

Building the Next Generation of Education Leaders

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Summary

It was a difficult time to work in education in Philadelphia in 2011: news of a financial crisis, adult cheating on student assessments and failing leadership created a negative, divisive environment. Enter a small group of energetic and engaged Philadelphians who wanted to change the conversation about education in the city. The organization now known as PhillyCORE Leaders started over Google Chat exchanges among Claire Robertson-Kraft and a few of her colleagues who worked in and around Philadelphia schools. As emerging education leaders, they recognized a critical need to change the dialogue about the future of the city's schools. So they began formalizing their efforts and recruiting others. Today, the group has developed into a cohort of citywide leaders with similar characteristics—open-minded, proactive, collaborative—and shared values who were connected to each other through shared work. PhillyCORE Leaders serves as a support network and resource to its members while simultaneously helping to build a more positive and collaborative education community. Together,

members tackle key areas critical to improving academic outcomes for students by elevating innovative practice and empowering parents and community members with the information, resources and skills they need to make an impact.

Introduction

In 2011, Philadelphia's schools were going through a turbulent time. The headlines were dominated by a growing financial crisis in the school district, adult cheating on standardized tests and a multi-million dollar contract buyout of Superintendent Arlene Ackerman. In the media, as well as in communities, the tone of the dialogue about schools was negative, divisive and focused on the past. The most vocal leadership—including educators, policymakers, elected officials and advocates—were caught up in political brinksmanship and attempting to place blame for past mistakes instead of looking forward with solutions. In short, it was a difficult time to work in education in Philadelphia.

At the same time, a group of young, energetic and engaged Philadelphians started having a different conversation about the city's schools. "It started over GoogleChats between a few of us who were working in and around Philly's schools," said Claire Robertson-Kraft, a cofounder of PhillyCORE Leaders, a coalition of rising education leaders committed to building a more positive and collaborative education community. Growing

increasingly tired of attending events and meetings dominated by negative dialogue, Robertson-Kraft recalls the original driving question of the group, "What if those of us who think differently about the possibilities for our schools started getting together to have a positive, more forward-thinking conversation?"

Education was becoming a top issue for the growing population of younger Philadelphians, and this group of rising leaders recognized a critical need to change the dialogue about the future of the city's schools. According to the Pew 2013 State of the City report, over the past decade, the proportion of 20- to 34-year-olds in Philadelphia grew from 20% to 26% of the city's total population, and education was identified as one of, if not the most important, factor driving their decision to stay. Unfortunately, most of the news about Philly education was deficit-focused and not the kind that would inspire confidence in the Philly school system.

The leadership of PhillyCORE saw a different narrative. Across the city, rising leadership was committing to supporting Philly education for the long haul. Parent leaders were forming grassroots community groups, such as Friends of Chester Arthur and Friends of Mifflin, to support their local schools. Teacher leaders had organized (through groups like Teachers Lead Philly and the Teacher Action Group) to ensure that their voices were represented in the conversation. And Philly had developed a vibrant education entrepreneur community through the

support of co-working spaces, incubators and city-government-run programs like Startup PHL. In short, despite challenges, there was a strong foundation for change. "A negative culture will drive away talented people who want to improve the system because change seems so difficult," according to Robertson-Kraft. "We wanted to elevate the incredible work that was already happening across Philly education and find ways to support and scale these efforts." By leveraging the city's best asset—innovative, committed people—PhillyCORE's leadership believes that Philadelphia can become a model education community that transforms opportunities for all youth.

Despite their optimistic outlook, they recognize the considerable challenges facing the district. Indeed, there is no quick fix. Supporting sustainable change will require a long-term commitment to change.

The Problem

The poor educational outcomes of Philadelphia students are well-documented. Among students who graduate from the School District of Philadelphia, only one in ten students obtains a two- or four-year college degree. The most recent National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) standardized assessment, the annual Nation's Report Card, which compares student performance across states and cities, shows that Philadelphia students

perform below a majority of other large cities. Only 19% of Philadelphia's fourth graders are mastering grade-level math—compared with 44% of students across the state—and only 15% of fourth graders are reading at grade level, compared with 40% across the state. In addition, only about 10% of Black and Hispanic fourth grade students are reading at grade level, and only 12% of Black and 13% of Hispanic fourth grade students are mastering grade-level math (NCES, 2013).

