

More Than a Bake Sale: Private Funds for Public Schools

by Erika M. Kitzmiller – February 09, 2015

This commentary discusses the response from local schools to use private funds to close budget gaps in Philadelphia's public schools.

It would be difficult for anyone to deny that the School District of Philadelphia has a severe budget problem. For the second year in row, Superintendent William R. Hite, Jr. threatened to delay the opening of the city's public schools because the city lacked the funds to operate its school system. For months, Hite and others who were deeply concerned about the effects that this funding crisis might have on student learning and school safety pressured political leaders to pass new legislation and increase school revenues. Engaged educators, committed activists, concerned families, and frustrated youth have staged citywide protests to stir public action and raise local support for the city's public schools. While these efforts have raised awareness of the dire conditions in the city's public schools, these actions have done little to remedy the situation.¹

In June 2013, the School District of Philadelphia closed 24 schools and laid off 3,768 employees—administrators, teachers, and classroom aids—who had provided essential support to the schools. In the summer of 2014, Hite announced that the school district still faced an \$81 million budget deficit. In August, Hite slashed the school district's budget even further cutting \$32 million dollars from transportation, school police, school maintenance, and other vendors, leaving many schools scrambling to provide the bare essentials to impoverished city youth. For the past two years, most of the city's public schools opened without school nurses, certified librarians, guidance counselors and fewer support staff such as classroom aids, lunch monitors, and administrative staff.²

Underneath all of this rhetoric about the city's inadequate funds and failed protests is a story that few in our city or nation have acknowledged. Even though the School District of Philadelphia's funding crisis is widespread and real, there are currently glaring funding disparities here in our city that go beyond the typical suburban-urban school or charter-public school divide. In the city's most affluent and increasingly white neighborhoods, influential school administrators and powerful home and school associations have courted local institutions (philanthropies, businesses, and universities) and pressured middle and upper-income families to donate additional funds and resources to their neighborhood public schools. In the city's poorest neighborhoods where the majority of Philadelphia's youth of color live, public school administrators, frustrated educators, and outraged residents who have some of the highest levels of poverty in the nation have had to rely on pitiful government aid to operate schools that, in most cases, are barely functioning.

The William M. Meredith Elementary School, whose catchment boundaries include most of the Queen Village community with its appealing historical row homes and thriving independent eateries, attracts middle and upper-income families with school-aged children who are deeply committed to their neighborhood public school. Meredith has a much less racially and economically diverse student body when compared to the school district. In the 2013-2014 school year, 61.5% of the 530 students who attended Meredith were white (compared to the district's 14.4%); 15.5% were African American (compared to the district's 52.8%); 9.6% were Asian (compared to the district's 8.1%); 49% of the student body was classified as economically disadvantaged (compared to the district's 87.3%).³

For decades, the Meredith school community—its committed principal, engaged teachers, and well-to-do families—have donated significant funds and essential resources to preserve Meredith's long-standing reputation as one of the finest schools in the city. In the past two years, the home and school association sent letters to families detailing the impact of the district's budgetary woes on the school and asked each family to contribute several hundred dollars per student to boost the school's operating budget. In addition, the association has sponsored community fundraisers to engage local residents such as a 5K walk/run and a silent auction to raise additional funds for the school. At the beginning of each year, teachers provide families with a supply list that each child must bring to school and request that each family donates money to cover additional expenses that the teachers might accrue during the year.⁴

Administrators and teachers have used these funds and resources to boost the school's operating budget and provide students with the educational experiences that everyone in the city of Philadelphia deserves. Today, the Meredith school is one of the only schools in the School District of Philadelphia that has an art and music program, a full-time school nurse, and a guidance counselor due largely to the influx of these private funds and local resources.⁵

As the school district's revenues continue to shrink, other schools have followed Meredith's approach and tried to close their budget gaps with private funds. In 2013, the Greenfield Elementary School, located steps from Philadelphia's Rittenhouse Square neighborhood, faced a glaring \$355,000 budget shortage as Republican Governor Corbett slashed educational funding across the state. The state's unwillingness to implement a fair funding formula compounds these problems. In the 2009-2010 school year,

Greenfield received approximately \$6700/student; in the 2013-2014 school year, that number had dwindled to approximately \$5700/student.⁶

In June the home and school association sent a letter to Greenfield parents that outlined the school's budgetary problems and asked those that could to donate \$613-per student. Daniel Lazar, Greenfield's current principal, recognized that this was a hardship for many of his families who reside all over the city and come from a variety of racial and economic backgrounds but he also knew that the school desperately needed more funds to maintain high-quality educational programs and activities that he and his teachers had worked to implement together. By the end of the summer, the Greenfield Home and School Association had raised nearly \$120,000. The school used these funds to reinstate five classroom aids who had lost their jobs during the first wave of budget cuts.⁷

This influx of private funds for public schools is not a story that is limited to Philadelphia, but Philadelphia's story is the one that I know best.⁸ And in Philadelphia, like countless other places in this nation, the schools that receive these funds are often located in the city's most affluent, and increasingly white, communities in Philadelphia's gentrified urban center. While families with school-aged children continue to flee the city for lower taxes and better schools in Philadelphia's pristine suburbs or exit the public school system to send their children to Philadelphia's prestigious private schools, other families move to these communities because of the quality of the city's public schools. As someone who lives in these communities, it is understandable. These families want what is best for their children—schools with robust curricular programs and teachers who have worked tirelessly in the face of these drastic budget cuts to provide their students with the educational resources and opportunities that all youth deserve.

However at the same time, it is also clear that these mechanisms inadvertently exacerbate educational inequality between those residents who have the social and financial capital to donate private funds to their public schools and those that do not. Across the city, Philadelphia educators, families, and youth are engaged in a campaign to convince state officials to institute a fair funding formula. Without state action, Philadelphia's public schools will remain completely dependent on insufficient and unpredictable public funds.

Notes

1. Motoko Rich and Jon Hurdle, "Philadelphia Schools to Open on Time Amid Millions in Budget Cuts," *New York Times*, August 15, 2014, nytimes.com; Allie Bidwell, "Why Philadelphia Schools Might Not Open," *US News and World Report*, August 13, 2014.
2. Motoko Rich and Jon Hurdle, "Philadelphia Schools to Open on Time Amid Millions in Budget Cuts," *New York Times*, August 15, 2014.
3. William M. Meredith School, Demographics, https://webapps.philasd.org/school_profile/view/2380, Accessed October 2, 2014; "District Schools," <http://www.phila.k12.pa.us/about/#schools>, Accessed October 17, 2014.
4. <https://meredithhomeandschool.files.wordpress.com/2012/10/kindergarten-supply-list-room-105.pdf>; Joseph Myers, "Meredith School to Host Fundraiser at IATSE Ballroom," *South Philly Review*, February 28, 2013.
5. Interview, Meredith Teacher, August 22, 2014.
6. Interview Greenfield Staff, September 10, 2014.
7. "Philly School Principals Appeal Directly to Parents for Cash," *Newsworks*, August 9, 2013, newsworks.org; "Philly School Principals are Appealing Directly to Parents for Cash," *Philadelphia School Notebook*, August, 9, 2013, the-notebook.org; "Seeking Private Funds for Public Schools Becomes 'Unfortunate Trend'," *Newsworks*, August 14, 2013, newsworks.org.
8. For an example in California, see Rob Reich, "Not Very Giving," *New York Times*, September 4, 2013.

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