years, the central office identified, interviewed, selected, and assigned new principals to each school. All teachers at the school were forced-transfer [3] but were eligible to reapply for their positions. The school was allowed to rehire up to 50% of teachers who chose to reapply through site selection. All staff remained part of the Philadelphia Federation of Teachers (PFT) union and employed by the District.

One Cohort One Promise Academy principal described the initial on-boarding and staff selection experience as follows:

The first year was amazing. I was excited, because this was what I got into education for—to help the kids that people write off. I went through the interview process and I guess they heard my passion. Once I was hired I was put on a panel to pick teachers that had passion and that believed in education… and did whatever it takes for the children.

According to another Cohort One Promise Academy principal who had been with the school since the initial turnaround, the process for selecting teachers was a "very important" aspect of the model's launch. In emphasizing the importance of the hiring process, the principal described how the interviews began in April and lasted throughout the summer. The principal described interviewing "passionate and excited teachers" and picking those who "would be a good match to turn around a school," almost all of whom were "fairly new to the District." Selected teachers aided in the school's renovations throughout the entire summer. In August, teachers came in for a boot camp, learned about the new instructional materials and programs that would be used, and, according to the principal, "talked about the direction we wanted the school to go in and the data of our school." In describing the first year, the principal said that "once we got started, you could see the improvement immediately in the students." The sense of excitement and buy-in during the first year was similarly expressed by Cohort One Promise Academy teachers, one of whom described that when the Promise Academy turnaround first started: "we looked for colors to paint the walls to change the culture and the look to show that it is fresh, new, and clean.… Teachers here chose to be here and bought into the program."

Promise Academy teachers were required, by a special contract provision negotiated between the District and PFT, to work—and be paid for—one additional hour per regular school day, two Saturdays per month, and a longer school year, including up to 22 days in July (Philadelphia Federation of Teachers & School District of Philadelphia, 2009). Principals were to have discretion over one teacher prep period per week. Staff were also required to adhere to a dress code. Teachers received a one-time $4,000 recruitment incentive and a retention incentive plan that promised $2,500 after the second year, $5,000 after the fourth year, and $7,500 after the sixth year.

Cohort One Promise Academy principals and teachers reflected extremely positively on the extended learning and professional development (PD) time during Year One and the importance of the contract provision that supported it. A teacher from a Cohort One Promise Academy regarded the extra hour each day as "wonderful… as long as we were being compensated for the time" and described the additional PD time as a "community learning experience… Having those extra hours every week, to just be a staff, helped us…. That hour just makes a huge difference."

Promise Academies received additional support staff, including a parent ombudsman, student advisor, social services liaison nurse, and resource specialist, and the school was to be governed by a School Advisory Council (SAC) comprised of peer-elected representatives from all stakeholder groups, including parents, school leadership and staff, community partners, and students. A Cohort One Promise Academy Principal described how, in the first year, the school:

had tons of money… We had 600 kids and three or four managers, with a counselor for each grade. We also had a climate manager, two assistant principals, a dean of students, a roster chair, and coaches. With PSSA [Pennsylvania System of School Assessment] in our first year, we made dramatic gains. The staff created a mission.

In addition to the increase in school-based support staff, Cohort One Promise Academies received designated support from the District's central office. In addition to "the restructuring of the staff and full site selection all year," a Cohort One Promise Academy principal described "the responsiveness from the central office" as an additional defining component of the model in Year One. This principal said that the central office "understood that if a Promise Academy principal called and said that they needed something, every central office was to respond, to make sure we had all the support we needed in order to be successful."