To address these challenges and others, more than 1,600 education-related nonprofits are spending more than \$1.5 billion annually, according to the National Center for Charitable Statistics (<http://nccsweb.urban.org/>). These nonprofit organizations work alongside and around a public school system comprising more than 300 schools and employing about 15,000 teachers and administrators, as well as dozens of other social service agencies. In total, there are tens of thousands of people—and billions of dollars—working to improve education outcomes for Philadelphia's students.

Given the sheer number of people and organizations working in Philadelphia's K–12 education sector, stakeholders frequently operate in silos, leading to duplication of services and competition for scarce resources. Too often, individuals and organizations are working in isolated pockets across the city rather than collaborating in ways that would maximize their impact.

In Philadelphia, collaboration among education stakeholders usually occurs at the organizational level among leadership, including executive directors, elected officials and policymakers. Typically, this type of collaboration is transactional and short-lived. Leaders collaborate on behalf of their organizations for a short-term purpose rather than building trusting relationships focused on longer-term outcomes. While this is necessary work, it means that efforts are dependent on the capacity of organizations and that when leadership changes, the work starts from scratch.

Oftentimes, organizations convene to develop new strategies to address specific issues or develop new initiatives. For example, Project U-Turn (<http://www.pyninc.org/projectuturn/>), led by the Philadelphia Youth Network, is a citywide collaborative campaign that aims to direct public attention to the city's dropout crisis and develops strategies to address it. There are numerous such initiatives driven by a collaboration of partners, and involvement is determined based on the needs and resources of an organization, not individuals.

Similarly, education advocacy coalitions are formed to collaborate around strategies to change a specific local or state policy. Involvement in these efforts is determined by an organization's mission, so individuals opt in and opt out of collaborative efforts based on whether or not the mission of the effort aligns with the mission of their organization. For example, Our City Our Schools

(<http://ourcity-ourschools.org/our-priorities>) is a coalition of parent, community and student groups aligned around a specific set of policy changes, including fair and equitable funding for all schools.

Broader-based groups of decision-makers also convene to discuss pressing policy issues, but these conversations are usually not solution-oriented. "There's a lot of talk in the education community, but not always a lot of action," said Jon Cetel, executive director of PennCAN, a statewide education advocacy organization, and one of the founding members of PhillyCORE. "To break through and actually get something done, we need less polarizing rhetoric and more collaborative dialogue."

A different kind of collaboration

Unlike these coalitions, PhillyCORE aims to develop a new kind of collaboration by bringing together individuals—not representing their organizations—to work together around their shared mission, goals and activities. Members are emerging leaders working and/or volunteering in education. Many work for the organizations that drive education policy and practices across the city. In addition to their professional work, members commit to working together on PhillyCORE initiatives, which gives members shared purpose and helps to develop deeper relationships. "From the beginning, CORE was about getting stuff done, not just talking about solutions but actually working on them collaboratively," said Robertson-

Kraft. "So we initially sought out people who were optimistic, open-minded and probably most importantly, doers."

PhillyCORE built its initial membership through word of mouth and actively recruiting a diverse group of rising leaders from a variety of sectors and organizations. This year, the organization opened up its membership process and created a public application with three criteria for membership: (1) a personal commitment to Philadelphia; (2) a demonstrated commitment to education and youth services; and (3) a commitment to collaboration and relationship building despite differences with others.

This final criterion is the most intangible but arguably the most important factor that sets PhillyCORE Leaders apart from other local education coalitions. As the organization's membership application reads, "We believe that education leaders who are humble, able to find areas of common agreement and ready to work with and learn from other parts of the community will solve our city's most pressing education challenges. Therefore, our membership should reflect these values of inclusivity and collaboration for the common good."

