

Foreword

I confess. I do not come to this foreword with any pretense of objectivity or neutrality. I am a third-generation Philadelphian on both sides of my family. My surviving grandparents came to Philadelphia as a part of the Great Migration in the 1920s.¹ My mother lived eighty-five of her ninety years there, and my father lived seventy-one of his eighty-five years there. Although they reminisced fondly about South Carolina, they were Philadelphians, and it never occurred to them to live anywhere else. My brother and I grew up in West Philadelphia in the 1950s and 1960s. We attended public schools there, graduated, and went on to college. Although I went out of state for college, I returned after graduation to begin my career as a teacher in the same school district in which I was educated.

I returned to teach in Philadelphia in 1968, one year into the time frame of this volume. The year 1967 marked a major Black student protest in the city. Black students across the school district walked out of their high schools and converged on the School District of Philadelphia's stately art deco building at 21st Street and the Benjamin Franklin Parkway. For those unfamiliar with the Parkway, it is the promenade that is lined with major cultural institutions—the main branch of the Free Library of Philadelphia, the Museum of Natural History, the Cathedral Basilica of Saints Peter and Paul, the Rodin Museum, the Horwitz-Wasserman Holocaust Memorial Plaza, the Franklin Institute and Fels Planetarium, and the Moore College of Art & Design—and that culminates at the iconic Philadelphia Museum of Art, where Sylvester Stallone's character, Rocky, ran the stairs and pumped triumph fists at the end of his workout.

On November 17, 1967, the Philadelphia Police Department estimated that some 3,500 students—Black and white and from public schools, Catholic schools, middle schools, and high schools—converged on the school district building to demand an end to tracking that regularly prevented Black students from entering college, improvements in the facilities in schools serving Black and poor students, and the inclusion of Black history and culture in the curriculum. By the time I entered the school district the following fall,

changes had already begun to happen. The people who had been working on Black history curriculum were moved out of the social studies office into the new office of African American studies. William Green and Gwendolyn Brightful led that office for many years and produced curricula that spanned social studies, literature, art, and music. It may have been one of the only standalone offices of African American studies in a public school district.

When I was hired, the school district was led by two “progressives”²—Superintendent Mark Shedd and the very well regarded (by liberals) Ricardson Dilworth as president of the Board of Education. Dilworth had previously served as mayor of the city. They inherited a school district embroiled in scandal and locked in a struggle with the federal government over its maintenance of racial segregation. The district was about 70 percent Black and other students of color, and its teachers were about 70 percent white. It was a large district serving 280,000 students in about 280 schools. (Today the district has about 119,492 students enrolled in its schools with another 80,000 students enrolled in charter and cyber charter schools.) The 1968 district reflected the reality of the 1968 neighborhoods. They were deeply segregated by race, and many communities actively resisted school busing. In an attempt to alleviate segregation among the teaching staffs, the school district restricted the placement of new hires. Despite growing up in West Philadelphia, I could not be assigned to any vacancies in West Philadelphia. Thus, my first teaching assignment was in South Philadelphia in a white, ethnic, working-class community. My students proudly identified as Italian, Irish, and Polish Americans. A few Black students were bused to my school, but they were never really accepted as a part of the school community. As tough as my first year was in my attempt to negotiate the racial climate at my school (yes, I was called the “n-word” by a number of parents), I recall a variety of professional development opportunities that Superintendent Shedd required for all new teachers. Once a month, all new teachers were required to attend professional development sessions. Those early professional development experiences taught me that even a big, bureaucratic organization could strive to meet the specific needs of individual members. Unfortunately, the most draconian, almost neofascist candidate in the city’s history, Frank L. Rizzo, decided to run for mayor on a platform vowing to get rid of both the superintendent and the Board of Education president.

His win signaled the move away from progressive reform ideas in the schools to what was known as the “back to basics” movement.

I spent ten years as a teacher in the School District of Philadelphia. During that time, I had various roles—classroom teacher, reading specialist, and social studies consultant. I also had an opportunity to watch the various political moves and scandals that emerged in the district. After the firing of Mark Shedd came the appointment of Matthew Costanzo (who incidentally was my brother’s eighth-grade math teacher) as superintendent, the firing of Costanzo as he lay flat on his back in the hospital, the hiring of Michael Marcase (who was an industrial arts teacher at my high school), and the issue of his having received a doctoral degree via what was then a correspondence school. Later, Marcase came under federal investigation for having district maintenance personnel work on his New Jersey shore vacation home.

