More Harm Than Good in "Failing" Schools: The Rise of the Standards-Based and Market-Driven Education Reform Models and their Adverse Implications in a High-Poverty Urban District

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Abstract
The national dialogue surrounding education policy has long been centered around two core strategies: the standards-based and market-driven reform models. Both approaches were firmly entrenched in federal law through the passage of the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (NCLB), and have since continued to act as guiding forces of reform in urban districts nationwide. This thesis examines the academic and political debates that have shaped the standards-based and market-driven reform models, and explores their implications within high-poverty schools. Since 2001, the School District of Philadelphia has rigorously implemented these reform strategies in an effort to boost the achievement of poor and minority youth; the district thus offers a useful case study for analyzing the assumptions and effects of standards-based and market-driven reform. While both strategies aim to reduce educational inequity, they have produced a range of adverse outcomes that disproportionately affect disadvantaged students in Philadelphia's high-poverty schools. The district's agenda has served to strain scarce resources, dilute educational quality, demoralize students and teachers, and fracture community ties in schools already grappling with the challenges of concentrated poverty and deep inequality. This thesis ultimately concludes that the standards-based and market-driven reform models – both within and beyond Philadelphia – have all too often done more harm than good in many high-poverty schools. In order to mitigate and avoid such consequences in future reform efforts, a broader dialogue is needed regarding the influences of poverty, resource scarcity, trust, and community stability on the academic achievement of low-income and minority youth.

Keywords
education reform, public education, urban education, education policy, Social Sciences, Political Science, Mary Summers, Summers, Mary

Disciplines
Political Science

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More Harm than Good in “Failing” Schools: The Rise of the Standards-Based and Market-Driven Education Reform Models and their Adverse Implications in a High-Poverty Urban District


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ABSTRACT

At both the national and local level, the dialogue surrounding education policy has long been centered around two core strategies: the standards-based and market-driven reform models. Both approaches were firmly entrenched in federal law through the passage of the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (NCLB), and have since continued to act as guiding forces of reform in urban districts nationwide. This thesis examines the academic and political debates that have shaped the standards-based and market-driven reform models, and explores their implications specifically within high-poverty schools (those in which at least 75 percent of students fall below the low-income threshold to qualify for free or reduced-price lunch). Since 2001, the School District of Philadelphia has rigorously implemented these reform strategies in an effort to boost the achievement of poor and minority youth; accordingly, the district offers a highly useful case study for analyzing the assumptions, objectives and effects of standards-based and market-driven reform. The Philadelphia case reveals a mismatch between the theoretical objectives and practical implications of these reform models. While both strategies aim to reduce educational inequity and shrink achievement gaps, they have produced a range of consequences and adverse outcomes that disproportionately affect disadvantaged students in high-poverty schools. In particular, the district’s standards-based and market-driven reform agenda has served to strain scarce resources, dilute educational quality, demoralize students and teachers, and fracture community ties in schools already grappling with the challenges of concentrated poverty and deep inequality. This thesis ultimately concludes that the standards-based and market-driven reform models – both within and beyond Philadelphia – have all too often done more harm than good in many high-poverty schools. In order to mitigate and avoid such consequences in future reform efforts, a broader dialogue is needed regarding the influences of poverty, resource scarcity, trust, and community stability on the academic achievement of low-income and minority youth.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Acronym</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ACE</td>
<td>Adverse Childhood Experiences</td>
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<td>ANAR</td>
<td>A Nation At Risk</td>
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<td>AYP</td>
<td>Adequate Yearly Progress</td>
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<td>CEO</td>
<td>Chief Education Officer</td>
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<td>CEP</td>
<td>Community Eligibility Provision</td>
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<td>EMO</td>
<td>Education Management Organization</td>
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<tr>
<td>ESEA</td>
<td>Elementary and Secondary Education Act</td>
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<td>ESSA</td>
<td>Every Student Succeeds Act</td>
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<td>GLA</td>
<td>Global Leadership Academy</td>
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<tr>
<td>IASA</td>
<td>Improving America’s Schools Act</td>
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<tr>
<td>KIPP</td>
<td>Knowledge is Power Program</td>
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<tr>
<td>MIS</td>
<td>Managed Instruction System</td>
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<td>NCLB</td>
<td>No Child Left Behind Act</td>
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<td>ORS</td>
<td>Office of Restructured Schools</td>
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<tr>
<td>PCAPS</td>
<td>Philadelphia Coalition Advocating for Public Schools</td>
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<tr>
<td>PFT</td>
<td>Philadelphia Federation of Teachers</td>
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<tr>
<td>PSSA</td>
<td>Pennsylvania System for School Assessment</td>
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<tr>
<td>RSI</td>
<td>Renaissance Schools Initiative</td>
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<td>SES</td>
<td>Supplementary Education Services</td>
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<tr>
<td>SRC</td>
<td>School Reform Commission</td>
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<td>SAC</td>
<td>School Advisory Council</td>
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A First Encounter With “Failure”

In October of 2013, I signed up to work as a student volunteer with the Urban Nutrition Initiative (UNI) and was promptly assigned to a position in an afterschool cooking program in West Philadelphia’s Samuel B. Huey K-8 School. Upon arriving at the school for the first time, I was immediately drawn to the large hand-painted mural spanning the building’s eastern wall. The mural was painted with broad brushstrokes and vivid colors, and it depicted a diverse group of students dancing, reading, and planting flowers in a flourishing school garden. Every Thursday for the remainder of the semester, I would take a moment to pause outside of Huey’s entrance and marvel at the mural before beginning my shift.

Meanwhile, inside of the school, I quickly came to find that the actual experiences of students and teachers stood in stark contrast to the vibrant and tranquil scenes painted on the building’s exterior. Like many schools in Philadelphia, Huey served a predominantly poor and minority community. About 94 percent of students identified as African American, and fully 100 percent of enrollees in the 2015-2016 school year fell below the low-income threshold to qualify for free or reduced-price lunch.\(^1\) The school’s annual performance on standardized tests was consistently and abysmally low; only fourteen percent and two percent of students (in third through eighth grade) scored above “proficiency” in reading and mathematics, respectively, on Pennsylvania’s 2016 state exams.\(^2\) At the time, Huey was also grappling with the challenges of increasingly large classes, frequent outbreaks of violence, and serious problems with teacher retention.\(^3\) During my weekly visits to the school, I listened closely as parent volunteers and staff shared their personal encounters with these realities. I heard accounts of harsh disciplinary practices, insufficient facility maintenance, pervasive food insecurity among Huey families, and intense verbal conflicts between students, parents and teachers that escalated into physical confrontation.

Yet in spite of these troubling realities, I grew quite fond of my energetic students, the devoted supervisors, and the Huey community in general. For nearly three years, I routinely visited the school as a UNI volunteer and worked alongside small groups of students to prepare nourishing snacks for children in various afterschool programs. Both the children and the community volunteers were passionate and enthusiastic about our mission, and I looked forward to the time I spent with them each week.

My experience with the program was cut short in the spring of 2016, when the School District of Philadelphia once again diagnosed Huey as “failing” and decided to transfer its management to a charter organization. After soliciting proposals and negotiating a contract, Superintendent William R. Hite announced that an outside charter group called Global Leadership Academy (GLA) would take control of the school’s operations in the upcoming academic year. GLA pledged to restructure Huey’s management, replace many of its teachers, and revamp its instructional formats, all in the name of boosting student performance on standardized exams. Parents and local advocates loudly protested the charter conversion, and teachers grew increasingly worried about the security of their careers. Yet the district plowed ahead

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in its efforts to transform Huey into a charter school, and the transition unfolded at the beginning of the 2016-2017 school year. Global Leadership Academy came to the Huey community with its own resources, programs and practices, and my UNI afterschool program was eliminated.

As these developments were unfolding at Huey, I was also working as a part-time legislative assistant in the Philadelphia office of Pennsylvania State Representative Brian Sims. I decided to use the experience as an opportunity to make sense of what I was seeing at Huey and to explore the logic behind the district’s decision to transfer the school to outside management. My efforts soon snowballed into a much larger quest to understand the assumptions, origins, theories and implications of the district’s broader standards-based and market-driven reform agenda. I found myself poring over the pages of the state education budget, scanning legislative documents detailing the state’s takeover of the Philadelphia district, and fielding phone calls from constituents expressing concerns about charter organizations and potential school closures. I was diving into the complexities and details of a fierce debate regarding the fate of the state’s “failing” schools, and I was starting to suspect that the political rhetoric surrounding education reform did not accurately reflect realities on the ground.

The experience was just as frustrating as it was fascinating, and I ultimately left with far more questions than answers. Why do state and local reformers insist on diagnosing schools as “failing” and labeling them as such? What assumptions are driving the decisions to privatize, restructure and close neighborhood schools? How have communities responded to — and been affected by — private sector influence and top-down intervention? Why have socioeconomic and racial achievement gaps persisted and widened, in spite of these ambitious and far-reaching reform efforts? And perhaps most importantly, what are we missing in the broader dialogue surrounding urban education reform? Though my work at both Huey and the political office had ended, I decided that I was not content with leaving these questions unresolved. This thesis is thus the product of my ongoing efforts to examine, address, and wrestle with the issues and debates surrounding the guiding theories of education reform, both within Philadelphia and in American cities more broadly.

The Huey example is merely one small part of the broad, complex and multifaceted story of standards-based and market-driven education reform at the local and federal levels. In the pages that follow, I tell this story, trace its origins, and explore its implications in schools serving predominantly low-income and minority communities. After thoroughly examining the Philadelphia case, I have reached the following conclusion: in many urban high-poverty schools, the dominant models of education reform have all too often done more harm than good.
INTRODUCTION

This thesis examines the academic and political debates that have shaped major education reform strategies at both the federal and local level, and explores their implications for public schools serving low-income and minority communities. The School District of Philadelphia is used a case study to explore the objectives and implementation of two particularly influential forces in education policy: the standards-based and market-driven reform movements (to be defined in the following section). These theories of reform were firmly entrenched at the federal level through the passage of the No Child Left Behind Act, and have profoundly shaped local education policy in urban districts nationwide. In Philadelphia, the enactment of the legislation marked the initiation of a rigorous standards-based and market-driven reform strategy centered on boosting the achievement of poor and minority youth. Accordingly, a close analysis of the district’s education agenda since 2001 yields critical insight into the assumptions, theories and debates that have shaped and sustained these reform models.

The study of the Philadelphia district is employed not only to explore the dialogue that shaped these reform concepts, but also to illustrate their ramifications when put into practice. In particular, this thesis focuses on the adverse impacts of these reforms for the city’s high-poverty schools, which comprise over three-fourths of the total schools in the district. In short, the case study analyzes the mismatch between the theoretical underpinnings of the standards-based and market-driven reform movements and their practical consequences in high-poverty urban schools. It concludes by looking briefly at the recent initiation of an alternative strategy (the Community Schools Initiative) that has gained traction in the wake of growing tensions over school closures, test-driven interventions, and other controversial “reforms.”

Before proceeding, it is important to note that this thesis limits its analysis to the two major reform movements mentioned above (labeled “standards-based” and “market-driven”), and thus does not address many other key issues in the nation’s education debates. While a number of these topics – such as school segregation by race and class, restorative justice models, and teaching practices – are of great importance, this thesis narrows its scope solely to the federal reform strategies embodied by NCLB and pursued in Philadelphia. In addition, the

Philadelphia case study is inherently limited to an analysis of urban high-poverty schools; thus, this thesis does not generalize its argument to schools serving affluent communities or to rural schools with large low-income populations.

The thesis begins with an introductory overview that outlines its core arguments regarding standards-based and market-driven reform in the School District of Philadelphia. Part I situates the Philadelphia story in a broader context by reviewing the history of the major political and academic debates surrounding national education policy. The Philadelphia case study is then explored at length in Part II, which traces the implementation of standards-based and market-driven reform within the district from 2001 to the present. Part III draws upon primary source material, research interviews and scholarly literature to argue that these strategies have produced a number of critical consequences in many high-poverty schools, and have often done more to exacerbate existing challenges within these schools than to ameliorate them. The case study concludes with a brief examination of emerging alternatives to the dominant reform agenda and the implications of the Philadelphia experience.

The Philadelphia Story: The Impact of Reform in High-Poverty Schools

On January 8, 2002, President George W. Bush stood in the center of a high school gymnasium in Hamilton, Ohio, with a copy of the nation’s newest federal education legislation set before him. Upon signing the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) into law, Bush proclaimed, “The fundamental principle of this bill is that every child can learn, we expect every child to learn, and you must show us whether or not every child is learning… And now it’s up to you, the local citizens of our great land, the compassionate, decent citizens of America, to stand up and demand high standards, and to demand that no child – not one single child – is left behind.”

Three years later, the United States Congress invited Paul G. Vallas – the Chief Education Officer of the School District of Philadelphia – to share his views of the federal legislation with lawmakers in Washington, D.C. In an impassioned testimony before the U.S. House of Representatives Committee on Education and the Workforce, Vallas echoed Bush’s optimism regarding the significance and promise of NCLB:

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There is simply no time to waste when it comes to setting high expectations for our children, providing the needed resources for children to meet these expectations, and holding adults accountable for achieving these expectations. The School District of Philadelphia has chosen to aggressively implement the Act because its tenets are sound and its goals are clear: we must do all that we can to ensure that all of our children are reaching their full potential.  

The implementation of NCLB marked a critical moment for the School District of Philadelphia, which had recently been subjected to a state takeover in the midst of a deepening financial crisis. At the time of NCLB’s passage, the district’s challenges were immense; decades of worsening poverty and budget cuts had sapped its resources, and its schools were struggling to serve their predominantly low-income and minority populations. For decades, state and local policymakers had grappled with the task of improving the academic performance of the city’s disadvantaged youth, particularly those in high-poverty schools (defined as schools in which at least 75 percent of students qualify for free or reduced-price lunch). In the months preceding NCLB’s enactment at the federal level, Republican state officials had essentially demanded that the Philadelphia district initiate an ambitious reform effort known as the “diverse provider model,” which expanded private sector involvement in the city’s low-performing schools.

The passage of NCLB provided additional guidelines for the implementation of more rigorous strategies in schools that failed to improve their students’ standardized test scores. In the eyes of Vallas, NCLB provided the necessary tools and prescriptions to enhance the performance of all Philadelphia pupils and to remedy deep inequities within the school system. Due largely to his enthusiastic embrace and swift implementation of the law, Philadelphia quickly earned a reputation among federal officials as the nation’s “first great experiment with NCLB.”

The content of NCLB is deeply rooted in two major concepts that have dominated federal education debates for decades: the “standards” movement and “market-driven reform.” Proponents of “standards” emphasize the role of strict accountability in ensuring that children

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master the required curriculum content and that schools are held responsible for student achievement. Advocates of market-driven strategies for educational improvement seek to encourage competition, innovation and transformation within districts by expanding private sector engagement, school “choice,” and market-oriented principles. Both strategies frame the poor achievement of America’s disadvantaged students as a consequence of educators’ “low expectations” and inadequate instruction for low-income and minority youth. NCLB fused the standards-based and market-driven reform models into a single piece of legislation, and these principles have also become the guiding forces of education policymaking within the School District of Philadelphia.

Like the proponents of NCLB, the leaders of Philadelphia’s reform effort have pointed to “low expectations” among teachers and principals as the fundamental cause of poor student achievement in the city’s high-poverty schools. State and district officials have placed the burden of responsibility for student test performance on educators and school administrators, arguing that holding these groups accountable will motivate improvement. Since 2001, schools with insufficient test results have been diagnosed as “failing” (a label introduced and popularized by NCLB) and subjected to a set of aggressive interventions that directly mirror the legislation’s prescriptions for struggling high-poverty schools. In the wake of NCLB, the standards-based and market-driven prescriptions embraced at the federal level – such as data-driven accountability, high expectations, targeted school interventions, and private sector engagement – have come to dominate the reform agenda in Philadelphia.

State and local policymakers have pursued these reform strategies in the name of educational equity, claiming that their driving motivations are to shrink socioeconomic and racial achievement gaps and to ensure that all children in Philadelphia receive the opportunity to obtain a high-quality education. However, a closer look at the experiences of Philadelphia’s high-poverty schools reveals a major gap between the theoretical objectives and actual outcomes of standards-based and market-driven reform. In the years since 2001, the district’s implementation of NCLB and its broader reform agenda have produced a wide range of detrimental consequences in schools serving low-income and minority students. The district’s accountability mechanisms have placed enormous pressure on high-poverty schools, which are expected to demonstrate steady progress toward statewide test score targets in spite of their severe financial constraints. As a result, principals and teachers within these schools have been forced to abandon
enriching extracurricular programs, art and music courses, and various student services to divert scarce resources toward test preparation. When these harsh strategies fall short of improving test scores, high-poverty schools are then branded as “failing.”

The label of “failure” not only undermines the morale of students and staff, but also invites a series of aggressive interventions that further destabilize the school community. As prescribed in NCLB, Philadelphia’s intervention strategies have included a range of disruptive measures: the repeated turnover of teachers, principals and staff, the transfer of school management to charter organizations and external providers, and in many cases, school closures. These actions – negotiated almost entirely between district officials, private consultants and external education providers – have stifled public engagement, fostered deep mistrust, and severed longstanding ties between schools and their neighborhoods. Put simply, NCLB’s prescriptions for standards-based and market-driven reform have largely served to aggravate and deepen the challenges of improving student performance in the School District of Philadelphia. In implementing the strategies espoused by NCLB, the district has inflicted considerable damage on many of the high-poverty schools that policymakers had initially set out to help.

The adverse outcomes of Philadelphia’s recent education policies expose a critical reality: the theories of standards-based and market-driven reform do not adequately address the underlying causes of low performance in high-poverty schools. These models for reform are rooted in a set of incomplete assumptions regarding the relationships between poverty, inequality and student achievement, and thus represent a misdiagnosis of why such schools “fail.” By framing poor student performance as the product of disengaged teachers, ineffective management and “low expectations,” these strategies effectively place the blame for “failure” within the walls of schools themselves. Accordingly, both the federal and local reform dialogues have focused on promoting drastic change in individual schools while devoting little attention to the contexts of poverty and inequality in which they operate. Therein lies the fundamental contradiction of standards-based and market-driven reform: these strategies demand that low-income and minority students demonstrate improved academic achievement, and yet fail to address the powerful external influences and traumas that inhibit their performance at the outset.

To challenge this discrepancy, many Philadelphia community groups have mobilized to demand alternative approaches to school improvement that more adequately address the links between poverty and academic achievement. This local resistance to NCLB has coalesced
around the notion of “community schools” as a strategy that offers a framework for meeting the social, emotional and health-related needs of children grappling with the stressors of poverty.

This model was formally embraced at the municipal level in 2016, when Philadelphia Mayor Jim Kenney announced his administration’s new Community Schools Initiative. Currently in its early implementation phase, this initiative is rooted in a conceptualization of academic achievement that emphasizes the interconnectedness of social conditions and educational outcomes. The initiative’s proponents reject the prevailing notion that poor academic achievement is primarily a product of “low expectations” on the part of school staff, and instead assert that improving performance in high-poverty schools requires addressing the contextual factors that impede student learning. With its focus on community-oriented approaches to the impact of poverty and trauma, the initiative represents a significant departure from the standards-based and market-driven models that have shaped Philadelphia’s education agenda.

As a theoretical alternative to the tenets of NCLB, the Community Schools Initiative has prompted considerable debate among municipal officials, scholars, district leaders and state policymakers. Among proponents of the “community schools” model, Kenney’s strategy presents an opportunity to refocus the policy dialogue on a more holistic, contextual understanding of why high-poverty schools “fail.” Yet as city officials and community advocates champion this local approach to reform, most state and district leaders remain firmly committed to the guiding theories of NCLB. These powerful actors continue to defend standards-based and market-driven reform as the most promising approaches to school improvement in Philadelphia.

