

## GUEST EDITOR'S INTRODUCTION: THE DISMANTLEMENT OF PUBLIC EDUCATION IN PHILADELPHIA

Robert Jean LeBlanc

### Editorial Vision

*Perspectives on Urban Education* is committed to fostering conversations between stakeholders in urban education—policymakers, teachers, students, parents, non-profit organizations, principals, and academics. We recognize the necessity for creating a forum for timely, vigorous, and generative responses to the most pressing issues of our time. As editors and writers in Philadelphia, a city in the midst of a full-blown educational crisis, we have been reminded daily of the need for such a response from all those willing to raise their voice. As an editorial board, we express here a commitment to the ideal and indispensable quality of public education, the notion that common schools and shared educational experiences can and must continue in Philadelphia. And while recessions and policies have continued to provoke educational emergencies across the country in cities such as New Orleans and Chicago (Lipman, 2011), the voices gathered here present a resounding 'No' in the face of the supposed inevitability of these crises, the narrow solutions proposed by policymakers, and the consequences they impose on communities and families. They also represent a commitment on the part of *Perspectives on Urban Education* to take a politically active and engaged posture toward scholarship by standing alongside teachers, students, parents, and community organizations and to provide a platform for their voices in the pages of our journal. Philadelphia has a rich and powerful history of educational activism: the Philadelphia Students Union, Public Citizens for Children and Youth, the Education Law Center, Philadelphia Teachers' Learning Cooperative, the Philadelphia Writing Project, Youth United for Change, Research for Change, Teacher Action Group-Philly, and other groups who continue to advocate for children's education. We are honored that a number of these groups, alongside several new voices, have contributed to this special edition.

### Situating the Crisis

Philadelphia's public education dismantlement is the result of a unique confluence of archaic property taxation (Brey, 2013), regime changes at the state and local level (Bulkely, 2007; Burns, 2003), deep structural poverty (Lubrano, 2013), and the incapacity of various large-scale accountability reforms to affect meaningful or equitable changes in student achievement (Corcoran & Christman, 2002). However, what is happening in the streets and board offices of the city has not only local importance but also national significance because of what it represents: a foretaste of what Pauline Lipman (2011) has called "the new political economy of urban education" in America.

In 2012, the city faced a \$300 million deficit brought on by a political reticence to reassess local property taxes, a state budget crisis in the wake of the 2008 recession, including a nearly \$1 billion reduction in funds for PreK-12 education statewide (Education Law Center, 2011), and stalling tactics in Harrisburg. To put this deficit in perspective, dramatic funding reductions by the state resulted in a loss of more than \$1,300 per student for Philadelphia schools (by far the highest in Pennsylvania), while the state average was approximately \$450 per student in lost monies (Pennsylvania Budget and Policy Center, 2013). The School District of Philadelphia's School Reform Commission – itself the product of an educational crisis only years earlier—proposed to enact what became known as "the Doomsday Budget" in response: closing schools, issuing thousands of layoffs to educational assistants, teachers, assistant principals, secretaries, and librarians, and cutting all funding to arts, sports, books, and extracurricular programming. Earlier this year, nearly 4,000 district employees lost their jobs (with only a portion hired back when the state provided the District with a fraction of the funding they requested) and 24 schools were shuttered.

Harrisburg's response to such a scenario has largely been one of indifference. The state legislature has offered the School Reform Commission \$15.5 million additional dollars (\$14 million of which were already slated in the governor's budget), a onetime offer of \$45 million, and the capacity for Philadelphia to raise approximately \$78 million through a 1 percent sales-tax extension. The rest of the \$300 million deficit is to be made up through wage concessions from teachers. Even this small concession by the state is now under debate, with SDP Superintendent William Hite threatening to keep schools closed come September if a fraction of this funding is not secured. This disturbing pattern – a budget shortfall due to tax abatements and widespread neoliberal policies, leading to demands for lower expectations from cities for school funding, large scale school closures, and the battering of teaching unions for wage decreases – has become all too commonplace across the country (Caref, Hains, Hilgendorf, Jankov, & Russell, 2012). What this has meant for public education is a series of rolling budget protraction and the wholesale takeover of school districts by appointed committees that often evade the accountability of public school boards (Lipman, 2011), combined with a dramatic reduction in public school offerings, notably in under-resourced communities of color (Saltman, 2007): in short, the dismantlement of what makes 'public education' truly 'public'.