With five extra school hours per week, students received one extra hour for enrichment and academic interventions four days per week. The extra hour on the fifth day was used for teacher professional development. Saturday classes two times per month and Summer Academy provided additional time for academic interventions and enrichment. Additionally, schools were to facilitate one family field trip per month. A Cohort One Promise Academy principal described the extended learning time and additional support as "very successful" and described how the school had "a lot of interventions, a lot of small groups," and small classes with fewer than 15 students and at least two teachers per class. The principal reported that the school made adequate yearly progress (AYP) that year for the first time ever and said that "All of the reforms really worked: just giving people the supports." Teachers reflected similarly on the structure of the first year, commenting on "the abundance of resources within the school" and having had "a brand new curriculum and everything—all of the books and extra resources—that went with it to supplement the lessons." Teachers also described having more co-teachers during the first year and being "really stacked, support-wise."

Promise Academies were required to use a prescribed set of instructional interventions, curricula, and programs, including *Corrective Reading* and *Corrective Math* (McGraw Hill Education, 2008), as well as world language studies. Schools also received substantial technical and building improvements in the first year, such as Smart Boards, computers, and newly painted facilities. The model required schools to implement climate and culture protocols, such as daily town hall meetings, daily recitation of the Promise Academy pledge, and the facilitation of school events once per quarter. Students were expected to wear Promise Academy uniforms.

The following description from a Cohort One Promise Academy principal describes the comprehensive infusion of supports in the first year:

We had enrichment activities throughout the week. We were able to contract with people from dance organizations, art organizations, mentoring organizations. We had an all-boys mentoring and an all-girls mentoring program. We had robotics club. The children went on all types of trips because a big part of the Promise Academy model was trying to expose the children [to new places and experiences]. A big belief, a core belief, was that a lot of our children are not succeeding because of lack of exposure. In order to help that, every class went on trips at least once a month. And one Saturday out of every month, we went on family trips. When we went to the aquarium, we had twelve buses and ten to 15 cars. It was so rewarding. It got everybody on board, especially the parents. It helped us to build community. We were no longer seen as the enemy. We had activities here for everybody. Every meeting we provided daycare, we provided food, whether it was dinner or breakfast. And all these things were funded centrally. So we had everything we needed. We increased the technology at the school with laptop carts, Promethean boards. We got a lot of online programs and interventions. It was like heaven.

Another Cohort One Promise Academy principal provided a very similar description of the Year One experience:

The children came in with new uniforms, better lighting, and new teachers. Their behavior changed. We had a full time counselor, social worker, nurse, and psychologist. Any issues, they had five people who could help them. There was a climate change immediately. When we did assessments, we saw suspensions went down and academic benchmarks soared. PSSA [scores] tripled. We were so happy about that. We saw we made a difference, but we also had the month of July to connect everything. We had a Promise Academy pledge that the kids memorized. We told them what we expected and let them know they had to try. It was embedded into our culture. We played music when they walked in to encourage them and push them to get forward. We set school expectations and they had a morning meeting every week to reinforce our expectations. That first year was incredible.

In interviews with Cohort One Promise Academy leadership and staff, it was clear that Year One brought with it a sense of intention, enthusiasm, and shared purpose. This sentiment was universally expressed during interviews by principals as well as teachers. A Cohort One Promise Academy teacher described the feeling of starting with a Promise Academy during its first year of turnaround after 17 years in other District schools:

You got the feeling you were at a different group. Kids felt privileged to be here. You felt like you were at a private school in a public school setting. Everybody felt different and took part in it. It was a unique climate. People in the community wanted to put their kids here, instead of their neighboring schools. They were trying to sneak their kids in.

Years Two and Three (2011-2012, 2012-2013)

