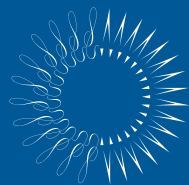


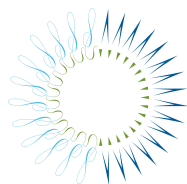
# Philadelphia's Changing Schools and What Parents Want from Them



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**SOMETIMES, THE MOST IMPORTANT CHANGES** in a city are the ones that happen gradually. You don't notice that they've taken place until you take a step back and compare where you are to where you've been.

That applies to K-12 education in Philadelphia, which looks far different today than it did 10 years ago. What once was a set of limited and straightforward options for parents has become a more complex, more diverse and more confusing set of choices. And the number of alternatives seems likely to grow in the years ahead, with the lines separating the three main elements in the city's basic educational system—traditional public, charter and Catholic schools—likely to blur.

At the core of this report are the parents, the people who must try to navigate this new landscape for their children. We polled them and met with them to find out how they are coping, what they think they are getting from their schools and what they would like to be getting.

In one sense, they're not entirely sure what they want, which is understandable considering the scope of the changes happening before them. In another, though, they know exactly what they want. They aspire to a better life for their children, and they believe education is the key to obtaining it. They want it delivered in a safe and caring environment. Most of them don't much care who provides it, as long as the school is reasonably nearby and their out-of-pocket costs are modest or nonexistent.

*Philadelphia's Changing Schools and What Parents Want from Them* is the work of journalist Tom Ferrick Jr., who has been writing about K-12 education in Philadelphia since the 1970s, and Laura Horwitz, research associate at The Pew Charitable Trusts' Philadelphia Research Initiative. Our poll was designed by Cliff Zukin, veteran pollster and professor of political science and public policy at Rutgers University, and was conducted by Abt SRBI Associates of New York.

Ferrick and Horwitz talked to dozens of educators, city officials and educational advocates. They visited schools and analyzed data on trends in education. Readers will note that this report includes a number of quotes from unnamed individuals. We allowed some educators to speak anonymously so that they could talk frankly about issues that go beyond their immediate responsibilities. And the parents who came to the focus groups held to supplement our poll findings did so on the understanding that they would not be identified.

Whether the current educational landscape is better or worse than in years past is for others to decide; we understand that more options and better quality are not one and the same. Our goals were to track the developments of the past decade, look to the future and take the temperature of the ultimate decision-makers in K-12 education, the parents.

**Larry Eichel**  
Project Director  
Philadelphia Research Initiative  
June 2010

# Executive Summary

**IN PHILADELPHIA, K-12 EDUCATION** is in the midst of a sweeping transformation that has left some parents elated, others perplexed and many scrambling to keep up with the range of options available to them. And more change is on the way.

Over the course of the past decade, the three largest elements in the city's educational landscape—traditional public schools, charter schools and Catholic schools—have changed dramatically in size. Only one of them, the charter schools, has been growing.

The traditional public schools, those run directly by the School District of Philadelphia, have lost 19 percent of their enrollment, falling from 200,435 in the 2000–2001 school year to 162,662 in 2009–2010, even though the district, particularly at the high-school level, offers more choices than ever before.

The Catholic schools, operated by the Archdiocese of Philadelphia, have lost 37 percent, dropping from 47,102 to 29,884 over the same period.

The charter schools, which are independently run but publicly funded, have grown by 170 percent, from 12,284 to 33,107; in 2008–2009, the charters, now 67 in number, surpassed the Catholic schools as the city's largest alternative system, building up large waiting lists for admission in the process.

To find out what the city's parents think about these trends and how they are coping with them, the Philadelphia Research Initiative commissioned a poll of 802 parents with children in local schools—half in district-run schools and a quarter each in charter and Catholic schools—and then conducted focus groups of poll participants. To see the survey questionnaire, go to [www.pewtrusts.org/philaresearch](http://www.pewtrusts.org/philaresearch).

This study does not include the independent, private schools that account for about 7 percent of K-12 enrollment in Philadelphia.

What parents think makes a huge difference. The expansion of options has given them greater control over their children's education, and school leaders are trying to respond to what parents want and need.

In our survey, we found that parents, unlike educators and administrators, tend to think in terms of individual schools, not educational systems, and are not philosophically wedded to one system or another.

We found that discontent regarding district-run schools runs deep, particularly among those parents who have chosen to send their children elsewhere; in a focus group, several Catholic-school parents said the only reason they could imagine sending their children to district-run schools was to punish them. At the same time, parents with children in district-run schools are generally upbeat about the schools they know from first-hand experience. But that does not mean they are committed to the system. Most of them have considered sending their children elsewhere.

We found that parental desire for discipline and for safety are central to the appeal of both charter and Catholic schools—and to parental unhappiness with the school district. And we found that middle-class and wealthy parents are not the only ones who want

a good education for their children and are unhappy about not getting it. The city's aspiring class of parents cuts across racial and economic lines.

Among the specific findings were these:

- Sixty-two percent of parents with children in district-run schools say they have actively considered sending their kids to charter, Catholic or private schools. The percentages are higher for parents under the age of 30 and for African Americans. While only 40 percent of parents with children in district-run schools think the public school system as a whole is doing a good or excellent job, 71 percent judge their own children's schools to be good or excellent.
- Charter-school parents are highly satisfied with the education their children are receiving, with 90 percent of them rating their children's schools good or excellent. Despite reports of financial irregularities involving some charter operators, 62 percent of all parents polled, regardless of what sort of school their children attend, think that the growth of the charters has been a good thing.
- Catholic-school parents are similarly happy with their schools, with 92 percent of them handing out good or excellent ratings. To look at it another way, 7 percent of Catholic-school parents rate their schools as "only fair" or poor, compared to 8 percent of charter-school parents and 28 percent of parents with children in district-run schools. But Catholic-school parents worry about the long-term future of their schools.
- Navigating the current educational landscape in Philadelphia can be daunting. Forty-two percent of the parents surveyed said that they found it "somewhat hard" or "very hard" to get enough information about their options. In a focus group, one parent said that finding a school for a child sometimes seemed like a full-time job. Another told us that there were so many choices that he thought none of the kids on his block went to the same school.
- Despite the new array of options, parents want still more. Seventy-two percent say that parents in Philadelphia do not have enough good choices in picking a school, with the figures slightly higher among black parents and parents under age 30.

One of the biggest differences among the parent groups has to do with safety in the schools. Only 31 percent of parents with children in district-run schools say that their schools are doing an excellent job on safety, compared to 67 percent of charter-school parents and 73 percent of Catholic-school parents. And 29 percent of parents with children in district-run schools say their schools are "only fair" or poor on safety, compared to 5 percent for charters and 1 percent for Catholic schools.

This is one area that shows how different the perspectives of parents and educators can be. In interviews for this report, numerous educators said that if a school offered a quality education, then students would be engaged—and discipline and safety would follow as a result. But parents told us that discipline and safety must be in place before a quality education can be delivered.

Each of the three larger systems faces major challenges in the next several years.

For the School District of Philadelphia, the challenge is to accelerate the gradual improvement in student performance recorded during the past decade, as measured by standardized test scores. Superintendent Arlene Ackerman's special focus is on some of the neighborhood elementary schools and comprehensive high schools that remain the default options for many low-income families—and where performance lags the most. Her Renaissance Schools initiative, which includes handing seven schools over to charter operators, is part of her plan to make the district a "diverse provider" of educational options. The district also must deal with issues of under-capacity; it currently has 45,000 empty seats in its schools.

For charters, which have become schools of choice for many lower-income Philadelphians, the challenge is to continue to expand in the face of widely publicized reports of financial mismanagement at several schools and test results indicating that students in some charters are not performing as well as those in district-run schools. The popularity of charter schools aside, the broader public may not be willing to see public funds go to institutions that produce mediocre academic results and engage in questionable financial behavior. The school district's increased focus on improving quality—as





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opposed to expanding choice—portends a future in which applicants wishing to open new charter schools will face tougher standards and in which existing schools will have to show academic results.

For the Catholic schools, the challenge is finding a way to survive. The number of students attending Catholic elementary schools declined 40 percent in the past decade, while enrollment in the high schools dropped 26 percent. The once-robust Catholic educational system in the city is being weakened by two factors, both of which have contributed to the closing of individual schools. One is the declining number of Catholics in the city. The other is competition from charter schools, which have some of the same appeal to parents as Catholic schools but, unlike Catholic schools, do not charge tuition. A key question for the Archdiocese is the degree to which it wants to educate non-Catholic students, who already comprise 24 percent of total enrollment.

For the parents, determining and assessing the

available choices can be a daunting task. In one of our focus groups, a North Philadelphia father whose two older children went through the city's public schools years ago said that he was having trouble guiding a younger child to the right school because, he said, "this thing is a whole new monster now." And the look of the monster is sure to keep changing in the years to come.

From the parental perspective, the goals for the years ahead are clear: giving residents of every neighborhood in the city access to safe, educationally sound and affordable options, whatever the source; making sure systems are in place so that parents can obtain the information they need to make good choices; and doing everything that can be done to make sure that as few families as possible fall between the cracks in a complex and changing set of educational systems.

How close educational leaders come to achieving these goals will help shape the future of the city's children, and with it, the future of Philadelphia. ○

# A Landscape Transformed

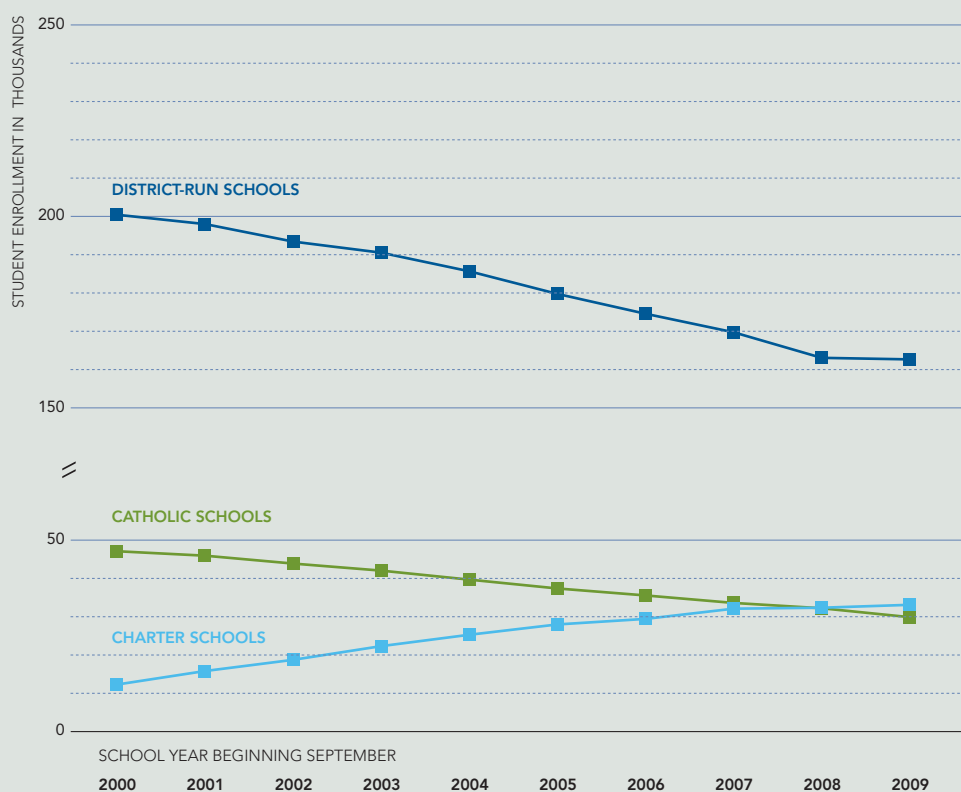
**IN THE PAST DECADE**, the world of K-12 education in Philadelphia has undergone a significant transformation. Each of the three largest educational systems in the city—public, Catholic and charter—looks very different today than it did 10 years ago, and the pace of change shows no sign of slowing.

In deciding where to send their children to school, parents are confronted with more options than ever before, a trend that is mirrored in varying degrees in cities across the nation. It is a far different landscape than the one parents encountered when they were children themselves; few of them recall their families feeling they had an abundance of choices, short of moving.

Some city parents find this new situation energizing and liberating, despite the decision-making challenges that choice brings. Others struggle to make sense of it all, searching for information about the available options and scrambling to secure the best ones for their children. Many parents wind up taking the default position, sending their children to neighborhood public schools, and most want more quality options.

Since the city's educational systems operate independently of one another—and even in competition at times—it is difficult for some parents to navigate the array of options. One parent said that finding a good school for her child feels like a full-time job.

**ENROLLMENT IN DIFFERENT TYPES OF PHILADELPHIA SCHOOLS, 2000–2010**



Source: Philadelphia data taken from School District of Philadelphia, "Proposed Budget Fiscal Year 2010–2011 (July 1, 2010–June 30, 2011), Presentation to the School Reform Commission, April 21, 2010," p. 12; Archdiocese of Philadelphia, Office of Research and Planning, Maps and Reports, Philadelphia North Vicariate, Philadelphia South Vicariate, Parish Cluster Reports, authors' analysis; Pennsylvania Department of Education, Non-Public Enrollment by County, 2008–2009, authors' analysis.



Another told us that it seemed as if none of the children on his North Philadelphia block go to the same school. That may be an overstatement, but it shows how much things have changed.

This report is about parents and the choices they make in their quest to get the best for their children from the three largest systems of basic education in Philadelphia: the district-run, charter and Catholic schools. It chronicles the changes that have taken place in the last decade and considers the challenges each system faces in the years to come.

The enrollment numbers tell part of the story. In the past decade, the district-run system has gone from 200,435 students to 162,662, a drop of 19 percent. The Catholic system operated by the Archdiocese of Philadelphia has lost 37 percent of its city enrollment, dropping from 47,102 students in 2000 to 29,884 in the just-completed school year.<sup>1</sup>

To some degree, those drops may be attributable to a modest decline in the number of school-age children in the city. But that is only part of the story.

A lot of the children who would have gone to district-run or Catholic schools in years past now go to the city's 67 charter schools, independently run and managed public schools which have 33,107 students—with another 3,019 staying at home to attend cyber charters over the Internet.<sup>2</sup> Charters, with waiting lists of nearly 30,000, have grown to become the largest alternative to the city's traditional public schools, surpassing the Catholic system in 2008–2009.<sup>3</sup>

Independent private schools, which are not discussed in detail in this report, have about 16,000 students, down about 20 percent in this decade.<sup>4</sup>

In our research, we analyzed data, visited schools and interviewed educators and public officials familiar with the three systems. The report's primary focus, though, is on the views of parents. Parents are sometimes relegated to the sidelines in debates about educational policy; unless they are activists, speaking up at meetings, they tend not to be heard. Our goal was to bring the parents' perspective more fully into the conversation.

We did so in two ways. In December 2009, we conducted a poll in which we surveyed the views of representative samples of parents with children in the

public, charter and Catholic schools.<sup>5</sup> In addition, we held focus groups with some of the parents we polled to flesh out the findings.

Most of the parents we surveyed are not happy with the performance of the School District of Philadelphia; 60 percent rated it "only fair" or poor.