These arguments about the presumptions and effects of education policies often unfold in government offices and conference rooms, far from the students and teachers whose daily experiences are dramatically altered with every attempt at reform. Within the School District of Philadelphia, the intellectual and political debates surrounding education reform have had profound – and often unanticipated – consequences in practice. In order to truly understand the implications of Philadelphia’s reform strategies, it is critical to examine both their underlying theories and their manifestations within high-poverty schools. Thus, this thesis now turns to a review of the assumptions, ideas and debates that have significantly shaped the education of low-income and minority children within Philadelphia and across the nation.
Philadelphia’s battles over education reform can only be understood in the context of a much broader national dialogue with regard to the academic outcomes of disadvantaged youth. This section provides a historical overview of the theoretical and political debates that have shaped American education policy, with a particular focus on the rise of the standards-based and market-driven reform movements. In addition, it highlights the ways in which public concerns regarding the performance of low-income students (particularly those in high-poverty schools) have shaped the nation’s various education reform strategies.

The federal government embarked on its first major effort to support struggling high-poverty schools in the 1960s. Since then, these schools have endured multiple waves of state and federal intervention, due largely to the increasing momentum of the standards-based and market-driven reform movements in the 1980s and 1990s. The two reform models laid the groundwork for perhaps the most transformative (and controversial) piece of federal education legislation to date: the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001. These historical developments and the debates surrounding them provide crucial context for understanding the guiding theories, objectives and implications of the School District of Philadelphia’s educational reform strategies.

Roots of Reform: LBJ and the Challenge of High-Poverty Schools

The first major federal intervention in the nation’s struggling public schools unfolded in the mid-1960s, as part of President Lyndon B. Johnson’s ambitious campaign to wage his “unconditional” War on Poverty. During this time period, widely publicized debates regarding school desegregation had drawn national attention to the plight of high-poverty schools. Johnson framed inequality in the education system as a crippling societal ill, and pledged to expand the federal government’s role in assisting schools that served poor neighborhoods. As part of this mission, the president called upon congressional Democrats to develop a piece of legislation that would equalize educational opportunities for American children.

The product of this legislative effort – the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) of 1964 – was specifically designed to target schools that served high percentages of poor students. The bill was crafted around the principle of “redress,” or the notion that schools serving predominantly low-income students required supplementary resources in order to match the educational quality of those in affluent neighborhoods.\(^\text{10}\) The legislation incorporated a grant program known as Title I, which provides financial assistance to schools that qualify as “high-poverty” under federal guidelines. According to the language of the legislation, schools were expected to utilize federal funds to “expand and improve their educational programs by various means… which contribute to meeting the special educational needs of educationally deprived children.”\(^\text{11}\) Upon the enactment of ESEA, the U.S. Department of Education began administering grants to schools based on a formula that accounted for census poverty rates, available school resources, and the cost of education in each state.\(^\text{12}\) Suddenly, billions of supplementary federal dollars were flowing into high-poverty schools on an annual basis. The legislation also established a framework for its expiration and reauthorization at five-year intervals, thus setting the stage for ongoing debates regarding national policy directed at high-poverty schools. From that point onward, these schools – often dubbed “Title I schools” – would remain primary targets of every subsequent federal reform effort.

The Johnson administration and Democratic lawmakers initially celebrated the establishment of Title I as a major feat in the sphere of education policy. In their view, the grant program offered a promising solution to the main challenge affecting high-poverty schools: the lack of finances and resources for additional educational services. This assumption was soon challenged by the publication of a formative study titled “Equality of Educational Opportunity,” more commonly known as the Coleman Report.\(^\text{13}\) The U.S. Department of Education commissioned the study in early 1964 (prior to the enactment of ESEA), with the intention of informing its civil rights agenda and assessing the impact of school integration strategies.

\(^{11}\) An Act To Strengthen and Improve Educational Quality and Educational Opportunities in the Nation’s Elementary and Secondary Schools, Public Law 89-10, U.S. Statutes at Large 79 (1964): 27.  
nationwide. Under the guidance of prominent Johns Hopkins University sociologist James S. Coleman, the research team embarked on an ambitious effort to evaluate the achievement outcomes of the nation’s low-income and minority youth. Coleman’s survey represented one of the first major education studies to rely on test scores as indicators of student performance and school quality.\footnote{Schugurensky, “History of Education: Selected Moments of the 20th Century.”}

Released in 1966, the highly publicized findings of the Coleman Report swept through the nation’s policy circles and dramatically reshaped a number of assumptions that had guided public education reform. After analyzing data from hundreds of schools nationwide, Coleman concluded that the higher quality of teachers, curricula and facilities had only a modest impact on academic performance.\footnote{Schugurensky, “History of Education: Selected Moments of the 20th Century.”} He argued instead that a child’s family background – especially socioeconomic status – constituted the most significant predictor of achievement.\footnote{James S. Coleman, “Equality of Educational Opportunity,” National Center for Educational Statistics (Washington, DC: Archives of the United States Department of Health, Education & Welfare, 1966), 20-23.} The language of the report seemed to imply that a child’s academic fate was predetermined by family income, and that schools themselves could do little to improve the educational prospects of poor and minority children.\footnote{Lisbeth B. Schorr, Common Purpose: Strengthening Families and Neighborhoods to Rebuild America (New York: Anchor Books, 1998), 140.}

Coleman’s findings called into question the underpinnings of Johnson’s entire approach to education reform. The administration’s Title I program, which funneled supplementary funding into high-poverty schools, was rooted in the logic that additional resources and educational services would improve the performance of low-income children in high-poverty schools. The report, however, essentially framed this strategy is futile; increased school funding would do little to address the individual socioeconomic factors that truly determined success in the classroom.\footnote{Schorr, Common Purpose: Strengthening Families and Neighborhoods to Rebuild America, 141.} So long as poverty and inequality persisted, Coleman argued, schools would be incapable of dramatically shrinking the academic disparities between low-income students and their more affluent counterparts.\footnote{Coleman, “Equality of Educational Opportunity,” 290-330.}

The release of the Coleman Report triggered a wave of intense debate among education scholars and policymakers. After reviewing the study, few could deny the existence of a powerful correlation between low socioeconomic status and student achievement. However,
many policymakers refused to accept Coleman’s conclusion that school reform could not address this critical relationship. At the national level, both Democrats and Republicans agreed that new strategies were needed to target the underlying causes of poor academic performance among the nation’s low-income students. Yet the nature of those causes – and the appropriate solutions for addressing them – remained unclear, and quickly became hotly contested topics among political and intellectual elites. In the decades that followed, these disputes would shape the assumptions and theories at the core of federal education policymaking.

Raising “Expectations” with Standards-Based Reform (1980 - 2000)

The debates surrounding student achievement rapidly intensified in the 1980s, as Cold War tensions reached their boiling point and federal lawmakers grew increasingly preoccupied with maintaining America’s dominance on the international stage. Congressional Republicans and Democrats alike began voicing concerns that deficiencies in the public education system would undermine the productivity and progress of America’s future workforce. In their view, the nation’s socioeconomic and racial “achievement gaps” – a popular term used to describe major discrepancies in educational outcomes (often measured with test scores) – threatened to diminish the nation’s competitiveness in a volatile global economy.

To bolster their arguments, federal lawmakers pointed to studies showing that American students performed far below their foreign counterparts on international exams in mathematics and science. These results appeared to validate the claim that the entire public education system in the United States was in decline. Other leading education scholars pushed back against these concerns, arguing that such sweeping generalizations masked dramatic variations in the quality and performance of American public schools. A closer look at the data, they argued, would reveal that the low performance of poor and minority students (particularly those attending high-poverty schools) was primarily responsible for bringing down national test score averages.

21 Rudalevige, “The Politics of No Child Left Behind,” 64.
In an attempt to resolve these disputes, the Reagan administration assembled a team of policy experts and government analysts to “review and synthesize data and scholarly literature on the quality of learning and teaching in the nation’s schools, colleges and universities.” The research team, known formally as the National Commission on Excellence in Education, published their highly anticipated report in 1983. The study was titled *A Nation At Risk (ANAR)*, and its release sent shockwaves through the education policy arena. The report did little to settle the broader disputes regarding the supposed decline of American education; rather, its findings generated increased tension between those who sought to overhaul the entire U.S. education system and those who pushed for a targeted focus on high-poverty schools.

In many respects, the report did corroborate the claims that poor and minority children accounted for the low performance averages of American schools in general. On nearly every measure of academic achievement – test scores, graduation rates, remedial and special education enrollment, literacy metrics, and so on – these students fared far worse than more affluent pupils. Furthermore, the low-income and minority students with the lowest educational outcomes tended to be those who attended schools in neighborhoods of concentrated poverty.

To make sense of these findings, the report’s authors offered a new theoretical explanation for the poor performance of disadvantaged students in high-poverty schools. They diagnosed the issue as one of “low expectations” for low-income and minority youth, defining “expectations” as the anticipated level of “knowledge, abilities and skills” that students should possess at a given age. According to ANAR, teachers and principals within such schools did not hold low-income and minority students to appropriate standards for learning and performance; as a result, these children were not challenged in the classroom or pushed to demonstrate higher achievement. In high-poverty schools, this “deficiency” in expectations ultimately translated into a lack of engagement, insufficient motivation, and poor-quality teaching.

The report, however, did not limit its appraisal to high-poverty schools alone. Instead, the authors paired their criticism of “low expectations” with a broader condemnation of instructional quality across all American schools. They argued that curricula nationwide had become

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fragmented and diluted, and that students were not leaving school equipped with the tools to thrive as citizens and members of the workforce.\textsuperscript{29} This “rising tide of mediocrity” in public schools, they explained, posed a threat to the nation’s democratic and economic future.\textsuperscript{30}

Based on these findings, the authors concluded that focusing solely on boosting academic achievement within high-poverty schools would be insufficient to remedy the ills of the American education system. They instead presented a set of policy recommendations designed to improve the quality of learning in \textit{all} public schools, which would include high-poverty schools in their scope and impact. Most notably, the researchers suggested raising the “standards” of learning for all students to ensure that every child was held to the same high expectations. The report endorsed the establishment of strong “minimum foundation curricula” to provide frameworks for comprehensive and enriching instruction in English, mathematics, history, science and various additional subjects.\textsuperscript{31} With these standards in place, the authors reasoned, teachers and principals in high-poverty schools would have no excuse for failing to deliver a high-quality education. Furthermore, content standards would ensure that every American student – whether “gifted or less able, affluent or disadvantaged” – was adequately prepared for a future of economic productivity and civic duty.\textsuperscript{32}

These recommendations quickly gained traction among many prominent legislators and education scholars, who eagerly embraced \textit{ANAR}’s emphasis on “standards” as a guiding framework for new reform strategies. Throughout the 1980s, the standards movement grew to become a highly influential force in the field of education. The push for new standards crystallized into a federal policy objective in 1989, when the incoming administration of President George H.W. Bush convened an Education Summit to establish performance goals for the nation’s public schools. The governors and policymakers present at the Summit agreed on a proposal called \textit{America 2000}, which emphasized the development of “world class standards” as a key component of future education reform.\textsuperscript{33}

To translate this commitment into policy action, Bush appointed major proponents of the standards movement to leadership positions in the U.S. Department of Education. Under the

\textsuperscript{29} National Commission on Excellence in Education, \textit{A Nation At Risk}, 18-19.
\textsuperscript{31} National Commission on Excellence in Education, \textit{A Nation At Risk}, 24-27.
\textsuperscript{32} National Commission on Excellence in Education, \textit{A Nation At Risk}, 24.
\textsuperscript{33} Rudalevige, “The Politics of No Child Left Behind,” 64.
guidance of Secretary Lamar Alexander (the former Republican governor of Tennessee) and Assistant Secretary Diane Ravitch (a respected education historian), the Department initiated an effort to develop “voluntary national standards” for a wide variety of subjects.\textsuperscript{34} Federal officials began administering grants to consortia of scholars and educators to collaborate on curriculum guidelines in history, language arts, civics, mathematics, economics, the arts, foreign languages, geography, physical education and the sciences. According to Ravitch, these voluntary standards for “rich curricula” would ensure that all students – regardless of race or income – received a comprehensive and compelling education.\textsuperscript{35}

In the early years of the Bush administration, Ravitch and other federal officials were confident in the steady progress of the national standards movement. However, as the Department began releasing the proposed standards to the public, the push for curriculum guidelines quickly became entangled in ideological and political disputes. Many conservative “states’ rights” advocates argued that the federal government was overstepping its boundaries and encroaching upon state control of education policy. A number of critics – most notably Lynne V. Cheney, the chairperson of the National Endowment for the Humanities – specifically attacked the suggested history standards, contending that they promoted a “distorted” version of the nation’s past that emphasized “oppression and failure.”\textsuperscript{36} These critiques attracted the attention of many prominent conservative news outlets, and the Department of Education soon found itself at the center of a media firestorm. By the early 1990s, the standards movement had devolved into a public dispute regarding who did or did not have the authority to decide what America’s students should learn.\textsuperscript{37}

In the midst of these polarizing debates, the new administration of President William J. Clinton began collaborating with Congress to assemble a massive piece of federal education legislation that would renew the terms of ESEA. Clinton viewed the reauthorization as an opportunity to make his mark on the performance of the nation’s schools, but he recognized that the passage of any major education reforms would require strong bipartisan support. Accordingly, Clinton and his congressional partners deliberately sidestepped the politically

\textsuperscript{34} Ravitch, \textit{The Death and Life of the Great American School System}, 16.
\textsuperscript{35} Ravitch, \textit{The Death and Life of the Great American School System}, 22.
\textsuperscript{36} Ravitch, \textit{The Death and Life of the Great American School System}, 17.
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“radioactive” topic of national curriculum guidelines. They opted instead for the more neutral alternative of granting states the authority to dictate their own content standards. The resulting legislation, known as the Improving America’s Schools Act (IASA), stipulated that each state must create its own content requirements and select a set of corresponding standardized tests.

As the legislation’s authors navigated the politically contentious terrain of “standards,” they managed to forge a bipartisan consensus around a single critical theme: increased accountability. The notion of “accountability” – in essence, holding schools and teachers responsible for student mastery of state-mandated content standards – quickly became a buzzword among Democrats and Republicans alike. Congressional lawmakers framed “accountability” as the remedy for “low expectations,” arguing that extensive testing and data collection systems would ensure that all students were encouraged to achieve high standards of learning in each state. Legislators placed particular emphasis on the importance of quantifiable metrics of achievement and insisted that “federal dollars needed to be tied more explicitly to measurable gains in student performance.”

The final version of IASA thus mandated that states utilize routine assessments to track academic progress as a requirement for receiving federal funds. These state exams, the legislators reasoned, would provide a wealth of data to evaluate the quality of learning and ensure that schools were teaching the required content.

The enactment of IASA in 1994 triggered the rapid proliferation of standardized assessments throughout the United States, as state education departments scrambled to align their practices with the federal legislation. The Clinton administration’s reform package cemented the role of state test results as the federal government’s primary metric for school quality and student achievement. By the end of the 1990s, the “standards-based testing era” had reached full maturity; a total of forty-eight states (plus the District of Columbia and Puerto Rico) either revamped or introduced routine assessments in the six years following IASA’s passage.

As states grew increasingly reliant on testing and data collection, a number of key voices in the field of education policy began to issue warnings about the direction of “standards-based reform.” These critics included former Assistant Secretary of Education Diane Ravitch, who

40 Rudalevige, “The Politics of No Child Left Behind,” 64.
lamented what she saw as the abandonment of the standards movement’s original goals. In her view, the initial aims of pro-standards reformers – the development of rich and diverse curricula to equip all students for future success – had been “hijacked” by the authors of IASA in their quest to unite legislators around the concept of test-based “accountability.” As a result, Ravitch argued, schools were being pushed to prioritize instruction in the “basic skills” assessed on state exams over providing an enriching and holistic education. Many teachers, principals and education scholars echoed Ravitch’s sentiment, arguing that standardized testing was becoming the focal point of student learning rather than a tool used to assess knowledge. Yet these warnings failed to derail the efforts of state officials and policymakers, who continued to revise and administer standardized assessments in compliance with IASA. The legislation essentially laid the groundwork for No Child Left Behind, which would soon build upon these existing accountability systems and expand the use of test data.


Throughout the 1980s and 1990s, the implementation of federal standards-based reform coincided with the growing influence of private sector actors in public education. A variety of increasingly powerful private interests – including corporate investors, family foundations, entrepreneurs, non-profit organizations, hedge funds and education management organizations (EMOs) – capitalized on widespread concerns regarding school quality to expand their ventures into the education policy arena. Many prominent think tanks, advocacy groups and scholars partnered with these economic actors to call for increased private engagement in schools, arguing that the “crisis” in American education was due to the inflexibility of highly bureaucratic and inefficient public institutions. Drawing upon increasingly dominant neoliberal modes of thought, these groups insisted that only free-market principles were capable of improving the nation’s ailing schools. The privatization of education services, they contended, would transform districts into competitive education “marketplaces,” ultimately serving to reduce costs while increasing efficiency, innovation and quality.

These ideas laid the groundwork for a “market-driven” reform movement that

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emphasized the concepts of choice, competition and privatization as the drivers of school improvement. As the intellectual and economic elites behind “market-driven” reform – known collectively as “corporate reformers” – vigorously promoted their agenda, the movement took its place alongside standards-based reform as a dominant (and highly contentious) approach to improving the quality of America’s schools.

The market-driven reform efforts of the 1980s and 1990s were built upon theoretical foundations that had been established decades earlier. The tenets of the movement – choice, competition and privatization – can be traced back to the 1950s, when Nobel Prize-winning economist Milton Friedman (then a professor at the University of Chicago) began advocating for a free-market approach to public education. In fact, his seminal 1955 article, titled “The Role of Government in Education,” was the first major scholarly work to introduce the language of “school choice” in education policy.46 Throughout his career, Friedman framed the school system in economic terms, arguing that parents and students should be viewed as consumers of educational services with the freedom to select from among a range of providers. The expansion of “choice,” he insisted, would motivate schools to innovate and improve in order to meet consumer demands for high-quality learning. In an interview with Newsweek, Friedman offered the following summary of his free-market view:

The true customers of the public schools – parents and children – have come to exercise less and less influence over the schools as the schools have become more and more centralized and bureaucratic. Monopoly and uniformity have replaced competition and diversity… Our goal is to have a system in which every family in the U.S. will be able to choose for itself the school to which its children go… If we had that, a system of free choice, we would also have a system of competition, innovation, which would change the character of education… You cannot make a monopolistic supplier of a service pay much attention to its customers’ wants — especially when it does not get its funds directly from its customers. The only solution is to break the monopoly, introduce competition and give the customers alternatives.47

Friedman and like-minded scholars remained vocal champions of such concepts throughout the 1980s and 1990s, paving the way for the “corporate reformers” to translate these theoretical arguments into policy action. The movement’s leading proponents specifically set their sights on low-income and minority communities, arguing that the notions of “choice” and “competition”

could be deployed to level the playing field of educational opportunity. Advocates of “choice,” for instance, argued that the strategy would allow students to “escape” from “failing public schools” by giving parents the freedom to enroll their children in more promising alternatives. In granting this decision-making power to parents, districts would be “giving low-income families the kinds of choices that white suburban families had when they chose where to live.”

The corporate reformers recognized that the expansion of choice alone would not be sufficient to rectify inequities in the education system; “choice” would have little impact if high-quality school options were not locally available. Accordingly, many pro-market advocates turned to privatization as a remedy for districts with large numbers of low-performing schools. One such advocate was University of Washington professor Paul T. Hill (founder of the Center on Reinventing Public Education), who suggested that districts negotiate contracts to shift the management of struggling schools to external private providers. These providers, Hill argued, would be freed from bureaucratic restrictions to pursue more innovative educational strategies. Further, the diversification of providers would generate competition within districts, thereby motivating all schools – whether publicly or privately managed – to improve.

This argument dovetailed with the claims of many charter networks, education management organizations, and entrepreneurs who insisted that “competitive school marketplaces” would drive positive change. A number of for-profit and non-profit groups (such as the Walton Family Foundation, Academica, Pearson Education, Inc. and Edison Learning, Inc.) positioned themselves to play active roles as key providers of school management and educational services.