In the summer following the 2010-2011 year, the District's financial situation led to thousands of layoffs and cuts for the 2011-2012 school year. In May 2011, in the midst of a looming budget crisis, the District announced that all Promise Academy teachers would be exempt from impending layoffs in an attempt to minimize disruption and preserve progress in the Promise Academies (Herald, 2011b). The PFT responded that the exemption was outside the collective bargaining agreement, which had been negotiated to include a longer school day, week, and year with commensurate salary for Promise Academy staff, but no special treatment during layoffs, which were to occur solely based on seniority. The dispute directly impacted the layoff status of 374 teachers: 174 Promise Academy teachers with less seniority would keep their jobs if exempt from the cuts at the expense of 174 non-Promise Academy teachers with more seniority. From July to August 2011, while more than 1,000 other teachers received layoff notices, these 374 teachers were left in limbo, unsure whether or not they would have a job in September. Three weeks before the start of the 2011-2012 school year, the PFT and District "arrived at a settlement" and "withdrew the Promise Academy seniority layoff issue from arbitration" (Philadelphia Federation of Teachers, 2011). Promise Academy teachers would no longer be exempt from seniority-based lay-offs. Teachers who had been laid off were called back and reassigned to Promise Academies based on their seniority (Graham, 2011), and 174 Promise Academy teachers with lesser seniority were laid off (Anonymous, 2011).

This had a dramatic impact on Cohort One Promise Academies, which, during the staff replacement process the year before, had hired mostly new teachers. Not only did Promise Academies lose much of the staff that they had spent the past year interviewing, hiring, training, and acclimating, but they now had just a few short weeks before school started to vet and select the educators who would replace them. A Cohort One Promise Academy principal who claimed to have lost 43% of staff after Year One emphasized that in order to achieve successful turnaround, "I need the ability to hire and retain good folks…. If you can't retain, you must start over."

The struggle was not necessarily or solely that the laid-off teachers were better than the new teachers who would replace them. According to feedback from Cohort One Promise Academy teachers and principals, the layoffs removed so many teachers who had already bought-in and established a sense of unity and shared vision—teachers who really wanted to be there to do the work of school turnaround—and replaced them with teachers who may or may not have shared the same passion, expectation, and vision, or, in the words a Cohort One Promise Academy school leader, "people who have just been sent here." According to the school leader, "That makes a difference… You want people who want to be here." A teacher from a Cohort One Promise Academy who has been with the school since turnaround gave a similar interpretation of the impact of the layoffs after Year One:

We had so many teachers who were new to the District. And then when everything happened, it was complete upheaval. We almost lost all of our teachers—there were maybe three of us left—and it was a scramble to rehire. That first year, we were such a unit. We were all in it together. We had such high hopes. We knew we were going to do it. And then, it felt like our balloon deflated when we had to scramble and rehire. Not that we didn't get great people in place of some of the people that we lost, but if you think about the unit that we had [in Year One]… that was a challenge.

Furthermore, the layoff process had a significant and detrimental impact on the schools' ability to keep the promise they made to students during Year One, which was that the adults in the building *chose* to be in these particular schools and had no intention of leaving, contrary to what the students were conditioned to expect. During interviews, principals and teachers described that in these lowest performing schools, students were not accustomed to consistency as a result of constant principal and teacher turnover. Therefore, throughout Year One, staff consistently reinforced the message that they "did not have to pick off of a list of whatever school was left," but rather that they "chose to come here," as the leader of a Cohort One Promise Academy explained. Despite initial hesitation and even pushback from some students to "open their arms to that help because of the track record," students

eventually "got on board" as Year One progressed and accepted that "these people are here for me." The leader went on to describe that in light of the changes that came with Year Two, "The energy was still there, but it was a little broken," staff were "shaken up with the whole union thing," and "we had to explain to the kids that Mr. Such-and-Such had to leave because they made him leave, and not because he wanted to leave."

In addition to the staffing upheavals caused by the budget cuts, the supports to Promise Academy schools were cut significantly for Year Two, including elimination of school-based instructional specialists, reading intervention specialists, one of the extra hours per week, and Saturday School and Summer Academy. Though supplemental funds for Promise Academies were cut 50% on a per student basis for 2011-2012, bringing their estimated supplemental per-pupil allotment from $430 to $215 (School District of Philadelphia [SDP], 2011), they were held harmless from a 29% cut to school operating budgets that impacted all other District schools (SDP, 2011). In many instances, individual Promise Academies chose to maintain supplemental services from the previous year through different funding streams. For example, one Principal from a Cohort One Promise Academy continued to offer Saturday School during the second year by allocating Title I funds, and another discussed using extra-curricular (EC) funds in the second year to supplant the lost resources and continue offering the same level of after-school programming.