Public-school parents gave their children's own schools much higher ratings than the system as a whole. While only 40 percent of them said that Philadelphia public schools were good or excellent, 71 percent gave those marks to their individual schools. But even there, the differences with charter- and Catholic-school parents were pronounced. Ninety percent of charter parents gave their schools good or excellent ratings as did 92 percent of Catholic-school parents.

The differences are more pronounced at the bottom end of the satisfaction scale. Twenty-eight percent of public-school parents rated their children's schools as only fair or poor. The corresponding numbers were 8 percent for charter parents and 7 percent for parents with children in Catholic schools.

## The Aspiring Class

For decades, the School District of Philadelphia has struggled to educate its students, especially those from poor or low-income families. Middle-class and wealthier families have long cited the performance of the city schools as a reason to turn to expensive private schools or move to the suburbs when their oldest child reaches school age.

But our survey revealed that middle-class and wealthy parents are not the only ones who aspire to a quality education for their children and are unhappy about not getting it. The city's aspiring class of parents cuts across racial and economic lines. In our poll, 82 percent of parents with incomes under \$40,000 a year said they wanted their children to get a college or graduate degree—not much lower than the 92 percent with incomes over \$40,000 who said the same thing.

Members of this group include such people as Cynthia Wakefield of West Philadelphia, who is helping to raise her four grandchildren. The children go to the local district-run school, Wakefield said, but she is looking for other options, including a nearby char-

## WHERE STUDENTS IN SEVEN CITIES WENT TO SCHOOL, 2007–2008 SCHOOL YEAR

	DISTRICT-RUN	CHARTER	CATHOLIC
Pittsburgh	94%	2%	4%
Chicago	85%	5%	10%
Baltimore	84%	6%	9%
San Francisco	76%	4%	20%
<b>Philadelphia</b>	<b>72%</b>	<b>14%</b>	<b>14%</b>
Cleveland	71%	15%	14%
Washington, D.C.	66%	25%	9%

Source: Philadelphia data taken from School District of Philadelphia, "Proposed Budget Fiscal Year 2010–2011 (July 1, 2010–June 30, 2011), Presentation to the School Reform Commission, April 21, 2010," p. 12; Archdiocese of Philadelphia, Office of Research and Planning, Maps and Reports, Philadelphia North Vicariate, Philadelphia South Vicariate, Parish Cluster Reports, authors' analysis; Pennsylvania Department of Education, Non-Public Enrollment by County, 2008–2009, authors' analysis.

Other cities' district and charter data taken from National Center for Education Statistics, Common Core of Data (CCD), "Public Elementary/Secondary School Universe Survey," 2007–2008. Other cities' Catholic enrollment data provided by local dioceses.

Note: Students attending other private schools or being home-schooled are not included.

**Philadelphia has a relatively low share of students in district-run schools and a relatively high share in charter and Catholic schools.**

ter school or another public school that stresses academics. "I am looking for an academic-plus school, with a better curriculum and more homework," she said. What are her aspirations for her grandchildren? "I hope they turn out to be doctors and lawyers."

The aspiring class also includes Mama Aboagye, an African immigrant and mother of two—one in private school and one in public school. Unhappy with the public school her son attends, she has tried unsuccessfully to get him into a charter school. "I want him to go to college and have a better career," said Aboagye, who lives in Northeast Philadelphia. "Education is the best gift that I can give to my child. The school he's at now is not helping him reach that goal."

What fuels this search for alternatives is dissatisfaction with the schools run by the district, driven to a large degree by concern about the perceived lack of safety and discipline. Only 31 percent of parents with children in district-run schools give their schools excellent ratings on safety, compared to 67 percent of charter-school parents and 73 percent of Catholic-school parents. And 29 percent of parents with children in district-run schools rate their schools as "only fair" or poor on safety, compared to 5 percent for charters and 1 percent for Catholic schools.

The overall dissatisfaction is most pronounced among African American and younger parents.

Only 63 percent of black public-school parents give their children's own schools (as opposed to the school district as a whole) a good or excellent rating, compared to 87 percent of whites.

When asked if they had ever seriously considered sending their child to a Catholic, charter or private school, 52 percent of the white parents with children in district-run schools said they had. But the number was 68 percent for black parents and 77 percent for parents of all races under age 30.

We also asked those public-school parents who had looked at alternatives why they had not switched. They cited the cost of the alternative schools, issues having to do with admission or waiting lists, and concerns about the distance from home.

While this report looks at the three major systems of K-12 education in Philadelphia, it is worth noting that many parents do not think of systems when it comes to educating their children. They think about individual schools.

One mother in our focus group of Catholic-school parents told us that she took her son out of public school in fourth grade because she was unhappy with the education he was getting and enrolled him in a Catholic school. "I didn't send my son to a Catholic school because I am Catholic," she said. "I sent him to a Catholic school because of the educa-

tion." But with her son's current school, Cardinal Dougherty High School, closing at the end of the 2009–2010 academic year, she was looking into charter schools. She has no loyalty to any system. She simply wants a good education for her son.

In another focus group, a mother from Northeast Philadelphia said she felt no loyalty to the public school system but was deeply committed to the district-run elementary school that her daughter attends. "The principal at my daughter's school, I absolutely love her," she said. "She has put so many things back into the school."

This search for options leads to anomalies that are distinctly Philadelphian. In the suburbs, parents with school-age children often decide where to live based on the local public schools, paying a premium on the price of a home if need be. In Philadelphia, parents tend to pick a neighborhood and then go looking for a good school, knowing their children may have to travel to get there. In our poll, 36 percent of district parents said their children do not attend the closest public school.

Wealthier parents who want to stay in the city have always had the option of private schools. But one of the key developments of the last 10 years has been the expansion of options for moderate- and low-income parents. For the most part, this is due to the growth of charters—independently run, tuition-free schools that are part of the public system—although choices among district-run schools have expanded as well, particularly at the high-school level.

In Philadelphia, charter schools have been embraced by parents in a way that resembles a slow-motion stampede. This trend has developed in the face of evidence that many charters perform no better than district schools and of a constant drumbeat of news reports and investigations regarding alleged and proven improprieties in the way charters operate. The allegations include engaging in nepotism and no-bid contracts, absconding with school funds, and using school property and personnel to benefit private businesses.

Even so, 62 percent of the parents we polled—regardless of what sort of school their children attend—say that the growth of the charters has been a good thing. Eleven percent say it has been a bad

thing; 7 percent have a mixed view; and 20 percent have no opinion.

Charter schools in Philadelphia are populated mostly by children coming from low- to moderate-income households. Sixty-seven percent of charter-school students are classified as economically disadvantaged; the figure is 76 percent for the district as a whole.<sup>6</sup> Charters have about the same percentage of black students as district schools, 64 percent compared to 62 percent.<sup>7</sup>

Arlene Ackerman has been the superintendent of the School District of Philadelphia since 2008. Although she praises advances made in student performance this decade, she criticizes the pace of advancement and the failure to show significant improvement in the lowest-performing schools.

Ackerman has devised a plan intended to improve educational performance of those schools dramatically and quickly. She believes that success will create a permanent constituency for reform. The plan calls for overhauling 13 of the district's lowest-performing schools for the 2010–2011 school year and dozens more in the years to come. Her goal, she said, is to show parents "what the other side of the rainbow looks like."

As this report shows, some parents believe they already have found the other side of the rainbow.

They have done so by opting for Catholic, charter and private schools. Or they have searched assiduously for niches within the district, taking advantage of the new educational offerings created in recent years, mostly on the secondary level. The list includes not just the traditional magnet schools, such as Central and Masterman High Schools, but the Science Leadership Academy, two military academies and new schools for the arts and performing arts, 30 of them in all. Each year, about 7 out of 10 parents with children entering high school seek admission to schools other than their neighborhood high schools.<sup>8</sup>

## Searching for the Best Option

In our focus groups, parents told us about the steps they have taken to do the best they can for their children. Some have moved to be within the catchment area of elementary schools they considered better

than the ones closest to their homes. Several lobbied officials and principals to get into the schools of their choice. Others have falsified their addresses so they could send their children to the district schools that they preferred. One mother told of working a second job so she could afford to send her three children to Catholic schools. Another converted from Lutheran to Catholic to ease her daughter's passage through the Catholic school system.

Parents with children in charter and Catholic schools cited the quality of education, the feeling of safety and the presence of religious instruction (in the case of Catholic-school parents) as their main reasons for preferring these schools.

"It is a very friendly, very privatized environment," said Heather Anderson, a mother of a child in a Catholic school. "You sense it the minute you walk through the door. My daughter is doing well. Her educational needs are being met and she gets the religious education as well."

The adoptive mother of three teenagers described their charter school this way: "I love it. I can walk in the door and I am known by everyone. It's more of a family environment."

As the breadth of options in charters and district-run schools has expanded, the opposite has been happening to the city's Catholic schools. Twenty-three grade schools and two high schools have closed in the last 10 years as enrollment has declined, mostly due to a drop in the Catholic population in Philadelphia. Some of the empty seats in the schools that remain open have been filled by non-Catholic children. Today, nearly one in four students in Catholic grade schools in the city is non-Catholic, and 20 of the system's 65 elementary schools are majority non-Catholic.<sup>9</sup>

West Catholic High School is the embodiment of these trends. According to Brother Timothy Ahern, president of the school, West Catholic is 80 percent African American, 75 percent non-Catholic and the median household income of a typical parent is \$33,000 a year. Tuition at the West Philadelphia school is \$6,500 a year for non-Catholic students, and although many of the low-income parents qualify for financial aid, that aid rarely exceeds \$2,000 per student. Paying \$4,500 tuition is a considerable

burden for a family making \$33,000 a year, but many families consider it a price worth paying.

In searching for what they deem a good education, parents often seem to be looking as much for a safe, caring environment as for a school with a record of high academic performance. In fact, some educators believe that parents are too lax in judging schools; in our focus groups, parents rarely mentioned academics unless prompted to do so. A safe school with caring teachers can still be a low-performing school. One educator said that parents do not understand what testing data about a school's performance means to them because no one has said to them: "Your 15-year-old son reads at a fourth-grade level. There is no way he will be prepared for college."

Though the number of options has expanded, the demand still appears to be unmet. The lines for private-school scholarships and charter-school admissions continue to grow. Competition remains stiff for admission to the district's niche schools. In our poll, about a quarter of parents with children in district-run schools listed "no alternative" as the main reason why their children are in those schools. Asked if they had enough good choices when it came to selecting a school for their children, 72 percent of parents said they wanted more. Among black parents, the figure was 77 percent; among all parents under age 30, it was 79 percent.

In this transformed landscape, active parental involvement becomes a significant factor, and children who do not get it are likely to suffer as a result. Figuring out what choices are available and determining their relative merits is a daunting challenge for any Philadelphia family, even those deeply committed to their children's education. Forty-two percent of the parents we polled said they found it "very hard" or "somewhat hard" to get enough information about their choices.

"I thought I would be prepared [for this landscape] because I had two older children who had graduated from the public schools," said a North Philadelphia father who works for the city Streets Department and is trying to guide a younger child to the right school. "But this thing is a whole new monster now." ◉

# The District-Run Schools

**IN THE PAST 10 YEARS**, the School District of Philadelphia has undergone significant changes in how it is governed, how it operates and in the array of educational choices it offers.

The changes began in earnest in late 2001, when the state took over operations of the city's public schools. Since then, the system has been run by the School Reform Commission, a five-member body, dominated by state appointees, with a mission to turn around a district deemed at the time of the takeover to be unable to balance its books or effectively educate children.

Contrasting the school district of 10 years ago with the district of today is one way to measure how much it has changed.

To begin with, it is smaller. There were 200,435 students enrolled in district-run schools in the 2000–2001 school year. This year, there were 162,662, although that number is projected to rise slightly in the coming school year.<sup>10</sup> Much of the decline is due to the migration of thousands of

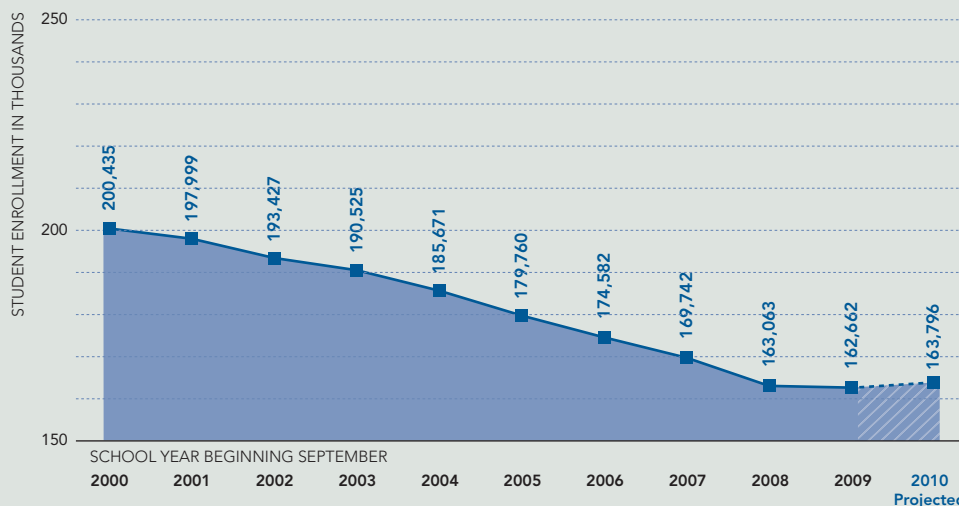
students to charter schools, which have grown rapidly in recent years.

Ten years ago, the district offered more of a “one-size-fits-all” educational experience. Most students were expected to go to the elementary, middle and high schools closest to their homes; there were only a handful of alternatives if those schools did not meet their needs.

Now, the district sees itself as a provider of diverse educational options. For example, in 2002, the district ran 38 high schools, most of them large, so-called comprehensive schools. Today, the district runs 63 high schools (not including charter schools), many of them special-admission schools open to students citywide.<sup>11</sup>

Ten years ago, poor student performance was one factor that prompted the state to take over the city's public schools. In 2002, for instance, only one of five students performed above the most basic level on standardized tests that measured knowledge of math and reading.<sup>12</sup> One of the poorest

ENROLLMENT IN PHILADELPHIA'S DISTRICT-RUN SCHOOLS, 2000–2010



Source: School District of Philadelphia, “FY 2009–2010 Revised Budget in Brief, Presented to the School Reform Commission on November 18, 2009,” p. 9; School District of Philadelphia, “Proposed Budget Fiscal Year 2010–2011 (July 1, 2010–June 30, 2011), Presentation to the School Reform Commission, April 21, 2010,” p. 12.



districts in the state, Philadelphia also was one of the lowest-performing.

Today, more than half of the district’s students perform above the “basic” level in math and reading. Since 2002, the district has made gains every year in student performance on the Pennsylvania System of School Assessment (PSSA), the state’s standardized test.<sup>13</sup> Superintendent Ackerman has ambitious plans to accelerate gains in the district’s lowest performing schools.

High school graduation rates also have improved. Ten years ago, 48 percent of students graduated in four years. Today, the number is 57 percent, and Mayor Michael Nutter and the district have made it a priority to keep that number rising.<sup>14</sup>

Ten years ago, the district was a financial basket case, often running deficits, while constantly fighting with the state over the adequacy of funding. In 2000–2001, the last year that the district was under local control, its budget totaled \$1.6 billion, and the district was projected to end up in the red once again.