The organization's leaders place a great value on open-mindedness and proactivity and specifically seek members who embrace these values. Unlike most coalitions, PhillyCORE intentionally seeks members with different, often contrasting perspectives and opinions. As

such, the organization attracted and convened a diverse group of about 50 members in its first full year of operation. Members comprise policy advisors and researchers, entrepreneurs developing innovative programs, teachers, school leaders, and parents.

Leadership

Perhaps PhillyCORE's greatest asset is its leadership. The president of PhillyCORE Leaders, Claire Robertson-Kraft, comes to the work with a deep passion for the issues—she is a former teacher and now studies education policy full-time. She is a PhD candidate in education policy at the University of Pennsylvania and the former chairperson of Young Involved Philadelphia, an all-volunteer organization that engages, connects and represents young Philadelphians. She led the organization for six years as it expanded its presence in Philadelphia, developed two large annual programs and became a leading voice of young Philadelphians.

From the onset, PhillyCORE was a shared endeavor, and leadership was distributed among a group of emerging leaders. The executive committee of PhillyCORE, a de facto board responsible for governance and strategic direction, predominantly comprises its founding members, the people who conceived of the idea over Google Chat. The committee includes an education policy advisor to the mayor, the executive director of a small family foundation, a parent, a special assistant to the

superintendent and an education entrepreneur. Like the broader membership, the leaders bring diverse perspectives but share the deeplyheld values of PhillyCORE: open-mindedness, collaboration, and proactivity. Above all else, they are the type of people who get things done.

Getting It Done: Build, Elevate, Empower

PhillyCORELeaders has a three-part mission; it is committed to improving education in Philadelphia by:

1. Building a diverse coalition of rising education leaders
2. Elevating promising practices and creating access through connections
3. Empowering stakeholders by connecting them with information, resources and skills

First, by building a diverse coalition of leaders who are committed to the long-term improvement of education in Philly, PhillyCORE is working to create a positive environment for education dialogue and cross-sector partnership. Most importantly, meaningful relationships develop between members, and PhillyCORE serves as a resource for them. The organization convenes members bimonthly to discuss challenges they are encountering in their work and provide opportunities to share innovations and skills with the broader membership. Past discussions

have focused on supporting teacher-led schools in Philadelphia and empowering parent and community leaders with specific skills. Given the organization's commitment to turning ideas into action, PhillyCORE is now collaborating with Teachers Lead Philly to develop a board preparation program to provide parent, community and teacher leaders with the skills and access they need to maximize their impact as leaders of organizations.

Second, PhillyCORE serves as a resource for innovative practices and promising strategies by elevating educators and community members who are making a difference for Philadelphia students. PhillyCORE members work year-round to elevate positive education news and practices through social media and other forms of storytelling. The organization's website is designed to serve as a hub for talent in the local education space by highlighting a "Spotlight of the Week" and posting career opportunities in Philadelphia education. "There's not enough focus on the good things happening in schools. Too much of the conversation is deficit-based instead of asset-based," said Robertson-Kraft. "If we want to attract and retain talent, we should talk about what is working and highlight evidence that change is possible. Philadelphia needs to be at the top of the list of cities where educators believe you can make transformational change."

PhillyCORE's annual event, in partnership with Philadelphia City Councilman Bill Green, SEED (Supporting Entrepreneurs in Education) crowd-sources

innovative ideas and uses crowd-funding to award micro-grants to entrepreneurs. The event spotlights innovative ideas and elevates teachers and entrepreneurs by giving them access to decision-makers, potential partners and new funding streams. PhillyCORE recently won a Startup PHL grant, designed to strengthen the city's entrepreneurial environment, from the City of Philadelphia to expand SEED into an incubator for innovative ideas in education. The grant funded one SEED event and will sponsor the two winners' participation in the Social Innovations Lab at the University of Pennsylvania's Fels Institute so they can fully develop business models and plans.

