

# **An Interview with Lisa Nutter, President of Philadelphia Academies, Inc.**

Ilana Weiz 11 February 2014

To recognize the passion and belief Lisa Nutter has for her work as president of Philadelphia Academies Inc. (PAI), you simply have to listen to her speak about the organization. She calls PAI the perfect marriage of community development and systemic change and feels that her whole career has been building toward her current role.

PAI focuses on building small learning communities within larger high schools, operating under the theory of change that students will thrive when they feel supported and that school is relevant to their lives. PAI students experience hands-on, industry-focused coursework and internships and have supportive adult allies to guide them and keep them accountable. Central to the academy model are relationship building and belief in the transformative power of emotional support. Watching the light bulb go off in children who grew up without a lot of hope, when they are finally given opportunities to show what they can do, is one of the most rewarding parts of Lisa's work. She loves how open the students are and how creative they are in their approach to solving problems: "They come up

with solutions that you never think of; many of them simple and low-cost, but high-impact," she says. Wanting to impact as many local high school students as possible is what drives Lisa to continue innovating and adapting her organization.

Supportive relationships have been key to Lisa's own development as a leader. Mentors feature prominently in her personal history. Her relationship with PHILADANCO founder Joan Myers Brown during a post-college internship at the organization first got Lisa involved with community organizing and development. Lisa was inspired by how Joan had built PHILADANCO from the ground up, recruiting youth with raw talent off the streets of West Philadelphia and molding them into professional dancers.

As recommended by Joan, Lisa's post-college career began at the Philadelphia Office of the City Representative helping to get the fledgling organization up and running. It was one of her first leadership opportunities, and she was shocked at first by how much freedom she was given. "I had an idea...to create a neighborhood-based arts program. And he told me to go do it," she says of her boss, Oliver Franklin. The project took her through some of the city's most neglected and impoverished communities, and Lisa soon found herself growing angry at the lack of empowerment and efficacy residents felt toward changing their situation. As she

spoke to her coworker Jerry Hofer about the struggles she witnessed and the frustration she felt, he said: "What are you going to do with all this anger?" The question was a catalyst, and they soon began talking about how to effect deliberate and systematic change. He encouraged her to enroll at his alma mater, specifically in the city and regional planning program at Penn's School of Design.

After finishing her master's program, Lisa took a job at OMG Center for Collaborative Learning, a firm that does public-sector and nonprofit consulting. Given a portfolio containing several organizations working in community development, she was impressed by how many of them were taking a holistic approach to community development rather than focusing on a single aspect like workforce training or physical development projects.

Philadelphia Academies Inc. was one of the organizations that stood out to her. The first academy in Philadelphia, an electrical program at Edison High School, was founded in 1969 by a group of Philadelphia business and civic leaders, and subsequent academies were merged under the umbrella of PAI in 1988. PAI worked with the school district to create learning academies that were "schools within schools." Each academy focused on placing students in small cohorts and working to develop their skills for a particular career through course work, internships and mentorships with area business leaders. The same teachers and staff followed the kids throughout the program, developing close relationships and networks

of support. The evidence-based model was replicated all over the country after it successfully boosted graduation and employment rates and postsecondary enrollment. Before her introduction to PAI, Lisa understood that businesses were ultimately the end users of the education system as employers, but she had never really thought that school conditions were a large concern for them. To walk into PAI board meetings and hear business leaders discussing education “in a soulful and connected way” was eye-opening for her. She soon realized that these business leaders could be a valuable part of education reform. They knew exactly the skills and competencies their employees needed and what training students needed to become useful employees of their companies.

After her evaluation of PAI came to an end, Lisa remained in touch with then-president Natalie Allen, who would often ask for guidance about the best ways to implement the recommended changes from Lisa’s report. When Natalie brought up transitioning to retirement, Lisa began to think about the next phase of her career. Wanting to be closer to home to look after her young daughter, as well as to focus on her hometown’s communities, Lisa decided she had had enough of consulting. Soon after, Lisa was elected the new president of PAI.

Managing a large, complex organization is not easy, but Lisa makes it work by continuing to build relationships. Within PAI, Lisa leads through motivation and

collaboration. She hires people whom she trusts to be able to deliver what they promise and surrounds herself with people who have strengths she lacks. She enjoys learning from people who are experts in their specializations. Preferring to give her staff autonomy to work on projects, Lisa admits that it sometimes causes frustration for people who would prefer more direction, but she believes in giving people room to grow and prove their abilities.