Despite the decline in enrollment, the district’s budget for 2010–2011 will total \$3.2 billion, double what it was 10 years ago, with the increase due mostly to hikes in state aid; this includes funds that

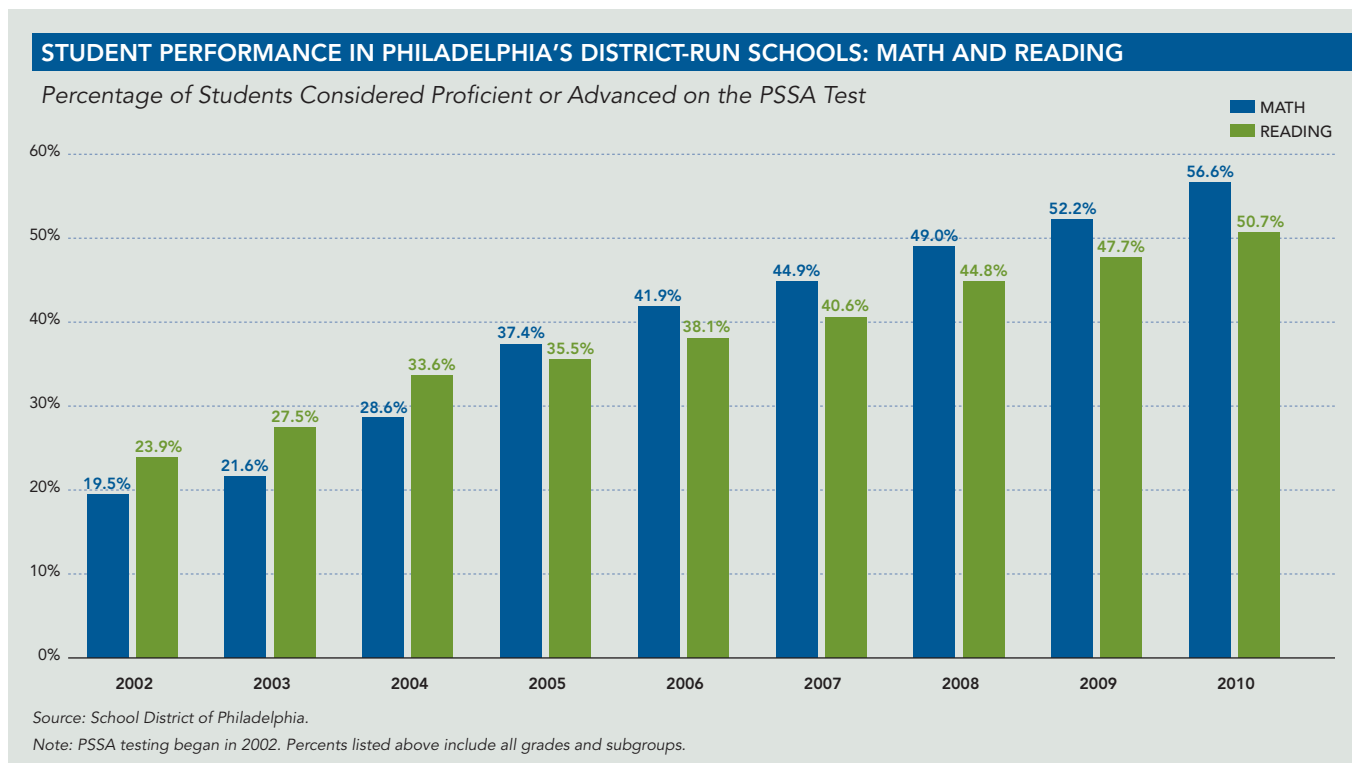
are passed along to charter schools.<sup>15</sup> The infusion of money has allowed administrators to reduce classsize, target additional funds to the poorest schools and undertake a major capital improvement program to repair older schools and build new ones.

Even with its increased budget, the district still lags behind most other school districts in southeastern Pennsylvania in per pupil expenditures, as calculated by the Pennsylvania Department of Education. A 2009 state report ranked Philadelphia’s per pupil spending 59th out of the 62 school districts in the five-county region and put it slightly below the statewide median.

## The Public Perception

It is important to keep these advances in mind in considering the areas where the district has fallen short. One is the realm of public opinion.

In our poll, 58 percent of parents with students in district-run schools said the overall job the district is doing is “only fair” or poor. Sixty-two percent of these parents have considered taking their children out of a district-run school and sending them to a private, Catholic or charter school. African American parents and parents under age 30 are especially unhappy.



## THE POLL: What Public-School Parents Think

Public-school parents are of two minds when it comes to the School District of Philadelphia.

Ask them about the system and they give it low ratings. Only 40 percent say the district is doing a good or excellent job in educating children. Ask them about their children’s individual schools, and a different picture emerges, with 71 percent saying that the schools are doing a good or excellent job.

But there are differences in opinion among several categories of parents—white and black, young and old. In general, whites give much better ratings to the system and individual schools than do blacks. Sometimes the difference is striking. For instance, 87 percent of white parents rate their children’s schools as excellent or good compared to 63 percent of African American parents.

Younger parents—those under 30—are among the district’s most dissatisfied customers. Only 35 percent of them believe the district is doing a good or excellent job, and nearly eight out of 10 say they have considered taking their children out of the district schools and transferring them to private, charter or Catholic schools.

Why have they not done so? Most cite the cost and lack of availability of the non-district options.

When asked if the best way to improve education is to strengthen the district schools or give parents more choice, 55 percent of these younger parents opt for more choice while older parents favor making the public system stronger.

Most district parents are not unhappy. But they are less satisfied than charter- or Catholic-school parents with the quality of education their children are receiving.

The poll found that 22 percent of parents whose children attend district-run schools are dissatisfied with the education their children are receiving, compared to only 3 percent of charter parents and 4 percent of Catholic-school parents.

When asked for particulars about their children’s school, district parents voice approval about the quality and commitment of the teachers and credit the school for creating a positive climate for learning. They are least happy with the size of the classes and the availability of extracurricular activities.

### HOW PUBLIC-SCHOOL PARENTS RATE THEIR CHILDREN’S SCHOOLS

	GOOD OR EXCELLENT
THE COMMITMENT OF THE TEACHERS	72%
THE QUALITY OF THE TEACHERS	71%
YOUR CHILD’S PHYSICAL SAFETY	70%
CREATING A POSITIVE CLIMATE FOR LEARNING	70%
THE JOB THE PRINCIPAL IS DOING IN RUNNING THE SCHOOL	69%
GIVING STUDENTS A SOLID BACKGROUND IN MATH AND ENGLISH	69%
THE SIZE OF THE SCHOOL	68%
TEACHER COMMUNICATION WITH PARENTS	67%
PREPARING YOUR CHILD TO DO WELL ON STANDARDIZED TESTS	65%
QUALITY OF PHYSICAL FACILITIES, SUCH AS CLASSROOMS	64%
THE EMPHASIS OF THE CURRICULUM	63%
KEEPING ORDER AND DISCIPLINE IN THE CLASSROOM	62%
HAVING THE NECESSARY COMPUTERS, SUPPLIES AND TECHNOLOGY	61%
AMOUNT OF ATTENTION TO YOUR CHILD’S INDIVIDUAL NEEDS	59%
HAVING THE RIGHT AMOUNT OF EMPHASIS ON MORAL VALUES	59%
THE SIZE OF THE CLASSES	54%
AVAILABILITY OF EXTRACURRICULAR ACTIVITIES AND SPORTS	50%

### LEVELS OF SATISFACTION AMONG PARENT GROUPS

	PUBLIC-SCHOOL PARENTS	CHARTER-SCHOOL PARENTS	CATHOLIC-SCHOOL PARENTS
VERY SATISFIED	40%	72%	74%
SOMEWHAT SATISFIED	37%	23%	21%
SOMEWHAT DISSATISFIED	13%	3%	3%
VERY DISSATISFIED	9%	0%	1%
DON’T KNOW/REFUSED	0%	1%	0%

“There are some gems in the system; you’ve just got to find them,” said a mother of two from northwest Philadelphia during our focus group of parents with children in district-run schools. “There are some other schools that need some help.”

The general public has an even dimmer view. In a quality-of-life poll conducted for the Philadelphia Research Initiative in January 2010, only 24 percent rated the system as good or excellent. Asked whether the public schools had gotten better or worse in the last five years, 23 percent said better, 29 percent said worse and 35 percent said it was the same.

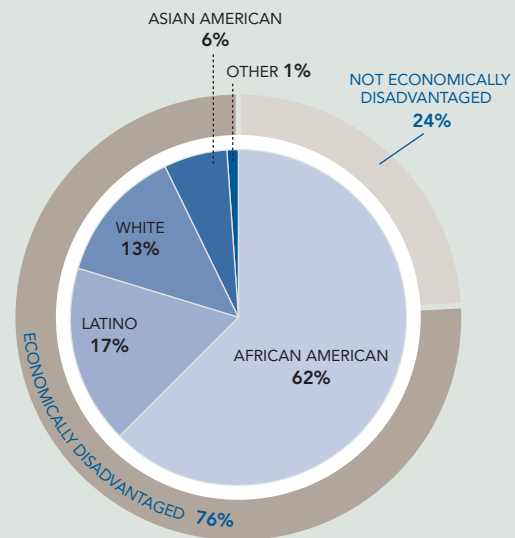
Meanwhile, academic performance still lags far behind state and national standards. Nearly one-third of the schools chronically underachieve, according to the district’s own definition.<sup>16</sup> Improvement is incremental and often spotty. With the PSSA, the state uses four designations to categorize students’ abilities in math and reading: below basic, basic, proficient and advanced. If the district keeps making progress at its current rate, Ackerman has noted, it will take until the year 2123 before all children are considered proficient.

The problem is particularly acute in the comprehensive, neighborhood high schools; there, the majority of students test poorly. In 2009, 62 percent of students who took the PSSA in these high schools performed below basic in math and 55 percent were below basic in reading.<sup>17</sup> And though the high-school graduation rate has improved overall, it still lags among certain groups, especially boys. While 64 percent of girls graduate in four years, the figure is 49 percent for boys. Among Latino boys, it is 39 percent.<sup>18</sup>

Finally, the district has lacked consistent leadership. Since the state takeover, four people have led it, including two interim appointees. Paul Vallas served from July 2002 until April 2007. Arlene Ackerman arrived in June 2008 and has said she intends to stay through 2014.

Much of the current shape of the district can be traced to Vallas. His agenda had two main thrusts: improve academic performance within the schools and expand the range of school choices for parents. To a large degree, he succeeded at both goals.

## DEMOGRAPHIC CHARACTERISTICS OF STUDENTS IN PHILADELPHIA’S DISTRICT-RUN SCHOOLS



Source: Office of Accountability, The School District of Philadelphia, 2009 District Data Overview.

Note: Based on enrollment data from June 2009.

The gains on the PSSA began in the Vallas era as he re-instituted the concept of a core curriculum: the idea that all of the schools should teach the same material at roughly the same time. It was the answer to a problem common in poor urban districts, which have students who move frequently from neighborhood to neighborhood and school to school.

“Students were going to two, three, four schools a year,” said Hugh Allen, a former Vallas aide. “What you want to do is try to make sure that they are learning the basic things they need to graduate into jobs where they can succeed.”

## The Arrival of Choice

To inject choice into the system, Vallas and James Nevels, then chair of the School Reform Commission, took several initiatives. One was to encourage the growth of charter schools; their enrollment doubled during the Vallas era, attracting large numbers of low-income students. In 2005, Vallas turned three district middle schools over to Mastery Charter Schools to run as charters. At one point, he tried and failed to convince officials at the Archdiocese of Philadelphia to convert the Catholic schools in the city into charters.<sup>19</sup>

## THE PARENTS: The Challenge of Finding the Right School

Cynthia Leung, a 40-year-old medical education researcher, is happy now with the Philadelphia public school that her two boys attend. But she did not always feel that way. She and her husband have been considering their options and working the system for years. Her elder son, Paxton, is already on his third school, and he is only nine years old.

When Paxton was nearing kindergarten age, the family lived in the Northern Liberties section of the city. The obvious option was the local district-run school, Kearny Elementary. But Leung was concerned about the lack of diversity at Kearny: its student body is 87 percent African American. As a result, she joined with other local families and tried to start a charter school. When those efforts failed, Kearny's principal began actively recruiting her and the other families.

"The principal thought that the best way to get the neighborhood bought into the school was to get families who weren't African American to send their children there," Leung said. Several families, including Leung's, agreed to send their children to Kearny for kindergarten. They were able to put all of their children into a class with a teacher they liked. But Leung still had concerns about Kearny. "The older children were rough with my son, who was the only Asian there," she said.

After researching school options around the city, the family moved to the Wissahickon section, where the neighborhood elementary school was Cook-Wissahickon. But upon arrival, Leung developed some misgivings about the school, misgivings that were exacerbated when she met with a counselor and asked for a description of the school's selling points. She recalls being told that this was her neighborhood school and that she had no choice but to enroll.

Vallas also sought to inject choice into the district-run system itself. To do so, he supported the magnet high schools, most of them started in the 1970s when the district was under court order to desegregate, and also created a dozen new ones. At these special-admission schools, students often must pass entrance exams to be admitted. Such schools have long served as niches for middle-class families seeking to avoid the large neighborhood high schools.

At the same time, Vallas reduced the size of the



CREDIT: PETER TOBIA

Cynthia Leung and husband Joseph Wentzell with sons Skylor and Paxton

Leung wanted a choice. She visited a nearby elementary school, Dobson, and liked what she saw. "The kids lined up ... behaviorally, the school looked better," she said. She convinced the principal to let Paxton enroll. Over time, however, she came to believe that the school was too strict and too test-focused. So she again began looking for an alternative.

With that in mind, she enrolled her younger son, Skylor, in kindergarten at Cook-Wissahickon. She had thought the school was disorganized, but her impression changed over time. "They aren't standing in line, but they do more hands-on stuff, it's more experiential," she said. "It's a freer and more well-rounded school." She had more interaction with the principal and got to know the other students. "The principal would talk to me about Skylor and knew exactly what he was up to," she said.

The following year, she put Paxton in Cook-Wissahickon as well. She plans to keep both boys there through eighth grade. "I'm waiting to see what kind of great high schools pop up in Philly," she said. "If that doesn't work, I'm saving money for Penn Charter [a private school] or something like that."

neighborhood high schools; the schools, some of which once had 3,000 students, today have an average of less than 1,000.<sup>20</sup> In some cases, he created hybrids: traditional high schools with new missions. Kensington High was divided into three schools: one for the culinary arts, one for business students and one for the creative and performing arts.

