

Setting the Record Straight – The School District of Philadelphia (“SDP”), *circa* 2008.

September 2, 2011

As a general rule, I avoid commenting on the performance and policies of the superintendents who have preceded and succeeded me in the various school districts that I have run. However, a recent video (produced with school district funds!) that presents “The Dr. Ackerman Record,” takes major liberties with the truth. While I will not comment on the accuracy of the video's narrative about “The Ackerman Record,” there is certainly enough public information in Philly dailies and other publications to give that a going over. I will instead vigorously challenge her assertions that she inherited a troubled district. In fact, nothing can be further from the truth.

The Budget

Dr. Ackerman inherited a budget that was balanced, and had been for two years prior to her arrival. The alleged “great budget deficit of 2007,” was actually a mid-year revision of the originally projected \$20 million dollar deficit, to \$73 million, against a budget of \$2.5 billion. This *temporarily* larger shortfall was largely due to delayed State Plan Con reimbursement, delayed property sale revenue and greater-than-projected early retirement payouts.

The *final* budget deficit in 2007 was *less* than the originally projected \$20 million, and was followed by two years of balanced budgets.

More importantly, the balanced budgets were based on minimal one-time revenues (less than 1%) and with no additional financial assistance from the city over that five-year period. It's important to remember that my team was recruited to come to Philadelphia in 2002, one year after the State takeover. Unlike Dr. Ackerman, we inherited a sizeable budget deficit of \$132 million *and* a \$300 million deficit financing bond obligation, requiring eventual repayment.

Facilities

In addition to leaving the district financially healthy in 2007, my team left the district with a fully funded \$1.7 billion school construction program. We raised all of the money to fund this program by

refinancing bonds, and creatively restructuring the district's financing of old debt. We did not raise a single tax, and received no monies from the city in the process of financing what became the largest school construction initiative in SDP history. Nor did we divert any money from the classroom to fund this plan. Every construction or renovation project "ribbon cutting" or groundbreaking "photo op" that our successors enjoyed, was funded by money my team secured through smart, creative and efficient money management.

Test Scores

SDP has achieved nine straight years of test score increases, the first six of which came during my team's tenure. These consistent, now almost predictable increases can be attributed to a *system*, which Dr. Ackerman inherited. My team, led by Ceil Cannon, Associate Superintendent for Curriculum and Instruction, under the leadership of Chief Academic Officers Ed Williams and Gregory Thornton, designed and established a (Pre K-12) data driven curriculum and instructional management system. The cutting edge curriculum included prescribed interventions, designed to ensure that *all* teachers in traditional schools had the materials needed to deliver quality instruction. The standardized nature of the *system* my highly talented educators created ensures – today! – that children continue to benefit from the high quality curriculum, interventions and materials even if they move from school one school to another within the district.

The curriculum developed by the Cannon, Williams and Thornton team was so highly regarded that the school district in Pittsburg bought it from us, as did several other districts in and outside of the state. Governor Ed Rendell bragged in 2005 that the number of new children meeting or exceeding the State standards (since our reforms had begun three years prior) exceeded the entire population of the school district of Pittsburg! The system we started in 2002 has produced strong test score growth each year for nine years in SDP! And, out of the 50 largest districts in the US, in both test scores and graduation rates, since we began implementing these reform in 2002, Philadelphia has ranked at the top, when compared to our respective State gains.

High Schools

Dr. Ackerman inherited a district where high school test scores had risen for five consecutive years upon her arrival. The credit for this goes to the leadership of Chief Academic Officers CregeWilliams and Al Biechner, the architects of our high school reforms. Those reforms included the nation's first, data driven, standardized "*large district high school*" curriculum and instruction program. And, just like our elementary grade curriculum reforms, our high school reforms proved so effective that Kaplan, the education company who partnered with us in its development, sold it to other districts nationwide.

In addition the curriculum, Dr. Ackerman inherited the 33 new small high schools (including 19 charters) that we opened. These new small schools achieved our goal of significantly downsizing and depopulating large, traditional, and poorly performing comprehensive high schools, expanding high quality secondary school choice options, and provided students with safer high school learning environments. We also opened a network of alternative schools and created alternative placements for dangerous and disruptive youth (with a daily population of more than 3,000 students) so that all schools could have relief and experience improved school safety and climate.