By the end of the 1990s, the market-driven reform movement had manifested in a number of concrete policy initiatives across the United States. As lawmakers at the national level remained locked in their battles over curriculum standards, the corporate reformers channeled their vast resources and political influence toward promoting their agenda among state and local policymakers. Proponents of privatization celebrated a major victory in 1991, when the

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48 Ravitch, Reign of Error, 33.
49 Sunderman, Kim and Orfield, NCLB Meets School Realities, xxx.
53 Ravitch, Reign of Error, 33.
Minnesota legislature enacted the first piece of state legislation allowing external charter organizations to manage and operate publicly funded schools. An additional thirty-five states followed suit by the end of the decade.\(^{54}\) Furthermore, a number of urban districts (most notably in Cleveland and Milwaukee) and states (such as Florida and Louisiana) began experimenting with the expansion of “school choice” through state-funded scholarships and “vouchers” for private school enrollment.\(^{55}\) Empowered by these initial successes, the proponents of market-driven reform intensified their efforts to court policymakers and expand choice, competition and privatization to districts nationwide.

These efforts, however, did not go unchallenged. Many education advocates, academics and school leaders expressed alarm (and at times, outrage) regarding the growing influence of the private sector in schools, and the opposition grew increasingly vocal as the market-driven reform movement made inroads in local and state policy. Critics argued that “choice” programs and external school management siphoned resources away from the public education system, pointing to the controversial provisions of many new state laws that detailed the use of taxpayer dollars in charter schools.\(^{56}\) Further, many opponents of choice framed the practice as nothing more than a “lifeboat” for a select handful of low-income children from families with the time and knowledge to take advantage of such programs. As the most motivated parents capitalized on choice to relocate their children to new schools, the majority of disadvantaged students would remain “trapped in a system without enough resources to meet their needs.”\(^{57}\)

Many prominent voices in the education sphere attacked the market-driven reform movement in its entirety, arguing that the corporate reformers were steadily dismantling the nation’s public school system under the guise of promoting educational equity. In their view, the movement did little to address critical questions regarding the substance and quality of children’s learning. Furthermore, the expanding role of the private sector was perceived as a threat to a fundamental feature of American democracy: the provision of education as a public good.\(^{58}\) As districts turned to privatization, the long-cherished notion of the American “common school” – a


\(^{57}\) Prothero, “What Are School Vouchers and How Do They Work?”

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publicly funded and publicly managed school open to all – was coming under attack. Vocal critics of market-driven reform argued that private sector influence in schools undermined their role in equalizing educational opportunity and preparing children for a future of democratic citizenship. Ravitch summarized all of these arguments in a scathing critique of market-driven reform, highlighting her doubts regarding the movement’s theoretical underpinnings, its proponents’ intentions, and its threat to the “public responsibility” of schooling:

There is something comforting about the belief that the invisible hand of the market will bring improvements through some unknown force. One need not know anything about children or education. The lure of the market is the idea that freedom from government regulation is a solution all by itself… Yet while the free market works well in producing goods and services, it produces extreme inequality, and has a high rate of failure. That is not the way we want our schools to work. The core principle of American public education is supposed to be equality of educational opportunity, not a free market of choices with winners and losers… Nothing inherent in competition guarantees that students will learn about history and government or the principles of democracy, nor will it ensure that young people are prepared to vote wisely or to assume the responsibilities of citizenship.

Despite such criticisms, the nation’s “corporate reformers” successfully established themselves as powerful players in the American education debates by the end of the 1990s. Many districts across the country continued to expand the role of private sector actors in their school operations, and the guiding theories of market-driven reform would soon become entrenched in education policy at the federal level.

The “Remarkable Consensus” of No Child Left Behind

The presidential election of 2000 pushed the country’s contentious education debates even further into the national spotlight. The new president would be tasked with guiding Congress through the reauthorization of ESEA, which would open up another political opportunity to enact broader reforms. Education policy quickly became a central theme in the campaign of Republican candidate George W. Bush, who had already earned a national reputation for his aggressive school reform agenda as governor of Texas. During his governorship, Bush worked tirelessly to implement the core components of standards-and-testing

60 Ravitch, Reign of Error, 300.
reform; he promoted annual testing for all children in third through eighth grade and established a school rating system based on performance on the Texas Assessments of Academic Skills (TAAS). His policy changes were often credited with producing the “Texas miracle” (higher test scores among the state’s minority students), and Bush’s supporters pointed to his education programs as the “best example of his ability to govern in a bipartisan way.”

Bush utilized this reputation to his advantage on the campaign trail, where he promised to implement a sweeping education reform agenda that would replicate the “Texas miracle” for poor and minority youth nationwide. He framed himself as a “compassionate conservative” with a vision for a “strong national role in education policy,” and he frequently voiced his concern for the disadvantaged students who were often “left behind.”

Like the authors of *A Nation at Risk*, Bush was thoroughly convinced that racial and socioeconomic disparities in achievement were the consequence of educators’ “low expectations” for poor and minority children. In an impassioned campaign speech before the NAACP, he decried the “soft bigotry of low expectations” that left disadvantaged youth feeling “abandoned to frustration and the darkness of self-doubt.” Throughout the campaign, Bush placed the burden of responsibility squarely on the shoulders of teachers and principals in high-poverty schools; these individuals, he argued, restricted the potential of low-income and minority students by failing to hold them to high standards. He pledged that, once elected, he would revamp the nation’s education system to raise standards of achievement, hold teachers and administrators responsible for student performance, and motivate schools to improve.

Bush carried these views and promises with him into the White House, where he quickly began working with a team of advisors to draft a far-reaching reform proposal. From the outset, Bush insisted on spearheading a bipartisan legislative effort. He immediately sought the expertise of renowned Democratic lawyer Sandy Kress, who had served on the Dallas school board and played a major role in designing Bush’s Texas education agenda. With help from Kress, the president convinced a number of key congressional Democrats – most notably Senator Edward Kennedy (D-MA) and Representative George Miller (D-CA) – to participate in the

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65 Lemann, “Testing Limits: Can the President’s Education Crusade Survive Beltway Politics?”
development of the bill. Like Bush, both lawmakers were deeply concerned about educational inequality and the persistence of racial and socioeconomic achievement gaps. Furthermore, both Kennedy and Miller had expressed support for the development of content standards and accountability systems in their home states. These legislators worked closely with Bush, Kress, Representative John Boehner (R-OH) and Senator Judd Gregg (R-NH) to build and maintain a congressional coalition in favor of sweeping education reform.

The architects of the legislation quickly confronted the challenge of reconciling key differences in the policy agendas of Democrats and Republicans. While lawmakers on both sides of the aisle had largely embraced the core tenets of standards-based reform, the parties diverged on a number of priorities that threatened to derail the legislation. Republican legislators, for instance, called for the establishment of a federal voucher program that would enable low-income families to enroll their children in private schools. Many Democrats vehemently opposed vouchers, and insisted instead that federal funds be used for school construction, special education and teacher training. Kress had gained considerable experience in navigating these debates through his involvement in Texas education policy, and he worked closely with Miller, Kennedy, Gregg and Boehner to negotiate concessions between the parties. Democrats were asked to accept funding for some – but not all – of their suggested programs, and Republicans grudgingly consented to the removal of vouchers from the bill. Through such compromises, the bill’s sponsors managed to piece together a “three-way coalition” that united conservative Republicans, liberal Democrats, and centrist “New Democrats” in support of the law.

To maintain these fragile bipartisan alliances, the bill’s Democratic and Republican authors sought common ground on the notion of “accountability.” Lawmakers on both sides of the aisle generally agreed that schools should be held responsible for student achievement, and this vague concept could be molded to satisfy both parties. The legislative process was therefore “framed by a common vocabulary centered on accountability,” which provided congressional leaders with a political strategy for “moving past divisive partisan issues.”

Bush, Kress and federal lawmakers coalesced around an accountability framework that

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66 Lemann, “Testing Limits: Can the President’s Education Crusade Survive Beltway Politics?”
67 Lemann, “Testing Limits: Can the President’s Education Crusade Survive Beltway Politics?”
69 Lemann, “Testing Limits: Can the President’s Education Crusade Survive Beltway Politics?”
71 Rudalevige, “The Politics of No Child Left Behind,” 68.
would build upon the standards-and-testing apparatus implemented under IASA. Lawmakers developed provisions that would broaden the use of routine assessments, expand the role of test results as metrics for school performance, and require states to develop their own content standards and “proficiency” benchmarks. This test-based accountability system, they argued, would provide public officials with “statistically valid and reliable” tools for ensuring that “every school in every state is held to the same standard of academic achievement.”

This consensus, however, threatened to unravel as debates intensified over a key feature of Bush’s legislative proposal: the establishment of benchmarks for “adequate yearly progress” (AYP). Bush and Kress vigorously advocated for the creation of state AYP targets, which would be used to track growth in student achievement and identify schools in need of intervention. These AYP metrics would be based on the percentage of students expected to meet or exceed state-defined “proficiency” thresholds on standardized assessments in a given year. Furthermore, Bush, Kennedy and many prominent civil rights organizations were united in insisting that schools “disaggregate” their test results (by race, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, disability, English language learners, and so on) to ensure that all subgroups of students were demonstrating sufficient academic progress. Schools would thus be judged not only on their overall performance, but also on the test scores of each specific subgroup relative to the state’s AYP targets. The president argued that AYP measures and data disaggregation would motivate schools to reach his ultimate national goal: the achievement of 100-percent proficiency in reading and mathematics by the 2013-2014 school year.

The announcement of these proposals prompted an uproar among many state officials, who insisted that the legislation’s original definition of AYP was far too stringent. A number of governors and policymakers expressed concerns regarding the data disaggregation component, arguing that the requirement created an unrealistic expectation for rapid improvement across all subgroups. They worried that “too many schools would be identified as failing” based on the new measures, and that the public would blame state governments for the supposedly poor performance.

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72 Mills, “A Legislative Overview of No Child Left Behind,” 13.
performance of their education systems. The opposition quickly united under the leadership of prominent state-level Republicans (such as Michigan Governor John Engler), who exerted immense pressure on the administration to revise its AYP provisions. Fearing that support for the bill would crumble otherwise, Kress rewrote Bush’s initial AYP formula to lower its minimum requirements for percentage increases in student proficiency over time.

Yet while Bush and his bipartisan allies agreed to modify the general AYP formula, they refused to budge on their data disaggregation proposal. In Bush’s view, data disaggregation was the most important tool for tackling the “soft bigotry of low expectations” that restricted the academic potential of disadvantaged youth. Schools would no longer be able to hide the low performance of their disadvantaged pupils in a larger student average; in the words of Education Secretary Rod Paige, “For the school to be making progress doesn’t tell us enough about what the individual children are doing.” Instead, data disaggregation would motivate teachers and principals to hold all children to the same standards of learning, and would ensure that schools were held accountable for every student’s performance. Bush and his close advisors were unwilling to compromise these aims in order to appease the opposition. As Kress boldly stated, the administration was “blood-committed to disaggregated data… It’s at the core of the president’s views – lift all groups above the bar.” Thus, to the dismay of many leading state officials, the data disaggregation requirement remained a central feature of the drafted bill.

In the midst of this turmoil, the “Big Four” congressional sponsors (Kennedy, Boehner, Gregg and Miller) managed to hold their tentative coalition together. Under their leadership, federal lawmakers finalized the accountability provisions and developed a set of “turnaround” interventions for schools that failed to make AYP. These interventions were designed to scale up many state-level market-driven reforms, which had garnered significant attention (and support) from congressional legislators on both sides of the aisle. In the final stages of the legislative process, the bill’s architects came together to “bridge… divergences between the House and Senate versions” and fortify “the bill’s bipartisan armor.”

The long months of intense debate, controversy and compromise finally culminated in an

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77 Lemann, “Testing Limits: Can the President’s Education Crusade Survive Beltway Politics?”
79 Lemann, “Testing Limits: Can the President’s Education Crusade Survive Beltway Politics?”
“impressive legislative victory” for Bush and the “Big Four.”\textsuperscript{82} The tireless pursuit of bipartisan support ultimately paid off, with overwhelming majorities in both houses of Congress voting to enact the finalized education bill in December of 2001.\textsuperscript{83} The legislation – dubbed the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) – reauthorized ESEA in a manner that promised to dramatically transform public education with a set of tools and strategies rooted in the guiding theories of standards-based and market-driven reform. When Bush officially signed the bill into law in January of 2002, Republicans and Democrats alike hailed NCLB as a “remarkable consensus.”\textsuperscript{84} Kennedy proudly proclaimed that “no piece of legislation will have a greater impact or influence” on the “future of our nation, the future of democracy, the future of liberty, and the future of the United States in leading the free world.”\textsuperscript{85}

**Fusing Standards-Based and Market-Driven Reform in NCLB**

In its final form, NCLB encompassed an ambitious and far-reaching set of reforms designed to “improve the performance of America’s schools while at the same time ensuring that no child is trapped in a failing school.”\textsuperscript{86} The legislation was considered a “landmark event” in the history of American reform, for it constituted an “unprecedented expansion” of the federal government’s role in education policy.\textsuperscript{87} Further, NCLB represented the fusion of the standards-based and market-driven reform movements into a single policy agenda at the federal level. The logic of the final law was relatively straightforward: use standards and accountability systems to evaluate student performance and identify “failing” schools, then target those schools with a set of market-driven interventions designed to promote rapid improvement.

**Standards and Accountability:** In many respects, NCLB was the cumulative product of a “standards-and-testing movement that began with the release of the report *A Nation At Risk* in 1983.”\textsuperscript{88} Like IASA, the legislation required the development of state-level content standards for mathematics and reading along with routine assessments to evaluate student learning. NCLB,

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\textsuperscript{82} Rudalevige, “The Politics of No Child Left Behind,” 68.
\textsuperscript{84} “The No Child Left Behind Act of 2001: Executive Summary,” 1.
\textsuperscript{85} Rudalevige, “The Politics of No Child Left Behind,” 68.
\textsuperscript{86} “The No Child Left Behind Act of 2001: Executive Summary,” 1.
\textsuperscript{87} Rudalevige, “The Politics of No Child Left Behind,” 64.
\textsuperscript{88} Rudalevige, “The Politics of No Child Left Behind,” 68.
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however, went far beyond its predecessor in its emphasis on test-based accountability; the new law essentially “punctuated the power of assessment in the lives of students, teachers, and parents” in every American public school. According to the legislation, test results would become the primary metric of academic progress and the most important diagnostic tool for identifying “failing” schools.

The centrality of test-based accountability was evident in the law’s provisions for performance benchmarks, AYP and data reporting. With new content standards in place, states were also made responsible for defining expectations for student “proficiency” on annual assessments in reading and mathematics. Accordingly, each state was required to identify specific “cut scores” that could be used to calculate the percentage of students performing at or above the “proficient” level. All schools were then required to disaggregate their testing data, and report both the overall averages and the performance of each subgroup to the state. These results were compared to the state’s AYP targets (the percentage of students expected to perform at or above the “cut score” in a given year) to determine whether schools were making progress toward the national goal of 100-percent “proficiency” by the 2013-2014 school year. Under the law’s provisions, any school that did not meet AYP was labeled as “failing” and consequently selected for intervention. Taken together, these provisions placed the standardized testing apparatus and AYP timeline at the center of all efforts to improve struggling public schools.

**Market-Driven Interventions in “Failing” Schools:** In addition to its expansion of test-based accountability, NCLB was also unprecedented in its inclusion of private actors and market-driven strategies as critical drivers of education reform. The law’s prescribed interventions for low-performing schools drew heavily upon the concepts of choice, competition and privatization as tools for transforming school quality and boosting student performance. The legislation mandated a series of “gradually escalating measures” (a set of increasingly aggressive market-driven remedies) that guided “failing” schools through phases defined as “improvement,”

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91 Mills, “A Legislative Overview of No Child Left Behind,” 14.
“corrective action” and “restructuring.” These interventions included, among others: the
replacement of teachers and administrators, the complete restructuring of school operations,
conversion to a charter school, and the use of contracts to shift management to private providers.
“Failing” schools were also expected to use their own Title I funds to purchase tutoring programs
called “supplementary education services” from external vendors, and were required to give all
students the “choice” to transfer out of the neighborhood school and enroll elsewhere.

In essence, NCLB’s reliance on these strategies constituted a “federal mandate” for the
use of market-driven reforms in the effort to revitalize struggling schools and rectify educational
inequality. As Ravitch explains, “For the first time in history, federal law decreed that
privatization was a viable remedy to improve low-performing schools.” Thus, with the
“endorsement of Congress,” many charter groups, entrepreneurs, EMOs, and philanthropic
foundations dramatically expanded their reach in the nation’s education landscape.

Early Implementation: Following the enactment of NCLB, state governments and school
officials scrambled to align their policies and practices with the legislation’s provisions. State
education officials worked tirelessly to develop and revise their content standards, AYP
benchmarks and standardized assessments, and then submitted their plans to the U.S. Department
of Education for review. Though the pace of implementation varied nationwide, the vast majority
of states acted quickly to familiarize school leaders with AYP measures, revamp their exams,
and increase their reporting of disaggregated test score data.

In the 2003-2004 academic year, state governments diagnosed their first set of “failing”
schools under the requirements of NCLB. It quickly became clear that the nation’s schools had a
long way to go before reaching NCLB’s proficiency goals; across the country, a staggering
twenty-five percent of all schools were unable to meet the AYP thresholds of their respective
states. Furthermore, the first round of AYP comparisons revealed that “failure” was far more

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95 Sunderman, Kim and Orfield, *NCLB Meets School Realities*, xxv.
likely in schools serving large low-income and minority populations. Over forty-three percent of the nation’s high-poverty schools were diagnosed as “failing” in the 2003-2004 school year, compared to only fifteen percent of low-poverty schools. A large number of these schools were then slated for “turnaround” interventions, thus ushering in the initial wave of NCLB-sanctioned market-driven reforms.

Sixteen Years Later: For sixteen years, the standards-based and market-driven reform strategies enshrined in NCLB – “high” expectations, strict accountability, competition, privatization and so on – have profoundly shaped the daily experiences of children, teachers and families nationwide. The replacement of the legislation was delayed repeatedly until 2015, when Congress passed the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) to supplant NCLB. The new legislation did enact a number of significant changes, including the devolution of authority over interventions for “failing” schools back to state governments. In the brief time since ESSA’s enactment, many state education departments have continued to adhere to the standards-based and market-driven mechanisms of reform that defined and guided NCLB. Such policies have been particularly consequential in the nation’s high-poverty schools, which continue to grapple disproportionately with the pressures of testing, the demoralization of “failure,” and the destabilizing nature of market-driven interventions. There is perhaps no better place to explore these outcomes than in the city of Philadelphia.

Turning to Philadelphia: Federal Reform Models at the Local Level

The theories and mechanisms of standards-based and market-driven reform have been guiding forces in the School District of Philadelphia, which quickly earned a national reputation for its rigorous implementation of NCLB. The district thus serves as a highly useful case study for exploring the underlying assumptions of standards-based and market-driven strategies, and for highlighting the ways in which these concepts manifest in policies and practices on the ground. Further, with its predominantly low-income and minority student body, a closer look at the district yields critical insight regarding the ramifications of these reform strategies in high-

poverty schools. Ultimately, an in-depth analysis of the Philadelphia case will shed light on the experiences of struggling urban districts nationwide.

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The following chapters turn to the recent reform history of the School District of Philadelphia, with a specific focus on the period between 2001 and the present. The case study begins with a brief historical overview of the demographic and economic shifts that have given rise to Philadelphia’s major challenges in education policy, most notably its large number of low-performing high-poverty schools. It then traces the implementation of NCLB and the initiation of school privatization efforts through a districtwide “diverse provider” model. The thesis argues that, rather than improving school quality, the standards-based and market-driven reform strategies embodied in NCLB have produced serious ramifications that have served to exacerbate the challenges of Philadelphia’s high-poverty schools. The case study then concludes with a closer look at the city’s recent effort to introduce the “community schools” model as an alternative approach to reform.
PART II

THE PHILADELPHIA CASE:
Standards-Based and Market-Driven Reform in High-Poverty Urban Schools

Setting the Scene: The Making of a High-Poverty School District

Before delving into the details of Philadelphia’s reform agenda, it is first necessary to understand the contextual factors that shape the realities and challenges of education in the city. This section traces the historical trends that have transformed the racial and socioeconomic composition of the district’s public schools. Over many decades, patterns of residential segregation and deepening poverty have manifested in a high concentration of low-income and minority families within Philadelphia. As a result, the district’s student population is largely comprised of disadvantaged youth, and the vast majority of schools qualify as “high-poverty” under the federal definition. The district has also wrestled with serious financial difficulties due to a series of onerous state budget cuts and appropriations decisions. Together, these demographic and economic factors have placed severe constraints on the operations and quality of the city’s public schools.

