

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.

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. ○