

THE EVOLUTION OF REFORM: STUDYING "COMMUNITY PARTNERSHIPS" IN PHILADELPHIA

Maia Cucchiara

The privatization of public schools in Philadelphia has generated a great deal of controversy both in the city and across the country. Researchers interested in understanding this latest wave of reform have already begun documenting and analyzing the implementation of privatization, the simultaneous recentralization, and the community's response to both processes. Yet, as the following discussion makes clear, I believe studying reform is not just a matter of following the implementation of a particular program and then assessing its outcomes. Instead, students of school reform, and of urban education in general, would do well to pay attention to the evolution of reform-to the ways different models dominate and then recede and to the conflicts and coalitions that form among reform actors-for these have much to tell us about the processes at work in the city and the ways various actors and stakeholders frame education problems and solutions. In this article, I will use the "lifecourse" of one model-the community partnership plan-as a lens into school reform in Philadelphia, focusing particularly on the politics of school reform and Philadelphians' responses to privatization. I will show that education reform is not about the orderly implementation of a particular program but rather about competing visions, multiple purposes, and, often, chaos and disjuncture.

When the governor of Pennsylvania proposed a state takeover of the School District of Philadelphia in 2001, he called the schools identified for major reform "partnership schools" and planned to turn the operation of each school over to a collaboration between a local community organization and Edison Schools, the nation's largest for-profit education management organization. Since that time, the district has been the site of significant turmoil, and much of what was originally predicted for Philadelphia has not come to pass. While the scaling back of privatization has been the most visible result of the recent struggles, the plan for community organizations to help operate schools was another casualty of the process, one that attracted little attention amidst the clamor around the state takeover and the role of private corporations.

I gathered the data discussed here as a part of a larger study of the state takeover and reorganization of the Philadelphia School District. This study, which is being conducted by Research for Action, a Philadelphia-based non-profit research organization, encompasses many aspects of the reform process, including the ways reform affects public engagement in education. In an effort to understand both the roles community organizations have played in the district and the disappearance of the community partnership plan, I attended numerous public meetings at the school district and at individual schools, reviewed local and national newspaper coverage of the takeover, and conducted interviews with representatives from a number of local organizations.

Privatization in Philadelphia

For many years, the School District of Philadelphia has been plagued by budget shortfalls and poor student performance. In the summer of 2001, in response to mounting deficits and low test scores, Mayor John Street and Governor Tom Ridge signed a "memorandum of understanding," which provided for some increased state funding but also gave the state the power to take over the district if the funding crisis was not resolved. Ridge, Pennsylvania's Republican governor until the fall of 2001, is a strong proponent of privatization in education. In preparation for the state takeover, he hired Edison Schools to conduct a \$2.7 million study of the financially strapped district.¹

In November 2001, Governor Schweiker (who assumed office when President Bush named Ridge head of the Department of Homeland Security), used Edison's report to argue that the district's financial woes were caused largely by bureaucratic mismanagement and inefficiency and that the solution was to turn the administration of the district over to Edison and the sixty "worst performing schools" over to new management. Calling these schools "partnership schools," the governor (and Edison) proposed that they be jointly run by community organizations and private education management companies-namely, Edison Schools.

Throughout the winter and spring, school reform in Philadelphia was the focus of much attention and controversy. Against a backdrop of protests from local organizations about the lack of public input and the plan to privatize schools, the governor and the mayor negotiated a "friendly takeover" of the district. The terms of the takeover, which went into effect on December 21, 2002, included a plan to abolish the school board and create a School Reform Commission, a five-member body charged with implementing a major reorganization of the district. Three of the members of the commission, including its chair, James Nevels, were appointed by the governor and shared his support of privatization in education. The other two commissioners, Sandra Dungee Glenn and Michael Masch, were appointed by the mayor and were more skeptical of the privatization agenda.