Racial Segregation and Concentrated Poverty: In Philadelphia, the latter half of the twentieth century was characterized by the rapid migration of affluent families to the suburbs and the intensification of residential segregation. These patterns were largely a product of inherently discriminatory real estate practices (such as zoning restrictions and bans on affordable housing in suburban areas), and the postwar influx of African Americans seeking employment opportunities in the city’s manufacturing sector. Fearing that property values would plummet as the black population grew, white homeowners began to leave the city of Philadelphia in droves.\(^\text{102}\) The pace of “white flight” to the suburbs accelerated throughout the 1960s, due in large part to the widespread social unrest and periodic rioting of the civil rights era.\(^\text{103}\) In the following decade, a


series of major strikes by the Philadelphia Federation of Teachers (PFT) pushed yet another wave of middle-class families out of the city as they sought better schooling for their children. These cycles of black settlement and white flight persisted over the course of many decades, creating a stark racial contrast between the affluent suburbs and the city’s increasingly poor minority communities.

Philadelphia’s economically disadvantaged neighborhoods sank even further into poverty in the 1970s, as rapid deindustrialization fueled the contraction of the manufacturing sector. In the decades that followed, the sustained loss of industrial employers (and the relocation of many jobs to suburban areas) drove a thirty-percent decline in the number of full-time employment opportunities within the city. The steady loss of available jobs pushed many families to seek employment elsewhere, resulting in the shrinkage of Philadelphia’s population by nearly twenty-three percent from the early 1970s to the mid-2000s. Meanwhile, those without the means to relocate have been left behind in struggling urban neighborhoods with limited job availability and deteriorating public services. Over time, the convergence of these factors – the loss of full-time work opportunities, rising unemployment, and the continued migration of more financially well-off families – has fueled a steady increase in the city’s overall poverty rate (see Figure 1 on the following page). While the magnitude of this increase varies from one neighborhood to the next, every council district in Philadelphia (with the exception of Center City) has experienced the substantial growth of concentrated poverty over the past five decades.

Over time, these demographic and socioeconomic trends have dramatically reshaped the composition of student bodies within the School District of Philadelphia. As segregation accelerated and poverty spread, the proportion of poor and minority students within the city’s schools increased considerably. By 2001 (the starting point of the district’s current standards-based and market-driven reform agenda), Philadelphia’s overall poverty rate had climbed to just over 20 percent, and low-income students comprised the majority of public school attendees.

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Part II. The Philadelphia Case

Furthermore, minority students accounted for nearly 70 percent of the school-age population. According to the best available data for 2001, approximately 52 percent of students identified as black, 13 percent as Latino and 4 percent as Asian.109

Figure 1. The Poverty Rate in Philadelphia from 1970 to 2015

Both within Philadelphia and in urban areas nationwide, public schools serving predominantly low-income and minority populations have grappled with a distinct set of obstacles and difficulties. In the early 2000s, an independent assessment conducted on the district’s behalf drew the following conclusions regarding these challenges:

The lives of many students in Philadelphia’s public schools are deeply troubling. Many students lack stable, supportive, safe and caring environments. Rather, their lives are marked by chaos and instability, poverty, neglect, violence, crime and fear, physical, emotional and sexual abuse, teenage pregnancies, and drug and alcohol abuse… Many of these students become the chronic ‘disciplinary’ problems that adversely affect the academic environment. Additionally, many students face various learning impediments… that require special supports.110

The cumulative effects of these disadvantages were highly apparent within Philadelphia’s public schools in 2001. By that year, the district’s graduation rate (the percentage of students completing high school in the expected four years) had fallen to a historic low of forty-three percent.\(^{111}\) In the 2001-2002 academic year alone, six percent of Philadelphia’s middle and high school students dropped out, and an additional four percent were absent more than half the time.\(^{112}\) Rates of high school completion were low among all racial and ethnic groups; estimates from the early 2000s show that only about 45 percent of Latino students and 58 percent of both white and black students earned a high school diploma in six years.\(^{113}\) The district also grappled with exceedingly high rates of disciplinary issues, violent incidents and crime on or near school grounds. Philadelphia’s rates of suspension (11.1 per 100 students) and expulsion (2.1 per 1,000 students) grossly surpassed national averages at the beginning of the decade.\(^{114}\) According to surveys from the same time period, roughly 45 percent of students engaged in physical fights during the school year, over 15 percent of students carried a weapon and nearly 9 percent did not attend school at least once a month due to safety concerns.\(^{115}\)

Philadelphia schools were also experiencing “distressingly high levels” of staff turnover and serious shortages of high-quality teachers.\(^{116}\) Between 50 and 125 teaching vacancies existed at any given time in the 2000-2001 academic year, and nearly half of the teachers in the highest-poverty schools had less than two years of experience in their position.\(^{117}\) In a survey conducted by the Philadelphia Education Fund, both prospective and former teachers cited large class sizes, fears for personal safety, low salaries and disciplinary problems as their main reasons for seeking employment elsewhere.\(^{118}\)

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\(^{113}\) Neild and Balfanz, “Unfulfilled Promise,” 4.


\(^{115}\) Tsoi-a-Fatt, “Focus on Philadelphia,” 3.


Resource Scarcity and Funding Constraints: In Philadelphia, these challenges have been further exacerbated by the severe shortage of resources within schools. The district has long spent less money per student than almost any other large urban education system in the country, with a per-pupil price tag that has hovered around $13,000. Meanwhile, the suburban neighborhoods surrounding Philadelphia – such as Radnor, Cherry Hill and Lower Merion – have “substantially outspent” the city district at a rate of roughly $22,000 per pupil.

The issue of resource scarcity is partially a product of the city’s decades-long experience with residential segregation; as affluent white families migrated to the suburbs, the city witnessed the erosion of its property tax base and the loss of locally available dollars. Due to this lack of revenue, the district has been forced to rely more heavily on state funding to finance the operations of its schools. However, since the 1990s, the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania has steadily drained public schools of much-needed funding through a series of budgetary cuts.

The drastic reduction in appropriations began with the state’s decision to freeze its funding formula in 1993. As a result, the state dollar allotment for each district no longer increased in response to rising numbers of special-needs students or decreasing local taxes. The state’s Republican-dominated legislature continued to squeeze the district’s finances with deeper annual budget cuts throughout the mid-1990s. These decisions eventually plunged the Philadelphia school system into a severe fiscal crisis, which reached an unprecedented magnitude in the early 2000s when the district adopted a budget with a $216 million deficit. The district’s financial struggles quickly drew national attention, as severe resource shortages created conditions in which “even the most dedicated teachers were hard-pressed to create a meaningful learning environment.” Yet in spite of these increasingly desperate circumstances, the state legislature periodically enacted even deeper cuts in its public education budget.

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123 Perkiss, “Education Reform and Local Control: The Fight for Philadelphia’s Schools.”
The State Policy Backdrop

The fiscal battles of the 1990s (described above) placed further strain on an already tense relationship between state policymakers and Philadelphia’s district officials. As funding decreased and student enrollment grew, former Superintendent David Hornbeck increasingly vocalized his frustrations with the state; he argued that Pennsylvania legislators were failing to support Philadelphia’s impoverished population, and even accused them of racist intentions.\(^\text{124}\) His forceful criticism further alienated state officials, and thus paved the way for more aggressive legislative maneuvers that shaped the district’s fate.\(^\text{125}\) In the late 1990s and early 2000s, the state enacted two specific policies that served as critical catalysts in the implementation of Philadelphia’s reform agenda: the passage of new charter school legislation (1997) and the state’s takeover of the school district (2001).

**Pennsylvania’s 1997 Charter School Law:** In 1997, the Pennsylvania legislature passed Act 22 (known widely as the Pennsylvania Charter School Law) to lay the foundation for the role of charter organizations in the state’s education system. The legislation defined charter schools as “independently operated public schools that are funded with federal, state and local tax dollars,” and established guidelines for the introduction, operation and oversight of charters.\(^\text{126}\) According to the legislative text, the establishment of charter schools would serve to “improve pupil learning, increase learning opportunities for all pupils, encourage the use of different and innovative teaching methods” and “provide parents and pupils with expanded choices in the types of educational opportunities that are available within the public school system.”\(^\text{127}\) In the name of promoting innovation, the law granted charter organizations considerable leeway in their management of schools through exemptions from many state and local requirements.\(^\text{128}\)

The Pennsylvania Charter School Law passed with strong bipartisan support, and marked a major victory for Republican Governor Tom Ridge and other proponents of market-driven

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education reform.\textsuperscript{129} With the new state legislation in place, charter organizations immediately began negotiating with the School District of Philadelphia to establish and manage independent schools. While then-Superintendent Hornbeck was generally opposed to the notion of charter schools, he adopted a relatively hands-off approach in the hopes of repairing his relationship with the state. As a result, Philadelphia witnessed the establishment of forty separate charter schools in the three years following the passage of Act 22.\textsuperscript{130}

Thus, by the end of the 1990s, the stage was fully set for the proliferation of contract management within the School District of Philadelphia. The state’s charter law has remained a contentious topic of debate in the years since its passage. Many critics have expressed concerns that the legislation unfairly drains district resources, since it grants charter schools a per-pupil allotment of public funding. Pennsylvania’s auditor general described Act 22 as the “absolute worst,” arguing that the law stripped districts of the ability to monitor charter school quality and hold charters accountable for serving “equitable student populations.”\textsuperscript{131} Yet in spite of such criticism, the lenient provisions of the original law have remained intact. All efforts to revise the controversial features of Act 22 have failed, and outside charter organizations have become particularly powerful players in the management of Philadelphia’s schools.

**The State Takeover of 2001 and the SRC:** Along with the proliferation of charter schools, the state’s decision to take over and manage the operations of the School District of Philadelphia in 2001 marked a critical turning point in the city’s experience with education reform. The Pennsylvania government paved the way for this takeover with two earlier pieces of legislation, which authorized direct state intervention in struggling local districts. The first of these measures was enacted in 1998 as a direct response to the intensifying standoff between the Republican legislature and Philadelphia’s district officials over the issue of education funding. The legislation – known as Act 46 – permitted the state to take control of any district in “financial or academic distress.” Two years later, state lawmakers passed Act 16 (the Education Empowerment Act) targeting Philadelphia and ten other districts where students performed


poorly on assessments.\textsuperscript{132} According to the law, districts that failed to improve test results within three years would be subjected to the installation of state governance bodies with “sweeping and unprecedented powers” to manage the local education system.\textsuperscript{133} The enactment of this legislation shocked Philadelphia’s distressed education officials, and prompted Hornbeck to resign from the superintendent position in 2000.\textsuperscript{134}

In 2001, Governor Ridge initiated preparations for the state takeover by hiring Edison Schools, Inc. (the nation’s largest for-profit education management organization, or EMO) for a six-week consultation period.\textsuperscript{135} For a price tag of $2.7 million, Edison reviewed district operations and issued a report with various recommendations for management and reorganization. One of the most significant components of the Edison report was its proposal for the establishment of the School Reform Commission (SRC), a district governance body comprised of four state appointees (selected by the governor) and one mayoral appointee.\textsuperscript{136} The report also called for placing various district functions and sixty low-performing schools under Edison’s direct control.

Governor Ridge left Pennsylvania to join the Bush administration, leaving Lieutenant Governor Mark S. Schweiker to fill the gubernatorial position and oversee the state takeover. In October 2001, Schweiker formally announced the state’s intention to implement the recommendations of the Edison report in the School District of Philadelphia.\textsuperscript{137}

Many community organizations and student groups throughout the city immediately expressed strong opposition to the Edison plan, arguing that the proposal shifted far too much power to a single private sector entity. The intense backlash weakened Schweiker’s resolve and gave greater leverage to newly elected Democratic Mayor John Street, who insisted on a renegotiation of the takeover plan.\textsuperscript{138}

The governor and mayor emerged from the negotiations with a compromise to implement a “friendly takeover” of the School District of Philadelphia. The two leaders agreed to pump additional funds into the district ($75 million from the state and $45 million from the city) to

mitigate the severity of its fiscal crisis.\textsuperscript{139} Furthermore, the negotiations resulted in an alteration of the state-local ratio within the SRC; upon implementation, the remodeled SRC would be comprised of three gubernatorial appointees and two mayoral appointees. Street’s supporters cheered this shift as a small political victory, but the ratio still granted a higher level of control over major district decisions to state officials.

The state’s takeover was formalized on December 21, 2001, when Pennsylvania Secretary of Education Charles Zogby signed a Declaration of Distress for the School District of Philadelphia. His action finalized the transfer of considerable financial and managerial authority to the state, and has been described as “effectively bringing an end to local control of education in the city.”\textsuperscript{140} The local school board was quickly dismantled and replaced with the first five appointees of the newly established SRC.\textsuperscript{141} At the time of the takeover, Philadelphia was “among the ten largest urban districts in the country,” with approximately 12,000 teachers and 210,000 pupils in its 237 district-managed schools and 40 initial charter schools.\textsuperscript{142}

\textbf{An Education Overhaul: Standards-Based and Market-Driven Reform in Philadelphia’s Schools (2001 - Present)}

The demographic trends, economic shifts and policy decisions described above paved the way for the School District of Philadelphia’s standards-based and market-driven reform efforts, which were officially initiated with the state takeover in 2001. This thesis now provides a chronological overview of the debates and decisions that have shaped the school district’s strategies, using primary source material, qualitative research interviews, scholarly literature, and the best available districtwide data.

\textbf{The Path to Privatization: Philadelphia’s “Diverse Provider” Model}

Shortly after the state takeover, the newly formed SRC embraced the “diverse provider” model promoted by many prominent voices in the market-driven reform movement. This strategy required that the district build a “portfolio” of private providers and charter organizations to foster competition between schools and to create innovative educational

\textsuperscript{140} Perkiss, “Education Reform and Local Control: The Fight for Philadelphia’s Schools.”
\textsuperscript{142} Bulkley, Christman and Gold, “One Step Back, Two Steps Forward,” 132.
opportunities for students. In the eyes of the SRC, the “diverse provider” model served as an effective vehicle for fusing standards-based and market-driven reform in Philadelphia. With a large “portfolio” of private providers at their disposal, the SRC and district officials could shift the management of Philadelphia’s low-performing schools to more promising alternatives.

The members of the SRC immediately began to solicit proposals from external vendors and charter organizations, hoping to establish management contracts for schools that had been scoring at persistently low levels on state exams. In his justification of the SRC’s enthusiasm for private providers, Zogby explained: “More than 150 [Philadelphia] schools had over 50 percent of their students performing at the below-basic level… We believed that there was not the capacity on the ground to turn that situation around. We needed outside expertise… We believed that the private sector could do a better job.” The district’s “diverse provider” approach quickly took shape in the early 2000s, and played a key role in facilitating the implementation of market-driven reform in compliance with – and in addition to – the guidelines of NCLB. Since 2001, the model has remained one of the most critical and controversial features of Philadelphia’s education reform landscape.

The Arrival of Philadelphia’s “Tireless Reformer”

One of the key players in Philadelphia’s early experience with the “diverse provider” model and school privatization was Paul Vallas, the city’s Chief Education Officer (CEO) from 2002 to 2007. The SRC appointed Vallas after reviewing his previous accomplishments as CEO of Chicago Public Schools, where he had resolved a $1 billion deficit, rehabilitated 500 schools, and drawn strong support from the private sector. Vallas brought his strong “no excuses” attitude and affinity for market-driven reform to Philadelphia, where he quickly earned a reputation as a “master communicator and a tireless reformer.” Throughout the early 2000s, he worked closely with the SRC to mobilize the district’s sweeping reform effort. According to former Assistant Superintendent James H. Lytle, Vallas “talked fast and moved fast and made things happen in a hurry… As a CEO with good political instincts, Vallas was, in many respects,
the ideal person to put the SRC’s model in place.”

By the end of 2002, the SRC had finalized its first round of five-year management contracts with various for-profit, nonprofit, and university-based education providers. Vallas identified a set of low-performing schools based on data from the 2001-2002 school year, and matched each of these schools with a new provider in the district’s “portfolio.” The specific method that Vallas used to create these pairings was not shared with the public, but the general understanding was that outside providers were granted management of the schools demonstrating the worst academic performance. In the eyes of close observers such as Paul Socolar, a respected education advocate and former editor of the Philadelphia Public School Notebook, the district appeared to be acting on the assumption that these outside providers would supply more effective leadership to “turn around” low-performing schools. As Socolar explained in an interview:

> The dominant thought was that there needed to be a radical intervention in all of those schools, and the main approach was to contract outside companies. The idea was that the contractual commitment, the selection of supposedly high-quality and innovative managers, and the pressures of the contract would be sufficient to guide major change… Basically, the concept was that the marketplace would provide us with competent school managers to replace the implicitly incompetent people who were already there.

In its initial form, the newly implemented “diverse provider” model encompassed three distinct forms of management for eighty-six low-performing district schools. These categories were established just as the district began to implement NCLB, and thus served as templates for all subsequent interventions for “failing” schools under the federal legislation.

The first category was comprised of twenty-one “restructured” schools, which remained under the direct control of the district but were required to dramatically alter their leadership structures and instructional formats. To implement and manage these changes, Vallas established the district’s new Office of Restructured Schools (ORS). He also negotiated compromises with the state legislature to secure supplemental funding for these schools, amounting to an additional $550 per pupil. The ORS oversaw the implementation of various district-designed interventions in the “restructured” school category, including intensive professional development, new core curricula, utilization of bimonthly benchmark assessments, and the

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assignment of assistant principals and rotating leadership coaches.\textsuperscript{151} These strategies reflected the district’s assumption that improving student performance would require targeting staff disengagement, insufficient teaching, and poor leadership within individual schools.