He also created new citywide schools that offer specialized training and draw students from across the city. Beyond the traditional vocational-technical

schools, the district now has citywide schools devoted to communications technology and health care, business and technology—and two district-run military academies, which provide ROTC training in addition to traditional courses. Thirteen percent of district high-school students attend these schools.<sup>21</sup>

In addition, one out of every four high school students attends special admission high schools, which often have entry exams.<sup>22</sup> The roster of these schools includes the new Science Leadership Academy, an arts academy at the former Rush Middle School and two creative and performing arts schools—in addition to the older magnet schools, such as Masterman, Central, Saul, Bodine and the Parkway high schools. In the district, these schools are called “special admits.”<sup>23</sup>

Forty-one percent of the district’s white high-school students attend special-admission schools.<sup>24</sup> This may help explain why white public-school parents in our poll gave their children’s schools higher approval ratings than did African American parents. One African American woman from Germantown, who is raising her three young grandchildren, expressed skepticism that the slots at the special-admission schools are decided on merit, as school officials say they are. “If you live in a poor area, I don’t care what your grades are, you’re not going to top schools,” she said. “They won’t let you go.”

That said, these niche schools are among the most successfully integrated schools in the district. At the special admits, 52 percent of the students are black, 23 percent are white, 13 percent are Asian and 10 percent are Latino.<sup>25</sup> Taken as a whole, the district is 62 percent African American, 17 percent Latino, 6 percent Asian and 13 percent white. Three out of four students come from poor or low-income families.<sup>26</sup>

The question of stratification is not a new one in the district, but it reverberates today with so many alternatives available. Do boutique and charter schools skim the best-and-the-brightest students, leaving the neighborhood schools to children whose parents lack the means, the guile or the motivation to find a niche? Are Philadelphia schools, already divided by race, also divided by class? Do children left in the lowest-performing schools lose out in the game of getting adequate resources?<sup>27</sup>

Arlene Ackerman would answer “Yes” to each of these questions. When told that white parents gave higher ratings to their schools than black parents, she said she was not surprised.

“Why are we surprised there is a difference?” Ackerman asked. “I am not, because the school system put together magnet and special-admit schools to keep ... middle class—but mainly white, middle class—families. So, of course, they are going to be happier because they are in the schools that are the most successful. And it is by design.”

## The Superintendent’s Vision

The contrast between the Vallas era and the Ackerman era is striking. While Vallas was broadly experimental, encouraging charters and diversifying the district’s portfolio of schools, Ackerman has kept her focus on the lowest performing schools. She has declared 107 of them “Empowerment Schools” and has directed more staff and money to their operations. Included are 26 of the 32 comprehensive high schools.<sup>28</sup>

In 2010, she designated 14 of the lowest of the low “Renaissance Schools” and implemented a central-office takeover of their operations. In a bid to improve student performance, her plan calls for removing at least half of the existing staff at these schools and imposing a longer school day and school year. She also brought in charter operators to run seven of the schools. The changes at 13 of the schools are to be in place in September 2010, and there could be more in coming years.<sup>29</sup>

Before Ackerman could implement her plans for these schools, she had to get the approval of the teachers union. Protective of its contract rights, the union had traditionally been hostile to plans to restructure schools in ways that changed existing work rules. But Ackerman got the Philadelphia Federation of Teachers (PFT) to agree to a new contract that allows the changes she was seeking for the Renaissance Schools. Teachers who work longer days and school years are to be compensated for the work, but seniority rules in selecting new staff will be waived. This is seen as a major concession by the union.<sup>30</sup>



## THE SCHOOLS: Explaining the Labels

The School District of Philadelphia used to be reticent to rank its schools. It frowned on efforts to label schools as good, bad or mediocre. Times have changed. Now, schools are measured and ranked on a variety of indices by the district's Office of Accountability. And each type of school is given a label.

**VANGUARD SCHOOLS.** These are 25 elementary, middle and high schools at which academic achievement has been at consistently high levels. In effect, these are the cream of the crop in the district, and Superintendent Ackerman has said that she intends to give them more leeway in developing their budgets and programs. They include 18 neighborhood elementary schools, two middle schools and five of the district's special-admission high schools, which draw students from throughout the city.

**EMPOWERMENT SCHOOLS.** These 107 schools are chronic underachievers, representing nearly one-third of the 265 in the district. Schools are classified as empowerment schools if they have not achieved Adequate Yearly Progress targets under the federal No Child Left Behind guidelines, which call for school performance to meet higher and higher targets each year. The district is directing more money and staff to these schools, which include most of the city's neighborhood high schools.

**RENAISSANCE SCHOOLS.** These are 14 schools identified by the district as the poorest-performing and in most need of intervention. They were drawn from the list of Empowerment Schools with the goal of improving student performance quickly, starting in September 2010. These schools will get new curricula and longer school-days and school-years; at least 50 percent of the staff will be changed. Seven will be turned into charter schools, and six will become Promise Academies, their operations supervised directly by the superintendent's office. One of the 14, West Philadelphia High School, will not undergo changes in the upcoming school year as originally planned.

The district's other 133 schools fall somewhere in the middle: not high-achieving enough to be tagged as Vanguard Schools, not low-achieving enough to be labeled as Empowerment or Renaissance Schools. There is no special category for them.

PFT president Jerry Jordan told us that his members disliked the reading and math programs that will be used in the lowest-performing schools and that require teachers to follow scripts in teaching these subjects. He also wondered about the wisdom of the changes. "The curriculum has narrowed so ... that they're teaching math and literacy for the greatest part of the day." This was being done, Jordan said, at the expense of "arts, music, science, social studies—the other courses that help to make a student well-rounded."

Jordan and Michael Lerner, head of the principals' union, said that the "fear factor" regarding Ackerman was high among their members, who felt they would be transferred or dismissed if they deviated from central-office dictates. Ackerman responded: "Why would you be afraid if you are doing your job? This is not about whether I love you or like you, this is about whether or not you are getting results ... They are not used to that."

The superintendent's next big challenge will be to institute what is called weighted student funding, which will fundamentally change how the district determines per-pupil spending.<sup>31</sup> The district will assign different weights to student characteristics—such as whether students are poor, recent immigrants or gifted—and allocate money to schools based on its student mix.

Ackerman said the plan is a way to "level the playing field" by giving more resources to schools with students in greater need: "It is a moral decision for me to look at the weighted student funding because I believe it is about equity."

There will be winners and losers when funding is re-allocated under the new formula. Per pupil spending on students who are not considered in as great a need as others likely will decrease, given the finite resources of the district. Ackerman said it would be fairer because the money will follow the student "whether he goes to Central High or Germantown High."

"I want to be careful because people accuse me of not liking the special-admit schools," Ackerman said. "I understand their purpose and I don't even argue with that, but don't take away from Peter's kids to pay Paul. What happened is that we have now created these schools at the expense of large

comprehensive high schools. We have comprehensive high schools that don't have journalism classes, or music or art or choir or band—the things I took for granted 40 years ago when I was in high school."

The district is likely to face financial difficulties in the coming years. State aid to schools has increased nearly every year since Edward G. Rendell became governor in 2003, a trend that will be difficult to sustain given the effects of the recession on the state budget.<sup>32</sup> Also, school districts across the state are bracing for large increases in employee-pension costs mandated by law and caused by serious underfunding in the statewide school-employee pension fund. The district estimates the money it contributes to the pension fund, which currently totals \$107 million a year, will have to rise by \$30 million in 2011 and another \$123 million in 2012.<sup>33</sup>

Some of these losses may be offset by an increase in federal aid, coming from the Obama administration's Race to the Top initiative, a competition which offers increased federal dollars to selected school districts that meet criteria set by the U.S. Department of Education. Ackerman and other district officials said they were optimistic the district will qualify because both the federal and the district's plans focus on low-performing schools and charters.<sup>34</sup>

Another challenge the district faces is that dozens of its schools are operating far below capacity, due to the exit of students to charter schools and a drop in the number of school-age children.<sup>35</sup> Asked if some of those schools will be closed, Ackerman responded, "Absolutely. We have 45,000 seats open."

And there are continuing concerns about discipline and safety. In December 2009, after Asian students told of being beaten by African American classmates at South Philadelphia High School, the district's response was widely criticized.

The feeling among parents is that the district long has been ineffectual in dealing with safety and discipline. That has been a key factor in driving parents to charter and Catholic schools. In our poll, 70 percent of Catholic and charter parents said the district did an "only fair" or poor job at maintaining

discipline in the classroom, as did 56 percent of public parents. "I heard horror stories about the discipline problems," said one Catholic-school mother, referring to her local district school. "You can't learn if it is not a learning environment."

Asked what the district could do to make schools safer, the superintendent replied, "It is a struggle. I don't know that I have an answer because safety is not just a school district problem. Safety is a community problem."

Lori Shorr, chief education officer for Mayor Nutter, said that she believes that there are national trends working in favor of Ackerman's agenda, with the Obama administration stressing many of the same themes: accountability, experimentation and emphasis on improving academic performance among the poorest students. "I am optimistic that some interesting things can happen here in Philly that we could not imagine five years ago, because the national mood is changing," Shorr said.

Ackerman is betting that she will be successful in turning around the lowest-performing schools and that, in turn, will create a constituency of parents eager to continue her policies into the future. Educators say that a lack of parental involvement has been a chronic problem in many of the city's public schools.

"I spend a lot of time with parents," said Ackerman. "If I can show them what the other side of the rainbow looks like, I don't care who comes in after me. They are going to force the new superintendent and the new administration to give them what their children deserve."

Ackerman is determined to make these changes and has the backing of her employer, the School Reform Commission. The questions are whether she has the time to make them and how quickly results will appear. ◉

# The Charter Schools

**CHARTER SCHOOLS**, which did not exist in Philadelphia 13 years ago, have become a significant component of basic education in the city. And they are the only one that has been growing.

There are now 67 such schools, some with multiple campuses, serving 33,107 students in every grade in nearly every neighborhood in the city—with enrollment projected to rise by nearly 2,000 in the coming year. Many of the students have come from the two other major segments of K-12 education in Philadelphia, the traditional public schools and the Catholic schools.<sup>36</sup> As the largest alternative to district-run schools, charters have a vocal parent constituency and strong support from local politicians. Currently, there is one student in a charter school for every five in a traditional public school.<sup>37</sup> That figure will almost surely rise in the years to come.

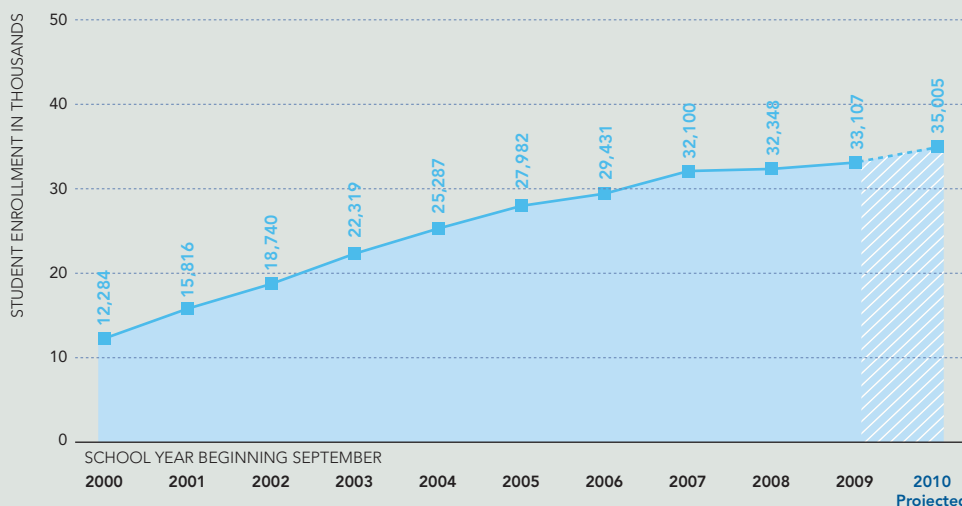
One factor feeding this expansion is demand. Charters are highly popular with the parents they serve. In our poll, 90 percent of charter parents rated their schools as good or excellent and 95 percent of par-

ents described themselves as satisfied with their children's schools, a much higher satisfaction level than parents with children in district-run schools and about the same as parents with children in Catholic schools. And demand far outstrips supply, with nearly 30,000 students on charter waiting lists.

In a focus group we conducted of participants in the poll, charter parents were effusive about what they think their children are getting. One mother, a lawyer in her 50s who lives in Northern Liberties, described her son's charter school as "one of those places where when you walked in, you just knew good things were happening" and said that she fell "in love with the school from the parent-orientation visit." She added, "I would put my son's school up against any private school."

A second factor feeding charter growth is the school district's Renaissance School plan to turn around its lowest performing schools, which includes inviting charter operators to take over some district-run schools starting in the 2010–2011

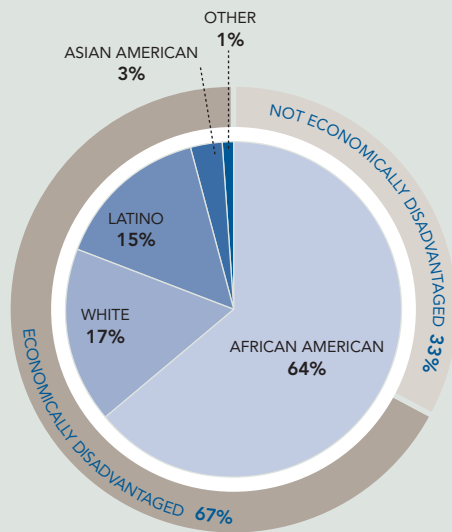
ENROLLMENT IN PHILADELPHIA'S CHARTER SCHOOLS, 2000–2010



Source: School District of Philadelphia. "FY 2009–10 Revised Budget in Brief, Presented to the School Reform Commission on November 18, 2009," p.9; School District of Philadelphia. "Proposed Budget Fiscal Year 2010–2011 (July 1 2010–June 30 2011), Presentation to the School Reform Commission, April 21, 2010," p. 12.

Note: Totals do not include 3,019 Philadelphia students who attend cyber charter schools.

## DEMOGRAPHIC CHARACTERISTICS OF STUDENTS IN PHILADELPHIA'S CHARTER SCHOOLS



Source: Pennsylvania Department of Education, *Public School Enrollment Reports, 2008-2009*; Office of Accountability, *School District of Philadelphia, Commonly Requested Lists, School Information 2008-2009*.

Note: Total does not include 3,019 Philadelphia students who attend cyber charter schools. Percent economically-disadvantaged is derived from number of students who qualify for federal free and reduced lunch program.

school year. If the program extends to other district schools in the years to come, charters could expand their reach even more.

The irony of the district seeming to embrace its competition is not lost on those who were present when charters first opened in the city. As one former school board member put it, charters were originally designed as a “build-around” by educators and legislators frustrated by what they saw as the district’s stultifying bureaucracy and union restrictions.

The charter school movement began in 1991 when Minnesota passed a law allowing for the creation of charters. Thirty-nine states and the District of Columbia permit them now. Today, there are nearly 5,000 charter schools serving 1.6 million students across the country.<sup>38</sup> Among the nation’s 50 largest school districts, Philadelphia ranks third in total number of charter students and 15th in the percentage of its students that go to charter schools.<sup>39</sup>

As charter and district officials are quick to point out, charter schools are public schools, independently run but funded out of the district’s budget. There is no tuition charged, a boon especially to

poor and working-class parents, who find it difficult to afford other alternatives to district schools, including the city’s network of private and Catholic schools. According to the School District of Philadelphia, two-thirds of the children in the city’s charter schools come from poor or low-income families, and 27 percent of current charter students have never attended district schools.