Despite turnover in District leadership and massive budget cuts, three high schools were designated as Promise Academies in 2011-2012. For these schools, the most impactful manifestation of the new Promise Academy designation seemed to be the opportunity to transform the staff at the outset of that first year. New principals were brought in who reset the tone and set high expectations for the newly placed and existing teachers. Principals had a bit more autonomy over the model than in the previous year, although they reported not having much time or capacity to conceptualize a high school turnaround vision prior to the start of the year. Furthermore, the enthusiasm and spearheading of turnaround buy-in relied almost entirely on the principal as opposed to the District-wide effort in the previous year.

Going into the 2012-2013 school year, additional cuts left the existing Promise Academies with a reduced number of extended days and further reductions in staffing and programs. No new Promise Academies were identified going into this year. The following report from a Cohort One Promise Academy principal provides insight into how changes to the model through Years Two and Three manifested at the school level:

[During the first year], we let the kids and the parents know that we were here for the long run. The extended day, extra hours, extended week every other Saturday—we were in full steam. Then the layoffs started. When that happened, I lost everybody. I spent that summer trying to get everyone back. By October, I had all but one back. It said to the kids I told you: We're here for you for the long run. The second year was a little tough, trying to regain the children's trust again, trying to get the programs up and running knowing there was a cut. It was a challenge to keep the climate and academic pace. The second year, we did not meet AYP. The third year, the same thing happened because we lost a lot more. We lost more folks and had to start again pulling people in to buy-in to the programs. We lost hours, mentoring programs, extended hours, and college readiness programs.

Year Four (2013-2014)

In February 2013, the District announced that six schools would become new Promise Academies in the 2013-2014 school year, including two high schools. These two high schools would begin with a planning year or "incubation period" to build support among students, families, and community members; hire staff; and develop the vision and instructional program (SDP, 2013). The District indicated that principals would have some flexibility in developing their model based on specific student needs (SDP, 2013). This is in sharp contrast to the original model, wherein schools did not participate in the development of the model, but rather were expected to implement the model prescribed by the District. The District also indicated that Promise Academies would have an extended school day, intensive supports for struggling students, and expanded professional development opportunities. However, due to subsequent budget cuts, the extended school day was eliminated from the Promise Academy model prior to the start of the 2013-2014 school year (Mezzacappa, 2013b).

In the 2013-2014 school year, supplements for Promise Academies included a math coach, reading coach, and school improvement liaison, as well as uniform supplements for teachers and students, summer professional development for teachers, and a teacher retention bonus (Mezzacappa, 2013b). Promise Academies were also guaranteed at least one counselor per school despite the district-wide reduction of counselors from 283 to 126, who were spread across more than 200 schools. The District's 2013-2014 budget included $7.8 million for the six existing and six new Promise Academies, which equated to a supplemental allotment of $65 per pupil (Mezzacappa, 2013b). It was difficult to distinguish through interviews exactly what was paid for with this funding because school leaders provided differing information about how they perceived Promise Academy funding to have been allocated and used.

One Principal from a Cohort One Promise Academy described that prior to Year Four, the District's instructions were to "get a school improvement support liaison (SISL), a counselor, and two additional positions" and that the rest of the money can be used "however you want." One principal elected to use the remaining funds to hire two additional teachers. Another described that, in Year Four, "being a Promise Academy means some extra money and the name, nothing else."