Vallas identified a second subset of schools known as the “Sweet Sixteen,” which had performed poorly on assessments but had demonstrated a trajectory of improvement. These schools were given additional funding drawn from both city and state dollars, and were closely monitored to ensure that gains in academic performance continued.\textsuperscript{152}

The forty-five lowest-performing schools in the district were set aside in their own category, and were soon shifted to private management under external providers. The first round of contracts with private managers included many for-profit education management organizations (namely Edison, Victory Schools and Chancellor Beacon Academies), some of which were publicly traded companies.\textsuperscript{153} These providers, according to Socolar, promised the district that they could “manage schools better and cheaper… and increase a school’s functioning while making a profit.”\textsuperscript{154} Vallas also established contracts with nonprofit providers (such as Universal Companies and Foundations), and university-based groups (from Temple University and the University of Pennsylvania).\textsuperscript{155}

As these reform efforts unfolded, Vallas quickly became known for his “strategic collaboration” with private providers and external vendors. He consistently promoted the “diverse provider” model as a means of forming “innovative new school-by-school partnerships… to manage and assist our lowest performing schools” and to “create more options for students.”\textsuperscript{156} Socolar offered a more candid description of the strategy, explaining that “the language of the ‘diverse provider’ approach came from the stock market, from the idea that you make a ‘portfolio’ of stocks – or school providers, in this case – and your approach is to hang onto the ones that are doing well and to dump the losers.”\textsuperscript{157} Philadelphia’s “portfolio” of providers continued to expand under Vallas, as he enthusiastically courted new charter organizations and integrated privately managed schools into the “core of district operations.”\textsuperscript{158}

\textsuperscript{154} Paul Socolar, interview, tape recording.
\textsuperscript{156} U.S. House of Representatives, “Congressional Testimony of Paul G. Vallas,” 2.
\textsuperscript{157} Paul Socolar, interview, tape recording.
By the mid-2000s, Vallas and the SRC had effectively “blurred the boundaries” between the public and private sectors in Philadelphia’s education system.\(^{159}\)

**The Nation’s “First Great Experiment” with NCLB**

The state’s takeover of the School District of Philadelphia coincided with the enactment of NCLB, thus setting the stage for a period of increasingly ambitious school reform. With the roots of the “diverse provider” model in place, the district was well-situated to become the nation’s “first great experiment” with the federal law’s rigorous accountability mechanisms and aggressive interventions for “failing” schools.\(^{160}\)

**Increased Accountability and the Diagnosis of “Failing” Schools:** Like the federal lawmakers behind NCLB, Vallas viewed socioeconomic and racial achievement gaps as the product of “low expectations” for poor and minority students.\(^{161}\) He stressed the need to hold teachers and principals responsible for individual student performance, and framed strict accountability as a means of mobilizing schools for improvement. Vallas eagerly embraced NCLB’s accountability requirements and insisted that meeting AYP was the most “important, substantive goal” for Philadelphia’s schools.\(^{162}\)

In Socolar’s words, Vallas was an ardent supporter of NCLB’s “main theory of change, which was that school success and failure could be defined primarily – almost exclusively – in terms of performance on test scores.”\(^{163}\) Accordingly, Vallas introduced a series of measures to place NCLB’s AYP and testing requirements at the core of Philadelphia’s reform agenda. He worked swiftly to streamline the district’s data collection and reporting systems, and increased the use of routine standardized assessments to track student performance. In addition to administering state-mandated exams through the Pennsylvania System for School Assessment (PSSA), the district implemented supplementary testing designed specifically for Philadelphia schools.\(^{164}\) Vallas contended that these districtwide tests acted as a “complement to the results from our state assessment” that would motivate all schools – whether publicly or privately

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\(^{163}\) Paul Socolar, interview, tape recording.

managed – to meet the SRC’s expectations for improvement.\footnote{165}

As the use of testing expanded, Vallas revamped the district’s reporting systems to ensure that all schools were capable of adhering to NCLB’s data disaggregation guidelines. In his view, the law’s disaggregation provisions constituted the “greatest tool” for motivating schools to improve.\footnote{166} As Lytle explained in his interview, Vallas would no longer allow schools to “pretend to be successful and avoid tough questions about whether they were actually providing equal opportunity.” Instead, he continued, the CEO “tied data disaggregation to state standards, and the district immediately saw differentiation based on poverty, race, special needs, and so on.”\footnote{167} According to Vallas, the practice of breaking out test scores by these subgroups would push schools toward his goal of shrinking educational inequities in Philadelphia. He argued that data disaggregation “shined a spotlight on groups that have been historically underserved,” thereby forcing teachers to channel more effort toward “correcting these imbalances” and boosting the achievement of disadvantaged students.\footnote{168}

In addition to overhauling the district’s testing apparatus, Vallas initiated a major effort to reshape the substance of learning in low-performing schools. District officials embraced NCLB’s emphasis on teaching “basic skills” in reading and mathematics, and worked to develop curriculum guidelines that aligned instruction with state-defined standards for “proficiency” in these subjects. The objective of this effort was to “improve test scores and the number of schools making AYP” each year by ensuring that students were well-versed in the content of Pennsylvania’s standardized exams.\footnote{169} The new mandatory curricula (known as the Managed Instruction System, or MIS) were first piloted in the twenty-one “restructured” schools, and were subsequently expanded to all elementary and middle schools in 2003.

Collectively, these reforms embodied and reinforced a core premise of NCLB: the notion that test scores and “proficiency” benchmarks could be used to determine educational quality, diagnose “failing” schools, and motivate teachers to raise their expectations for all students. Socolar emphasized the centrality of these concepts during an interview: “The focus of reform in Philadelphia has been almost entirely test-centered… The PSSA has been the determining factor in deciding whether schools are successful or not. This strategy reflects a certain view of

\footnote{165}{U.S. House of Representatives, “Congressional Testimony of Paul G. Vallas,” 3.}
\footnote{166}{U.S. House of Representatives, “Congressional Testimony of Paul G. Vallas,” 1.}
\footnote{167}{James H. Lytle, interview, tape recording.}
\footnote{168}{U.S. House of Representatives, “Congressional Testimony of Paul G. Vallas,” 1.}
\footnote{169}{Bulkley, Christman and Gold, “One Step Back, Two Steps Forward,” 136.}
accountability, which focuses on setting a bar for performance, a bar based on test scores, that will place pressure on schools to improve.”

The Phases of Market-Driven Intervention: After implementing NCLB’s accountability mechanisms, Vallas and the SRC acted swiftly to identify “failing” schools and apply the law’s prescribed “turnaround” remedies. Within two years, 176 out of 263 schools (nearly two-thirds of schools within the district) were diagnosed as “failing” based on test scores that did not meet AYP thresholds. These schools were deemed “in need of improvement” in accordance with NCLB’s structured timeline for intervention. Such schools were required to develop action plans to boost academic achievement and increase the percentage of students making AYP; additionally, NCLB required that the district offer “choice” and supplemental education services (additional tutoring from external vendors) in all schools deemed “failing.”

In compliance with these provisions, Vallas set out to “expand comprehensive school choice options” in the district’s first cohort of “improvement” schools. Families were granted permission to remove their students from these schools and enroll them elsewhere. The district reformers echoed NCLB’s leading proponents by insisting that such choice would grant flexibility and opportunity to families whose income and residential location had initially tied them to low-performing schools. In the 2003-2004 academic year (the initiation of the district’s “choice” expansion), over twenty percent of Philadelphia students left their “failing” neighborhood school to seek an education from other public schools, charter organizations, magnet programs, alternative schools and private providers.

NCLB’s second major prescription for these schools – the provision of supplemental education services (SES) – created yet another avenue for the infusion of private actors into district operations. Under the law, all schools deemed “in need of improvement” were expected to acquire and offer SES to their low-income students as a complement to their instruction. Vallas and the SRC turned to external vendors to procure content for SES, and quickly established contracts with twenty private providers and tutoring companies (such as Kaplan Test

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170 Paul Socolar, interview, tape recording.
Prep, Voyager and Princeton Review). By the 2004-2005 school year, sufficient time had passed to begin shifting persistently “failing” schools into NCLB’s more aggressive intervention phases: “corrective action” and “restructuring.” Both phases incorporated a variety of market-driven strategies designed to fundamentally transform an individual school’s “operations, management and approach to teaching and learning.” In the “corrective action” phase, NCLB required that schools recruit new teaching staff, overhaul their curriculum, or hire teams of external consultants to develop and execute a turnaround plan. For schools in “restructuring,” the law mandated the “complete privatization or replacement of staff and management” through “reconstitution” (firing all teachers and principals), charter conversion, or contracts with private providers. With its “diverse provider” model in place, the School District of Philadelphia was well-prepared to enact NCLB’s “corrective action” and “restructuring” provisions. Vallas already had a vast array of eager private providers at his disposal, and he capitalized on these relationships to swiftly implement the legislation’s prescribed interventions for chronically low-performing schools.

Throughout the mid-2000s, the district targeted a growing number of schools with rapid changes in management, staffing and organization. Vallas established a set of “intervention teams” comprised of district officials and private consultants, and tasked these groups with monitoring the progress of “corrective action” schools. Under the surveillance of these teams, many schools were required to fire large numbers of teachers, introduce zero-tolerance discipline policies, and establish extended-day test preparation programs for students with insufficient scores. Furthermore, the School District of Philadelphia implemented “aggressive recruitment and retention practices” and turned to many external programs (such as Troops for Teachers and Teach for America) to replace “low-performing” instructors. In 2004 alone, the district hired 1,200 new teachers to take the place of those who had been fired in an effort to revitalize specific

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schools. The SRC also acted quickly to shift a number of “failing” schools to new managers, thereby continuing to expand Philadelphia’s “diverse provider” model. During this time period, a number of powerful charter organizations and private providers – such as Mastery, Aspira, GLA and Universal – expanded their role in the management of Philadelphia’s “failing” schools.

The Post-Vallas Era: Contracts, Closures, and Controversies

By the time Vallas left Philadelphia in 2007, the principles of standards-based and market-driven reform had been firmly entrenched in the district’s practices and agendas. He had succeeded in solidifying the roles of AYP, test-based accountability and “proficiency” benchmarks as the district’s primary metrics of educational quality and school failure. Further, Vallas had effectively spearheaded what education policy expert Katrina E. Bulkley described as the “unprecedented growth in private-sector expansion through contracting and partnership in Philadelphia.” The city was left with a “perception of progress” after his departure, but his successors inherited a brewing controversy over the district’s reliance on private providers and the threat of looming budgetary crises.

Ackerman’s Agenda (2007 - 2011): After a brief period with interim CEO Tom Brady at the district’s helm, the SRC appointed Arlene Ackerman to fill the superintendent position in late 2008. Like Vallas, Ackerman was an outsider; she had earned a reputation for boosting student test scores in San Francisco and Washington, D.C. before making the transition to Philadelphia.

In 2009, Ackerman released her strategic five-year plan for reform titled Imagine 2014: Building a System of Great Schools. To develop her proposal, Ackerman turned to a team comprised almost entirely of external consultants with little experience in Philadelphia. The resulting plan reflected Ackerman’s openness to the privatization of schools and her intention to ramp up the district’s use of test-based accountability.

Her new plan included a set of strategies designed to boost test scores on Pennsylvania’s state exams across all Philadelphia schools. Like Vallas, Ackerman was determined to push a greater percentage of students over the state’s AYP threshold. She built upon her predecessor’s efforts to integrate standardized test preparation into class time and to expand instruction in “basic skills” among students that demonstrated consistently poor test performance. In 2009, Ackerman introduced a new set of “corrective” curricula in reading and mathematics for schools that failed to make AYP.\(^\text{184}\) These curricula were “scripted,” meaning that teachers were required to use an outline of pre-written statements to methodically coach students through each forty-five-minute lesson. While these “corrective” plans were initially designed just for children that performed below “proficiency,” many schools utilized these curricula to guide instruction for all of their students.\(^\text{185}\)

Ackerman’s Imagine 2014 also created additional avenues for private sector involvement and charter expansion in the district. Using standardized assessment scores, the district sorted Philadelphia’s schools into different categories for intervention. Ackerman selected a group of high-performing “Vanguard Schools,” which were granted increased flexibility in their operations through “autonomy agreements” with the district.\(^\text{186}\) At the same time, the district identified its thirty-five lowest-performing schools (labeled “Renaissance Schools”) for targeted intervention. Ackerman’s plan encompassed a variety of possible reforms for these schools, but she ultimately came to rely most heavily upon outside providers. She encouraged charter organizations to submit proposals for the takeover of Renaissance Schools, and she established the Office of Charter, Partnership and New Schools to streamline the contract negotiation process.\(^\text{187}\) Private providers and charter organizations with an established presence in Philadelphia (such as Mastery, Universal Companies, and Aspira) acquired additional contracts, and Ackerman invited a number of new providers to take control of low-performing schools.\(^\text{188}\)

Ackerman’s embrace of free-market principles was also evident in her use of sanctions and incentives to enhance teacher quality. District officials continued to pursue an agenda rooted in the notion that individual teachers and schools were responsible for poor student achievement,

and thus implemented various “carrots and sticks” to motivate improved performance. This approach was apparent in the contract negotiated between the Ackerman administration and the Philadelphia Federation of Teachers (PFT) in 2010, which rewarded salary bonuses to teachers who demonstrated higher performance through increases in student test scores. The contract also established a set of consequences for teachers in Renaissance Schools, which reflected the strategies prescribed in the “corrective action” intervention phase of NCLB. Within schools that failed to demonstrate improvement in test results, all teachers would be “forced to transfer out and only up to fifty percent rehired.”  

Although Ackerman was widely regarded as a deeply committed reformer, she gained far more recognition for the controversies that unfolded during her tenure. Between 2007 and 2011, Ackerman had repeatedly made state and national headlines due to allegations of test score manipulation, her slow response to serious violent incidents within schools, an increasingly tense relationship with the PFT, and her failure to shrink the district’s deficit. The SRC asked Ackerman to leave the position in 2011 and quickly initiated a search for a new superintendent. By the time of her resignation, she had placed “basic skills” at the core of school instruction, implemented a new system for categorizing “failing” schools, and expanded the district’s vast network of charters and private providers.

**The SRC and School Closures:** Ackerman’s departure from Philadelphia coincided with the most severe reduction in statewide education funding since the SRC’s takeover of the district in 2001. Upon assuming office in 2011, newly elected Republican Governor Tom Corbett slashed nearly $1 billion from Pennsylvania’s education finances. He also permitted the expiration of federal stimulus funds for various educational programs, and abandoned plans for a school funding formula that would direct more state dollars toward schools with high proportions of low-income students. The governor’s actions deepened the existing fiscal crisis in the Philadelphia district and exacerbated severe resource shortages within high-poverty schools.

In the midst of these dire financial circumstances and the firestorm surrounding

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190 Strauss, “Philadelphia Pushes Out Schools Chief Arlene Ackerman.”
Ackerman’s resignation, the SRC was quietly piecing together a broad strategy to conserve district resources and address the issue of decreasing enrollment in many public schools. As privately managed schools and charters continued to proliferate in Philadelphia, a growing number of families opted to leave their “failing” neighborhood schools behind and send their children elsewhere. This trend, coupled with a steady decrease in the size of the city’s student population over time, resulted in insufficient enrollments in many low-performing public schools. By 2011, the number of empty seats across all district-managed schools had risen to approximately 70,000 spots.193 The members of the SRC argued that, in the midst of an ongoing budget crisis, the district simply could not afford to manage schools that were operating below capacity. Thus, the SRC initiated perhaps the most controversial project in Philadelphia’s entire education reform agenda: the shutdown of low-performing public schools.

The logic behind the SRC’s decision reflected a critical and yet lesser-known provision of NCLB, which granted states and districts permission to close persistently “failing” schools (essentially, those that could not be salvaged through market-driven intervention) and redistribute their students.194 The “school closure” option was a direct reflection of the free-market principle that competition would weed out the weakest schools in a diverse district “marketplace.”195 In the eyes of the SRC, such closures served a dual purpose: they would reduce the budgetary strain of operating too many schools with low enrollments, while simultaneously eradicating some of the district’s most troublesome low-performers.196

As the SRC’s appointees searched for a new superintendent, they also compiled a list of suggested school closings for the upcoming academic year. In November of 2011, SRC Chairman Pedro Ramos announced that nine schools had been selected for closure, and explained that “phasing out” these schools would eliminate 14,000 empty seats and save over $8 million in district finances.197 His announcement sparked major protests and heated debates over school closures that played out in community hearings across the city. Yet in spite of the backlash, the SRC had no intention of backing down from its incendiary proposal. The new superintendent would thus inherit the controversy over school closures, and would be forced to

196 “Timeline: Closings and Controversy.”
navigate this contentious issue while simultaneously continuing the district’s existing standards-based and market-driven strategies.

**Charters and Closures under Superintendent Hite:** Once again, the SRC looked beyond Philadelphia to find a superintendent capable of spearheading their ambitious education agenda. The appointees selected William R. Hite, Jr. (the former Superintendent of Prince George’s County Public Schools in Maryland) to fill the position in October of 2012, and he continues to serve as Philadelphia’s leading district official.

Like his predecessors, Hite is a vocal champion of standards-based and market-driven reform. He has continued to implement the core aspects of Ackerman’s reform agenda through the Renaissance Schools Initiative, which encourages the proliferation of external providers throughout the district. Using test scores, the Hite administration identifies “neighborhood schools with long-term academic and climate challenges” and matches each school with a charter organization that “is experienced in successfully turning around low-performing schools.”

Most recently, the district has entered into contracts with Mastery and Global Leadership Academy (two regional charter organizations with a large presence in Philadelphia) to take over a handful of schools in the 2016-2017 school year.

The immense controversy over school closures has also been a critical feature of Hite’s tenure in Philadelphia. His first year as district superintendent coincided with the SRC’s initial wave of school closings; in 2012, the doors were officially shuttered at seven of the nine schools on the SRC’s original list. However, its members were still unsatisfied with the large number of empty seats that remained in the district. With a new superintendent firmly in place, the SRC set out to shut down a second batch of schools.

In late 2012, Ramos and Hite announced the names of 37 low-performing neighborhood schools that had been identified for closure. District officials insisted that the plan would result in $28 million in annual savings, and that the 17,000 affected students would be swiftly redistributed to different schools. In Hite’s view, the proposed closings would “allow the district to give more money and attention to fewer schools” and would create “a system that better serves

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199 “Timeline: Closings and Controversy.”
all students, families, and stakeholders. Yet these arguments did little to quell the outrage and discontent among students, parents and employees in the selected schools. The SRC’s public hearings were often dominated by the “complaints, accusations and counter-proposals” of individuals representing various school communities. Many local advocates and student groups also organized protests, candlelight vigils and forums to voice their frustrations with the SRC’s plan. In one instance in December of 2012, hundreds of protesters “marched up Broad Street from Philadelphia City Hall to School District headquarters, waving signs and chanting ‘Save Our Schools’... during a four-hour SRC meeting.”

Socolar, who covered the school closure debates at great length during his time with The Notebook, described the message of these recurring protests:

During those two years, 2012 and 2013, the district had a huge number of schools on the chopping block. There were, of course, a few schools where only a handful of people came out to protest the closure. But for the vast majority of the schools that were scheduled to close, families and staff came out together, often in incredibly impressive numbers. And they said, “Save our school. This is an important institution. This school is serving our kids well.”

In response to this widespread opposition and intensifying criticism, the SRC voted to remove a handful of the designated schools from the list of closures. However, they also collaborated with Hite to expedite the shutdown of the remaining schools by waiving a state requirement for public consultation and canceling the remaining community hearings. In March of 2013, the SRC’s members formally voted to shut down twenty-three of the original thirty-seven schools slated for closing. While a handful of schools were spared, the number of confirmed closures still amounted to “about ten percent of the total schools” under district management.

By the time of the SRC’s final decision, protests in Philadelphia had reached a boiling point and the notorious proposal had drawn national attention. One observer from the New York Times documented the intense opposition during the time of the final vote:

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201 Herold, “Philadelphia School District Wants to Close 37 Schools, Relocate or Configure Dozens More.”


203 Paul Socolar, interview, tape recording.


205 Hurdle, “Philadelphia Officials Vote to Close 23 Schools.”
The decision was made after the police arrested 19 protesters, including Randi Weingarten, president of the American Federation of Teachers, charging them with disorderly conduct. The protesters blocked doorways into a meeting room in an attempt to prevent members of the School Reform Commission from entering… The votes were taken during a sometimes heated three-hour meeting after some 500 protesters gathered outside district headquarters, blocking a major road in central Philadelphia.206 Yet despite the best efforts of protesters and community groups, the district swiftly initiated the process of shutting down the final twenty-three schools in the 2013-2014 school year. As a result, thousands of students have been redistributed to various public and charter schools across the district. Many families have complained that the closures forced their children into schools that perform no better than the original, and that the relocated students are often treated as outsiders.207 Hite has acknowledged that the closure process is “incredibly painful,” but he has repeatedly implored parents to consider the long-term benefits for their children.208 As a vocal supporter of market-driven reform, he has framed school closings as both a critical cost-saving measure and an unfortunate but natural consequence of competition. Thus, since stepping into the superintendent position, Hite has gained a reputation not only for his controversial charter conversion decisions, but also for his active role in facilitating the largest spate of school closures in Philadelphia history.

Philadelphia Schools Since 2001: What We Know From the Numbers

Sixteen years after the state takeover and the enactment of NCLB, Philadelphia’s leading reformers remain deeply committed to a standards-based and market-driven agenda. The assumptions and strategies of these reform movements have guided the district through numerous transitions in leadership, persistent resource shortages and repeated budget cuts. Yet in spite of the district’s continued dedication to this agenda, many policy analysts and observers have questioned the outcomes of such reforms. Before turning to a critical appraisal of Philadelphia’s reform strategies, it is thus necessary to examine the measurable changes that have taken place in the district. A closer look at the data and trends from 2001 to the present reveals that these reforms have had little direct effect on student achievement, and that many conditions in high-poverty schools have persisted or worsened over this time period.