Charters were created to be free from many of the rules and restrictions on staffing and curriculum that govern traditional public schools. The idea was that greater accountability would come with their enhanced freedom from the rules. Schools that fail to meet achievement criteria set out in their three- to five-year charter contracts with the school district can be closed. But few have been shut down. Even at charters where academic performance lags, parents have rallied to protect them, saying they prefer them to district schools.<sup>40</sup>

## The Pros and Cons of Charters

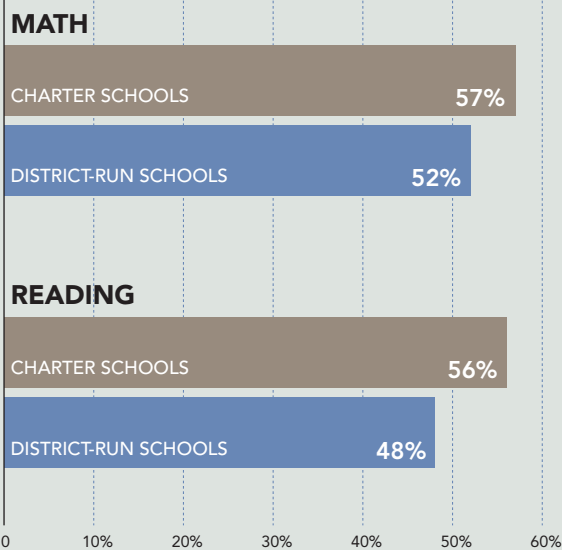
Charters are schools of choice, which means that students are not assigned to them as they are to many district schools; they must apply if they wish to attend. If there are more applicants than available spots, students are selected by lottery. There is no real evidence that charters cream the best students away from the district, as some detractors had feared. But given the rigors of finding a charter school and navigating the application process, charter families are, almost by definition, a highly motivated group, more so, perhaps, than the families of children in some district-run schools.

“I think the public schools in Philadelphia have it stacked against them,” said a painter who lives in Northeast Philadelphia and whose fifth-grade daughter attends a charter school. “A lot of the kids in the public schools don’t have the home support and structure. It’s a tough environment to learn in. When you go to a charter school, every person in the charter school is there by choice. Every student is there because their family made an effort to get them there.”

Many charters require students to wear uniforms, and schools emphasize discipline and safety. Some require students to sign pledges that they will attend school regularly and work hard—and ask

## STUDENT PERFORMANCE IN PHILADELPHIA'S CHARTER SCHOOLS FOR 2009: MATH AND READING

Percentage of Students Considered Proficient or Advanced in the PSSA Test



Source: Pennsylvania Department of Education, "2008–09 School Level Math and Reading PSSA Results – School Totals," authors' analysis.

parents to sign statements promising to remain active in the life of the school. When those pledges are not fulfilled, students are sometimes asked to leave.

Parental engagement is central to the operating philosophy of many charter schools; in the view of some charter operators, it is one reason why parents become such strong advocates of the schools.

When it comes to academics, charters as a group have a mixed record, with performance varying widely among individual schools.<sup>41</sup>

On the PSSA, charter students in Philadelphia performed better in math and reading in 2009 than their district counterparts. Fifty-six percent of charter students scored "advanced" or "proficient" in reading, compared to 48 percent of the district students and 71 percent statewide. When it came to math, 57 percent of the charter students scored "advanced" or "proficient," compared to 52 percent of the district students and 73 percent statewide.<sup>42</sup>

And a greater portion of charter schools (72 percent) made "Adequate Yearly Progress" in 2008–

2009 under the federal government's No Child Left Behind program—which in Pennsylvania establishes targets for advanced and proficient performance on the PSSAs—than did district-run schools (45 percent).<sup>43</sup>

On the 2009 SAT, however, students in charter high schools performed worse than their counterparts in district-run schools. They scored an average of 779 out of 1,600 in the math and verbal portions of the test, taken by students applying to college, compared to an average of 814 in district-run high schools.<sup>44</sup> Both are well below the national average of 1,016.

Regardless of the test scores, charters enjoy broad support from the parents of Philadelphia's schoolchildren. In our poll, 76 percent of all of the parents surveyed—regardless of what kind of schools their own children attend—said they knew "a lot" or "some" about charter schools, and 62 percent said that the growth of the charters has been a good thing.

But not all is well. In the last two years, several area charter schools made headlines for questionable financial practices and two of them, Germantown Settlement and Renaissance, were closed. The reasons were fiscal mismanagement, poor academic performance and failure to meet the state requirements to submit timely annual reports and have at least 75 percent of teachers certified. In 2009, the founder of Philadelphia Academy Charter School killed himself while under federal investigation for his management of the school; two former officials of the school were sentenced to prison after pleading guilty to federal fraud charges. Allegations of financial improprieties at other charter schools are being investigated by the U.S. Attorney's Office. In a recent report, City Controller Alan Butkovitz criticized the district's oversight of charters as "minimal" and "ineffective" and said that taxpayer dollars spent on charters were "extremely vulnerable to fraud, waste and abuse."<sup>45</sup>

In Philadelphia over the years, charters have been alternately opposed, dismissed, ignored and, finally, embraced as a viable alternative to district schools. The current position is in keeping with the stance of the Obama administration, which promotes the schools as part of its educational reform agenda.



## THE POLL: What Charter Parents Think

Despite the diversity of charter options, charter parents speak with one voice when it comes to their experience. And it is a satisfied voice.

Ninety-five percent of charter school parents are somewhat or very satisfied with the quality of their child’s education. Eighty-two percent said they would be very likely to recommend their school to other parents—compared with 46 percent for parents with children in district-run schools and 76 percent for Catholic-school parents.

If given the opportunity to send their children to a different school, only 20 percent of charter parents said they

would do so, compared to 23 percent for Catholic-school parents and 45 percent for parents with children in district-run schools.

### WHY PARENTS SEND THEIR CHILDREN TO CHARTER SCHOOLS

SCHOOL QUALITY	38%
ATTENTION FOR STUDENTS/CLASS SIZE	12%
CURRICULUM	11%
SAFETY	8%

Charter parents’ happiness with what their children are getting was reflected when we asked them to rate their schools in specific categories.

In each category, charter school parents rated their schools higher than parents with children in district-run schools rated theirs—by 19 percentage points or more. The ratings by charter-school parents were similar to the ones Catholic-school parents gave their schools.

Charter parents are more critical of the performance of the school district than district parents but less critical than their Catholic-school counterparts. Asked about public school performance, 24 percent of charter parents gave the district high marks. More than half of the charter

parents in our sample have children who previously attended district schools.

We asked all parents whether they thought there are enough safeguards in place concerning the financial management and academic performance of charters schools. Fifty-five percent had no opinion. Among those who had opinions, district- and Catholic-school parents said they considered existing safeguards insufficient. Charter parents did not agree: 42 percent said that there were enough safeguards while 17 percent did not. The question was asked in December 2009, and there have been a number of news reports about financial improprieties of charters since then.

### HOW CHARTER PARENTS RATE THEIR CHILDREN’S SCHOOLS

	GOOD OR EXCELLENT
YOUR CHILD’S PHYSICAL SAFETY	94%
CREATING A POSITIVE CLIMATE FOR LEARNING	93%
KEEPING ORDER AND DISCIPLINE IN THE CLASSROOM	93%
THE EMPHASIS OF THE CURRICULUM	93%
THE COMMITMENT OF THE TEACHERS	92%
THE SIZE OF THE SCHOOL	92%
GIVING STUDENTS A SOLID BACKGROUND IN MATH AND ENGLISH	91%
HAVING NECESSARY COMPUTERS, SUPPLIES AND TECHNOLOGY	91%
QUALITY OF TEACHERS	91%

	GOOD OR EXCELLENT
HAVING THE RIGHT AMOUNT OF EMPHASIS ON MORAL VALUES	90%
QUALITY OF PHYSICAL FACILITIES, SUCH AS CLASSROOMS	90%
THE JOB THE PRINCIPAL IS DOING IN RUNNING THE SCHOOL	89%
AMOUNT OF ATTENTION TO YOUR CHILD’S INDIVIDUAL NEEDS	88%
TEACHER COMMUNICATION WITH PARENTS	88%
PREPARING YOUR CHILD TO DO WELL ON STANDARDIZED TESTS	87%
THE SIZE OF THE CLASSES	87%
AVAILABILITY OF EXTRACURRICULAR ACTIVITIES AND SPORTS	69%

The financial impact of charters on the district remains a point of contention between charter advocates and district officials. And the debate is not an easy one to sort out.

All state funding for public schools, both district-run and charter, comes first to the district. The district then reimburses the charters on a per-student basis determined by the state. In the 2009–2010 school year, that amount averaged \$9,423 per student.<sup>46</sup> The district gets additional state funding to help defray the charter-related costs it incurs, such as providing transportation, special-education services and oversight.<sup>47</sup> By law, charters are forbidden to get capital funding from the school districts; one of their biggest challenges is raising the money to buy or construct a school building. Many have set up separate boards to raise money.

District officials say the state funding is insufficient. By their own calculations, they save \$3,488 on the costs of teachers and materials for every student who moves from a district-run school to a charter. But they point out that most of their costs—including administration, building maintenance, utilities and debt service—are fixed and do not shrink when a student departs. In addition, students who leave district schools for charters do so in scattered patterns, making it difficult to take full financial advantage of lower enrollment by reducing staff or shuttering facilities. If the district were to close entire schools, the potential savings would be greater.<sup>48</sup>

Charter operators say the district saves money for every student who leaves for a charter. If the district has failed to capitalize on this savings, they say, that is the district's fault.

## Gaining Increased Acceptance

Thirteen years of experience with charters in the city has greatly reduced resistance to them. In interviews for this report, city and educational leaders, including Superintendent Ackerman, uniformly expressed support for charter schools, with some of them saying that the better charters can have a positive impact for K-12 education generally. "It used to be Republicans were pro-charter and Democrats anti-charter, but that is gone," said a long-time public school advocate. "I was anti-charter for

a long time. There were those of us who were anti-charter because we felt that ... public schools are the basis of democracy. Now, I think that was a straw man. Philly public schools are still at the center of things, and charters are at the margins. But you make changes in the margins, and they begin to affect the center."

In Pennsylvania, charters did begin as a Republican idea, although they had support from a few key Philadelphia Democrats, including state Rep. Dwight Evans and state Sen. Anthony Hardy Williams. Tom Ridge, the state's Republican governor from 1995 to 2001, started off as a proponent of vouchers, the program to provide public money to families who wished to use it to pay for tuition at private and Catholic schools. But when his voucher bill failed to pass in the state legislature, he turned to charters as an alternative. The compromise that produced the charter-school law gave local school districts, including the School District of Philadelphia, the power to authorize charter schools.

One charter operator, Joseph Proietta, president and CEO of Community Academy of Philadelphia in the Juniata section of the city, described the early years, roughly the period between 1997 and 2001, as "a golden age" characterized by "benign neglect" by both the state and the school district. The district took a laissez-faire approach both to authorization of charters and to oversight. Politicians secured schools for the neighborhoods they represented; community groups developed schools with unique specializations and themes; and charters opened their doors throughout the city. Between 2000 and 2004, charter enrollment nearly tripled.

In the grand scheme of things, however, charter schools were still few in number and small in size. As Proietta explained, "Charter schools were not a particular threat or even a particular issue in terms of choice because we still had a behemoth school district and a little bit of charter schools."

Paul Vallas, hired to run the Philadelphia schools in 2002 by the new School Reform Commission, encouraged the growth of charters as part of a broader program of offering school choice to parents. Under Vallas, the district's charter-oversight lacked consistent standards for academic and financial performance. Requests to expand were handled on a case-by-case basis, and new charters

## THE PARENTS: Happy with a Charter Option

When it was time to enroll his son, Jaquaan, in kindergarten, Aubrey Buie, 32, a West Philadelphia census worker, sent him to the local public school, Bluford Elementary. Buie, a product of the Philadelphia public schools himself, did not feel that he had much choice in the matter.

As the years passed, the feedback from the boy's teachers at Bluford made Buie wonder whether another school might serve Jaquaan better. "Every teacher always told us that he doesn't belong there," Buie said. "He would finish his work before everybody and just sit there and twiddle his thumbs."

Then last spring, Jaquaan's fourth-grade teacher suggested that the family consider a new charter school, Knowledge is Power Program (KIPP) West Philadelphia Preparatory, which was opening in part of Bluford's building. Jaquaan's teacher helped the Buies complete the paperwork for the entrance lottery. Jaquaan got in, and father and son could not be happier.

From the start, Aubrey Buie has been impressed with KIPP's approach, which includes asking families to sign a contract that commits Jaquaan to work hard and follow KIPP's rules. Buie appreciated the fact that school officials took the time to explain their mission and their expectations.

He also thinks highly of the teachers and has been pleased with his son's progress in learning the basics. Said Buie, "When those teachers walk in the school building, they're there to do their job, to make sure all the kids get the information that they need. And if they need to stay or tutor or something, they're there. No



Aubrey and Jaquaan Buie

ifs, ands or buts about it. And if the kids have any problems with homework or something, they can call the teachers. Now, I don't know any other public school that will do that. Any."

Jaquaan, 10, a member of the first class at KIPP West, said that it took time for him to adjust to the charter school's routine, which includes a 10-hour school day and longer school year than at Bluford. But now he sees the value in the approach.

"It's not like any other type of school because ... you don't just come in there and look all bored," he said, describing classes as often interactive and, at times, fun. He likened going to school to playing with Wii, an electronic game system that requires physical exertion. "You're working out but you don't even know it because you're having so much fun, right? That's what KIPP is."

Although it has been less than a year, both father and son feel certain that KIPP has been the right choice for them. "If I have any say in it, he's going to stay in KIPP as long as he can," Buie said, "I don't want him to go anywhere else."

were welcomed. Lori Shorr, the mayor's chief education officer, said that too many charters were granted in the early years and that "we're paying for that now."<sup>49</sup> After Vallas' departure in 2007, the district's relationship with charter schools remained in limbo until Ackerman became superintendent in 2008.

Ackerman, who has spent her entire career in public education, was not enamored of charters when she was superintendent in Washington, D.C., a decade ago. But now, she says, she is committed to a "diverse provider" model. "I have come full circle with charter schools," Ackerman explained, "I actually

believe in a city you have to create a system of great schools and it really doesn't matter what the provider model is, as long as you get success. If a parent can get a better education across the street, I say go across the street and get it. My job is to make sure they don't go across the street because they had no choice at 440 [the headquarters of the School District of Philadelphia]."

At the same time, she has been stepping up oversight of charters, especially when it comes to academic performance. In the past year, the district's Office of Charter, Partnerships and New Schools

## THE SCHOOLS: A Variety of Options

The charter movement is diverse by design. While there is no typical charter school, these four offer a flavor of the diversity among Philadelphia's 67 charters.

### BOYS' LATIN CHARTER SCHOOL

As the name implies, Boys' Latin has two distinguishing features: it offers education in the classics and a single-gender learning environment. Like a number of other charters, this school, located in West Philadelphia, enforces strict behavior and dress codes. Other qualities include an emphasis on service-learning, a blend of traditional and progressive education techniques and a requirement that students participate in at least two extracurricular activities per school year. Now in its third year of operation, Boys' Latin serves 360 students in grades nine through 11. Ninety-nine percent of students are African American, and many are low income. The school will add 12th grade in 2010–2011.