Although Promise Academies maintained full site selection [4], they were at this point only able to hire teachers from the large existing pool of laid-off staff, due to the contract requirement stipulating the reassignment of laid-off employees first when vacancies occur. Therefore, principals were only able to select from teachers who had been recently laid off when their positions were eliminated at another school (PFT & SDP, 2009). A Promise Academy principal described the candidate pool at that point as very limited and said the applicants from whom she could select were not appealing. A Cohort One Promise Academy principal described having to choose individuals from the forced transfer list, and "If we say no, they come to us anyway because we do not have anyone else interested, and if we do not fill all of our vacancies by a certain time, HR will send you people." This is in sharp contrast to the recruitment landscape during the model's earlier years, when Promise Academies were attracting candidates and creating buy-in with the incentive of increased pay (due to the extended school hours) and opportunity to become part of a team with a strong unified vision and mission. In Year 4, Promise Academy positions no longer had either of those compelling aspects as recruitment tools, as the extended school hours (and associated pay) had been eliminated, and the excitement for the model had dwindled down to nothing.

Many principals from Cohort One Promise Academies were acutely aware of how the dwindling model impacted the various stakeholders at their schools. A leader of a Cohort One Promise Academy described how the school has "hit a plateau and we're kind of staying there…. If we had our staff and our extended time, we'd be off the roof." The leader described how the disinvestment has trickled down to the parents, whose attitudes have become "whatever" and who are "just waiting for me and the principal to leave."

In Cohort Four Promise Academies, which were designated in 2013-2014, the existing principal remained in place at four of the six schools, even in cases in which the principal had been there for several years. Staff was still replaced at most schools. At this point in time, the difference between a Promise Academy school and a non-Promise Academy school is "in name only," as indicated repeatedly during interviews with leadership and staff. There is currently no difference in the model or resource allocation for Cohort One, Two, and Four Promise Academies [5]. However, Cohort One Promise Academies had the benefit of the early influx of resources and technology, which other cohorts did not have. Additionally, Cohort One Promise Academies had the benefit of at least one or two years of intensive extra academic and professional supports, of which the Cohort Four schools had none. Many of the Cohort One Promise Academies have tried to maintain as much as they could of the original model from Year One despite the increasingly reduced resources because "we believe in it," as one Cohort One Promise Academy principal whose school is "working very hard to try to maintain the integrity of Promise Academies" explained.

Based on the tone and content of interviews with Cohort Four Promise Academy leadership and staff, the concept of being a Promise Academy, at this point, seems to evoke more resentment than anything else. This is in stark contrast with the initial year of implementation, which exuded optimism, clarity of purpose, and enthusiasm. A teacher from a Cohort Four Promise Academy described that when the school became a Promise Academy, she "was all excited" because she thought the school "would get a ton more resources, but it actually got less." The teacher went on to explain that at her school, "We are all trying to figure out why it was turned into a Promise Academy in the first place." A Cohort Four (Incubation Year) Promise Academy principal described continually hearing the message that "the Promise Academy model isn't working and the charter model is working," which she perceives as a "farce" because "[the District] is tying our hands and feet" and "has never allowed us to implement correctly." A member of the leadership team in another Cohort Four (Incubation Year) Promise Academy reported that when staff were told the school would become a Promise Academy, they "did not know what that meant because the District didn't know what that meant." The school assumed the designation would come with funding and extra resources but realized that "The Promise Academy designation means nothing…. We're the same as we were before Promise."

Discussion and Conclusion

Over the past four years, Promise Academy schools have experienced substantial systemic barriers to improvement, particularly in their ability to maintain fidelity to the model in the face of severe budget constraints as well as attract, hire, and retain quality, invested staff. Along with the diminishing resources, as the model dissolved, so did the intangible sense of shared commitment to its purpose. In most of the Cohort One Promise Academies, turnaround began when resources, clarity, vision for the model, and supports were at an all-time high. At these schools, especially in the lowest grades, some of the initial successes of the model in Year One may have had a sustained impact in subsequent years. But for the later cohort schools, particularly Cohort Four, there was no initial investment to build on, and the concept of being a turnaround school is abstract.