Because the major changes to the district, including the privatization of particular schools, would not commence until the following September, the School Reform Commission (SRC) spent the next several months developing and refining a series of plans. In April 2002, the SRC announced that as many as 75 elementary and middle schools would undergo major transformations. Rather than privatizing all of these schools, the SRC unveiled a "multiple-provider" plan that included management by for-profit and non-profit organizations, the conversion of several schools to charter and "independent" schools², and the "restructuring" of about twenty schools by a special office within the school district. In theory, this approach established a sort of competition, between models and managers, which would then enable the SRC to determine which approach is most effective. During this time, the SRC also named Edison "lead consultant" to the district and began to identify other organizations to play a role in the newly restructured school system.

Community Partnerships on the Rise

When Governor Schweiker announced his plan for Philadelphia's schools, he identified six local organizations as potential community partners: four community-development corporations, an umbrella organization of West Philadelphia groups, and an organization founded in response to the takeover. Though these organizations received a great deal of attention from the local (and even national) media, their exact responsibilities with respect to their future partner schools were unclear (Mezzacappa & Snyder, 11/19/01; Reid, 2/6/2002b; Dean, 5/15/2002; Fieldnotes, 5/22/2002). At one point, many had thought the organizations would actually select the EMOs to run their schools, but the SRC envisioned their role as "advis[ing] in the governance and decision making of the school" and possibly also providing a variety of academic and/or social services (SRC, 2002). While the list of potential partners changed over time—it was eventually expanded to include organizations that had opposed the takeover, social service organizations, and others—both the model and the potential partners themselves impacted the reform process over the next several months. In the next section I will focus on three key ways the proposed partnership model affected reform: bolstering legitimacy, generating support, and helping to determine the form that privatization would take in Philadelphia.

First, the partnership model—and the groups named as potential partners—helped achieve a legitimacy for the reform that was otherwise lacking. According to Max Weber, legitimacy in modern societies is generally based upon legal authority, or "the belief in the validity of legal statute and functional competence based on rationally created rules" (1946, p. 79). People accept the legitimacy of an *action*—like the state takeover of the schools—or of an *institution*—like the School Reform Commission—when they can see that the rules have been followed rationally and in a way that is consistent with legal statute and accepted norms and procedures. In the case of the state takeover, the legitimacy of the governor's actions and the administrative body he established was questioned by Philadelphians from the very beginning. Several lawsuits challenged the constitutionality of the takeover, and politicians, columnists, educators, and many other Philadelphians criticized Edison for, as they said, "recommending itself," in what appeared to be a conflict of interest and a violation of standard consulting norms. In addition, the Pennsylvania Department of Education came under fire for seemingly favorable treatment of Edison. In fact, Pennsylvania's Auditor General accused state officials of failing to follow routine competitive bidding procedures, and U.S. Representative Chaka Fattah initiated a federal investigation into Edison's dealings with the state.

In this climate, the partnership model played an important role. While the model could not itself ameliorate concerns about the legality of the takeover, it could enable supporters to counter one of the most compelling challenges to the takeover plan, namely that it had been designed with minimal local input and was being implemented against the wishes of the community. This interpretation did not escape a local, anti-privatization newspaper:

A small number of politically connected groups lined up to be approved community partners, with the blessing of Edison and the governor. To ease opposition to privatization, the anointed community organizations would have been given responsibility for the process of bringing in school management companies, along with a tidy sum of money for programming. (*Philadelphia Public School Notebook*, Spring 2002)³

Events at public meetings would seem to support this perspective. For example, at one meeting, in which SRC commissioner Daniel Whelan faced a particularly angry crowd, Whelan attempted to pacify frustration about lack of public input by referring to the partnerships: "In every case, we have asked for community partners for the 70 schools. Those community partners, we hope, will be made up of the community group. We hope they will be made up of interested parents like yourselves" (Fieldnotes, 5/17/02). Hence the community partnership model lent legitimacy to the state's plan by implying that schools would actually be *more* connected with, and accountable to, the community than before.

