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Successes at a Big-City System

Focus, Funding Help Turn Around Nation's 8th-Largest School District

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PHILADELPHIA -- Darren Romero could see this was no ordinary parent-teacher meeting.

Romero had left his construction job early, having been summoned to M. Hall Stanton Elementary School with a call that his first-grade son, Darren Jr., had fallen behind in reading and math. Now, a large screen flashed video footage of Darren coloring with markers when he should have been working on a money-counting exercise. The teacher pointed to a chart showing Darren's reading level, far below where he should be at this point in the school year.

Then the teacher, principal, literacy coach and other parents shared ideas for helping Darren -- one-on-one tutoring, books on tape that the school could lend, and a clever trick that involved speaking into a curved plastic PVC pipe so he could hear himself read.

This kind of meeting is part of a broad range of reforms introduced in the [Philadelphia](#) public schools targeting the lowest-performing students. After five years of intense focus, the strategy in the nation's eighth-largest school district is bearing fruit: Citywide, the number of students reaching "proficient" and "advanced" levels on the [Pennsylvania](#) state tests has risen steadily -- in some grades outpacing the average improvements statewide.

As [D.C. Mayor Adrian M. Fenty](#) (D) implements his plan to seize control of the struggling public schools, Philadelphia and a handful of other cities are showing signs that it is possible to repair broken school districts, but only through extraordinary effort.

The school systems making the largest gains are united by some common threads: Government and school leaders have set aside differences and harnessed their power behind reforms, superintendents have brought an intense, persuasive leadership style to the process, and efforts have concentrated on raising the test scores of the lowest-performing students.

But Philadelphia also illustrates how hard it can be to sustain improvements. The superintendent credited with much of the gain, Paul Vallas, is leaving the city this month as budget projections show a large deficit threatening his reform program.

Much like Washington's, Philadelphia's public schools have grappled with a daunting assortment of challenges. Five years ago, the 177,000-student district was in such disarray -- with deteriorating buildings, dysfunctional operating systems and dismal test scores -- that the state seized control of the system, which was already in the hands of the mayor.

For years, the Democratic mayor who controlled the schools had pressed the state for more money. The Republican governor said he wouldn't put any more money into such a poorly run district.

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They reached a compromise in late 2001: The mayor got the money he needed, and the governor got the accountability he wanted, with the power to appoint a majority of the members on a commission established to run the district.

Over the past five years, the state and the city have kicked in an additional \$500 million for reforms.

In 2002, the district appointed Vallas as its chief executive, and he quickly introduced new curricula aligned with Pennsylvania's academic standards and assessments. Teachers receive a guide detailing what lessons they are to teach every week. Vallas doubled the periods for math and reading to 90 minutes. He required schools to test students every two weeks to determine whether they -- or their teachers -- need help. And he expanded some existing programs that were showing results, such as intervention meetings like the one with the Romero family.

Philadelphia students have made steady gains on the state test since 2001, the year before the reforms were introduced. The number of eighth-graders reaching "proficiency" or above in reading, for example, rose 21 percentage points. At the same time, the number of eighth-graders who fell below "basic" levels declined 24 percentage points.

During the past four years, the number of Philadelphia schools making "adequate yearly progress" under the federal No Child Left Behind law soared from 26 to 166. In the District, just 28 of 146 schools met that standard in 2006.

Philadelphia still faces serious challenges, especially maintaining student progress while balancing the budget.

But its strategies succeeded in transforming schools such as M. Hall Stanton. Surrounded by run-down and boarded-up rowhouses in North Philadelphia, the school used to be a place where teachers feared students and where failure was rampant. One recent morning, the halls and classrooms were calm and orderly. More students are on the honor roll. Test scores are among the best in the city. And much of the improvement reflects the new attention to low-performing students, school officials say.

A few weeks after the intervention meeting, Romero said his son was showing progress. "We're using the PVC pipe," Romero said. Darren Jr. is "sounding out his words" with the device. "You can hear yourself. You can get the vowels and sounds extra clear."

Michael Casserly, executive director of the Council of the Great City Schools, a Washington-based organization that has worked with the school system on its reform efforts, said Philadelphia "hasn't reached the promised land. They have a long way to go. But they've made enormous strides over the last few years."

"If you can do this in a place as big and tough as Philadelphia," he said, "there's no reason not to make progress instructionally in a school system like D.C."

A New Wave of Reform

Two decades ago, an earlier wave of school reform was sparked across the country by "A Nation at Risk," a widely circulated 1983 federal report that warned how growing mediocrity in education "threatens our very future as a nation and as a people."

The report cited statistics illustrating the failures of schools: [U.S.](#) students ranking last on numerous international achievement tests, math and verbal SAT scores dropping steadily from 1963 to 1980 and a dramatic rise in the number of remedial courses required for high school graduates entering colleges and in the military.

The report recommended rigorous standards, more time in school and increased focus on core courses. An array of reforms followed, creating a hodgepodge in districts, with instruction varying widely from school to school and classroom to classroom.

Now, in a reversal of that trend, largely driven by states' attempts to comply with the No Child Left Behind law, school systems are standardizing instruction, with a primary aim of helping failing students.

In [Miami](#), Superintendent Rudolph F. Crew raised test scores by requiring the lowest-performing schools to extend the day by one hour and the year by 10 days. He gave teachers the option of transferring out, then boosted pay by 20 percent to attract replacements committed to the cause. He recruited retired teachers to be tutors and added a cadre of social workers, psychologists and anti-gang specialists.

In [Richmond](#), scores rose as schools began following a standardized curriculum and a pacing chart detailing what lessons should be taught every day.

