

Leveraging Community Partnerships to Improve Graduation Rates

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Preparing high school students for college and career is a key area in which community-school partnerships can make a crucial difference, creating opportunities for exposure, real-world experience and postsecondary access support that most Philadelphia youth would not have otherwise. South Philadelphia High School (SPHS) Principal Otis Hackney and counselor Pierre LaRocco, who is in charge of partnerships, have embraced this potential and made their diverse and vibrant school a model for collaboration. With support from staff and member organizations of the Southeast Philadelphia Collaborative, SPHS began convening monthly provider meetings three years ago. Those meetings—focused on building knowledge and increasing communication among the agencies providing services at the school—grew so large that work groups were formed this school year to focus shared efforts around climate and postsecondary supports. Sunrise of Philadelphia, a city- and state-funded out-of-school time (OST) program provider, joined the school as an on-site partner in fall 2013 and is working with the school and other partners to build innovative and

collaborative models to help more students stay on track and graduate with the skills they need to succeed in postsecondary education and careers.

Community partnerships at South Philadelphia High School represent the opportunity to align resources to address student needs, especially during a time of change and cutbacks in public funding for both school and nonprofits. SPHS faces challenges common to too many urban public high schools—concentrated poverty (94 percent of students qualify as economically disadvantaged), low graduation rates (53 percent for a four-year cohort rate) and only 31 percent of students matriculating into college (School District of Philadelphia, n.d.). As both an asset and a challenge, the diverse student body includes over 17 different languages and ethnicities, with a large number of immigrant and refugee families, including a recent surge in Bhutanese immigrants. Positive progress related to school climate and academic expectations is reflected in steady increases in daily attendance since Hackney became principal in 2010, going from 77.8 percent in 2010-11 to 85.7 percent in 2012-13. At the same time as school district budget cuts reduced ratios of support staff at the school, SPHS' enrollment jumped from just over 600 students to more than 1,000 at the start of the 2013-14 school year with the integration of students from Bok High School, a career and technical education school a few blocks away that the School Reform Commission voted to

close in spring 2013. The SPHS administration has invited partners to actively support the integration of different student populations over the past school year, while also working to coordinate and expand postsecondary supports.

Sunrise, founded by former Bok administrators operating under a community school model, had based their operations at that school since the organization's founding in 1999. With Bok's closing, Sunrise seized the opportunity to work directly with a neighborhood-based feeder school pair and shifted operations to Southwark Elementary and South Philadelphia High. Strong relationships and a reputation for quality programming facilitated a shift in operational sites and staff structure, while maintaining uninterrupted programming and also establishing the organization as a key partner with the new host schools. As an embedded provider in the schools, Sunrise works closely with administrators and other on-site partners for planning, coordination and communication regarding students. All of these factors enhance the potential impact for already-strong program offerings, now connected in a college and career pathways model that especially focuses on the transition from middle to high school.

SPHS offered Sunrise the opportunity to move into program space vacated when funding for the Project Grad site ended as of June 2013, which had resulted in the loss of full-time staff who had supported students with college

access during the school day. Sunrise established the space as a hub for programming and staff, including career-focused OST clubs, credit recovery and a Teen Lounge. Increasing college access exposure and supports had been a goal for Sunrise going into the new school, with the attempt to achieve greater reach by taking a collaborative approach. Sunrise's current program funding focuses only on the OST time hours, while other resources—such as the Free Library's College Access program—serve students during the day as well. Through personal discussions and shared planning as part of the school's Post-Secondary Workgroup, partners scheduled rotating staffing to facilitate use of the program space and computer resources to support college access during the day. Collaboration also expanded and deepened support after school, through Career and College Wednesdays. Staff from Sunrise, City Year and the Free Library worked together to create a weekly calendar of related workshops and to organize a college fair as well as college visits. Close communication with school administrators ensures alignment of these efforts with the school's goals.

Keys to success for the coordinated partner efforts at SPHS include the administration's desire for collaboration, establishing and working from the idea that SPHS is everyone's school, the partners sharing space and being responsive when asked to take on new roles and the school's including partners in communication like email listservs and convening inclusive school-wide visioning

sessions.

As the next chapter of SPHS collaboration, Sunrise is working with partners and school staff at both SPHS and feeder schools to launch a summer bridge program known as Jumpstart, which targets incoming ninth graders identified as needing additional support to make a successful transition to high school. The JumpStart program will run for seven weeks this summer, utilizing high school and college mentors, as well as SPHS teachers, to provide a lively and interactive introduction to the 21st century skills needed to succeed in achieving education and career goals. To help students start on the right foot and manage the social and academic pressures of the transition to high school, Sunrise and SPHS plan to continue targeted supports during the school year and ultimately ensure that more students stay on track to high school graduation and prepare for college and career.

References

School District of Philadelphia. (n.d.). School profile: South Philadelphia High School. Philadelphia, PA.

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