Second, the potential partners attempted to build support for the reform within their local communities. For example, Senator Anthony H. Williams and the West Philadelphia Coalition of Neighborhoods and Businesses (one potential community partner) helped to organize the "Philadelphia Community Partnership Forum," which provided a number of EMOs with the opportunity to give presentations about their programs and services. The forum was the first time that EMOs other than Edison received significant attention. Of the five presenters, three (Edison, Chancellor Beacon, and Victory) were later named by the SRC to manage schools. The forum also gave Williams an opportunity to explain why he applauded the involvement of private

companies and to generate support for the reorganization of the district. Williams and several of the presenters emphasized the injustices of the current system-failing schools, no choices for poor parents, low expectations-and argued that EMOs could help remedy the situation. All of the EMOs claimed that they could improve student performance; to support this claim, one speaker, a teacher at an Edison school in Baltimore, became so moved when she recounted her students' achievements that she began to cry (Fieldnotes, 1/26/02).

Finally, several of these organizations began shaping privatization in Philadelphia long before the official takeover of the schools. Representative Dwight Evans and Senator Anthony H. Williams, leaders of two of the organizations, were vocal supporters of Pennsylvania's 1997 Charter School Law, and both moved quickly to open their own charter schools the following year. In fact, Evans is often recognized nationally as one of the first African-American politicians to advocate school choice (Reid, 2/6/02a). In April 2001, Evans began planning to remove a cluster of schools in his area from the district and run them as charter schools, an approach that resembles the SRC's plan for future "charter" and "independent" schools. Several of these groups also helped determine what the proposed partnership between EMOs and community groups would look like. In early November, before Schweiker announced his plan, representatives from these groups met with Edison to outline the terms of the possible partnerships between Edison and the community partners (Mezzacappa & Snyder, 11/19/02). In addition, Nueva Esperanza, another potential partner, was one of several organizations that helped Edison with access in Philadelphia. According to Reverend Luis Cortes, the director of Nueva Esperanza, the organization received \$10,000 to conduct surveys and set up focus groups and meetings with community leaders (Mathematics Education News, 1/8/02).

By spring 2002, there was every reason to believe that, come September, the partnership plan would be put into effect and community organizations would be playing an unprecedented role in Philadelphia's schools.

The Fall of the Partnership Model

During the spring and summer of 2002, the controversy over school reform in Philadelphia continued unabated. In this section, I describe the next stage of the reform process in Philadelphia, focusing on three key issues related to the demise of the partnership model-the popular criticism of privatization, the arrival of Paul Vallas, and the dissension over the state funds. I will then discuss the present status of the partnership plan and the experiences of the potential community partners.

When the state takeover went into effect, the governor's appointees to the SRC largely shared his views with respect to the efficacy of privatization and increased competition, and, as the majority on the commission, they continued to push the privatization agenda, including the community partnership plan, throughout the spring. Grassroots opposition to privatization from local activists, student groups, parents, and teachers, was vocal and intense; the SRC's decision to scale back the number of schools to be turned over to private companies did little to appease its critics. A number of community groups opposed the SRC's plans and were a strong presence at meetings on reform, often shouting down the commissioners, booing, chanting, and waving anti-privatization posters. In fact, one commission meeting became so heated that a police officer moved to stand between the crowd and the commissioners. Local activists grew increasingly indignant over the summer, as Edison's stock continued to fall (Edison was *the* symbol of privatization in the city) and Philadelphians learned that a number of districts across the country were canceling their contracts with Edison.

While it is not clear exactly how much the SRC was affected by community sentiment and the negative news about Edison, it is clear that the appointment of Paul Vallas as the district's CEO marked the start of a new era and the reign of a new approach to school reform. Paul Vallas, formerly the chief of Chicago schools, was appointed CEO on July 10 with great fanfare; the local papers told of his successes in Chicago, the SRC lauded his credentials, and his performance at various public meetings seemed to win him supporters wherever he went.