### FOLK ARTS CULTURAL TREASURES CHARTER SCHOOL (FACTS)

Located in Chinatown, FACTS serves students in kindergarten through eighth grade and offers a curriculum that emphasizes arts, language (all students learn Mandarin) and multicultural studies. To meet the needs of a diverse student body, the school offers English language and bilingual support to all students and families. This means translating every document the school sends home into four languages. Deborah Wei, the principal and CEO, sees the school as a laboratory that highlights the possibilities for responsive, multicultural education for immigrant students.

### CHRISTOPHER COLUMBUS CHARTER SCHOOL

Christopher Columbus, located in South Philadelphia, has the look and feel of a well-run, traditional public school. Serving kindergarten through eighth grade, it has a student body that is 51 percent white, 35 percent black, 7 percent Asian, and 5 percent Hispanic. Classes are divided by grade level in the lower grades, by subject area in the upper grades. There's a computer lab and library. Since most students remain at the school through eighth grade and siblings of current students are given first preference for kindergarten openings, there are few slots available each year.

### YOUNG SCHOLARS CHARTER SCHOOL

Located in Northern Liberties, Young Scholars, one of the city's oldest charter schools, focuses on trying to close the achievement gap between Philadelphia's low-income, minority students and their counterparts in the state and suburbs. With a student body that is 99 percent black and mostly low income, the school offers students in grades six through eight an extended school day and extended school year, data-driven instruction and a strict school culture. In each classroom, the expectation that students should be professional, attentive, thoughtful and hardworking is posted prominently. The school has a range of cheers and clapping rituals designed to keep students engaged and motivated.

moved to limit when existing charters can seek to add schools or grade levels and to clarify that expansion will be granted only to those charters with proven records of academic performance. Said the chief of that office, Benjamin Rayer, "We are not interested in simply expanding charter schools. We are interested in expanding good charter schools."

The charter community is divided over whether this new level of oversight is a good thing.

Some of the founders of the movement believe that charters should strive to stay as independent as possible. These charter operators started their schools because they considered public education a failure. The fact that they are now going to be judged by the district galls them and others. Jean

Wallace, CEO of Green Woods Charter School, explained this point of view: "The district is paperworking us into the same dysfunctional system that already exists. I can't be an innovative model for school reform if I do what [the district has] done."

Newer operators, looking to expand their operations or open new schools, welcome the district's new policies. Scott Gordon, CEO of Mastery Charter Schools, is a leading voice among operators who embrace the approach. "They are only going to support the expansion of schools that demonstrate student achievement and that is going to upset some people," he said, "but it's been done in a transparent way with kids' best interest in mind." Marc Manella, CEO of KIPP Philadelphia Schools, said that weak and poorly run schools ulti-

mately should face closure if they aren't able to get their own houses in order.

Yet even as the district seeks to tighten controls on charters, it is embracing the charter model to lift up the performance of its most problematic schools, making charters central to its Renaissance Schools initiative.

For the charters, school-turnaround work offers the opportunity to expand without the challenges of finding students or facilities, both of which will be provided by the district. But it also requires closer collaboration with the district than ever before. If Ackerman's Renaissance Schools model expands as planned, takeovers of district schools may comprise a substantial portion of charter growth in the years to come, and the distinction between district and charter schools could become increasingly blurred.

The district is not the only entity that can shape charter growth; the state may get involved in a more direct way. Under consideration in Harrisburg is a measure that would expand the state's role in charter oversight.

Regardless of these developments, charters remain popular with parents. Although many charters do not produce better academic outcomes than district-run schools, parents continue to vote with their feet and seek admission.<sup>50</sup>

## Explaining the Attraction

Charter operators say that their schools provide a safer, more supportive environment than district-run schools, and our poll data indicate that charter parents agree. Ninety-four percent of them say that their school does an excellent or good job in providing a safe environment; the figure for parents with children in district-run schools is 70 percent. Similarly, 88 percent of charter parents give high ratings to their schools for teacher communication with parents and the amount of attention their children receive.

Another part of the attraction is that charters treat parents, including low-income parents, as customers and tap into their aspirations and willingness to sacrifice for their children in a way that neighborhood district schools typically do not. One mother, a janitor from Southwest Philadelphia

whose only daughter attends a charter school, explained their appeal. "The teachers really take interest in your child," she said. "Anything they are lacking in, they go the extra mile to make sure they get what they need."

"People of power here always portray students and their families as this gigantic bunch of losers," said David Hardy, CEO of Boys Latin of Philadelphia Charter School. "And I'm not seeing that. For the most part, I see our parents as a real bunch of savvy consumers."

Some charter advocates argue that tightening the quality controls on charters would hurt families who seek alternatives now. There are also voices within the charter movement that welcome higher quality standards and fear that the public will grow weary of charters without them.

"I understand the value of safety as well as anybody and that's why people send their children to charter schools ... but that being the case, you still have to make academic goals," said Hardy. "And if you don't, what's the point? It's nicer, it might be a cleaner building, they might be happier kids, safer kids, but if they can't read a STOP sign, at the end of the day, you didn't do what you were supposed to do ..."

Many educators and administrators believe charter enrollment will continue to grow over the next five years—possibly to 50,000 students or more—as new schools open and existing charters expand. In this context, Richard Fitzgerald, CEO at MaST Community Charter School, does not view the district's greater scrutiny of expansion and the financial scandals as long-term threats to the charter movement.

"It looks like it's a watershed moment for the movement but you know what it is? It's just a pause," he said. "The reality is charters are here to stay." ◉



# The Catholic Schools

**IN TERMS OF ENROLLMENT**, the Catholic school system in Philadelphia is in a freefall.

The number of students attending Catholic elementary schools has declined 40 percent in the past decade, while enrollment in the high schools run by the Archdiocese of Philadelphia has dropped 26 percent.<sup>51</sup> Most pastors, principals and archdiocesan officials expect the decline to continue, with more and more parish schools and perhaps some high schools closing over the next five years. In 2010, the archdiocese closed Cardinal Dougherty High School and North Catholic High School.

The once-robust Catholic educational system in the city, which gets high ratings for educational quality from the families it serves, is being weakened by two factors over which it has little control. One is the reduction in the number of church-registered Catholics in Philadelphia, down by 180,000 since 1990. The other is competition from charter schools.

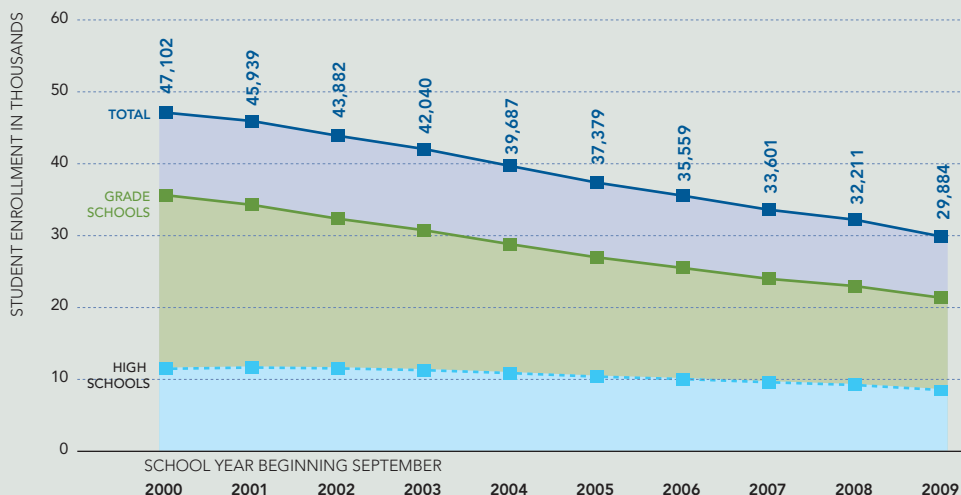
"I don't see any significant change in the decline," said Most Rev. Joseph P. McFadden, the auxiliary

bishop who oversees the educational system in the Archdiocese. When it comes to enrollment, the bishop said, "It will continue to spiral [downward], simply because there is a demographic shift that is taking place, especially with the Catholic constituency in the city. Many are still continuing to leave."

For a 40-year period beginning in the 1950s, Catholic schools in Philadelphia were filled to overflowing with the post-war generation of baby boomers. Among them was Mary Rochford, now the superintendent of Catholic education for the archdiocese and a Dougherty alumna. She recalled that when she graduated in 1970, Dougherty had 5,900 students. This past year, its last, it had 630.

In the mid-1970s, there were 13 Archdiocesan high schools in the city with 30,000 students and 129 parish elementary schools with 76,000 students. Total enrollment: 106,000.<sup>52</sup> In the 2009–2010 school year, there were 10 high schools (now eight) with 8,526 students and 65 grade schools with

ENROLLMENT IN PHILADELPHIA'S CATHOLIC SCHOOLS, 2000–2010



High school enrollment taken from Pennsylvania Department of Education, *Non-Public Enrollment by County, 2008–2009*, authors' analysis.

Grade school enrollment taken from Archdiocese of Philadelphia, *Office of Research and Planning, Maps and Reports, Philadelphia North Vicariate, Philadelphia South Vicariate, Parish Cluster Reports*, authors' analysis.

21,358 students. Total enrollment: 29,884. Twenty-three grade schools in the city have closed since 2000.<sup>53</sup> With few exceptions, Catholic schools are running below capacity. More than one of three seats in the elementary schools are unfilled.<sup>54</sup>

This decline has been a traumatic experience for lay and religious Catholic educators who have devoted their lives to their mission and for Catholic-school parents, who still place a high value on what the schools have to offer. In our poll, 92 percent of Catholic parents rated their child’s school as good or excellent, and 95 percent said they were satisfied with the quality of education their children were getting.

And when it comes to finances, Catholic schools do a lot with a little. The average per pupil expenditure was \$3,042 in archdiocesan city grade schools in 2007–2008, the latest period for which data is available. High schools spent an average of about \$7,000 per pupil.<sup>55</sup>

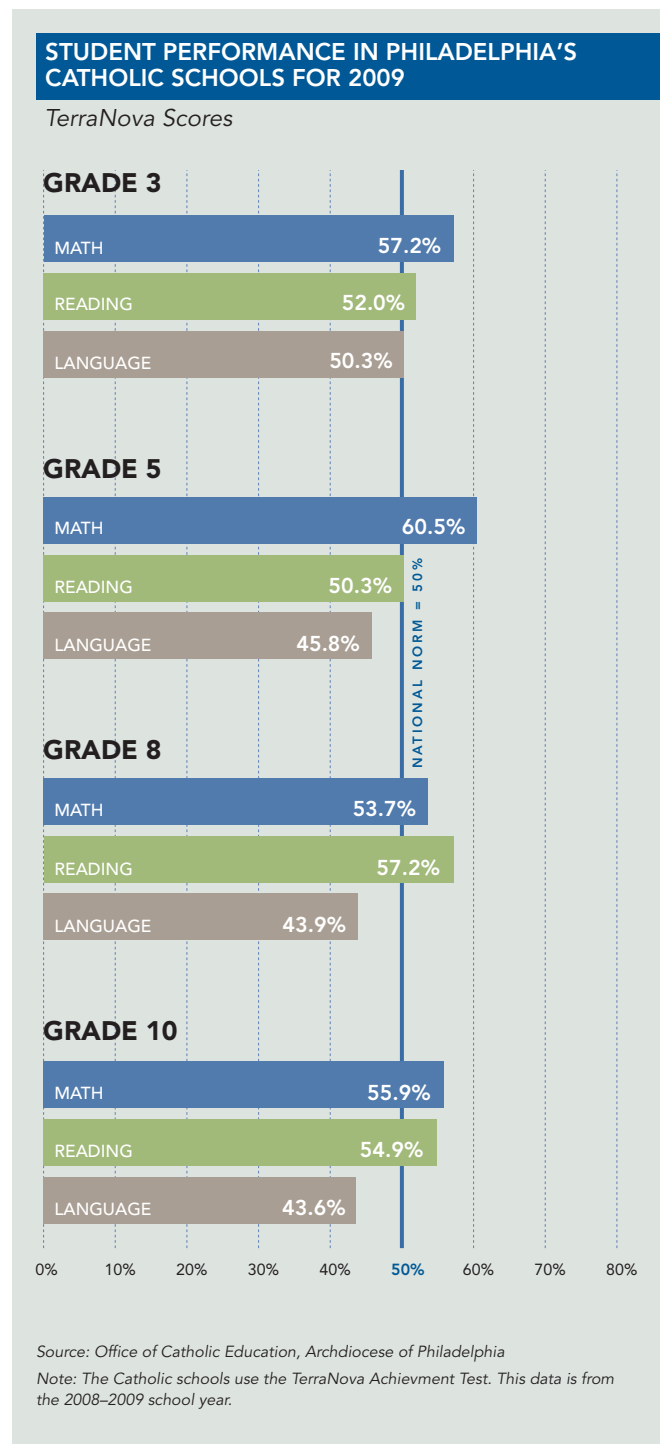
The most recent data on the standardized test Catholic students take to measure basic skills show that most score at or above the national norm in reading and math but fall below the norm in language skills.<sup>56</sup>

Catholic-school parents, many of whom are products of a Catholic education, lament the closing of so many schools and wonder how long theirs will stay open. They value the discipline they see as the hallmark of the archdiocesan school system. Said a Catholic-school mother from Northeast Philadelphia, “If the children are not being disciplined and you want to learn, you can’t focus. So I just put my kids in Catholic school.”

## Managing the Decline

Bishop McFadden acknowledged that the contraction of the system in the city had caused pain for parents, priests and educators and “for the bishop, too.” He recalled an incident from this past Palm Sunday. He was leaving a church and was confronted by a woman, dressed in what he described as “North Catholic regalia,” who called him a “disgrace” for closing the high school.

It is particularly difficult for pastors. Under church law, they have the final say on whether their parish



grade schools should remain open. In recent years, the central administration of the archdiocese has urged parishes to undergo what is called self-study, a process through which issues can be considered by pastors on a regional basis. The process, involving as many as a dozen pastors in adjoining parishes, often results in the closing or consolidation of schools and parishes. Said one pastor, “You could be the best, most popular pastor, but once

word gets out on the street that there is a self-study, you are despised.”

A Catholic educator said that a pastor who closes a school is viewed as a “Judas” by his parishioners. Another priest, who engaged in a self-study that involved his own school, recalled explaining the process to parishioners at a meeting in the church

hall. “I felt like Daniel in the lion’s den,” he said. “I told [a fellow priest] they might surround the rectory with pitchforks and torches.”

What is happening to Catholic schools in Philadelphia is happening to Catholic schools throughout urban America. Most large cities have seen steep declines in Catholic enrollment and have had to

## THE POLL: What Catholic-School Parents Think

Two things stand out in our poll of Catholic-school parents: how much they like their children’s schools and how much they dislike the Philadelphia public schools.

Only 14 percent of Catholic-school parents rated the public system as good or excellent, compared to 24 percent of charter-school parents and 40 percent of public-school parents.