Third, PhillyCORE empowers key stakeholders with information, skills and resources to help improve schools. The organization has developed committees to provide key audiences—parents, teachers and innovators—with streamlined access to information and resources. For example, PhillyCORE convened local parent and community groups to discuss best practices and challenges to improving neighborhood schools. PhillyCORE is helping these grassroots organizations, who were all previously operating independently in their own communities, to share strategies and is providing information to support their local efforts.

Measuring short-term impact

How will PhillyCORE's leadership know that its model is

working? In the short term, PhillyCORE is measuring success against its three-part mission:

1. If PhillyCORE is truly building a diverse coalition of leaders, the membership profile will reflect the diversity of the education community and the city. Members will value the time they dedicate to the organization, as indicated by member retention. In addition, PhillyCORE is collecting information via a member survey, including the number of meaningful professional relationships and amount of trust established through PhillyCORE.
2. PhillyCORE is tracking the change in the numbers of positive stories in the media to measure the changing perception of Philadelphia's schools. Success elevating promising practices is also measured by the amount of funds raised and used to support these practices, including their direct impact on the teachers and entrepreneurs funded by the SEED event.
3. To measure the organization's ability to empower stakeholders by connecting them with each other and information, PhillyCORE is tracking the number of parents, teachers and community members reached through the board prep program and other informational events and is determining event satisfaction and value through surveys.

Immediate Impact: A Case Study

PhillyCORE's initial membership in 2011 included many entrepreneurs developing innovative programs and services for Philadelphia's schools and students, including Alejandro Gac-Artigas, founder of Springboard Collaborative. Gac-Artigas created the program to prevent the summer reading loss that he observed as a teacher; Springboard combines student reading instruction with parent training to close the literacy gap for low-income students in Philadelphia.

Gac-Artigas entered the PhillySEED competition in spring 2012 after its pilot program had served 42 students in summer 2011. The event allowed him to pitch Springboard to an audience of over 100 education stakeholders, including influential policymakers and funders. While the winner in the "Emerging Entrepreneur" category collected \$5,000 in seed money, Gac-Artigas earned a set of in-kind contributions and meetings as the winner in the "Established Entrepreneur" category.

As the winner, Gac-Artigas earned a meeting with Jeremy Nowak, then president of the William Penn Foundation, one of the largest grant-making organizations in Philadelphia. After the meeting, Nowak visited the program in the summer of 2012 as it expanded to serve 340 students in four schools, and he ultimately granted \$70,000 to Springboard, the organization's largest gift to date. "The SEED prize really speaks to Philly because we're a town that's about introductions and conversations," said Gac-Artigas. "But it's hard to build a

network quickly because it's hard to get enough credibility to meet with [decision-makers]. On my own, who knows how long it would have taken to track down Nowak. Maybe forever."

The grant from William Penn funded the new chief operating officer of Springboard as they prepared to expand into four additional schools the following year. The event also earned media attention for the organization and connected Gac-Artigas to more school operators and funders.

Gac-Artigas continues to build on Springboard's success as a member of PhillyCORE by developing new partnerships and gaining new revenue sources. He also leverages CORE members for advice and connections, leading to breakthrough opportunities for Springboard such as expansion of the program into the School District of Philadelphia.

"Information about how to navigate the district as a potential partner can be hard to come by, and different people have different perspectives on how it works," said Gac-Artigas. "PhillyCORE gave me a much better and cohesive understanding of that [district] process. There's also something that gives you hope and courage in being with a group of positive, optimistic people, especially in a place that doesn't always give you that narrative."

Long-term Vision and Outcomes

The full potential of PhillyCORE Leaders will be realized in ten to 20 years as members grow into citywide leadership roles. The organization's vision is to develop a cohort of leaders who (1) are open-minded, proactive and collaborative, (2) embrace PhillyCORE's values and (3) are deeply connected with and trust each other. Over the coming years, PhillyCORE will serve as a support network and resource to its members while helping members build leadership skills through practical leadership experience. The organization also helps members to access resources and decision-makers and as such allows rising leaders to expand their impact and influence.