Vallas' approach to school reform in Philadelphia involves a strengthening of the role of central administration, a recentralization of sorts. He consistently portrays himself, and in fact the school district administration, as capable of solving whatever problem emerges. Vallas' agenda for the schools includes creating a more efficient, streamlined administration, making wise financial decisions, and returning financial stability to troubled school districts. He plans to improve teaching and learning by developing a standardized curriculum, training teachers in particular instructional models, and providing mandatory additional instruction for students who are behind academically. He addresses concerns about school safety and climate with a zero-tolerance discipline policy and by ending the practice of transferring offenders from school to school. Finally, he plans to renovate old schools and build new ones, adding libraries, science labs, and technology centers, a step he previously took in Chicago and one that he connects with improvements in instruction and learning. While Vallas claims to be neutral on the issue of privatization, it is difficult to imagine how widespread privatization and decentralization of the sort envisioned by the governor and SRC could coexist with this agenda and the recentralization it represents.

Vallas' appointment coincided with another, and perhaps the summer's last, major school-reform controversy: the distribution of the \$75 million that the state had promised the school district, money that the governor had committed when he negotiated the takeover deal with the mayor of Philadelphia. Less than two weeks after the Pennsylvania legislature approved the allocation of

these funds, a local paper discovered that the money would actually come with particular strings attached-nearly \$55 of the \$75 million could only be used for those 45 schools (out of a total of 254 schools in the district) that would be run by outside managers. The news drew immediate reactions from the SRC and shocked the city, especially when it became apparent that the amount of additional money the state targeted for privately run schools (\$1500 per pupil) was exactly the bonus Edison had said it needed to implement its program.

This conflict represented a major turning point in the takeover story. The School Reform Commission, which, only weeks before, had appeared divided on a number of issues, unanimously refused to accept the state's conditions. At public meetings, the same Philadelphia activists who had expressed such 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!" (Fieldnotes, 7/24/02). At this moment, the city was united with the SRC against a common enemy, the state and, in particular, Charles Zogby, the Pennsylvania Secretary of Education. The School Reform Commission suddenly became local, the voice of Philadelphians standing up to the state's perceived bullying and Zogby's apparent favoritism.

Vallas joined the SRC in refusing to accept the state's conditions for the \$55 million and demonstrated no particular enthusiasm for the privatization project. By early August, he had negotiated a more equitable distribution of state funds and rejected the plan for Edison to serve as a consultant to the district, saying there was nothing Edison could do that his team at the district could not do just as well. These moves were particularly reassuring to Philadelphians who had felt for months that the deck was stacked in favor of Edison and against the wishes of city residents. Shortly thereafter, an Inquirer columnist captured the feelings of many Philadelphians when he concluded that the district was, "in a place, I'd say, that looks surprisingly good." He described the commissioners as "tough" and "resourceful" and called Vallas' performance so far "impressive" (Eichel, 8/2/02).

Meanwhile, the organizations that had been identified as potential community partners, and, in fact, had applied to the SRC to serve in that role, fell from the spotlight. Newspaper coverage of the reform during this period focused largely on Edison or other EMOs, Paul Vallas, the conflict over the \$75 million, or what the different models would look like when it came time to open schools in the fall. This shift was not due simply a loss of interest on the part of the media; the groups themselves, and the partnership model, were no longer a part of the reform process. Commissioners no longer referred to the role of the community partners, and while some local groups have become more involved in the schools, the plan for such groups to help operate schools is essentially defunct.

In the fall of 2002, I interviewed representatives from several of the organizations named as potential community partners. In these interviews, I learned that not only had the groups not been named to serve as community partners but the School Reform Commission had never even responded to their applications. In interview after interview I was told, "We never heard from the SRC, so I guess we'll just assume we didn't get it," or "the school district never communicated with anyone." Several respondents were angry about the process, saying it was "asinine," "fraught and laden with politics," or, more circumspcctly, "a bit rushed." Overall, they were disappointed that the community partner piece had fallen from the agenda and concerned that, without it, real reform would be impossible.