Catholic-school parents—many of them with no direct experience with the public system—gave the public schools consistently low ratings on safety, discipline and learning environment. In a focus group that we assembled, several such parents said they view the public schools as synonymous with violence and lack of safety, disorder in the classroom and general unruliness.

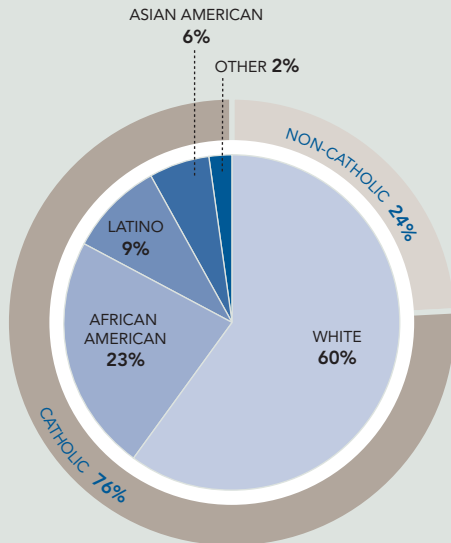
In the poll, the Catholic-school parents gave their own schools consistently high marks on almost every measure. Ninety-two percent rated their children’s schools as excellent or good; 95 percent said they were very or somewhat satisfied with their schools and 76 percent said they would be very likely to recommend them to a friend.

WHY PARENTS SEND THEIR CHILDREN TO CATHOLIC SCHOOLS	
SCHOOL QUALITY	36%
RELIGIOUS GROUNDS/MORAL VALUES	29%
PHYSICAL SAFETY	21%
LEVEL OF DISCIPLINE	9%

The high ratings continued when parents were asked about particular aspects of the schools.

HOW CATHOLIC-SCHOOLS PARENTS RATE THEIR CHILDREN’S SCHOOLS	
	GOOD OR EXCELLENT
YOUR CHILD’S PHYSICAL SAFETY	98%
HAVING THE RIGHT AMOUNT OF EMPHASIS ON MORAL VALUES	96%
THE COMMITMENT OF THE TEACHERS	95%
CREATING A POSITIVE CLIMATE FOR LEARNING	94%
THE EMPHASIS OF THE CURRICULUM	93%
KEEPING ORDER AND DISCIPLINE IN THE CLASSROOM	93%
GIVING STUDENTS A SOLID BACKGROUND IN MATH AND ENGLISH	93%
THE SIZE OF THE SCHOOL	91%
HAVING NECESSARY COMPUTERS, SUPPLIES AND TECHNOLOGY	89%
THE JOB THE PRINCIPAL IS DOING IN RUNNING THE SCHOOL	88%
QUALITY OF TEACHERS	87%
QUALITY OF PHYSICAL FACILITIES, SUCH AS CLASSROOMS	87%
TEACHER COMMUNICATION WITH PARENTS	87%
AMOUNT OF ATTENTION TO YOUR CHILD’S INDIVIDUAL NEEDS	87%
PREPARING YOUR CHILD TO DO WELL ON STANDARDIZED TESTS	85%
THE SIZE OF THE CLASSES	84%
AVAILABILITY OF EXTRACURRICULAR ACTIVITIES AND SPORTS	81%

## DEMOGRAPHIC CHARACTERISTICS OF STUDENTS IN PHILADELPHIA'S CATHOLIC SCHOOLS



Source: Office of Research and Planning, Archdiocese of Philadelphia.  
Note: This data is from the 2009–2010 school year.

close or consolidate schools.<sup>57</sup> Enrollment is also declining in suburban areas but at a slower rate. In the last five years, enrollment in Catholic grade schools in the Philadelphia suburbs has gone down 13 percent. Some suburban parish schools have closed, especially in inner-ring communities.<sup>58</sup>

There is no official count of the number of Catholics in Philadelphia, but the archdiocese does keep data on “registered” Catholics. These are the people who visit a rectory and sign up as parishioners. Between 2000 and 2008, the latest year for which data is available, the number of registered Catholics in the city declined by 22 percent. In 2008, the number stood at 321,580. In 1990, it was 503,451.<sup>59</sup>

And the birthrate in Catholic families has declined as well. According to the Archdiocese’s Office for Research and Planning, the number of elementary-school age children who have been baptized has gone down 38 percent in the past decade and the number of baptized children of high school age has declined 32 percent.<sup>60</sup>

Another factor is that the ties of many Catholics to the church are not as strong as they once were. Fewer attend mass and take the sacraments. Fewer feel compelled to send their children to Catholic

schools for faith formation. There is a sharp decline in those choosing religious vocations.

Said one principal who was born in the 1950s, “Today’s Catholic parents are not as Catholic as our parents were. That has all changed now. They are more interested in saving the money for college. Catholic education is not as essential as it would have been in the parish of our day.”

## Competition from Charters

A final factor is the rise of charter schools. The number of students enrolled in these public, independently run schools has risen dramatically in this decade. Philadelphia school district officials estimate that 73 percent of the children now in charters came from district schools and 27 percent from other schools.<sup>61</sup> That 27 percent amounts to about 9,000 students, and Catholic-school educators believe that most of them came from Catholic schools.

Charter schools have one distinct advantage over Catholic schools. They do not charge tuition.

“The only difference between a Catholic school and a charter school is the religious reinforcement,” said a Catholic-school mother from the Harrowgate section. “That’s the only difference. Honestly, I struggle to pay. Especially high school Catholic education; it’s a lot.”

As Bishop McFadden put it, “The charter schools have presented a particular issue for us, because it is hard to compete against free—especially when the economy is making it difficult for families.”

Some Catholic educators believe that charters—many of which emphasize safety, discipline and the teaching of values—have, in effect, stolen the Catholic brand. “They have a mission statement that is nearly the same, except it doesn’t mention the word ‘God,’” said a Catholic-school principal. “They have uniforms. They have discipline. It is competition we can’t meet.”

There are Catholic educators who disagree with that conclusion. They believe there is both an existing and untapped market for Catholic education in the city and that their schools could compete effectively if they offered a strong, distinctive educational product. One principal expressed it this way:

## THE PARENTS: Valuing Catholic Education

Marie Moran is a modern Catholic mother who resembles Catholic mothers of the past. She is devout in the practice of her religion and believes in the value of Catholic education almost as an article of faith.

Moran, 50, who lives in the Tacony section of Philadelphia, is herself a product of the Catholic schools and has sent her three children to Catholic schools from grades one through 12. There was never any question about it.

"It was and is a sacrifice," said Moran, a stay-at-home mother whose husband, Martin, is a Philadelphia police officer. "I just believe in the values that a religious-based education provides. I had that. My husband had that, and that is what I wanted my children to have."

Her children, Albert, Bernadette and Regina, went to St. Josaphat elementary school, which is within walking distance of the Moran home. All three also went to Catholic high schools, and the family is happy with the results. Albert, a graduate of the University of Pennsylvania, works with Teach for America; Bernadette is a sophomore at LaSalle College; Regina attends Little Flower High School.

Marie Moran sees the declining enrollment in the Catholic schools now and thinks about how different things used to be. She graduated from St. Hubert's High School in 1977, when Catholic schools were overflowing with students. "I graduated in a class of 700 girls," Moran recalled. "Back then, you did get a good education, and it was disciplined and safe. I didn't get a warm and fuzzy feeling, though. There were so many, you went through like cattle."

"The need is there. For us, we need to figure out how do we set ourselves apart and give parents what they are looking for? You have to put out a model that is meeting their needs. People shouldn't focus on what they can't control. The question is what we need to give them."

Another Catholic principal outlined what parents want from schools: "Parents are looking for an environment that is safe and caring. They are looking for you to challenge their children academically. They are looking for their children to be provided the same opportunities as children in private



Little Flower High School

schools. Today, students can pick any high school in the archdiocese—and the schools compete vigorously for a declining number of would-be customers.

The Morans wanted their daughter to attend an all-girls school. After visiting a number of them, they had a good feeling about Little Flower, although they had concerns about its neighborhood. Said Marie, "We really felt there was such a caring community there and they had a real handle on the safety of the girls."

Moran grades the quality of Catholic education her children have received as "good to excellent." But she is aware that a Catholic education doesn't mean as much to some modern Catholics as it did to her and that the system is hurting.

"I think that we will have fewer schools, clustered in areas," Moran predicted. "You have to see the handwriting on the wall. Short of drastically cutting tuition, which they are never going to do, they are not going to be viable. And unfortunately, the Catholic Church is not very good at looking ahead. I think they got sideswiped by this."

schools. They are making the sacrifice to pay for it—they want the bang for their buck."

It is hard for Catholic schools to deliver that bang when they are in financial straits. In the Philadelphia archdiocese as a whole, tuition only brings in 67 cents of every dollar spent on elementary schools.<sup>62</sup> City parishes used to make up most of the difference, but that is no longer the case. The average parish subsidy is now about 15 percent of a school's total budget, with the rest coming from school-based fund raising and other sources.<sup>63</sup> The archdiocese itself subsidizes the high schools.



On any given Sunday, only one out of four Catholics in the city can be found attending Mass. Less money is flowing into the collection baskets, and the parish has its own bills to pay. Pastors say deficits are common and parishes must dip into their reserves to pay operating expenses.<sup>64</sup> “There are parishes in this city that are going bankrupt,” said one pastor. “Sometimes the question is: Do you save the school or close the church because of the finances?”

In part, this explains why 23 Catholic grade schools in the city have closed since 2000.

## The Search for Financial Help

Increasingly, Catholic schools are looking outside the parish for financial help. These efforts include time-honored methods, such as selling candy, gift wrap and pizzas, to more sophisticated development efforts to get alumni, foundations and private donors to give.

Each high school in the diocese has a president whose main job is to serve as chief operating officer—and chief fund raiser—for the school. Some have been successful. For example, the alumni group called Friends of West Catholic High School gives about \$800,000 a year in aid to the school for its operation and for scholarships; the school’s total budget is about \$4.2 million.<sup>65</sup>

A grade school that has met the challenge is the St. Francis de Sales School, at 47th Street and Springfield Avenue in West Philadelphia. This 106-year-old school is thriving due mostly to the efforts of a former principal and former teacher, Sister Constance Marie Touey and Sister Jeannette Lucey, who several years ago took over the mission of fund-raising as their full-time occupation.

Today, St. Francis, which has 510 students, costs \$1.6 million a year to operate—\$1 million from tuition, and \$600,000 raised by the nuns. This removes the need for the parish, which is a poor one, to subsidize the school.

Most of the students there are poor and members of minority groups. Often, they are the children of immigrants; only 23 percent are Catholic. The main hallway is lined with flags for each country where students or their parents were born, 44 flags in all.

They include Trinidad, the Congo, Belize, Cameroon, Ethiopia, Liberia, Jamaica, Vietnam and the Dominican Republic.<sup>66</sup>

Catholic educators call schools where non-Catholics are predominant “mission schools.” Some got that way by design: the pastor and principal made it their mission to serve the poor and immigrant populations in their neighborhoods, regardless of religion. They see their schools as fulfilling the church’s mandate of helping the needy and of evangelization of the faith.

Others got there by happenstance. Pastors and principals, looking to fill empty seats in their schools, accepted more and more of the non-Catholic students who applied. Non-Catholics pay a tuition premium, often amounting to several hundred dollars, to attend these schools.

Regardless, the percentage of non-Catholics in the archdiocesan schools has risen over the past decade. Non-Catholics now account for 16 percent of students enrolled in archdiocesan high schools in the city and 27 percent of the grade-school children. Non-Catholics are in the majority in 20 of the 65 grade schools.<sup>67</sup>

One Catholic official said this influx of non-Catholics has led to “mission schizophrenia” among educators. He phrased it this way: “Why do we have Catholic schools? Are we doing it as a social service or doing it as a school? If it is a school, it should be about faith formation.”

In the past, archdiocesan officials have leaned towards the view that the mission of Catholic education was to educate Catholics. Today, some principals and pastors take a different view. As one pastor said, “We are trying to fulfill a social mission of the church—to care for any members of the population and improve their lives as a faith-based mission.”

These same educators complain about a lack of clear direction from the central administration over the issue. “On one hand they tell us you can’t fill the school with non-Catholics,” said one pastor. “On the other hand, they say you shouldn’t shut down. So what is the third option?”

The tension is exacerbated by the fact that many non-Catholic students are from low-income families

## THE SCHOOLS: Consolidating to Survive

One model for the future of Catholic education in Philadelphia may be the school that sits on East Thompson Street in the city's Port Richmond section. Our Lady of Port Richmond Regional Catholic School opened in 2008 and currently enrolls about 470 students, from pre-K through eighth grade.

The school itself is housed in the former St. Adalbert's parish school. It is the result of the consolidation of three schools—St. Adalbert's, Our Lady Help of Christians (Our Lady) and Nativity of the Blessed Virgin Mary (BVM). These schools (and churches) date back to the days when different ethnic groups had their own parishes. St. Adalbert's is Polish, Our Lady is German and Nativity BVM is Irish.

By the middle of this past decade, though, the schools were in trouble. Each had enrollments hovering around 200. Sister Mary Ripp had gone to Our Lady Help of Christians as a student and had returned to serve as principal. In an interview, Sister Mary, a member of the Sisters of Christian Charity order, ticked off what she did and did not have at Our Lady in its final days.

"We had one [class] of every grade, with about 20 to 25 students in each. We had a phys ed teacher, but no music, no art and no world language programs. We had no science lab and no gym. The children ate lunch in the parish hall ..."

It was a difficult decision to merge the schools, Sister Mary said, especially for the adult parishioners—

many of whom were graduates of the schools being closed. "For the children, though, there was minimal adjustment," she said. "Everyone loved the school they were in. They were small and they were homey. When the children came together in the new school, though, they were really very enthusiastic about it."

Now, as principal of Our Lady of Port Richmond, Sister Mary has improved resources, due to the additional tuition income generated by the combined enrollment.

"We have an art teacher, a music teacher, a Spanish teacher, a science lab, a computer lab, a full gym program, a teacher for remedial and enrichment," she said. "We also have boys and girls soccer teams, boys and girls basketball teams, a girls softball team and a boys baseball team."

Sister Mary has become a believer in the regional-school concept, though she realizes her experience may be more difficult to replicate in other areas of the city. In Port Richmond, the students all live within walking distance.

"I can't imagine our neighborhood or the city—or the nation for that matter—without Catholic schools," she said. "What we have to offer is a holistic education—but one that has the spiritual aspect as well. And we need that today in this country."

who often have trouble paying the tuition and fees. Nearly half the students at St. Francis receive some form of financial aid, and there are local organizations that each year hand out thousands of scholarships to Catholic students based on need or academic achievement.<sup>68</sup> The principal sources of this aid are the Connelly Foundation, Children's Scholarship Fund Philadelphia and Business Leader-ship Organized for Catholic Schools (BLOCS).

Still, principals and pastors tell tales of tuition bills going unpaid and of schools with double-digit delinquency rates. Each spring, hundreds of students are sent home because their parents have not paid tuition since the school year began. They are told not to return until the parent comes and makes payment arrangements.