The ability for Promise Academies to implement a longer school day for additional instructional and professional development time, which was written into the union contract as a stipulation reserved for Promise Academy teachers, seemed to be the most critical element of the model, the one that was most central to turnaround when it existed and felt the hardest when it was cut. School leaders and staff expressed mixed perspectives on the value of the Summer Academy and Saturday School, but these elements, as well as others that were part of the original or iterative model, have been implemented for too short of a time, by too few schools, and with too much variation in fidelity to make an informed judgment as to their inherent value.

At best, the current Promise Academy model resembles light-touch efforts that may be effective in helping some average-performing schools improve but are vastly insufficient in producing successful turnaround of chronically poor-performing schools (Calkins, Guenther, Belfiore, & Lash, 2007).

The turnaround troubles that have plagued Philadelphia are not unique. A study of school intervention efforts recently found that most are marked by inadequate design (lack of ambition, comprehensiveness, integration, and networking support), inadequate capacity, inadequate incentive change (driven more by compliance than buy-in), and inadequate political will (episodic and confusing policy design, under-funding, and inconsistent political support) (Calkins et al., 2007). Unfortunately, though it may have begun with most of the ingredients needed for success, the inputs to the Promise Academy model—related not only to funding but also to strong will and clarity of vision—were not sustained.

At this point, the future of the Promise Academy turnaround model in Philadelphia remains uncertain. If anything has been made clear by the past four years, it is that light-touch, incremental school improvement strategies will not suffice to transform this city's lowest performing schools. According to a Promise Academy principal, if any hope remains for achieving rapid gains in student achievement for the lowest-performing schools, someone needs to say, "that this is a priority."

Endnotes

[1] Year One 2010-2011: Cohort One schools' first year of turnaround

Year Two 2011-2012: Cohort Two schools' first year of turnaround

Year Three 2012-2013: Cohort Three schools' first year of turnaround

Year Four 2013-2014: Cohort Four schools' first year of turnaround

[2] The School Reform Commission (SRC) is the governing body of the School District of Philadelphia (SDP). The SRC was established in December 2001, in response to the School District's financial difficulties, and oversight of the School District shifted from the local school board to the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania. The SRC is made up of three members appointed by the Governor and two members appointed by the Mayor. (Education Voters of Pennsylvania, 2013).

[3] The term "Forced Transfer" refers to a current School District employee for whom there is no budgeted position to remain in the school the following year. These employees still have a position with SDP, but need to select a new location through the Site Selection process (The School District of Philadelphia Web site: http://webgui.phila.k12.pa.us/offices/e/ee/resources/faqs#QdBg43mk92Mx8VaIq2bmiQ)

[4] In general, the PFT/SDP Collective Bargaining Agreement states that "for every two (2) vacancies in each school, one (1) shall be site selected and one (1) shall be filled through the existing seniority process (PFT and SDP, 2009). Teachers who are "site selected" have applied to an open position at the school and been interviewed and selected by a staff committee. Teachers placed through seniority-based assignment are assigned to a vacancy without any input from the school principal and staff. Per the PFT/SDP contract, Promise Academies are "full-site select," meaning 100% of their vacancies may be site selected.

[5] There are no Cohort Three Promise Academies, as no new schools were designated Promise Academies in 2012-2013.

KATI STRATOS is a Senior Research Associate in the Office of Research and Evaluation at The School District of Philadelphia. She received a Masters of Science in Social Policy from the University of Pennsylvania's School of Social Policy and Practice. Her work at the District focuses on evaluating the impact of school-wide programs and District/State policy.

TONYA WOLFORD, Ph.D., is Deputy of Research and Evaluation at The School District of Philadelphia. She has extensive experience both conducting mixed-methods school evaluations and considering results of these evaluations in shaping school improvement efforts. Her work over the last five years has involved interacting with external stakeholders on critical SDP issues.

ADRIENNE REITANO is a Program Coordinator in the Office of Research and Evaluation at The School District of Philadelphia. She began working for the District after receiving a Masters of Social Policy from the school of Social Policy and Practice at the University of Pennsylvania in 2013.