206 Hurdle, “Philadelphia Officials Vote to Close 23 Schools.”
207 Hurdle, “Philadelphia Officials Vote to Close 23 Schools.”
208 Herold, “Philadelphia School District Wants to Close 37 Schools, Relocate or Configure Dozens More.”
A Snapshot of the District (2001 to 2017): In the years that have passed since the state takeover, the School District of Philadelphia has experienced critical shifts in its size, enrollments and student body composition. The district now directly manages 220 public schools, and the charter sector has grown to encompass 88 independently operated schools throughout the city. The overall student population has decreased considerably, dropping from 210,000 students in 2001 to roughly 190,000 (including over 60,000 students enrolled in charter and privately managed schools).  

The proportion of poor and minority students within the district has grown substantially, a trend that reflects the continued spread of poverty and rising concentrations of nonwhite families in many neighborhoods. The district’s white population has declined to just 14 percent, and minority youth now account for over three-quarters of the district’s pupils (50.5 percent of all students identify as black, 20 percent as Latino, 8 percent as Asian and 7 percent as mixed race). The overlap between these demographic categories and socioeconomic status is highly apparent. More than 80 percent of all enrollees in district public schools are now considered “CEP economically disadvantaged,” a federal category used to identify low-income students that meet the criteria to receive free or reduced-price lunch. In order to qualify, the parents of these children must earn at or below 185 percent of the federal poverty line, which amounts to an annual income of $44,000 for a family of four. Every school in the district now satisfies the federal definition of a “low-income school” (meaning at least 30 percent of students are from low-income families), and over three-fourths of Philadelphia’s total schools are classified as “high-poverty” (with at least 75 percent of students below the CEP income threshold). In 174 district schools, fully 100 percent of students are CEP economically disadvantaged.

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A Closer Look at Test Scores: The district has relied heavily on standardized assessments to track student achievement, and yet the trends in Philadelphia’s test scores have been somewhat difficult to interpret. Overall scores in reading and mathematics did increase considerably throughout the early and mid-2000s, as shown in Figure 2 (on page 54). However, many policy analysts agree that this progress was not a direct product of the district’s reform effort. Instead, the performance gains among Philadelphia students appeared to parallel improvements across Pennsylvania’s districts as a whole.\footnote{215}{Gill, Zimmer, Christman and Blanc, “State Takeover, School Restructuring, Private Management,” 40.} As education researcher Brian Gill explains, the total increase in proficiency percentages “subsequent to the state takeover… was not substantially greater than the increase of other low-achieving schools in the state.”\footnote{216}{Gill, Zimmer, Christman and Blanc, “State Takeover, School Restructuring, Private Management,” 41.} The reason for this statewide improvement in test scores remains a topic of debate, but education scholars have posited that the “relaxation of some state AYP criteria” and proficiency benchmarks throughout the mid-2000s may have been implicated in the increase.\footnote{217}{Gill, Zimmer, Christman and Blanc, “State Takeover, School Restructuring, Private Management,” 15.}

In recent years, districtwide performance appears to have leveled off or dropped precipitously in many subjects, with the most notable declines in mathematics scores.\footnote{218}{District Performance Office, “2015-2016 PSSA & Keystone Performance.”} Many district administrators and state officials have attributed plummeting scores to major changes in state content standards and exam formats enacted in 2014. During the 2014-2015 school year, Pennsylvania Education Secretary Pedro Rivera justified the significant drop by arguing that “not all schools have taught or aligned the curriculum to the content that’s on the new assessments.”\footnote{219}{Kristen A. Graham, “Philadelphia Schools’ Scores Plunge On New State Tests,” The Philadelphia Inquirer, September 3, 2015, accessed February 23, 2017, http://www.philly.com/philly/education/20150903_Philadelphia_Schools_scores_plunge_on_new_state_tests.html.} Hite insisted that the 2014 PSSAs constituted a “new baseline” for achievement, and thus year-to-year comparisons of Philadelphia scores are “not appropriate.”\footnote{220}{Graham, “Philadelphia Schools’ Scores Plunge On New State Tests.”} However, others have suggested that deteriorating financial conditions and worsening resource shortages have played a key role in the drop. As education reporter Kristen Graham noted in The Philadelphia Inquirer, many school leaders argue that “Philadelphia’s school budget situation has surely had some effect” on the recent “score tumble” among their students.\footnote{221}{Graham, “Philadelphia Schools’ Scores Plunge On New State Tests.”}
Figure 2. Trends in Districtwide PSSA Scores

Note: The “proficiency” percentages displayed above include all Philadelphia students tested in grades 3-11 each year.


Trends in Philadelphia test scores also reveal that, contrary to the claims of many reformers, charters and privately managed schools have fared no better on average than traditional public schools. In one major study, the RAND Corporation employed a longitudinal analysis of student performance in “treated” schools (those that were shifted to outside management) before and after the transition, and compared their trends with those of other Philadelphia students. While slight differences did exist across grade levels and subjects, the researchers firmly concluded that “despite additional per-pupil resources, privately managed schools do not produce average increases in student achievement any larger than those seen in the rest of the district.” 222 A second evaluation utilized similar methodology to build upon these findings, and reported that the average gains of students attending charter schools “are statistically indistinguishable from the gains they experience while at traditional public schools” in Philadelphia.223 These results, the authors continued, were “largely consistent” with a growing

body of research that “generally found small negative, small positive, or no effects for charter schools across various locations” nationwide.²²⁴

**Persistent Problems:** A focus on test scores alone does little to highlight the challenges that have persisted in the district over time, particularly within high-poverty schools. Many schools continue to grapple with the same problems that plagued the district in 2001, and a number of these difficulties have worsened. One exception appears to be graduation rates; across the district, the number of students that completed high school on time rose steadily from forty-three percent in 2001 to sixty-five percent in 2011. However, the overall graduation rate “has hit a plateau after years of steady increases,” and major gaps still exist based on race and ethnicity.²²⁵ In particular, the graduation rates of black and Latino males appear to be dropping significantly after years of improvement.

At the same time, issues related to staffing, violence and school discipline have remained largely unresolved. At present, the district is experiencing a shortage of 130 full-time teachers across its schools.²²⁶ Philadelphia’s public schools have also witnessed a dramatic increase in disciplinary infractions, primarily due to the implementation of zero-tolerance policies since the enactment of NCLB. The number of annual districtwide suspensions, for instance, has skyrocketed to 25.9 per 100 students.²²⁷ Furthermore, many schools continue to confront frequent episodes of violence and physical conflict. While accurate measures of violent incidents are somewhat difficult to obtain (due to frequent changes in reporting systems), most analysts agree that rates of violence have remained consistently high. An estimated “three out of every 100 students are the victim or perpetrator of a violent school crime” each year, and over 1,200 violent incidents across Philadelphia’s schools have been reported to district authorities since the implementation of the newest reporting system in 2011.²²⁸

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It is important to note that a handful of high-poverty schools have effectively addressed many of these problems and have demonstrated substantial improvement in response to recent turnaround efforts. These individual cases of successful reform have generally involved schools with extraordinary principal leadership or high-quality management under specific charter providers. Notable examples include the four high-poverty schools operated by KIPP, a national charter network managing over 200 schools across the country. According to the most recently available data, approximately 75 percent of students within Philadelphia’s KIPP schools score at or above “proficiency” in both reading and mathematics by the time they leave 8th grade. Additionally, the city’s KIPP schools boast a graduation rate of roughly 94 percent, which far surpasses the district average.229 A number of Philadelphia schools within the Mastery charter network have also demonstrated moderate but steady gains in test performance, in addition to significant declines in student absenteeism and disciplinary issues.230 In some communities with well-functioning charter schools, parents and families have come to embrace the outside provider as a high-quality and promising alternative for their children.

However, these individual successes do not overshadow the fact that the district’s ambitious reform efforts have failed to produce large-scale transformation across Philadelphia’s high-poverty schools. As teachers, principals and administrators wrestle with the persistent challenge of raising student test scores, district officials and the SRC continue to target large numbers of “failing” schools with aggressive turnaround strategies and market-driven reform tactics. According to the most recently available “School Progress Report,” about 40 percent of Philadelphia schools remain classified as in need of direct intervention, and an additional 41 percent are under close district monitoring due to poor performance on standardized exams.231 If these schools fail to demonstrate improved test scores, they may soon find themselves in the intervention category as well.

A close evaluation of the Philadelphia reform agenda reveals a critical gap between the underlying assumptions and actual effects of its chief strategies. The district’s story provides significant evidence that the implementation of standards-based and market-driven reform has produced a wide range of damaging outcomes that exacerbate existing barriers to academic progress in high-poverty schools. By adopting a narrow framework for diagnosing and improving “failing” schools, state and district officials have failed to address the contexts of poverty, inequality and resource scarcity that undermine the learning and performance of disadvantaged children. In sum, the district’s reliance on the reform models enshrined in NCLB may well have done more harm than good in many high-poverty schools, which largely serve the poor and minority students that federal and local reformers sought to help.

This chapter analyzes key features of Philadelphia’s education reforms (and the NCLB provisions that have guided them) to shed light on their consequences in many low-income and minority school communities. Drawing upon primary source material, interviews and scholarly literature, the chapter specifically highlights the punitive nature of test-driven accountability and the mistrust, disruption and instability generated by many market-driven interventions. To highlight the relevance of these critiques beyond the Philadelphia context, this section also incorporates the observations of scholars that have explored the implications of NCLB on a national scale. The argument concludes with a closer look at a central flaw in both reform models: the failure to acknowledge the critical role of external influences (most notably, the stressors of poverty) in shaping students’ experiences and performance inside of the classroom.

Test and Punish: The Implications of Standards-Based Reform and NCLB’s Accountability System in High-Poverty Schools

In her work titled The Death and Life of the Great American School System, education historian Diane Ravitch offers a useful framework for exploring the ramifications of “accountability” – a core ideal of the standards-based reform movement – both within and
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beyond the School District of Philadelphia. In her view, the underlying purpose of “accountability” (holding teachers and principals responsible for student performance) constitutes an important and practical goal in education reform. She argues, however, that the implications of “accountability” differ tremendously based on the ways in which reformers operationalize and implement the concept.

To illustrate this point, Ravitch draws a distinction between “positive” and “punitive” accountability mechanisms. She defines “positive accountability” as a set of comprehensive systems that track various measures of student performance to provide holistic and thorough information on each individual school.232 In theory, such systems would rely not only on test scores, but also on other metrics (attendance, graduation rates, class size, resource availability, teacher feedback, and so on) to assess the unique circumstances of every school and identify specific areas for improvement. Conversely, “punitive” accountability – the form enshrined in NCLB – is rooted in the assumption that school quality and student learning can be assessed using test scores alone. In this framework, schools that perform below the expected level are diagnosed as “failing” and “punished” for their inadequacy. Rather than developing carefully tailored school-specific improvement plans, reformers respond to poor test scores with disruptive interventions and “get tough” measures that “impose serious consequences on students, educators and schools.”233

Moreover, this punitiveness is unevenly distributed; as Stanford University education scholar Linda Darling-Hammond explains, NCLB’s AYP and “proficiency” requirements “disproportionately penalize schools serving the neediest students.”234 The explanation for this imbalance is straightforward: on average, low-income and minority students (particularly those in neighborhoods of concentrated poverty) tend to perform far below “proficiency” on standardized exams, and yet high-poverty schools are held to the same state-level expectations for test performance as their more affluent counterparts. Accordingly, these schools find themselves at an inherent disadvantage in meeting performance goals.235 High-poverty schools are disproportionately identified as “low-performing,” diagnosed as “failing,” and subjected to a series of rigorous interventions. In the words of education policy analyst Gail L. Sunderman,

NCLB’s “accountability” mechanisms ultimately “open the way for a major attack on public school systems serving low-income children by blaming them for failing to respond” to the pressures of meeting AYP.\(^\text{236}\)

The punitive nature of NCLB’s accountability framework is readily apparent in Philadelphia. In the year immediately following the implementation of the legislation under Vallas, nearly *two-thirds* of schools within the district (176 out of 263 schools) were labeled as “failing” based on their AYP measurements. Despite efforts to increase test preparation and “turn around” chronically low-performing schools, the exceedingly high rates of “failure” have persisted; at present, the district is directly monitoring or intervening in over 170 schools due to consistently poor performance on standardized exams.\(^\text{237}\)

A closer look at Philadelphia’s high-poverty schools provides an opportunity to explore the ramifications of “punitive” accountability and the diagnosis of “failure” in further detail. The legislation essentially predetermines the “failure” of many high-poverty schools by layering uniform targets for academic achievement onto an education system characterized by deep resource inequities. Furthermore, NCLB’s testing apparatus has unfairly “punished” students in under-resourced schools, where increased test preparation often comes at the cost of an enriching and comprehensive education. Lastly, since high-poverty schools tend to perform at lower levels, they are subjected more frequently to the demoralization associated with the “failing” label. Each of these themes is discussed below, with evidence from the Philadelphia story.

**Financing “Failure”:** In keeping with their stated goal of establishing “high expectations” for students, the lawmakers behind NCLB mandated that states apply uniform targets for academic progress to all schools within their jurisdiction. As a result, state education officials have demanded incremental and consistent gains in student test performance from schools that often operate on a grossly uneven playing field. Due to severe inequalities in school funding and resource availability, high-poverty schools often find themselves struggling to surmount additional barriers in their efforts to meet state AYP thresholds. In her critique of NCLB’s accountability system, Darling-Hammond summarizes this inherent flaw in the nature of the legislation: “While NCLB focuses on test scores as an indicator of school quality, it largely


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ignores the resources that enable school quality. It does not provide substantial investments in under-resourced schools where many students are struggling to learn, nor does it require that states demonstrate… equitable and adequate funding.”

In essence, NCLB’s accountability mechanisms layer a set of uniform “expectations” onto a system characterized by deep and pervasive inequality, thereby placing high-poverty schools in a disadvantaged position relative to those in more affluent neighborhoods. Schools that serve low-income and minority communities are thus penalized disproportionately for their “failure” to make AYP, and are more likely to encounter the legislation’s punitive sanctions and interventions as a result.

Nowhere is this reality more evident than in the School District of Philadelphia, which operates within the most inequitable state education funding system in the United States. Until recently, Pennsylvania was one of just three states that lacked a “fair funding formula” designed to channel additional state funding into schools serving large numbers of disadvantaged students. As a consequence, periodic budget cuts at the state level (particularly Corbett’s decision to slash education funds by $1 billion in 2011) have been particularly damaging in high-poverty districts, which lack the local tax revenue to compensate for the resulting shortfalls. In mid-2016, state legislators finally responded to the growing frustrations of local school officials and education advocates by enacting a bipartisan proposal for a funding formula. Yet while the legislation was pitched as “fair and comprehensive,” it actually mandates that the first $5.5 billion dollars be allocated in accordance with existing guidelines from the previous school year. Only incremental funds that go beyond this initial sum are subject to the formula outlined in the 2016 legislation. As a result, the law effectively “guarantees that school districts will continue to face huge inequities” by allowing for the persistence of “systematic” disparities in the vast majority of state education funding along racial and socioeconomic lines.

Due in large part to these developments, the current gap in education funding between Pennsylvania’s high-poverty and affluent communities is larger than that of any other state in the nation. In the wealthiest suburbs, the amount of spending per student is about two times higher

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238 Darling-Hammond, “Race, Inequality and Educational Accountability,” 246.
240 Bergman, “The Haves vs. The Have-Nots of Education Spending.”
242 Brown, “Pennsylvania Schools Are The Nation’s Most Inequitable. The New Governor Wants to Fix That.”
than the per-pupil price tag in Philadelphia. Students living in Bryn Athyn and Lower Merion – two affluent suburbs just outside of the city – boast per-pupil expenditures of $26,675 and $22,963 respectively, compared to roughly $13,000 spent per child within Philadelphia. Pennsylvania’s poorest districts (such as Shenandoah and Mount Carmel, where poverty rates surpass those of Philadelphia) are able to spend just about one-third of the amount devoted to each pupil in the state’s most affluent neighborhoods (see Figure 3 below for details). These imbalances in education funding not only constrain the operations of high-poverty schools, but also serve to exacerbate and reinforce existing inequalities between disadvantaged students and their more affluent counterparts. As former assistant superintendent James H. Lytle candidly explained in an interview, wealthier students “are still having almost double the amount spent on them compared to kids from families with less advantage.”

Figure 3. Annual Per-Pupil Spending on School Operations

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>City</th>
<th>Annual Per-Pupil Spending on School Operations</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Bryn Athyn</td>
<td>$26,675</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lower Merion</td>
<td>$22,963</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Radnor</td>
<td>$22,337</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>William Penn</td>
<td>$14,138</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lancaster</td>
<td>$13,625</td>
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<tr>
<td>Philadelphia</td>
<td>$13,077</td>
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<tr>
<td>Wilkes-Barre</td>
<td>$12,602</td>
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<tr>
<td>Panther Valley</td>
<td>$12,229</td>
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<tr>
<td>Shenandoah</td>
<td>$11,105</td>
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<tr>
<td>Mount Carmel</td>
<td>$8,660</td>
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These funding inequities have manifested in stark differences between high-poverty and affluent schools in terms of resources, programming and educational quality. Within Philadelphia, public schools serving communities of concentrated poverty often do not possess sufficient resources to support basic learning. Many schools lack the financial means to keep nurses, student aides, guidance counselors, psychologists and librarians on their payrolls, and

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244 James H. Lytle, interview, tape recording.
often struggle to fund support services for children with disabilities and English-language learners (two groups that are disproportionately represented in the district’s low-income student population).\textsuperscript{245} Quite often, these schools can barely afford to procure the textbooks and print materials that are needed to teach their core curricula. In an investigative report, education journalist Meredith Broussard found that, on average, high-poverty schools in Philadelphia could purchase only 27 percent of the books required in the district’s mandated curriculum.\textsuperscript{246} To summarize and illustrate the disparities that result from Pennsylvania’s unequal system of education funding, a recent \textit{Washington Post} article provided a striking example of two schools – one in Philadelphia, and the other in a wealthy suburb – located only ten miles apart:

PHILADELPHIA – At Martin Luther King High, a hulking half-full school here, there aren’t enough textbooks to go around. If teachers want to make a photocopy, they have to buy paper themselves. Though an overwhelming majority of students are living in poverty, no social worker is available to help. Private donations allow for some dance and music classes, but they serve just 60 of the school’s 1,200 students.

But at Lower Merion High, 10 miles away in a suburb of stately stone homes, copy paper and textbooks are available but rarely necessary: each student has a school-provided laptop. A pool allows for lifeguarding classes, and an arts wing hosts courses in photography, ceramics, studio art and jewelry-making. That campus has a social worker.\textsuperscript{247}

Due in large part to these funding constraints, Philadelphia’s high-poverty schools often struggle to keep pace in meeting the state’s expectations for test scores and AYP. Consequently, these schools find themselves at a profound disadvantage relative to schools in the suburbs. As Lytle explained in his interview, this discrepancy has resulted in the inevitable persistence of “failure” within Philadelphia’s high-poverty communities:

One of the deep questions is whether we have designed a system that’s \textit{guaranteed} to perpetuate failure in the city... We have an urban district that serves predominantly low-income and minority populations and has very few resources to begin with. Its purpose is essentially to provide custodial schooling – basically, to keep kids off the street under the pretense of education – but it is still held to performance expectations that are unrealistic. The key here is the deeper question: is this system actually designed to work or not? The system works perfectly if what we care about is maintaining privilege... but what does it do to make urban districts work?\textsuperscript{248}


\textsuperscript{247} Brown, “Pennsylvania Schools Are The Nation’s Most Inequitable. The New Governor Wants to Fix That.”