Most principals and pastors believe if enrollment at a grade school dips below 200, questions are raised about the sustainability of a school, and the central office will urge that a self-study begin. As of this year, there were 30 Catholic grade schools in the city with enrollments below 225. These schools are at the highest risk of closing. Even schools in areas with large Catholic populations suffer enrollment losses each year. In 2009–2010, Catholic grade schools in the city were operating at 63 percent capacity, with 12,400 vacant seats.<sup>69</sup>

All this weakens the appeal of the Catholic school. Parents of first graders are unsure if their parish school will still be open when their children reach eighth grade. What the schools end up offering, according to one educator, is a "lukewarm" educa-

tional product that cannot compete against some district-run and charter schools.

## Determining the Mission

In an era when the church is feeling financial strain, some priests wonder if it is time to cut back on the number of schools and refocus only on educating Catholic students.

“It is not an ‘either-or,’” Bishop McFadden said. “It is a ‘both-and.’ It is faith formation and the primary idea of forming young men and women in the values of the Catholic faith. But there is the other part, that we do have a responsibility as Christians to care for our brothers and sisters who are poor. So we have to outreach to those children.”

The bishop offered a caveat, however. If there are Catholic schools with a sizeable number of non-Catholic students, these schools should seek to become self-sustaining and not rely on a financial subsidy from the parish to balance their budgets. There already are a dozen grade schools in the city where the parish provides no subsidy or only a token amount.

Archdiocesan leaders also favor consolidated schools—two or three Catholic elementary schools combining into one regional school. They point to several examples where this has happened and worked well, including the De Paul Catholic School in Germantown and Pope John Paul II Regional Catholic School in Bridesburg. Eleven parishes in South Philadelphia currently are in a self-study, and a new regional school may be the result.

The philanthropies that support the Catholic schools have encouraged the archdiocese to develop a strategic plan for Catholic education in the city—and working to help individual schools develop plans of their own.

BLOCS has expanded its role from offering scholarships to giving grants to parishes willing to develop strategic plans for their schools. Another group that is active is the Churchill Institute on Leadership Development (CHILD), which is helping 24 parish schools raise money and set up advisory committees of lay people. Both efforts are aimed at schools with large populations of poor, minority

and non-Catholic students but also help more traditional parish schools.

Some educators and pastors say privately that the archdiocese’s central office should be dealing more aggressively with the issues facing the city system. “If all you are doing is managing decline,” said one principal, “You cannot grow, you cannot sustain, you cannot innovate.”

Bishop McFadden said the central office was “constantly strategically planning.” As an example, he said that the archdiocese, long an opponent of charters, was considering using the charter model in some circumstances; he mentioned poor Latino neighborhoods in North Philadelphia, where all of the nearby Catholic schools have closed and the residents are too poor to afford tuition. “I would say that all things are on the table,” he said. How to blend the Catholic mission with the mandate that charters be nonreligious is a hurdle, the bishop said, but one the church is looking at resolving. Catholic schools in Washington, D.C. and Brooklyn, N.Y. have been “charterized” in order to serve neighborhood residents.<sup>70</sup> In Washington, the converted schools have retained many of the same faculty and students but have done away with religious symbols, in-school prayer and religious instruction.<sup>71</sup>

Catholic education in Philadelphia remains a series of unresolved questions—over leadership, financial strains that threaten the quality of education and the very mission of Catholic schools. All of this is overshadowed by one enduring trend: the continued decline in the number of Catholic students and schools. Those who are working against that trend admit it is a daunting task. As one financial supporter of the schools put it, “We are in a race against time.” ◉

# The Outlook

There is little doubt about what Philadelphia parents want when it comes to schools. They want safe, caring environments where their children can get a quality education. Their definitions of “quality” may vary; their aspirations do not. They believe a good education is the path to a better life, and they want more quality choices. This sentiment cuts across ethnic, racial and economic lines.

Finding the right school, though, looks like an increasingly complicated proposition in the years ahead. The world of K-12 education in Philadelphia, which has been reshaped in the past decade, is likely to continue its ongoing transformation.

In our poll, 42 percent of parents reported that they now find it “somewhat hard” or “very hard” to get enough information to understand their options when it comes to selecting a school. “You have to do your homework as a parent,” a public-school parent from Northeast Philadelphia said of the options. “It’s crazy.” That sentiment is likely to become more widespread in the years ahead; the educational landscape appears set to become more complex, not less, now that choice has become one of its central elements.

When it comes to education, many public officials and educators still think in terms of systems, isolated from one another. Increasingly, though, parents tend to think in terms of individual schools. As we have seen in this report, many parents don’t care much about labels—public, private, charter or Catholic. Rather, they care about finding the best options for their children, subject mainly to cost and logistical issues.

While the outlook for the next five years cannot be predicted with any certainty, the research conducted for this report points in these directions:

- Charter schools seem likely to continue to proliferate as much as parental demand, state and local regulation, the teachers’ unions and concerns about their academic and financial performance will allow.
- The Catholic schools, despite their popularity with the families that use them, are likely to continue their slow fade unless demographic patterns shift—or unless the leaders of the Archdiocese resolve to turn them into a full-fledged alternative system appealing as much to non-Catholics as to members of the church.
- The School District of Philadelphia faces a daunting set of challenges as it seeks to stabilize its enrollment, build on the academic progress it has made and turn itself into a provider of diverse educational options. Its challenges include trying to figure out how to cope with excess capacity in many of its schools and how to improve the lowest-performing schools without weakening the special-admission high schools that have kept many families in the system.

For the public schools, the challenge for the future goes beyond the success or failure of any one specific program, such as the Renaissance Schools initiative that has become the signature proposal of Superintendent Ackerman. Our poll found that 62 percent of parents with children in the district-run system are sufficiently dissatisfied with it that they had, at one point or another, seriously considered taking their children out. The district is no longer the near monopoly it once was. But even now, the other educational providers in the city do not have the capacity to absorb the full volume of unhappy customers. The district’s success is vital to the future of tens of thousands of children.

Charter parents told us that if the charters disappeared, they would do everything they could to avoid sending their children to district-run schools, including moving out of the city or trying to cobble together the tuition for private or Catholic school. Catholic-school parents expressed similar views. They said their own experiences were of children struggling when in public school, thriving when taken out. In a focus group, when one woman said that public schools are an option only “if you don’t like your kid” or “want to punish your kid,” other parents agreed.

The charter school movement, which represents the growth sector of K-12 education in Philadelphia, is likely to confront a different set of issues in the next several years. Test results indicate that some charter schools are not providing as good an education as the public schools, and various investigations have found or pointed to financial mismanagement at others. The popularity of the schools aside, the broader public may not be willing to see public funds go to institutions that produce mediocre academic results and engage in financial misdeeds. If charters are to flourish and grow, they must retain public confidence and deal with what are likely to be tighter controls from the School District of Philadelphia.

The district’s increased focus on improving quality—as opposed to expanding choice—portends a future in which applicants wishing to open new charter schools will face tougher standards, and existing schools that fail to show academic results will be denied the opportunity to expand. This presents a challenge to those charter operators who see their independence as central to everything they do and chafe at the district’s attempts to control them.

For the Catholic school system, the issue is survival, or at least the form in which the system will survive. Increasingly, Catholic schools are educating non-Catholics, including many poor students. In some distressed neighborhoods, Catholic schools serve as community anchors and offer important educational options to families that have few other choices. The question is what value the broader community places on what the Catholic schools provide, especially in these low-income communities, and whether something can be done to help make sure this option does not disappear.

Within the archdiocese, there are some pastors, educators and parishioners who believe that the leadership has given up the fight for Catholic education in Philadelphia and is willing to let the system slowly collapse. Officials at archdiocesan headquarters say that they are committed to urban education and are ready to consider an array of options, including turning some Catholic schools into charters.

Philip Goldsmith, who ran the school district a decade ago and later served as the city’s managing director, recalled telling former Mayor John Street, “You should care less about where kids are going to school. What you should care about is whether the kid is going to get a good education and is he or she going to be able to be a productive member of society.”

That view has a lot of supporters these days. One is a newly formed group, The Philadelphia School Project, which aims to raise private money to support high-quality schools, regardless of whether they are district-run, charter or parochial. Another is the superintendent herself.

“I am big on parents choosing,” Ackerman said. “I believe in the parents’ ability to make a good choice for their child, once they see what good really looks like.”

Choice matters only if quality alternatives are available. And parents want more of them—a viable school in each neighborhood supplemented with an array of accessible, attractive and affordable options.

The efforts of the city’s educational leaders to make that happen will help shape the future of the city’s children, and with it, the future of Philadelphia. ◉



# Notes

1. Office for Research and Planning, Archdiocese of Philadelphia, 2009–2010 enrollment data. Unless otherwise noted, this and similar data and documents were provided to the authors by the persons or entities named.
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5. A telephone poll of 802 Philadelphia parents with children in district-run, charter and Catholic schools was conducted by Abt SRBI Associates for the Philadelphia Research Initiative between December 11 and December 22, 2009. The survey oversampled charter- and Catholic-school parents (polling 201 charter, 200 Catholics), to get statistically significant samples of both groups. For questions asked of all parents, the results were adjusted so that charter- and Catholic-school parents were not over-represented. The poll has a margin of error of plus or minus 3.5 percent for the sample as a whole, higher for subsets.
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9. Archdiocese of Philadelphia, Office of Research and Planning, Maps and Reports, Philadelphia North Vicariate, Philadelphia South Vicariate, Parish Cluster Reports, authors’ analysis.
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12. School District of Philadelphia, 2009 District Data Overview, p.10.
13. Ibid.
14. School District of Philadelphia, 2009 District Data Overview, p. 8.
15. School District of Philadelphia, “Proposed Budget Fiscal Year 2010–2011,” p. 49.
16. Eighty-five of the district’s 265 schools are categorized as “Empowerment Schools,” the district’s designation for low-performing schools.
17. Pennsylvania Department of Education, “2008–09 School Level Math and Reading PSSA Results—School Totals,” [http://www.portal.state.pa.us/portal/server.pt/gateway/PTARGS\\_0\\_123031\\_595948\\_0\\_0\\_18/PSSA\\_Results\\_Math\\_and\\_Reading\\_School\\_Totals\\_2009.xls](http://www.portal.state.pa.us/portal/server.pt/gateway/PTARGS_0_123031_595948_0_0_18/PSSA_Results_Math_and_Reading_School_Totals_2009.xls), authors’ analysis.
18. School District of Philadelphia, 2009 District Data Overview, p. 9. Class of 2008 graduation rates is the most recent available.

19. The Most Rev. Joseph McFadden, auxiliary bishop of the Archdiocese of Philadelphia, interview with authors, April 20, 2010.
20. Authors' aggregation and analysis of high school profiles as listed at [https://webapps.philasd.org/school\\_profile](https://webapps.philasd.org/school_profile).
21. Ibid.
22. Ibid.
23. This report follows the classification of high schools used by the school district in "A Directory of High Schools for 2010 Admissions."
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34. U.S. Department of Education, "Race to the Top Fund," <http://www2.ed.gov/programs/racetothetop/index.html>.
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39. National Alliance for Public Charter Schools, "Top 10 Charter Communities by Market Share," 4th edition (Washington, D.C: National Alliance for Public Schools, October 2009). For the 2008–2009 school year, charter schools served 16 percent of public-school students in Philadelphia. In several major cities, charters comprised more than 20 percent of the market for public school students. New Orleans had the highest share of charters at 57 percent.
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41. Research suggests that the academic performance of charter schools varies widely from school to school, city to city, and state to state. A recent national study examining how the academic performance of students attending charter schools in 15 states and the District of Columbia (Pennsylvania was not among them) compared with the performance of students in traditional public schools found that 17 percent of charter schools produced significantly better results, 37 percent produced worse results, and the remainder did about the same; see Center for Research on Education Outcomes, "Multiple Choice: Charter School Performance in 16 States," Stanford University (June 2009). A recent study in New York City that compared students who attended charter schools with those who applied to the charters but had not gotten in found that the charter students performed significantly better; see Caroline M. Hoxby, Sonali Murarka and Jenny Kang, "How New York City's Charter Schools Affect Achievement, August 2009 Report" (Cambridge, MA: New York City Charter Schools Evaluation Project, September 2009). There have been two studies of Philadelphia's charter schools' academic performance; both found little evidence that charter schools produce better academic performance than district schools. For an early evaluation of Pennsylvania charter schools, see Gary Miron, Christopher Nelson, John Risley and Carolyn Sullins, "Strengthening Pennsylvania's Charter School Reform: Findings From the Statewide Evaluation and Discussion of Relevant Policy Issues," Evaluation Center at Western Michigan University, October 2002. For a more recent look at Philadelphia charter schools, see Ron Zimmer, Suzanne Blanc, Brian Gill, Jolley Christman, "Evaluating the Performance of Philadelphia's Charter Schools," Rand Education Working Paper Series (March 2008).
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44. Pennsylvania State Department of Education, "Public School SAT Scores 2001–2009," [http://www.portal.state.pa.us/portal/server.pt/gateway/PTARGS\\_0\\_123031\\_595985\\_0\\_0\\_18/PUBLIC%20SCHOOL%20SAT%202001-2009.xls](http://www.portal.state.pa.us/portal/server.pt/gateway/PTARGS_0_123031_595985_0_0_18/PUBLIC%20SCHOOL%20SAT%202001-2009.xls). Weighted average of charter and district schools SAT scores calculated by authors.
45. Office of the Controller, City of Philadelphia, Fraud and Special Investigations, "Review of Charter School Oversight: A Fraud Vulnerability Assessment," April 2010.
46. Masch, "The Financial Impact of Philadelphia Charter Schools on the School District of Philadelphia," p. 3. The per-pupil funding for non-special education charter Students is \$8,184; for special education charter students it is \$17,789. The \$9,423 figure assumes a 13 percent special-education population at charter schools.
47. School District of Philadelphia, "FY 2009–10 Revised Budget in Brief," p. 13. For the 2009–2010 school year, the state subsidized \$117 million of the district's charter costs.
48. For instance, the district estimates that consolidating four district-run schools that have total excess capacity of 600 students into three smaller schools would save the district approximately \$889,000 per year. Masch, "The Financial Impact of Philadelphia Charter Schools on the School District of Philadelphia," p. 15.
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50. Zimmer et al., "Evaluating the Performance of Philadelphia's Charter Schools." The authors examined longitudinal test scores of students who had attended both a district-run and charter school between the school years of 2000–2001 and 2006–2007 and compared students' year-to-year gains on standardized reading and math tests in each setting. They found students' average gains while attending charters were statistically indistinguishable from their experience at district-run schools. The study also looked at who attends charter schools and found that charters attracted students "whose prior achievement levels ... [were] slightly below the district-wide average but higher than the average achievement levels of the traditional public schools they left" (p. iii).
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53. Office of Catholic Education, Archdiocese of Philadelphia.
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57. Dale McDonald, "United States Catholic Elementary and Secondary School, 2000–2001, The Annual Statistical Report on Schools, Enrollment and Staffing," National Catholic Educational Association, 2001; Dale McDonald, "United States Catholic Elementary and Secondary School, 2008–2009, The Annual Statistical Report on Schools, Enrollment and Staffing," The National Catholic Educational Association, 2009; in addition, local diocese officials in six cities provided enrollment trend data that illustrate Catholic enrollment in urban areas is declining.
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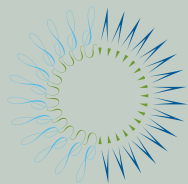
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