One relationship in particular has proved a unique challenge to Lisa as a leader; her marriage to the current mayor of Philadelphia has created both opportunities and constraints for PAI. Among the positives, she notes that being First Lady of Philadelphia “has provided access to people in places I would not ordinarily be sitting.” Meeting with mayors and leaders from other cities has given Lisa insight into the types of educational and community problems they face and has allowed her to learn from their experiences while sharing her ideas and the PAI model. As for the hindrances, Lisa says PAI has had to “leave a lot of money on the table” due to conflict of interest concerns, particularly regarding requests for proposals offered by the city. PAI has not had to alter any internal procedures or rules because the city’s ethics rules are so clear on the matter, but Lisa says she has made conscious choices about how she leads. She is careful how she presents herself and the organization in order to protect its reputation. When speaking in public, she discusses PAI as

a small part of a larger education system and does not use her pulpit as a soapbox for her organization. "When you're a public person, people are looking at everything you do," she says. She would not want her actions to be politicized and used against the organization (something she thankfully has not had to experience).

The complexities of navigating her dual role in the city have, in some ways, had a positive effect on PAI. Partly initiated to ensure that PAI's funding was transparent, one of Lisa's most significant moves as president has been changing the dynamic of its relationship with the school district. Previously, PAI had contracted extensively with the school district, believing that a fee-for-service dynamic would incentivize the district to be engaged with and supportive of PAI's model. Lisa felt that a more cooperative partnership would be better, and more sustainable, for both organizations than a contract-vendor relationship by allowing the district to focus sparse funding on other concerns while giving PAI more freedom to serve its big-picture vision without getting bogged down by the minutiae of the contract process. Because Lisa focuses much of her energy on fundraising, PAI now brings more of its own money to the table and is viewed as a "resource bringer rather than a resource taker." This gives PAI more leverage in negotiations and more control over its programming, and it provides both organizations with autonomy to work to their strengths. Overall, it helps build trust and allows them to communicate honestly with

each other.

Additionally, Lisa has shifted PAI's programming focus toward scaling up operations in order to have the greatest possible impact. Where PAI once provided many direct services to schools, its work with the district now focuses on helping it build the technological infrastructure and capacity to handle PAI's planned expansion to serve 12,000 Philadelphia students by 2015. The expansion plan aims to create more wall-to-wall academy schools in which all enrolled students are in academy programs. Emphasizing the need to provide schools with the right tools and support to ensure that they stay the course over the long term, Lisa says the expansion is also centered on adult development training that will prepare district and school staff to run the academy models on their own with fidelity.

As for the individual schools, Lisa is very careful about the partnerships PAI forms. They seek out principals who are strong leaders with disciplined and organized staff, and they only work with schools that are willing to stick with the model over the long term. PAI has had to walk away from a few schools that have not been able to deliver on implementation. PAI knows that the model works, and they cannot afford to waste time and resources on partners who are not fully committed.

Commitment to PAI's vision is a core component of Lisa's personal leadership style, and it greatly influences how

she runs the organization. As an inspiration, she references author Simon Sinek, who argues that what sets successful organizations and leaders apart from their less successful counterparts is that they are purpose-driven rather than product-driven. It is not what they do but why they do it that motivates people to take action, whether buying a product or joining a cause. For Lisa, the “why” of PAI’s existence is that the traditional education system is not adequately preparing many students for a 21st-century economy and is putting the future of their communities at risk. By expanding PAI’s evidence-driven model to as many Philadelphia high school students as possible, PAI can change the direction of Philadelphia’s future. Unsure when, if ever, this work will be complete, Lisa says she “will know we have hit the tipping point when everyone in my organization has learned to attack problems in a systematic way.”

Reaching that tipping point requires not only a vision but a clear plan of action. Lisa has initiated discussions with management and staff to lay out a strategic plan that is outward- as well as inward-looking, ensuring the long-term viability of the organization no matter who is leading it. Part of the inward-looking strategy includes investing in PAI’s staff. “Human capital is all we’ve got,” Lisa says. While not everyone will attain a formal leadership position at PAI, Lisa sees all her employees as leaders in their own way. She strives to make sure everyone feels valued by the organization and is given room to grow and improve.

Professional development opportunities are built into the budget and emphasized, and salary packages and work portfolios are structured to reward growth. Keeping employees engaged and invested in PAI's vision is the only way it can continue to be successful. Believing in the importance of practicing what one preaches, Lisa adds, "If we're saying it's good for kids, we should believe it's good for adults."

Ultimately, the kids keep Lisa driven. When asked about whom she admires and is inspired by, Lisa rattles off a long list of people who have helped her along the way, but she also includes "all of the resilient young people that this work has put in my life." Knowing personally the transformative power of having supportive people who will push you to channel anger and frustration into something productive, Lisa believes that PAI will create a new generation of young adults who will be ready to tackle 21st-century problems in a skilled and systematic way. Her job is to continue molding and perfecting the organization and its model to ensure that today's students will be ready to serve as tomorrow's leaders.