\textsuperscript{248} James H. Lytle, interview, tape recording.
In an assessment of NCLB’s accountability requirements in urban areas across the country, education scholars Jeffrey Duncan-Andrade and Ernest Morrell demonstrate the relevance of Lytle’s assertions on a broader scale. These authors aptly summarize the central flaw of the legislation’s standards-and-testing apparatus, arguing that policymakers have relied upon an accountability framework that essentially consigns high-poverty schools to “failure”:

Given the overwhelming evidence that reveals decades of funding and structural inequalities between schools in high- and low-income communities, it is illogical to compare schools across these communities and then decry urban schools as “failures.” When one set of schools is given the resources necessary to succeed and another group of schools is not, we have predetermined winners and losers. In this scenario, failure is not actually the result of “failing.” This is the paradox facing urban school reformers. On the one hand, urban schools are producing academic failure at alarming rates; at the same time, they are doing this inside a systemic structural design that essentially predetermines their failure.249

The Costs of Test-Based Teaching: The “punitive” effects of NCLB’s accountability provisions are highly apparent inside the classrooms of Philadelphia’s high-poverty schools, where teachers have come under immense pressure to divert their limited time and resources to instruction in the “basic skills” tested on state exams. Test performance has remained the leading educational priority since the Vallas administration first implemented NCLB, and many schools have completely reoriented their lesson plans and class time around the district’s mandated curricula in reading and mathematics. At present, the Office of Curriculum and Assessment mandates that all Philadelphia elementary schools utilize two standardized “basic skills” curricula – titled Everyday Math and the K-5 Reading Initiative – which are deliberately designed to mimic the “basic skills” knowledge and format of the PSSAs.250 As a result, lessons in the classroom are often rigid, monotonous and unimaginative.

The district’s use of “correctional” curricula offers a particularly useful example of “basic skills” instruction. Under Ackerman’s tenure, district officials developed a series of ambitious test preparation interventions specifically for “failing” schools, including “correctional” instruction for students that performed below “proficiency” on state exams. These forty-five minute test preparation programs were designed to extend and maximize the time that students spent each day practicing the “basic skills” on the PSSAs. As a consequence, these curricula

were considered to be far more stringent and dull than the district’s already inflexible standards.\textsuperscript{251} Since the introduction of “correctional” curricula in 2009, the district has continued to impose extended test preparation programs in “failing” schools as part of its intervention strategy. Inevitably, the weight of “correctional” instruction has fallen most heavily upon students in high-poverty schools due to their increased likelihood of “failure.”

The district’s \textit{Corrective Math} curriculum offers a particularly illustrative example of the rigidity and monotony of these “remedial” programs, and of “basic skills” instruction in general. Ackerman mandated that all “failing” middle schools (the vast majority of which were “high-poverty”) implement this “scripted” mathematics curriculum in 2009, and the district continues to rely on its lesson plans for its “targeted” test preparation interventions.\textsuperscript{252} An observing researcher described the nature of this highly regimented program: “In the script, the students are instructed to practice each skill individually until it is memorized. If a student produces a wrong answer, he is to be corrected immediately. Skills are taught in a specific order, progressively increasing with difficulty, and students… are taught to the level of the lowest performer, with the hope that all students prove mastery of a concept before moving forward.”\textsuperscript{253}

This curriculum exemplifies the rudimentary and mechanical nature of “basic skills” instruction, which University of Pennsylvania researcher Caroline Ebby (a leading expert in mathematics education) describes as “outdated, overly simplistic, and counterproductive.”\textsuperscript{254} In an editorial published in the \textit{Philadelphia Public School Notebook}, she highlights the ways in which the \textit{Corrective Math} curriculum – and mandated test preparation in general – serve to unfairly “punish” both students and teachers within “failing” schools:

This approach has no basis in the growing scientific evidence on how children develop mathematical concepts and skills, nor does it incorporate any recent research findings on learning and using mathematics. District officials have been very clear that the program can be taught by anyone, and requires no planning or special training. Teachers hate the scripted nature of the program… and students feel degraded by the dumbed-down robotic choral exercises. More importantly, it does not develop the kind of understanding and skills that students need to be successful learners of mathematics in school, college or the workplace.\textsuperscript{255}

\textsuperscript{251} Bulkley, Christman and Gold, “One Step Back, Two Steps Forward,” 151.
\textsuperscript{253} Connor, “(Dis)empowerment: The Implementation of Corrective Mathematics in Philadelphia,” 2.
\textsuperscript{255} Ebby, “Correcting the Corrective Math Problem.”
In sum, NCLB’s intense focus on test performance has prompted many high-poverty schools to funnel their scarce resources almost exclusively into “basic skills” instruction that is stringent, rudimentary and monotonous. In Philadelphia, the law has promoted the mentality that “whatever cannot be measured does not count,” and has therefore played a major role in dramatically diluting the substance of learning in schools throughout the city.\textsuperscript{256}

This prioritization of instruction in “basic skills” has occurred not only within Philadelphia, but also in high-poverty schools nationwide. As Ravitch argues, NCLB essentially constricted the definition of a “good education” to a set of basic reading and mathematics concepts; rather than developing curricula of “high quality and breadth,” schools have thus narrowed their focus to only those skills that are tested.\textsuperscript{257} In an effort to meet AYP thresholds and avoid sanctions, urban schools in poor communities across the country have sacrificed their enriching and diverse academic offerings to make way for increased test preparation.\textsuperscript{258} Consequently, many schools (particularly those with limited resources) fail to provide holistic and engaging instruction, and students are left with few – if any – reasons to come to school, let alone opportunities to develop the problem-solving skills, reasoning capabilities and civic values that all citizens should possess.

**The Demoralizing Diagnosis of “Failing” Schools:** In accordance with the accountability provisions of NCLB, state and district officials have relied entirely upon test scores and AYP to identify and target Philadelphia’s “failing” schools. In the words of Darling-Hammond, both NCLB’s authors and the city’s reformers assumed that low-performing schools would be “motivated to change if they were identified and shamed.”\textsuperscript{259} Yet rather than prompting improved performance, the diagnosis of “failure” in high-poverty schools has proven to be a demoralizing experience that compounds existing barriers to academic progress. Both within and outside of Philadelphia, surveys in urban schools have shown that students, educators and principals alike perceive the “failing” label as a condemnation of their own personal failures and shortcomings.\textsuperscript{260} The diagnosis of “failure” leaves many poor communities feeling embarrassed and deflated, and often engenders a sense of “frustration and helplessness” in schools where

\textsuperscript{256} Ravitch, *The Death and Life of the Great American School System*, 16.
\textsuperscript{259} Darling-Hammond, “Race, Inequality and Educational Accountability,” 250.
\textsuperscript{260} Sunderman, Kim and Orfield, *NCLB Meets School Realities*, xxv.
morale is already lacking.\textsuperscript{261}

The aversion to teaching in “failing” schools partially explains the ongoing hiring crisis in the School District of Philadelphia, which is still struggling to fill over 100 vacancies with professionally trained educators.\textsuperscript{262} The city’s high-poverty schools tend to “get less qualified teachers than their counterparts with more advantaged students” in general, due in large part to the fact that these schools are disproportionately represented among the district’s “failures.”\textsuperscript{263} Education researcher Doris A. Santoro summarizes these negative consequences in her detailed evaluation of educators’ experiences with NCLB, in which she concludes that the law itself may actually “be working against the improvement of the nation’s stock of quality teachers… due to the shame of working in schools labeled ‘failing’.”\textsuperscript{264}

The diagnosis of “failure” not only demoralizes members of the school community, but also sets schools apart as targets for rapid and aggressive district intervention. The next section looks more closely at the disruptive nature of NCLB’s prescribed market-driven strategies for “failing” schools and their damaging effects on high-poverty communities in Philadelphia.

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The Philadelphia case provides strong evidence that NCLB’s standards-based reform strategies and accountability systems have been far more punitive than transformative within many high-poverty schools. In Philadelphia and beyond, NCLB has layered uniform achievement targets onto an unequal playing field that renders urban public schools far more vulnerable to “failure.” In spite of their efforts to funnel scarce resources into test preparation, many high-poverty schools in Philadelphia have continued to fall below state AYP thresholds. The resulting diagnosis of “failure” has fueled further demoralization in schools already struggling to serve disadvantaged students in resource-poor contexts. The Philadelphia case thus makes clear that, in Darling-Hammond’s words, NCLB’s accountability provisions may have done more to “harm the students who were the targets of its aspirations” than to help them.\textsuperscript{265}

\textsuperscript{262} Dean, “Philadelphia School District Still Struggling to Fill Teacher Vacancies.”
\textsuperscript{265} Darling-Hammond, “Race, Inequality and Educational Accountability,” 246.
Disrupt and Destabilize: The Effects of Market-Driven Intervention

For sixteen years, the School District of Philadelphia’s market-driven interventions for “failing” schools have mirrored the “turnaround” strategies prescribed in NCLB. However, a close analysis of the city’s high-poverty schools reveals that the market-driven reform model has failed to deliver on its promise of fostering districtwide innovation, improvement and positive transformation through competition and private sector involvement. In fact, the district’s chosen intervention strategies appear to have had the opposite effect in many high-poverty schools. Both within and beyond Philadelphia, the processes of top-down intervention and dramatic market-driven change have produced substantial mistrust, disruption, instability and discontinuity. Rather than motivating improvement, these strategies have undermined the capacity of many high-poverty schools to generate tangible gains in student performance.

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As Lytle explained during his interview, the highest-performing schools – independent of the student body’s average family income – are those where “the kids trust the teachers, the parents trust the teachers, the teachers and the parents trust the principal, and the community trusts the school… all of these players must trust each other.” Lytle is not alone in his assertion that trusting relationships are essential in providing an effective education; a number of prominent scholars and researchers have also argued that trust constitutes a critical component of high-quality schooling and successful reform.

One such scholar is Anthony Bryk, a former University of Chicago professor and current president of the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, who describes trusting relationships as the “connective tissue that binds individuals together” in a school community. To examine the importance of trust in schools, Bryk and his colleagues conducted a comprehensive longitudinal analysis of over 400 public schools in Chicago. The authors employed a measure of “social trust” that encompassed twenty-four survey items addressing teachers’ attitudes toward their coworkers, principals and parents. The results showed that “social trust” was a “powerful discriminator” (in other words, a very strong indicator) of school improvement; the presence or absence of trust represented the major distinction between

266 James H. Lytle, interview, tape recording.
improving and non-improving schools.\textsuperscript{268} According to Bryk’s findings, schools with high levels of social trust were significantly more likely to demonstrate notable progress in student achievement across the five-year study period. Meanwhile, in schools with reports of “chronically weak trust,” Bryk found that students “had virtually no chance of improving in either reading or mathematics” over the same time interval.\textsuperscript{269}

These findings led Bryk to conclude that social trust is a “key resource” in the management and operations of schools, as well as a “crucial ingredient” for effective education reform.\textsuperscript{270} Trusting relationships facilitate collective action and reduce the risk associated with change, thereby enabling administrators and principals to pursue new school improvement efforts.\textsuperscript{271} However, many high-poverty schools are seriously lacking in these critical networks of trust. Lytle described the nature of this mistrust in Philadelphia’s high-poverty schools, where “challenging” circumstances foster a sense of uncertainty and frustration among teachers, students and families. He noted that students and parents often perceive teachers “as tired and angry and burned out and unwilling to teach resistant kids… and the kids, for their part, are very aware that they may be seen as resistant, and it takes a lot to earn their trust.”\textsuperscript{272}

Due to this trust deficit, many high-poverty schools lack the foundations and social resources necessary to enact and sustain effective strategies designed to boost student performance. Accordingly, as Bryk argues, it would seem logical that reform efforts in poorer districts would focus on “strengthening connections between urban school professionals and parents of low socioeconomic status to improve their children’s academic achievement.”\textsuperscript{273} Yet the market-driven approaches that have guided reform in Philadelphia’s high-poverty schools have largely done the opposite; rather than building trust, the district’s strategies have often aggravated and deepened suspicion and insecurity in schools where stronger social bonds are needed most. Consequently, the SRC and district officials have further undermined the capacity of many high-poverty schools to improve academic achievement and educational quality.

The district’s heavy reliance on external education consultants has played a particularly powerful role in undermining social trust in Philadelphia’s high-poverty schools. Since 2001, the

\textsuperscript{269} Bryk, “Trust in Schools: A Core Resource for School Reform,” 41.
\textsuperscript{270} Bryk, “Trust in Schools: A Core Resource for School Reform,” 42-43.
\textsuperscript{272} James H. Lytle, interview, tape recording.
\textsuperscript{273} Bryk, “Trust in Schools: A Core Resource for School Reform,” 41.
SRC has repeatedly turned to outside expertise to inform its market-driven reform strategies, hiring private advisors from the Walton Family Foundation, Boston Consulting Group and the Gates Foundation to partake in critical decisions.274 These external actors generally earn high consulting fees and lack connections to the communities that their decisions affect. Many local teachers and principals resent the SRC’s willingness to pay large sums of money for the recommendations and proposals of “outsiders.” In his critique of the district’s relationship with external consultants, Lytle captures the frustration of Philadelphia educators by positing the following questions: “Why is it that rich folks are leading the conversation about what poor black and Latino kids need? And what does the Boston Consulting Group know about urban schooling that the district’s teachers and principals don’t?”275

The expansion of Philadelphia’s charter sector has also been fraught with mistrust and insecurity. Education researcher Katrina E. Bulkley describes the School District of Philadelphia as a “contracting regime,” arguing that the “primary decision-makers” regarding the fate of “failing” schools have been those with “the formal authority to form relationships through contracts” (specifically, the SRC, district officials, and charter executives).276 As a result, the contract management process has left “little room for public consultation” and often serves to “stifle community engagement.”277 The SRC has largely excluded parents, teachers and community groups from the decision-making process, thereby undermining support for many charter conversions before they have even begun. Socolar described the role of these charter negotiations in deepening the mistrust between local communities and district reformers:

The controversy stems from the suspicion that outside charters are, in some ways, exclusive and not open to the community. There’s this mass of parents and educators who clash with district officials when there are proposals like this… Take the Renaissance Schools approach, for instance, where the district identifies a school that is low-performing and uses some deliberative process to select an outside provider. In some of the schools, there were these furious, intensive campaigns between the charter advocates and the parents and teachers. Even in the cases where the initiative was done best, there was still a very narrow range of options. The community could pick “Provider A or B” – but remaining under district management or keeping your staff was not part of the option. It was only just a little better than saying, “You can choose the color you want to paint your school.” It’s all just so controversial – that’s the only phrase that comes to mind.278

278 Paul Socolar, interview, tape recording.
Part III. More Harm Than Good: Ramifications of Reform

The district’s two most recent selections for charter conversion – the Samuel B. Huey K-8 School in West Philadelphia and John Wister Elementary School in Germantown – serve as strong examples of the SRC’s propensity for neglecting community input and fostering mistrust. Through the Renaissance Schools Initiative, both schools were identified as chronic “failures” and slated for takeover by charter organizations in the 2016-2017 school year.\(^\text{279}\)

At Huey, many parents and teachers protested the district’s decision to transfer the school to charter management. Various advocacy groups (such as the Philadelphia Coalition Advocating for Public Schools, or PCAPS) became deeply involved in mobilizing the Huey community to challenge the charter decision, but the SRC refused to offer alternative “turnaround” options. Instead, the district pressed forward with its charter conversion plan, and presented the community with the limited option of selecting a provider from a list that included only three possibilities.\(^\text{280}\) PCAPS member Amber Felton played a leading role in rallying the community against the charter conversion, and she described the futility and frustration of protesting the SRC’s decision: “We did all of this work at Huey, and we lost… and part of the reason it was so difficult was because there was never really an avenue to push. The SRC has all of these meetings and conferences, but they never seemed to listen to anything that we were saying.”\(^\text{281}\)

The top-down and exclusionary nature of the SRC’s decision-making structure was even more apparent at Wister, where battles over the transfer to charter management generated immense controversy. Local advocates pointed out that Wister’s selection for charter conversion was based on flawed data that misrepresented the school’s progress, and they organized large community protests against the district’s decision. After re-evaluating the school’s test results, Hite conceded that Wister had demonstrated sufficient improvement to avoid a charter takeover. He approached the SRC members with the suggestion that they terminate plans to transfer the school to outside management.\(^\text{282}\) However, the SRC had already negotiated a contract with Mastery (which currently operates fifteen Philadelphia schools), and opted to preserve its arrangement with the powerful charter organization rather than honor the community’s request.

\(^{279}\) Office of Research and Evaluation, “Renaissance Schools Initiative.”


\(^{281}\) Amber Felton, interview, tape recording.

\(^{282}\) Graham, “Philadelphia School District to Turn Cooke and Huey Over to Charters.”
In an interview, Felton described the controversial and troubling nature of the SRC’s decision to place Wister under Mastery’s control as follows:

Mastery already had control over many schools in that area of Germantown, and Wister was strategically located. The parents and teachers there organized and protested, but Mastery still turned around and went for Wister anyway. When Mastery relied on those false numbers about Wister’s performance levels, it completely demoralized and embarrassed the entire community. So the principal came out and went to the district and told Hite that the numbers were not real. And even after Hite agreed to withdraw his charter recommendation, the SRC still imposed the Mastery charter. It was because they already had this plan. They already struck the deal with Mastery behind closed doors.\(^{283}\)

The use of charter conversion as a “turnaround” strategy not only engenders suspicion between local neighborhoods and district officials, but also fuels mistrust and fragmentation within school communities themselves. In some cases, parent leaders have broken from the charter opposition to “embrace the idea that their struggling school needed the radical intervention.”\(^{284}\) Consequently, the charter selection process for many schools has pitted parent groups, teachers and administrators against one another, leading to tense public hearings, polarizing protests and “painful battles that divide school communities.”\(^{285}\) Felton’s descriptions of the charter hearings at Wister serve as a useful example:

There were parent leaders at Wister during the Mastery charter deliberations who had to step out of meetings because they got into bitter arguments and said terrible things to each other and were so upset and distraught. At the end of the day, the SRC members and charter organizers get to leave the community and go home. But for the parents who were fighting, they have to walk around their neighborhood and see each other everyday. For these parents and teachers at the school, these are their lives. It’s not just a day job. And we can’t afford these kinds of major divisions in the school community.\(^{286}\)

The controversial charter selection process is just one of the many market-driven reform strategies prescribed in NCLB that have served to foster mistrust and insecurity in Philadelphia’s “failing” schools. In accordance with the law’s “corrective action” and “restructuring” requirements, district officials have pursued a variety of aggressive interventions in addition to charter management that have engendered instability in many high-poverty neighborhoods. For instance, in many chronically low-performing schools, teachers and leaders with deep

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283 Amber Felton, interview, tape recording.
284 Paul Socolar, interview, tape recording.
285 Paul Socolar, interview, tape recording.
286 Amber Felton, interview, tape recording.
Community ties have been fired and swiftly replaced. As a result, families and students have lost their sense of connection with veteran educators, and thus with the school itself. Such changes have been sudden and far-reaching, and have ultimately served to further undermine local social networks and disturb the lives of students and teachers.

Perhaps the greatest source of instability in Philadelphia’s recent reform agenda has been the SRC’s push for school closures (discussed in detail in the previous chapter). Since 2011, district officials and SRC appointees have overseen the shutdown of over 30 “failing” public schools, which displaced entire student bodies and forced families to seek out new schools in unfamiliar neighborhoods. State and local education officials have relied upon a market-oriented justification for the school closures, arguing that the strategy reduces district costs and eradicates weak “competitors” in the school “marketplace.” However, they have done little to address the resulting damage wrought on community stability and cohesion. As Socolar explained in his interview, the SRC “rarely discusses… what it means to shutter schools that are institutions with real assets and deep attachments and relationships that are valued and treasured in many communities.” He described the resulting tensions as follows:

The histories and community ties in schools are very different than what you find when you’re thinking about stocks, when you’re thinking about a company like CVS with its portfolio of stores. A company opens some stores and sells off or closes some others, but people don’t generally cry. They don’t protest and testify and demonstrate and write letters and so on. To me, this is the central flaw of the market-driven approach and the “diverse provider” model here in Philadelphia… We see that when the decision is made to close schools, the families and communities and educators find it incredibly problematic, and policymakers find it hard to figure it out and make those decisions in a way that doesn’t cause trauma or damage students’ educational prospects.

