

From the Executive Director

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Philadelphians who have lived through multiple variations of school reform may be unsure of how to react to Paul Vallas' new Key Academic Initiatives. Are they more "change-for the sake of change," or are they, at last, a well thought out strategy designed to move away from a system of "random acts of excellence" amid a backdrop of widespread student failure?

As both an educator and a student of education, I am an enthusiastic supporter of the new academic design. A standardized curriculum in literacy and math, core curriculum materials, extended learning opportunities for students, and on-site curriculum coach support for teachers were components I had in place when I was a suburban principal and my junior high school won a Blue Ribbon Award for academic excellence.

Yet, earlier, they were the key elements we lacked when I was a middle school principal in southwest Philadelphia and my high-poverty school was struggling academically. I did not become a better principal when I left the city. Rather, I was given the tools needed to create an effective instructional program.

In addition to personal experience, there are other reasons to believe that Paul Vallas' academic package places the school district on a renewed path to success. Foremost, it addresses the realities that plague urban school districts and offers a design to combat them. These realities include high student mobility rates, inexperienced and/or poorly trained teachers, inadequate and sometimes irrelevant curriculum materials, large class size, and a lack of parent involvement. These variables typically lead to student failure.

But a consistent citywide focus on common core textbook materials will help mediate the impact of student transfers and maximize the effectiveness of teacher professional development. The extended day, extended year and smaller class sizes will more closely replicate the conditions that helped my suburban school deliver a rich and rigorous academic program. And students enthused with learning will lead to greater parental involvement.

The development of an academic plan for Philadelphia was sparked by the determination and experience of C.E.O. Vallas. It is grounded in the best models of systemic school reform. The Philadelphia Education Fund worked with Chief Academic Officer Edward Williams to benchmark national and international practices and involve some of the country's leading curriculum experts to advise the District.

The local team spent time with top administrators from Houston to learn about their successful efforts to close the achievement gap. A team of experts from the Council of Great City Schools was brought to Philadelphia to offer examples and strategies from other model districts. Nationally respected authors and scholars met with the C.E.O. and his academic team to incorporate strategies for a multicultural instructional approach.

My optimism about the Philadelphia plan also emerges from a recent Eisenhower Fellowship where I visited and studied educational systems in high performing countries. In New Zealand I saw the important role of a nationally mandated curriculum with a strong literacy focus. In that country, educational dollars were scarce yet the outcomes were impressive. All resources were aligned with national goals and any outside support agencies had to demonstrate understanding of, and support for, the mandated curriculum.

Singapore consistently ranks first or second in international comparisons of student achievement. In fact, even the bottom 15 % of students in Singapore score above the international mean. To achieve such tremendous results, the country worked to become the “most aligned educational system” in the world. Like other high performing countries, they have a fixed curriculum for the first 9 or 10 years of schooling, aligned materials, assessment and professional development. They mandate extended day programs for students not performing well and assign the best teachers to the most challenged learners.

Thus the academic design presented by Paul Vallas incorporates many of the critical components used by successful systems in our country and across the world. If we stay on course with the implementation of this design, Philadelphia may one day be cited as a system of excellence. I believe the right ingredients have been put in place. It now will be up to the state and city governments to provide critically needed financial support to sustain them, and it will be up to our teachers and principals to make them work for children.

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