In Philadelphia, school leaders have gone to great lengths to motivate students. On a recent morning, Stanton Elementary Principal Barbara B. Adderley stood on the auditorium stage, in front of blue and gold curtains, beaming. "I'm so proud of you boys and girls -- you've done such a good job," she told students at an awards ceremony.

She passed out prizes, including backpacks and crayons, to students with the most improved grades. She drew loud cheers when two teachers rolled in from the wings on boys' and girls' bikes. She said students with perfect attendance during state testing week would have a chance to win them.

Six years ago, when she became principal, she said, the environment was so chaotic that some teachers let students eat lunch in the classroom to keep them safe from fights. She said she started to see a reduction in absenteeism and violence when she divided students into three "academies," allowing them to get more individual attention in the smaller groupings.

Last year, 70 percent of [Stanton](#) fifth-graders scored at or above state targets in reading, compared with 13 percent in 2003.

Downsizing High Schools

Not far from Stanton, Strawberry Mansion High School Principal Lois Powell Mondesire welcomed students as they walked through metal detectors on a recent morning. The point of her greeting was not all social: Two neighborhood shootings had occurred the night before, and Mondesire wanted to make sure that no street beefs were brought into school.

In the freshman academy on the fourth floor, William Withers, 16, was conferring with a mentor from a nonprofit education advocacy group, a recent high school graduate. The mentor looked at Withers's A, D and two F's and urged him to sign up for tutoring during lunch or after school.

The freshman academy is separate from the rest of the school, and students receive remedial course work and other help to get them on grade level. A month later, after receiving tutoring, Withers had brought up his D and F's, said his mother, Christenea Blakeley.

Strawberry Mansion's enrollment has been downsized from about 2,500 to 560, part of an effort to establish more personalized high schools. The district is accomplishing that by phasing out middle schools, where large enrollments and frequent violence have made them the most troubled schools. It has been moving sixth-through eighth-graders to elementary schools and thus far converted 30 middle schools into high schools.

The incidence of violence at Strawberry Mansion has dropped dramatically, Mondesire said. Based on the

school's previous designation as a "persistently dangerous" school, the district assigned about 12 security guards to the building. Reports of violence have declined by more than 80 percent, Mondesire said, prompting the district to reduce the number of guards to nine. She also attributes the declining violence to the lower enrollment and the separation of students into four academies.

"One of the reasons we had many of the problems before was that a lot of kids -- especially ninth-grade kids -- got lost in the shuffle, and problems would escalate," said Marshall Album, the school's assistant principal, who is in charge of discipline.

"We make sure we know the students," he added. "The respect for the students goes a long way in establishing a [peaceful] environment."

Reggie Mays, an 18-year-old senior, said getting individual attention from Mondesire and teachers has helped transform him from a D student into a B student. In fact, 53 percent of Strawberry Mansion's 11th-graders met or exceeded state targets in math, up from 13 percent in 2003, surpassing the state average.

During his freshman year at the school, Mays said, he went through lots of turmoil at home and was "out of control" at school, repeatedly getting suspended. In his neighborhood nearby, he said, "I've seen people shot, stabbed -- I've seen it all."

In the 10th grade, he signed up for the school's law academy, where he said he received lots of academic and personal support. Prominent Philadelphia lawyers mentored him, inspiring him to pursue his dream of practicing law. Every day, he said, Mondesire and several teachers tutored him. He now takes the role of prosecutor and defense lawyer in the mock trial program.

Earlier this year, he said, Mondesire and other administrators intervened to keep him at Strawberry Mansion when he was moved into foster care and would have been sent to a school across town.

Without the help, Mays said, "I'd be locked up or doing something illegal. . . . I wouldn't have anything to strive for to keep me going."

None of the Philadelphia reforms came cheap.

"Reform costs money," said Jim Nevels, chairman of the city's School Reform Commission. "There has to be an understanding that there have to be funding sources."

Still, even with the progress, the relationship between Vallas and government leaders collapsed over escalating costs of reforms. State officials predict a \$192 million deficit if no action is taken. Facing a huge deficit itself, the state might not be able to maintain funding levels for existing reforms or provide the hundreds of millions of dollars Vallas sought for a new round of reforms.

Rather than contend with the possible gutting of his reforms, Vallas opted to quit.

"It's tough," he said. "We're at the stage in our reform" where it cannot go further without adequate funding. He believes that his changes have raised achievement as much as possible and that further gains will require money to expand after-school and summer programs and to reduce class sizes.

Vallas, who will leave by the end of the month, has signed on for another difficult assignment: rebuilding the [New Orleans](#) school system.

In his three years as D.C. school superintendent, [Clifford B. Janey](#) has pushed some of the same strategies, introducing new standards and testing. Student Support Teams, the D.C. version of intervention meetings, have been credited with reducing the number of students referred to special-education programs. Freshman

academies introduced this school year have been applauded by parents but are too new to measure results.

Janey has proposed converting low-performing senior high schools into academies that could offer students more personalized attention and job training. Eastern High in Northeast, for instance, would become a Latin academy, and Anacostia High in Southeast would become a health and medical science academy. But, bogged down in the planning stages, they have yet to be implemented.

When Janey asked the city for an additional \$38 million for his reforms, he was turned down.


Thomas M. Brady, former chief business operations officer in the D.C. system who recently was named interim superintendent to replace Vallas, said he believes Janey's reforms have been dragged down by major problems in hiring, payroll, facilities and procurement.

"If you don't fix the backroom and just focus on academics, the system won't be there to sustain the initiatives you're trying to do," he said.

Test scores in the District are up, but not by as much as those in other urban systems.

"School reform doesn't need a lot of study. . . . We know what works and what doesn't work," said Vallas, who previously had served as chief executive of the [Chicago](#) public schools. "You bring in action people who can deliver -- people with a track record for getting things done."

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