## Special Commentary Content

This summer edition of *Perspectives on Urban Education* presents a series of commentaries on the "Dismantlement of Public Education in Philadelphia". We invited commentaries from a range of stakeholders, all committed to public education in the city. To ensure this commentary was timely and accessible to a variety of audiences, we asked authors to write short, thoughtful pieces that addressed their own particular engagement with the crisis or that highlighted the ongoing struggle of stakeholders to support city schools. We present two sets of articles: *Research Commentaries* from various researchers and university scholars and *Notes from the Field* by working Philadelphia teachers, teacher organizations, and public advocacy groups. Each provides a unique venue from which to view the present crisis. To conclude, Michelle Fine speaks across the various commentaries and nationally situates Philadelphia's present educational environment.

The first of the *Research Commentaries*, James "Torch" Lytle's *Philadelphia School District Deconstruction*, was initially sent to all contributing authors to help frame their commentary. Lytle provides an overview of the current state of public education in the city and situates it through the 30-year experience of a former superintendent, principal, and administrator. His commentary helps contextualize the present crisis by demonstrating the continual ebbs and flows of large- and small-scale 'reforms' that have made public education unstable in the city. James Jack and John Sludden of Research for Action provide insight on the impact of school closures in Philadelphia, the impact of state and national policies on these closures, and the academic and financial fallout from such policies. Jerusha Conner and Sonia Rosen demonstrate in their commentary, *How Students are Leading Us*, the tremendous impact of student organizing, protest, and public commentary on resisting cuts and closures, notably the work of the Philadelphia Students Union. Finally, Nicole Mittenfelner Carl and Rand Quinn provide commentary on how parental activism is reframing the discourse of 'disengaged families' and demonstrate how parents are working to support public education in the city by reaching across traditional boundaries.

*Notes from the Field* presents a diversity of voices from teachers, students, and advocates. Sam Reed III, Gillian Maimon, Zach Lax, and Indi Ekanayake welcome us into their classrooms to show what systemic changes have meant 'on the ground' and how budget cuts and policy changes impact the daily lives of teachers and students. These poignant, powerful commentaries represent the rich insights of teacher knowledge (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009) and the capacity of local actors to 'write back' to distant policies. Anissa Weinraub's commentary, *Why Teachers Must Join the Fight for Public Education*, offers the perspective of a member of Teacher Action Group-Philly, and includes a series of recommendations for teachers interested in participating in reforming and reformulating many of the most devastating cuts. Nuwar Ahmed, a senior in the SDP, offers a devastating critique of the corporate takeover of public education and the dehumanizing of students through policies that reduce them to test scores. Finally, we reproduce in full the explanatory document of the Philadelphia Students Union from the May 17th mass walkout, in which thousands of students marched from their schools to City Hall.

Michelle Fine, a scholar with a longstanding commitment to public education in Philadelphia and across the country, captures the impact of cuts, closures, and crises by situating what is happening here within the broader American context. Given that the debate will go on long after the pages of this journal close, Fine proclaims the crucial role that various stakeholders must

continue to play in advocating for strong public schools in the face of the challenging days to come.

## The First Days of School

September is an ambiguous time for teachers, students, and parents- a chance for new beginnings and new opportunities, but also a chance for old habits and tired routines. The great promise of public schooling, a promise diminished each day that the doors of our schools stay shuttered and funding remains inequitable, has always been an opportunity for something different for children and their families: a renewed public citizenry, a renewed economy, a renewed set of relationships, a renewed chance for a better life. The first days of school are approaching, and along with full classrooms, smiling faces rushing down the halls, and the hope of a new academic year, comes the very real possibility of further funding retrenchment, protracted labour action, and bitter political gamesmanship. These are indeed challenging times in Philadelphia and across the nation for the very ideal of public schooling and the promise it offers. In these first days of school, we must remind ourselves of the sacred trust that public schools offer to communities, and pledge to support their continued vitality for the sake of children and families who deserve the very best the city has to offer. *Perspectives on Urban Education* is pleased to present you here with a chorus of voices that announce loud and clear that public education can and must remain strong.

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