REFERENCES:

Calkins, A., Guenther, W., Belfiore, G., & Lash, D. (2007). *The turnaround challenge: Why America's best opportunity to*

dramatically improve student achievement lies in our worst-performing schools. Mass Insight Education and Research Institutes. Retrieved from http://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED538298.pdf

Education Voters of Pennsylvania. (n.d.). *Who runs the School District of Philadelphia?* Retrieved from: http://www.educationvoterspa.org/images/uploads/SDP_Governance_FINAL_2013.pdf

Gold, E., Norton, M., Good, D., & Levin, S. (2012). *Philadelphia's renaissance schools initiative: 18 month interim report*. Research for Action. Retrieved from http://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED531671.pdf

Graham, K. (2011, August 17). *http://www.Philly.com*. Retrieved from http://articles.philly.com/2011-08-17/news/29896857_1_teacher-vacancies-philadelphia-federation-layoffs

Herold, B. (2011a, January 26). Announcing 18 more Renaissance Schools, District questioned on cost, community input. *Philadelphia Public School Notebook*. Retrieved from http://thenotebook.org/blog/113251/announcing-18-more-renaissance-schools-district-faces-questions-about-cost-community-inp

Herold, B. (2011b, May 18). District wants promise academies layoff exemption. *Philadelphia Public School Notebook*. Retrieved from http://thenotebook.org/blog/113677/district-wants-promise-academies-layoff-exemption

Leach, S. (2014, June 13). Broken promise? School turnaround model in limbo amid district funding crisis. *Philadelphia Daily News*. Retrieved from http://articles.philly.com/2014-06-13/news/50539759_1_promise-academies-turnaround-model-william-wade

Mezzacappa, D. (2013, July 26a). SRC approves renaissance conversions and grants to expand three District schools. *Philadelphia Public School Notebook*. Retrieved from http://thenotebook.org/blog/136239/src-approves-renaissance-conversions-and-grants-expand-three-district-schools

Mezzacappa, D. (2013, September 26b). No shortage of counselors at promise academies. *Philadelphia Public School Notebook*. Retrieved from http://thenotebook.org/blog/136479/promise-academies-have-no-shortage-counselors

Philadelphia Federation of Teachers & School District of Philadelphia. (2009). *Collective bargaining agreement*. Retrieved from http://www.pft.org/docs/28102_PFT_v6%20-%20Final.pdf

Philadelphia Federation of Teachers. (2011, August 16). *Promise Academy Arbitration Settled*. Retrieved from http://pft.org/Page.aspx?pgid=51&article=335

School District of Philadelphia (2010, January 27). School district of Philadelphia launches major turnaround school initiative – renaissance schools [Press release]. Retrieved from https://webapps.philasd.org/announcements/renaissance-release-masthead.pdf

School District of Philadelphia. (2011). *FY 2011-12 budget in brief*. Retrieved from http://webgui.phila.k12.pa.us/uploads/wK/hg/wKhgBou3qzN7r6BXUEP83Q/11-04-27-BiB---FY12-Proposed-Budget.pdf

School District of Philadelphia. (2013). School district of philadelphia selects new renaissance schools [Press release]. Retrieved from https://webapps.philasd.org/news/display/articles/1413

School District of Philadelphia. (2014). *Action plan v 2.0*. Retrieved from http://webgui.phila.k12.pa.us/offices/a/action-plan

Socolar, P. (2011, April 27). What gets cut, what gets spared. *Philadelphia Public School Notebook*. Retrieved from http://thenotebook.org/blog/113629/what-gets-cut-what-gets-spared

Wolford, T., Stratos, K., & Reitano, A. (2013). *Renaissance schools initiative progress report: 2010-2011 through 2012-2013*. The School District of Philadelphia. Retrieved from http://webgui.phila.k12.pa.us/uploads/TM/8_/TM8_61FkJvh05xlyLNSS9w/Renaissance_Report_Dec_2013.pdf

---