The cohort model of leadership development in education is not new. It is frequently used in principal development programs to create a peer support network and improve collaboration across schools. By connecting earlier in their careers, developing leaders establish relationships and are more likely to work together later despite diverging career paths.

Increasingly, cross-sector collaboration is seen as a critical component of citywide, systemic change in education. Recently, the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation funded a multi-year initiative to support the design and implementation of District-Charter Collaboration Compacts (<http://www.crpe.org/portfolio/district-charter-collaboration>) in ten cities. These collaborations are aimed at breaking down long-existing silos and improving the citywide sharing of resources to better serve all students

equitably. Similarly, many cities are working to increase collaboration between school district leadership and teachers unions in order to improve teacher effectiveness and student learning. All of these cross-sector collaborations typically require overcoming historically adversarial relationships and rebuilding a base of trust that eroded long ago.

PhillyCORE aims to build a like-minded cohort of connected leaders in Philadelphia who can individually leverage a support network of peers and collectively embrace transformational change. As a result, Philadelphia's educational community will be more collaborative and willing to embrace innovation and change and will attract more talented leaders and educators.

In the longrun, talented educators will be attracted to teaching and leading Philadelphia's schools, and families will choose to send their children to schools in the city. Families will be invested in Philadelphia education, building equity in their schools and communities. Innovations will lead to better schools. "Our vision is that a new kind of citywide leadership will improve the recruitment and retention of talent, build families' investment in the schools and increase innovation across the system," said Robertson-Kraft. "Ultimately, these will all lead to improved outcomes for students over the longterm."

Opportunities for replication

Organizations like PhillyCORE exist in other cities, such as Young Education Professionals, which started in Washington, DC and now has thousands of members in eight cities. However, these organizations are primarily focused on networking and connecting young education professionals, with less emphasis on working together on specific projects and initiatives. At present, PhillyCORE Leaders does not intend to expand to other cities or replicate the model; however, it could serve as a model for a similar group in another large city.

Financial model and return on investment

Improved citywide leadership can have an exponential impact. Research shows that effective district leadership—even just an effective superintendent alone—can positively impact student achievement across a district. An improvement in citywide educational outcomes can have significant financial returns for the region. According to a 2011 study from the Alliance for Excellent Education, decreasing the number of high school dropouts can increase tax revenues and GDP as a result. In Philadelphia, decreasing the number of dropouts in just one high school class by 50% will lead to combined annual lifetime earnings of \$132 million and a \$15 million increase in tax revenue. This leads to a more than \$175 million growth in

GDP.

Risks & Challenges: Policy

Can an innovation drive positive change without explicitly driving policy changes? Given its diverse base of members, PhillyCORE Leaders does not have a cohesive policy platform to engage in advocacy efforts. Although many of the organization's members are professionally or personally involved in advocacy, the organization strives to remain neutral, especially on the most deeply contested issues. This is due to the potential conflict for individual members whose own organizations might prevent them from engaging in advocacy and to the nature of a broad-based civic coalition.

Research from the American Enterprise Institute shows that education reform coalitions can face "a trade-off between coalitional breadth and cohesion...A coalition with a focused agenda built around a core of shared beliefs may be capable of concerted action and policy learning, but may be unable to build alliances with groups that do not share the coalition members' core policy beliefs." In order to build a broad-based coalition like PhillyCORE Leaders, the organization will likely need to sacrifice a focused policy agenda.

However, PhillyCORE's leadership recognizes that the organization must have a voice in the citywide dialogue in order to be relevant and serve its mission. It will face the

ongoing challenge of balancing its goal of diversity while creating a relevant voice. "As we grow and expand, we'll have to continue to ask ourselves this question: How do we shift the public dialogue in a way that represents our diverse membership?" said Robertson-Kraft. "One misstep can alienate an entire group of stakeholders, undermining all our work. But not giving a united voice to this group would be missing a huge opportunity to create a more proactive, positive narrative about our schools."

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