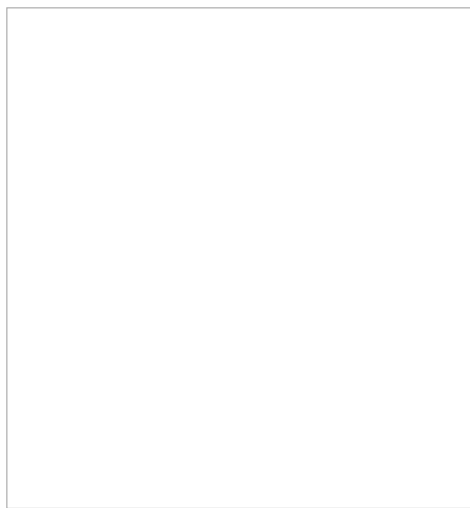


PRINCIPALS OFFER MIXED PERSPECTIVES ON FIRST YEAR OF TAKEOVER SUPPORTS AND CHALLENGES IN THE MULTIPLE PROVIDER MODEL

Sukey Blanc

"Overwhelming"... "A new start"... "Exciting, but I've never been so tired."



These are some of the ways that principals from schools identified as low-performing and targeted for reform by the School District of Philadelphia describe their feelings about the new initiatives in their schools.

These principals present a complex picture of hope and chaos -- of change and inertia.

Not surprisingly, issues of communication are paramount during this first year of a major change within the District, as the school system shifts to what is being called a "multiple provider model" -- involving outside companies, universities, and nonprofits in managing individual schools.

As part of a study of the state takeover, a team of researchers from the Philadelphia nonprofit education group Research for Action has interviewed principals at 20 schools, as well as representatives from the School District and from education management organizations (EMOs). Eighteen of the 20 principals are at schools managed since September by outside partners or by the District's Office of Restructured Schools (ORS); one school was designated an emerging charter by the School Reform Commission (SRC); and one school is receiving extra funds but no other interventions.

Gaps in communication

Principals in both privately managed and restructured schools report being baffled by the absence of clear lines of authority and communication among the schools, the education management organizations, the regions, and the central office.

Central office staff say they are well aware of this issue and are considering strategies for addressing it.

As one central office staff member commented, "There are many, many offices [at 21st Street] and there are communication issues....Do EMO principals need to go to regional meetings? Do they need to go to high school meetings? Special education meetings? New principal meetings?... How do you make decisions? That is the challenge. If we don't get that fixed, the multiple provider model will be a failure."

Research for Action's ongoing research will explore whether communication issues within the District and with outside managers can be resolved as the new reform strategies mature.

During this first year of state takeover, the central office still faces the task of developing a coherent process for communication and decision-making in a system characterized by increased centralization as well as by the outsourcing of school management.

'Serving two masters'

During interviews in January, many principals said they felt they were "serving two masters."

As one principal with an outside manager commented, she must report to both the District and her EMO, creating a backlog of paperwork and uncertainty about the chain of command. She also experienced a communication vacuum.

"We're living under a cloud. I wait until the newspaper comes to find out information about my school. The regional office doesn't know things either, nor does [the manager]," this principal commented.

In a follow-up interview, the same principal said, "The situation is not any better. I go to two sets of meetings. And I just got two surveys from the School District and a survey from [my manager]. The process and responsibility for my evaluation is not clarified."

Principals at restructured schools had similar experiences with reporting to many different offices.

One principal noted, "We're pulled, because we're part of the Office of Restructured Schools, but also part of the region. My fax machine is burned out, because I send everything to both offices. The ORS is supposed to be responsible for instructional issues and the region for everything else. But when you're dealing with children, there is no division.... It's often unclear who's in charge."

During subsequent interviews, some principals reported that their EMOs had developed strategies for facilitating communication and eliminating duplication.

Other principals reported that they relied on their pre-existing relationships with people in the regions or central office to facilitate communication. One principal with an outside manager explained, "I have a history with almost everyone at 21st Street. If I need to reach the [region's] director of school support service, I can call her on her cell phone and reach her even if she's in the middle of a meeting.... Other people in EMO schools don't have that access."

If it is to be successful, Philadelphia's multiple provider model must come to grips with the challenges of communication and decision-making.

Principals applaud supports

Some principals are more positive than others about the new, outside management.

Nine out of 18 principals interviewed at schools with new managers (including ORS) describe strong agreement with the overall approach of their managers. They believe that the 'package' of curriculum, professional development, assessment, and student supports provided by their managers will contribute to higher achievement by the students in their schools.

Seven of these 18 principals value some aspects of the program, but disagree with other aspects. For example, one principal in this group appreciates the new materials, but is skeptical about the quality of professional development provided by the manager's team of coaches.

Two principals believe that the outside manager is either destructive or brings little of value.

Other important findings from the principal interviews include the following:

- Principals working at schools with the same manager have implemented the new program very differently, depending on their own leadership experience, their history in the school and community, their pre-existing professional networks in the district, and their relationship with the manager.
- Many principals appreciated the addition of new staff positions, such as assistant principals provided by the Office of Restructured Schools.
- Of the 20 principals, 17 specifically said they valued the new instructional materials or technology their schools had received.
- At several privately managed schools, principals report that class size has been reduced. However, many principals describe gaps in security, office support, and coverage for absent teachers due to the redeployment of staff to the classroom. Principals specifically mention problems with cutting NTAs, assistant principals, literacy interns and librarians.

This article was first printed in the Summer 2003 edition of the Philadelphia Public School Notebook, and was part of a series that explored the theme: "The takeover-one year later." The Notebook is an independent quarterly newspaper that serves as a voice for parents, students, teachers, and other members of the community who are working for quality and equity in Philadelphia's public schools.

Sukey Blanc is a senior researcher at Research for Action and leads the research team for the principal interview study. This study is part of Learning from Philadelphia's School Reform, a research and public awareness project that assesses the effectiveness of key aspects of the state takeover and the multiple provider model currently in place in Philadelphia's public schools.

RFA, a nonpartisan, nonprofit organization focused on providing sound research on school improvement efforts for a broad public, has followed school reform in Philadelphia since 1992. For this project, RFA has brought together a team of well-known scholars to develop a broad-based research agenda, funded by the William Penn Foundation and others, for the benefit of educators, policymakers, and the community.

RFA plans to continue in-depth case studies of a smaller number of schools in order to track their successes and challenges in upcoming years of reform. The work will continue to examine whether these new governance and management structures improve school conditions for teaching and learning and consider how this radical experiment in Philadelphia's public schools affects public confidence and involvement in public education.

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