School Climate

We didn't solve all the problems of school climate, but we had significant success. Dr. Ackerman inherited our "mandated reporting policy" for all incidents, on or off school grounds, with its strict provision for the discipline or even termination of school leaders who failed to comply. We set up 24/7 "complaint hotlines" so that faculty, students or parents could be heard. We created 24/7 "crisis intervention teams," and even extended the services on occasion to parochial schools. We established a 24/7 "Zero Tolerance Policy" that expelled students to alternative schools for certain offenses, even if the offender acted off school property or during non school hours. We partnered with the faith-based community ("Two Church Per School Program"), the District Attorney's Office, the Police Department of Philadelphia and its sister agencies.

Dr. Ackerman inherited the largest after school and summer school program in the SDP history, which we opened in an effort to keep kids off of the streets. We tripled the number of clubs and more than

doubled the number of athletic teams, in an effort to keep students engaged and involved. We even introduced previously unavailable offerings such as crew, lacrosse and ice hockey. The new, smaller high schools, combined with the proliferation of sports and clubs dramatically increased the number of students involved in extra curricular activities. The dramatic increase in extra curricular activity extended even into the middle grades, where many of these activities were introduced for the first time.

Our comprehensive focus on school climate left the SDP with improved student behavior as measured by declining incident reports, and a significant improvement in student attitudes reflected in dramatic improvement in test scores and increased graduation rates.

School Choice

Dr. Ackerman inherited a system that included the nearly 60 new charter schools we opened and provided with unprecedented support. The support included assistance with securing facilities, access to our curriculum and instructional programs, permission to participate in our school climate initiatives, crisis intervention services and the zero tolerance program. We set a high bar by aggressively resisting pressure to approve mediocre charter proposals and held charters to the same accountability standards as traditional schools. We never displaced children in an existing building when the school converted to a charter. As a result, the overwhelming majority of our charters were non controversial and successful. Our charters as a group experienced dramatic test score growth that matched the growth experienced by the district's traditional schools and far exceeded that of the State. We accomplished all of this without demonizing teachers in the traditional schools and in partnership with the Teacher's Union leadership and members.

Community Relations

Given our commitment to accessibility to the community, and corresponding decision to make the "Senior Management Team" available to the press and public at all times, we reinvented the "communications office" into a "community relations and public service office." Under the leadership of Cecilia Cummings, this office supported local school councils, managed the schools crisis fund,

provided crisis intervention, emergency family support services and managed the parent/community and student hotlines. The office conducted parent leadership training and built the interfaith network. It provided services and financial assistance to any family of an SDP student victimized by violence, and paid for some tragically necessary funerals. It posted rewards for the arrest and conviction of those responsible for crimes against our students.

My staff was expected to be on call for emergencies 24/7. I am considered idiosyncratic by many, for giving my personal email address and phone numbers, to practically anyone who asked for it, including local school council members, ministers, community leaders – not to mention regular parents and students who I had met at a community meeting or at school. My wife can confirm that we fielded more than 5,000 messages to personal email addresses during my tenure at SDP.

Conclusion

We didn't solve all the problems of the SDP but my team revitalized a district by making great progress, and created a district that showed great promise. We closed huge budget deficits, corrected structural problems, gave the SDP the largest school construction program in its history without raising taxes, dramatically expanded school choice, opened a significant number of new high quality high school options and implemented an education plan that brought about the largest big city school district test score improvement in the nation, with no testing controversy. We did it with the most talented and diversified leadership team in SDP history who actively worked to unite, rather than to divide the community and thought it wiser to support, rather than to alienate, teachers. And, if imitation is the truly the greatest form of flattery, we feel proud that other districts purchased and adopted our curriculum with great success. We admire how education companies such as School Net, Voyager, Fast Forward, Scholastic and others are using their SDP experience and success to grow their businesses by securing work in other districts. Charter providers are using their SDP successes as models to open high quality charter schools all over the country. Teach for America was so impressed with the progress of our reforms that they decided to conduct their East Coast summer training program for 700 new teachers in Philadelphia, as part of our summer school program.

In spite of this, for me personally, the result that makes me the most proud is that, to date, 11 former member of my Philadelphia team have been hired to run their own districts, and 9 of them are still employed as school superintendents today. Their districts have included Camden, Milwaukee, Providence and St. Louis and high profile local suburban districts such as Radnor, Lower Merion and Norristown.

In 2007, the SDP, financially sound and academically advancing with its combination of rapidly improving traditional schools, charter schools and small high schools, was a district on an upward trajectory. SDP was “THE” Promise District. That is the district Dr. Ackerman inherited.

Paul G. Vallas