Speculating on Reform

The 70 schools currently under different management models in Philadelphia are still called "partnership schools." The term, however, no longer refers to collaboration with community organizations; presumably, it now refers to ongoing coordination between the school district and the new managers. This shift in the term's meaning occurred with little notice and without public discussion of the strengths of the partnership idea, its costs, or any reasons the district should or should not adopt it. Because so many of the decisions about school reform in Philadelphia over the past few years were made behind closed doors, it is difficult to explain why, exactly, the partnership plan dropped from the reform agenda. I can, however, offer two possible, largely conjectural, explanations. First, perhaps the model was dropped because it was associated with privatization, an approach to school reform that had come under heavy fire in the city and that conflicted with Vallas' own vision for Philadelphia's schools. Giving community organizations power over local schools could impede Vallas' implementation of district-wide reform, a prospect Vallas may have recognized and hoped to avoid. Second, perhaps it was dropped because the need for legitimacy that the community partnership plan had helped to meet-and perhaps had been designed to meet-had been satisfied in other ways. Maybe Vallas' popularity and the SRC's gain in stature bolstered the legitimacy of the new arrangements and made the partnership plan expendable. Other possible explanations include sheer chaos-with so much going on and so many changes being made at once, perhaps the model just got lost in the shuffle-and a reduction in the funds available for the reform.

Because the partnership model was never implemented, it would be as premature to bemoan its loss as it would be to celebrate its potential. Indeed, the lack of clarity about the details of the plan makes it impossible to even imagine what the model would have looked like in the schools. However, the significance of this particular reform may have more to do with what its story tell us about school reform in general than with the model itself. The evolution and disappearance of the partnership plan points to the impact efforts to secure legitimacy, shifts in the balance of power, and changing agendas and approaches to reform have on the ways reform is envisioned, articulated, and enacted. As reform in Philadelphia proceeds, and with it, presumably, research into

the reform process, my hope is that scholars will pay attention to the many manifestations a particular proposal takes on-to what gets lost, contested, changed, or added-because those manifestations have much to tell us about the messy, highly political, and emotional nature of urban school reform.

References

Eichel, L. (2002, August 2). Phila. schools on track? *Philadelphia Inquirer*.

Gewertz, C. (2001, November 7). Unprecedented change eyed for Phila. schools. *Education Week*.

Mezzacappa, D. & Snyder, S. (2001, November 19). Community groups worry about their role in takeover. *Philadelphia Inquirer*.

Reid, C.S. (2002, February 6a). Connections, savvy give some community groups a head start on school contracts. *Education Week*.

Reid, C.S. (2002, February 6b). Community groups looking to run Philadelphia schools. *Education Week*.

Weber, M. (1946). *From Max Weber: Essays in sociology*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Notes

1Ridge and his replacement, Mark Schweiker, are both staunch supporters of Edison schools, consistently arguing for an increased role for the company and remaining loyal despite reports of poor performance and falling stock prices. See, for example, Snyder (3/9/02). [back](#)

2The independent school model was never clearly defined and was later dropped by the SRC. [back](#)

3The author's observation that these groups were "politically connected" and had the governor's "blessing" was validated in April 2002 when two of the groups, the West Philadelphia Coalition and Nueva Esperanza, received large grants from the state (\$300,000 and \$425,000 respectively) to explore converting a number of public schools to "independent schools" (Snyder, 4/10/02). [back](#)

Maia Cucchiara

Maia Bloomfield Cucchiara is a Ph.D. candidate in Education and Sociology at the University of Pennsylvania. Her research interests include privatization in education, family-school relationships, and the social contexts of urban education. Maia has an M.A. in Education from Teachers College, Columbia University and taught elementary school for three years. Previously, she worked in New Orleans and rural Louisiana as a community organizer and literacy trainer. Maia is currently working on a dissertation exploring African American parents' perceptions of various school reform strategies.

[Report accessibility issues and request help](#)

Copyright 2025 The University of Pennsylvania Graduate School of Education's Online Urban Education Journal

Source URL: <https://urbanedjournal.gse.upenn.edu/archive/volume-2-issue-2-fall-2003/evolution-reform-studying-community-partnerships-philadelphia>