

Improving Student Achievement:

We must position Philadelphia public school students for lifelong success

By Tony B. Watlington, Sr., Ed.D.

In June, I completed my first school year as Superintendent of the School District of Philadelphia, the eighth largest district in the country where 197,288 public school students are educated. A few weeks ago, the Board of Education unanimously approved [Accelerate Philly](#) - a five-year strategic plan between 2023 - 2028 designed to accelerate student achievement by preparing them to imagine and realize the future they desire.

Leading one of the nation's largest public school districts is a tremendous privilege, particularly in Philadelphia. Historians remind me that I stand on the shoulders of great education and political leaders, as Philadelphia is the birthplace of our democracy and was once the nation's capital where our Declaration of Independence and Constitution were both signed in 1776 and 1787 respectively. Over the past generations, students who have attended these public schools have had an indelible impact across the region and country by helping to build the middle class, developing the world's strongest military, and growing the world's largest economy during the 20th century.

But, superintendency today comes with enormous challenges, as well. In a 2022 [survey from the Education Advisory Board](#), nearly half of superintendents said they were considering or planning to leave their jobs in the next two to three years. Another report from ERS found superintendent turnover is the [highest it's been in the last seven years](#). A similar study was conducted by the [American Association of School Administrators \(AASA\)](#) in 2010.

In recent years, the education sector has faced a variety of hurdles. On a macro level, what began as the emergence of increased stress, anxiety, and social-emotional

challenges during the pandemic, has evolved into attacks on the content of school libraries, textbooks and the teaching of accurate history. Couple this with the issues our cities are facing every day: Philadelphia, home of the 8th largest school district in the nation, like other large, urban cities, has battled generational and systemic poverty, and a continued rise in gun violence. It is hard to prepare our students - 81% of whom identify as students of color - to compete globally when they are facing societal barriers that impact their ability to not only learn but excel.

Despite these challenges along with years of underfunding, we must remain committed to the success of public education. Because as a product of public schools, with a resume that reads like a school district jobs board - bus driver, school custodian, teacher, principal, and district administrator - I know firsthand how public schools can serve as the bedrock on which the American dream rests. Although we cannot control political shifts in opinion on the role that public education plays in a democracy, as education leaders, we can utilize the proven tools and resources that we have to best position our young people for post-secondary success.

So, how did we establish this new vision for Philadelphia students?

Immediately after the Board of Education hired me on April 1, 2022, and long before introducing a plan, or even before meeting with stakeholders and tapping into the decades of knowledge that so many of our public and private sector partners have, we needed to look at the numbers. We had to review existing data and seek out additional data where there are gaps in our understanding of how children are performing.

I've studied the Pennsylvania assessment data and the 2022 [Nation's Report Card data](#), which allows us to look at our growth compared to the nation. We must admit, it's a sobering picture. In comparison to our counterparts across the country, the majority of public school districts in large cities continue to outperform the School District of Philadelphia across all four tested areas.

But the data also presented some signs of resilience.

For example, while students nationwide experienced steep score declines in fourth- and eighth-grade reading and math on the most recent assessments, Philadelphia students saw no score change from 2019 to 2022, with the exception of declines in fourth-grade math. Given the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on education during this period, we considered this progress to build upon.

With data in hand, our next step was to listen and learn from those who are closest to the work and those who experience our work. Instead of telling our stakeholders what I think the ultimate plan should be, we intentionally listened and heard directly from them: what the District does well, what needs improvement, and what they think needs to be prioritized.

For years, they've been rolling up their sleeves, doing the hard work. They have the most skin in the game and the institutional knowledge. So, in my first 100 days, we hosted 90 Listening and Learning sessions that engaged more than 3,000 educators, school leaders, students, family members, central office and school-based staff, citywide groups, faith leaders, and community-based organizations.

We then assembled a Transition Team that harnessed the collective power of more than 100 members of the Philadelphia community, including a few local and national K-12 education experts. These members brought their local knowledge, experiences, and expertise to review quantitative and qualitative information, educational research, and best practices to develop recommendations to shape the District's future priorities.

All of this work - alongside the engagement of more than 200 members of the District community - resulted in ***Accelerate Philly***, the School District of Philadelphia's new five-year strategic plan with five priority areas and 63 strategic actions, each accompanied by supporting research. The District will begin to implement the year one research-based strategies outlined in the plan in the 2023- 2024 school year.

I recognize that superintendent tenures, especially at the nation's largest districts, are becoming notoriously brief. And it's a luxury to have a year to plan. I also know that superintendent's who fail to cultivate a "nothing for us without us" culture in their first year are less likely to marshal the community support and drive to do the heavy lifting or boots on the ground efforts that are needed to improve academic outcomes for all children, particularly Black and Brown children.

For superintendents, time is of the essence and the community wants results now, plus we must invest in our children with urgency to provide every student with the opportunity to achieve positive life outcomes in partnership with diverse families, educators and community members who are valued and respected.

That is why during my first year, we also identified and began monthly reporting on four immediate focus areas: student attendance, teacher attendance, dropout rates, and graduation rate based on new state requirements.

We can't teach kids if they're not in school. So we became laser-focused on tracking student attendance and the dropout rate.

Additionally, we began monitoring and reporting on teacher attendance, as research indicates that teachers have the greatest impact on students' academic performance. Our children learn more when they are consistently taught by high-quality teachers—not substitutes.

As a result of these efforts, statistical research shows student regular attendance increased from 57% in the previous school year to 60% this year. Teacher regular attendance increased from 77% in the previous school year to 84% this year. Student dropouts decreased from 3,917 in the previous school year to 3,652 this year, remarkably 265 fewer students dropped out of school.

Despite this progress, there is still much work to be done. Now, it's time to implement and execute. I am eager to continue bringing our key stakeholders to the table as we launch Accelerate Philly and implement this new vision.

As school system leaders, we can't do our part as a team of one. We have to link arms with our communities and work together collectively to meet our goals, using data-based evidence to make the best decisions possible. That's a formula for sustainable and effective leadership and more importantly, for student well-being and success.

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