While the superintendency seemed in turmoil, *Philadelphia Magazine* wrote an exposé on the Board of Education sometime in the early 1970s. Unlike most municipalities, Philadelphia has an appointed school board of nine members. The appointments are made by the mayor, and historically major political donors and interest groups have lobbied for specific appointments. The magazine article revealed that the board, at that time comprise primarily of white men, had at least one member who did not even live in the city. He operated a dental practice in Philadelphia but lived in New Jersey.

Although the board members do not receive a salary, there were many perks. For the nine board members, the school district purchased eleven Chrysler New Yorkers and hired nine chauffeurs at a salary greater than that of a beginning teacher. When asked why eleven cars for nine people, the board president insisted that there must be an available car in case one or two were out of commission. An audit revealed that a frequent destination for the cars was Atlantic City, where board members had “meetings” since apparently there was no place to meet in the City of Philadelphia. Each board member was given an American Express corporate card, and the audit of those bills also showed extravagant dinners and entertainment expenses at the New Jersey shore. A climate of corruption is something that Philadelphians have grown accustomed to, and it was so entrenched that it is difficult to see how schools could ever improve.

The work of this volume is to describe what has transpired in Philly schools since 1967, through the 1980s when a Black woman, Constance Clayton, took the reins, followed by a series of “reformers.” Although I knew Dr. Clayton (she was the head of early childhood education when I was a social studies consultant), I was no longer living in Philadelphia when she became superintendent. I worked in Philadelphia through two teachers’ strikes and the clash of the mayor and the teachers’ union representatives. I witnessed the district struggle with white flight and a shrinking tax base. I watched from the other side of the country as the district bounced from one scandal to the next. As a graduate student, I began to look at big school districts from another vantage point. I could see that San Francisco, Oakland, Los Angeles, Houston, and Chicago shared some unfortunate similarities with Philadelphia.

Big urban districts all seem to be drowning in bureaucracy, and as a consequence they are rarely nimble. Each of them grapples with rapidly changing demographics—becoming more Black and Brown not just because of birth rates but also because white families began seeking nonpublic options. In San Francisco, for example, the overall city population is about 45 percent white, but the public school population in the city is only 15 percent white. The white community is deserting the urban public schools both physically and in terms of economic support. The moves toward charter schools and choice also represent an attempt to appease white families, but often the largest users of these options are Black and Brown families. White families choose to leave cities altogether and find what they want in suburban districts.

For me, the saddest part of deteriorating support for public schools is the loss of the vision of the schools as democratizing and equalizing agencies that had the possibility of fostering social mobility. My generation, the baby boomers, may have been the last that realized the full benefits of public schooling in big cities. When we graduated from high school, we entered a robust economy bolstered by Lyndon Johnson’s Great Society. We became the generation that was able to take advantage of the work of civil rights struggles and a nation that showed some level of remorse for horrific way it had treated its citizens of color, especially those who were Black, Latinx, and Indigenous. I had high school friends who decided not to attend college but were able to get good jobs that would eventually support families and allow them to purchase homes and cars. In short, their high school diplomas meant a ticket to

the American dream. My earning a bachelor's degree almost assuredly guaranteed me financial stability and social advancement.

Today, we look at students graduating from schools in districts like Philadelphia and worry that their diplomas are not worth the paper on which they are written. Are the students prepared to enter postsecondary education or the world of productive work? Have they been well served by the public system that their parents and community have paid into? Does the constant churning of school leadership, fiscal mismanagement, and cheating scandals mean we should give up on public schooling? Surprisingly, I maintain just enough hope to believe the catastrophe of the COVID-19 pandemic may be just the crisis that can force us to utterly redo our schools so that we might be more responsive to this next generation of young people.

Watching our youth take to the streets in the summer of 2020 with protests sparked by the brutal murders of George Floyd, Ahmaud Arbury, and Breonna Taylor convinces me that our young people are among the world's best and brightest. I believe they are hungry to learn important knowledge and skills that can reshape our society and save our planet. I believe adults owe them a real opportunity to become the citizens we need them to be.

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