The destabilizing nature of Philadelphia’s school closures is also made clear in the work of Elaine Simon, the Director of Urban Studies at the University of Pennsylvania and an expert in local education reform. She explains that district schools are often the only public institution “still surviving in low-income neighborhoods, and they serve as a point of pride and community for families.” Accordingly, a school closure results in the loss of an institution that “builds

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289 Herold, “Philadelphia School District Wants to Close 37 Schools, Relocate or Configure Dozens More.”
290 Paul Socolar, interview, tape recording.
291 Paul Socolar, interview, tape recording.
relationships among local residents and binds generations” while simultaneously “serving local children.” 292 She elaborated on this argument in a 2013 article published in *The Philadelphia Public School Notebook*, in the midst of the city’s largest spate of school shutdowns:

> Are schools important to their neighborhoods? Ask the more than 4,000 people who attended community meetings on school closings over the last few months…The School District of Philadelphia’s closings plan – affecting majority black and low-income neighborhoods – threatens to deal them a deathblow… Losing schools makes it all the more likely that these neighborhoods will deteriorate further. 293

The detrimental effects of market-driven intervention in Philadelphia’s high-poverty communities illustrate the troubling nature of NCLB’s solutions for “failing” schools in general. In Ravitch’s words, the legislation’s prescribed “remedies” have ultimately served to “disrupt lives and communities, especially those of children and their families” and have “accelerated a sense of transiency and impermanence, while dismissing the values of continuity and tradition, which children, families and communities need as anchors in their lives.” 294 In short, the district’s market-driven interventions have all too often done more to fracture and weaken school communities than to aid them. High-poverty schools cannot be expected to improve when the critical foundations of effective reform – trust, stability and community cohesion – are further damaged and undermined.

**The Missing Piece of the Reform Puzzle: Addressing the Context of “Failure”**

The standards-based and market-driven reform models have been pursued with the intention of shrinking racial and socioeconomic achievement gaps, reducing educational inequity, and ensuring that low-income and minority students are given the opportunity to succeed. To achieve these aims, proponents of both models emphasize strategies that remedy the problem of educators’ “low expectations” for low-income and minority youth. The notion that “low expectations” engender poor performance does hold some validity; educational research has shown that the ways in which educators communicate their attitudes and inferences about


The problem lies in the fact that the assumptions at the core of standards-based and market-driven reform are incomplete. By conceptualizing poor student performance as the product of “low expectations,” both strategies “place the blame” for “failure” on teachers and administrators inside of individual schools.\footnote{James H. Lytle, interview, tape recording; Sunderman, Kim and Orfield, \textit{NCLB Meets School Realities}, xxxii.} These models thus offer solutions that frame schools as having “totally transformative power” over the sources of “failure” and “low expectations” within their walls.\footnote{Sunderman, Kim and Orfield, \textit{NCLB Meets School Realities}, xxxviii.} In doing so, both strategies overlook the broader contexts of poverty and inequality in which many schools operate, and therefore do little to address a number of significant factors that affect student learning. Lytle highlighted this critical flaw in Philadelphia’s guiding theories of reform during his interview:

As you set high expectations and standards for an urban school district, the prospect is that a high proportion of students are not going to meet the standards. The simple explanation – and the one that we see in Philadelphia’s reform efforts – is to blame the teachers, principals, and the curriculum. The real explanation is external – the circumstances that students live in. The district’s reforms are based on this claim that schools can simply ameliorate the baggage that students bring into the classroom on their own, without any support.\footnote{James H. Lytle, interview, tape recording.} Lytle’s assertions have been echoed among prominent education scholars and advocates nationwide. In the words of Columbia Teachers College researcher Bronwyn E. Becker, the standards-based and market-driven theories of NCLB saddle schools with the responsibility of
“fixing problems they have never been able to fix and that largely lie outside of their zone of influence.” Ravitch makes a similar argument in her own work, asserting that the “reformers say they care” about supporting low-income and minority children, but “they leave the root causes of low academic performance undisturbed.”

These claims have been bolstered with a growing body of scientific evidence that highlights the relationship between low student achievement and the stressors of poverty. Researchers and scholars have repeatedly concluded that disadvantaged urban youth encounter major barriers to the development of the physical, mental, emotional and cognitive capacity to excel academically. This argument is certainly the case in Philadelphia, where large numbers of students routinely grapple with food insecurity, insufficient medical care, family instability, domestic and community violence, and an inability to afford uniforms, books and school supplies. Susan Gobreski (the director of the Philadelphia Community Schools Initiative in the Mayor’s Office of Education) elaborated on this argument in an interview:

The focus of reform here has been on requiring teachers to teach all kids to the same standards to get the same results, regardless of whether or not some kids are hungry, or have the same supports at home, or have glasses, or have additional issues. We know that poverty is a great stressor, and has a major impact on kids’ wellbeing, yet we’ve pushed all of the responsibility to address these issues – or ignore them – onto teachers. That approach doesn’t make sense.

Ultimately, state and district officials have placed a “near total focus on manipulating in-schol factors as a means of improving standardized test achievement,” while failing to acknowledge the “patently obvious interconnectedness” of poverty and academic success. Consequently, the district’s standards-based and market-driven reform efforts have often resulted in “callous and unsuccessful” policies that do more to impede than promote school improvement.

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301 Ravitch, Reign of Error, 6.
Emerging Alternatives: The Philadelphia Community Schools Initiative

In the wake of NCLB’s implementation in the School District of Philadelphia, many community organizations and advocates grew increasingly vocal in their opposition to standards-based and market-driven reform. These groups accused the SRC and district officials of imposing punitive interventions on high-poverty schools while “failing to address the underlying inequalities that are mirrored in their test results.”

Local advocates began to call for a greater commitment to the needs of students in poor neighborhoods, and have worked to mobilize parents, teachers and principals around alternative strategies to education reform.

One such alternative is the “community schools” model, which has gained favor among members of PCAPS and other community organizations. This strategy is built upon the premise that the conditions and stressors of poverty beyond the school walls undermine students’ capacity to learn inside of the classroom. The model therefore aims to transform high-poverty schools into “neighborhood hubs” equipped with comprehensive services to support the social, physical and emotional needs of students and their families.

Proponents of the model have asserted that it represents a drastic departure from the guiding theories of NCLB, and have framed the approach as a much-needed “answer to the predominant school reform strategy of at least the past decade” in Philadelphia.

In November of 2015, the election of Democratic Mayor Jim Kenney created an opening for PCAPS and other advocacy networks to press for a political commitment to the “community schools” model. District officials had expressed only lukewarm support for the notion of “community schools,” and PCAPS viewed Kenney’s election as an opportunity to bring their proposal directly to the city government. The newly elected mayor had campaigned on the promise of strengthening high-poverty schools, and expressed a willingness to cooperate with the PCAPS Community Schools Task Force on the development of a new educational strategy.

This collaboration manifested in the establishment of the Philadelphia Community Schools Initiative, which was formally introduced in early 2016.

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309 Amber Felton, interview, tape recording.
The City’s Hopes for the Community Schools Initiative: The new Community Schools Initiative represents the first city-led effort to implement the “community schools” model on a large scale in Philadelphia. Its proponents argue that the city government can play a leading role in connecting neighborhoods with local partners and municipal programs capable of providing holistic services in a school setting.\textsuperscript{310} With these supports and resources in place, schools will be equipped to meet the specific needs of low-income children and address the barriers to learning that inhibit their academic achievement. As Socolar explained, the “hope of the city-led effort is that we now have some of the resources and the energy and the agency to really get schools to think about this approach – about this different way of being a school.”\textsuperscript{311}

Both the Mayor’s Office of Education and the city’s advocacy groups have adopted the language of “trauma-informed care” as the guiding theory of the Community Schools Initiative. By definition, a “trauma-informed” approach to schooling focuses on acknowledging the social and environmental stressors that impede children’s capacity to learn in contexts of poverty.\textsuperscript{312} Socolar elaborated on this definition and its importance to the city in his interview:

I recently grasped this whole idea of childhood trauma. I think that it’s the main concept that the city effort is really paying attention to. It’s the idea that the burdens and mental health issues that children experience – especially in poor communities, where you have issues of basic survival, hunger, violence, abuse, loss of family members, and so on – create this trauma that kids carry with them. And to address that, we need teachers and everyone in the community to figure out how to support kids who aren’t getting the help they need to deal with these traumatic events.\textsuperscript{313}

This concept of “trauma-informed care” builds upon a growing body of research pointing to the role of “adverse childhood experiences,” or ACEs (events and pressures associated with conditions of poverty) in producing negative educational outcomes.\textsuperscript{314} Multiple studies across a variety of fields – sociology, psychology and neurobiology – have highlighted the ways in which ACEs impede the cognitive, emotional, behavioral and physical development of low-income students.

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\textsuperscript{311} Paul Socolar, interview, tape recording.
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\textsuperscript{312} Gordon R. Hodas, “Responding to Childhood Trauma: The Promise and Practice of Trauma Informed Care” (Harrisburg, Pennsylvania: Pennsylvania Office of Mental Health and Substance Abuse Services, 2006), 33-35.
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\textsuperscript{313} Paul Socolar, interview, tape recording.
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\textsuperscript{314} Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), “About Adverse Childhood Experiences: Association Between ACEs and Negative Outcomes,” CDC-Kaiser Study Online Archives, last modified April 1, 2016, accessed February 15, 2017, \url{https://www.cdc.gov/violenceprevention/acestudy/about_ace.html}.
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children. Philadelphia city officials have frequently cited this literature to contextualize and explain the purpose of their new “community schools” plan. In their view, the new strategy reflects an “understanding that dealing with the trauma in students’ lives can improve education” by addressing the needs of the “whole child,” and thus reducing their barriers to learning.

The “Inaugural Class” of Community Schools: After surveying students, parents and teachers from across the city, the Philadelphia Mayor’s Office of Education announced its “inaugural class” of “community schools” in July of 2016. The list included nine schools (three high schools, three elementary schools, one middle school, and two K-8 schools) that represented a “wide cross-section of neighborhoods – from gentrifying South Philadelphia to some of the city’s poorest zip codes.”

To assess the concerns and opinions of these school communities, city officials hosted town forums and roundtable discussions, conducted in-school visits and observations, and collected feedback from student groups, families, teachers and principals. The Mayor’s Office of Education summarized its findings in a report that identified major needs across all nine schools. The report documented repeated calls for increased access to social services and supports for students and their families, including basic medical care, mental health counseling, vocational training, food access, programs for English-language learners, and GED preparation and financial literacy courses. Communities also expressed a desire for additional resources to provide enriching learning opportunities through afterschool activities, music and art education, summer programs and tutoring. Using this feedback, the city’s education officials set out to identify service providers, resources and programs that could address the needs of students, families, teachers and residents in each school community.

317 Wolfman-Arent and Mezzacappa, “Philadelphia Launches Initiative, Choosing Nine Community Schools.”
318 Mitman, “City’s Office of Education Releases Findings from Community School Meetings.”
Gobreski described the process of evaluating community needs and matching schools with appropriate services as follows:

We have so many city departments that serve children, families and neighborhoods, and so the idea is that we can do some work to align those efforts with schooling and increase the way that we use schools as a locus for those services. We use the strategic needs assessment in each school to look at various areas, including the physical, social and emotional status of the kids. We look at each school as a community resource and then examine what needs to happen there in order to support student learning and growth… and we consider not only city services, but also non-profit and mission-driven services.\(^{320}\)

Gobreski also emphasized one of her key aims for the new initiative: tailoring the model to meet the distinct needs and concerns of each specific community. She explained that the Community Schools Initiative does not rely on a “one-standard definition” to support student needs, but instead is an “iterative approach” that can be molded to the unique circumstances of each school:

We do the needs assessment for each school, and we choose a number of specific priorities for each school. So the assessment process and broader objectives are consistent from school to school, but in one school they might choose a food pantry while in another school they might need health services, and another school might choose to focus on something else. The idea is that this is an individualized approach instead of a cookie-cutter approach to what schools need.\(^{321}\)

To facilitate the process of developing partnerships with local service providers, the Mayor’s Office of Education has hired sixteen new city employees tasked with supporting the Community Schools Initiative. The team includes nine Community Schools Coordinators (one per school), who are responsible for organizing services and resources, collaborating with local partners, and meeting regularly with parents, teachers and students.\(^{322}\) The city has also recruited three Healthy Schools Coordinators to oversee the implementation of nutrition and wellness programs, and three Technical Assistance Coordinators. As Kenney himself explained at an eight-day training for new coordinators just prior to the 2016-2017 school year, the team’s objective is to “be the intermediary… and intercede in those problems that parents face, that teachers face, that neighborhoods face.”\(^{323}\)

\(^{320}\) Susan Gobreski, interview, tape recording.
\(^{321}\) Susan Gobreski, interview, tape recording.
Part III. More Harm Than Good: Ramifications of Reform

The early implementation phase of the Community Schools Initiative is now underway; in each of the nine schools, full-time coordinators have begun working with small School Advisory Councils to establish partnerships with organizations, universities and service providers to access new social and educational resources. For instance, Logan Elementary School has partnered with a handful of Philadelphia-based non-profit groups (such as Common Market) to increase families’ access to fresh and affordable produce.324 At Southwark K-8 School, the principal and coordinator have connected with local organizations such as Puentes de Salud, United Communities and Migrant Education to provide health services, afterschool programming and English-language learner supports.325 Cramp Elementary School is working to expand its health and wellness initiatives through partnerships with St. Christopher’s Hospital and Playworks (a non-profit organization that implements recess activities), and South Philadelphia High School is collaborating with CityLife Church to create an in-school “closet” stocked with donations of new clothing.326 Kenney and his education team continue to express optimism about the initiative’s promise; after a recent tour of South Philadelphia High, Kenney proudly proclaimed that “this is the way public schools should be.”327

Looking to the Future: While many local advocates and officials have echoed Kenney’s enthusiasm, it is important to acknowledge that questions remain regarding the effectiveness and replicability of the Community Schools Initiative. As Gobreski noted in her interview, “Ultimately, this is new. In the pilot stage, there’s always a lot of learning to do.”328

Some observers worry that severe resource scarcity and a complete absence of trust may pose insurmountable barriers to the implementation of the “community schools” model as it moves beyond the initial cohort of selected schools. In Philadelphia, some high-poverty schools may be

328 Susan Gobreski, interview, tape recording.
lacking the strong principal investment, locally available resources, and capacity for community mobilization that the model requires. Citing Bryk’s research, Lytle explained:

One of the core findings is that there are some… neighborhoods that are so troubled that there is simply no way their schools can succeed. There are simply no community resources left. It’s a devastating part of the story. But it goes back to how realistic it is to expect schools to improve when they are located at the end of the pipeline.\footnote{James H. Lytle, interview, tape recording.}

Socolar succinctly summarized the concerns and obstacles facing the new initiative, stating that its implementation “is not going to be an easy slam-dunk effort here in Philadelphia.”\footnote{Paul Socolar, interview, tape recording.} Yet in spite of these challenges, he concluded his interview by expressing cautious optimism about the initiative’s potential for the high-poverty schools in which it is implemented:

Imagine a school where most of the staff have no support and yet need to deal with all of these children who have intense emotions and stressors about things that have happened in their lives. That’s huge. And I think that, until recently, there was this culture – both in Philadelphia and more generally – that we should take a zero-tolerance approach to students and their problems and misbehavior. We should punish them instead of taking the time to figure out what kids are really acting out about. But I think that the pendulum has really swung on that issue, toward finding the resources to help kids and finding out what their struggles are, what happens in their homes and why they behave the way they do. It’s difficult, of course, but that’s were I think “community schools” could really make strides – the whole idea of having a trauma-informed school… We need to have the sense of community in these schools.\footnote{Paul Socolar, interview, tape recording.}

City officials, PCAPS advocates and other proponents hope that the “community schools” model will eventually become a leading turnaround strategy for the Philadelphia district.\footnote{Philadelphia Community Schools Task Force, “PCAPS Platform for Community Schools.”} However, this long-term goal will require sustained political, financial and community support, which can only be mobilized if the model’s implementation yields positive results in the first nine schools. As advocates and officials seek to expand the “community schools” strategy to new neighborhoods, they will likely confront a number of challenges, constraints and complex policy questions. Ultimately, such concerns will need to be addressed if the city hopes to scale up and sustain the “community schools” approach.

While the potential effectiveness of the Community Schools Initiative remains an open question, its introduction does signify a critical step in generating a citywide dialogue regarding poverty and academic success. On a theoretical level, Philadelphia’s “community schools”
model represents a drastic departure from the fundamental assumptions that guide standards-based and market-driven reform. While these dominant strategies attribute “failure” to “low expectations” within individual schools, the mayor’s initiative embodies a conceptual alternative: a holistic educational approach that emphasizes the interconnectedness of contextual factors and academic outcomes. The introduction of the new strategy has fueled a growing awareness of the relationships between poverty, inequality and schooling in Philadelphia’s low-income and minority communities. As Gobreski herself explained during her interview, part of “the potential significance of the initiative… is that it gives people a chance to talk about what children here actually need, and what the stressors on our school system really are.”

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333 Susan Gobreski, interview, tape recording.
CONCLUSIONS

Lessons Learned in the School District of Philadelphia

In the early years of NCLB’s implementation, the School District of Philadelphia was dubbed the nation’s “first great experiment” with the legislation’s standards-based and market-driven models of reform. Sixteen years later, the outcomes and implications of this “experiment” have become clear. Although these reforms were initiated with the intention of boosting achievement among poor and minority youth, they have often served to strain scarce resources, undermine the richness of education, demoralize students and teachers, and destabilize communities. Ultimately, within many of the city’s high-poverty schools, the dominant reform agenda appears to have done far more harm than good.

The Philadelphia case reflects the experiences and realities of reform in high-poverty urban districts throughout the United States. As this thesis made clear, scholars and advocates nationwide have repeatedly expressed strong criticisms of NCLB’s prescriptions and their adverse effects on schools serving low-income and minority populations. Yet in spite of this vocal opposition, federal and state policymakers largely continue to rely upon the standards-based and market-driven theories that have dominated the reform discourse since the 1980s. As a result, the nation has witnessed a steady increase in the number of schools – especially high-poverty schools – that have been diagnosed as “failing” and penalized accordingly. Many of these schools have thus experienced the demoralization, disruption and destabilization that accompany Philadelphia’s dominant reform efforts.

As the Philadelphia story powerfully illustrates, the notion that “low expectations” engender poor student performance – a concept at the core of standards-based and market-driven reform – is insufficient in explaining the challenges and disadvantages of high-poverty schools. By relying on this flawed assumption, reformers in Philadelphia and across the nation have promoted strategies that place the blame for “failure” within school walls while overlooking the contexts and conditions in which these schools operate. Put simply, policymakers cannot produce dramatic gains in achievement among poor and minority youth without addressing the external factors that undermine their learning in the first place. Only time will tell whether Philadelphia’s new Community Schools Initiative proves effective in fulfilling this objective, but the strategy at least represents an important development in the city’s education reform dialogue. At both the
local and national level, a much broader discourse is needed regarding the profound influences of poverty, inequality and resource scarcity on academic potential.

Both within Philadelphia and in cities nationwide, tackling the challenges of schooling in high-poverty and resource-poor communities remains a daunting and formidable task. The debates surrounding urban education reform are complex and polarizing, and the policy process itself is highly prone to the influence of powerful political and corporate interests.

However, the Philadelphia case does highlight a number of critical starting points for charting a new path forward. In urban districts, new and improved strategies are needed to ensure the retention of devoted, nurturing and effective teachers. Reformers must create and maintain channels for open and transparent communication with parents, educators, students and principals. To lay the foundations for effective reform, policymakers and local officials should acknowledge and emphasize the importance of maintaining stability and building trust between school actors. Finally, crafting effective education policy will necessitate a broader dialogue regarding the influences of poverty and a greater commitment to meeting the needs of low-income and minority communities. By taking these critical themes into consideration, policymakers and reformers may be able to make greater strides toward reducing educational inequity, promoting academic progress, and ensuring that all children – regardless of race or socioeconomic status – are able to learn, grow and thrive within their local schools.
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