



# Report on Community Forums to Inform the Search for the Next Leader of the School District of Philadelphia



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## I. Introduction:

On January 10, 2012, the Superintendent Search Committee of the School Reform Commission (SRC) proposed initial criteria for the next leader of the School District of Philadelphia. The SRC asked the United Way of Southeastern Pennsylvania and the Penn Project for Civic Engagement to solicit public comment and discussion of these criteria to inform the deliberations of the Search Committee.

In response, the United Way of Southeastern Pennsylvania and the Project for Civic Engagement conducted a series of community engagement forums to gather deliberative public input for the Search Committee. Ten of these events were open to the public and were held in neighborhood high schools – one in each city council district. Six events were invitation only, sponsored by six different leadership groups in the city: the Greater Philadelphia Chamber of Commerce, Education First Compact, Young Involved Philadelphia, Charter Schools CEOs, faith-based leaders and student leaders.

Each of the fifteen forums was structured the same way:

- Opening presentation of the search context and the initial criteria by a member of the Superintendent Search Committee. (A copy of the PowerPoint presentation that was used in each of the forums is available at <http://www.gse.upenn.edu/pcel/programs/ppce>.)
- Small group discussion, led by trained facilitators from the Penn Project for Civic Engagement and the United Way of Southeastern Pennsylvania, focusing on three questions:
  - What about these nine criteria makes sense to you? Why?
  - What about these nine criteria concerns you? Why?
  - What difference would it make if the successful candidate were or were not from Philadelphia? Why?
- In those forums where there were multiple small groups, we held a closing plenary session where participants discussed possible commonalities and differences they noticed across small group discussions.

More than 557 people participated in these forums, the date, location of each and the number of participants for each forum is listed below:

Wednesday, February 1, 2012:	Mastery Gratz High School, 60 participants
Thursday, February 2, 2012:	Education First Compact Meeting, 45 participants
Saturday, February 4, 2012:	Roxborough High School, 26 participants
Saturday, February 5, 2012:	Lincoln High School, 19 participants
Monday, February 6, 2012:	Greater Philadelphia Chamber of Commerce, 30 participants
Monday, February 6, 2012:	West Philadelphia High School, 58 participants
Wednesday, February 8, 2012:	Strawberry Mansion High School, 22 participants
Thursday, February 9, 2012:	Edison High School, 17 participants
Monday, February 13, 2012:	Northeast High School, 42 participants

Wednesday, February 15, 2012: Faith Based Leaders Forum<sup>1</sup>, 40 participants  
 Thursday, February 16, 2012: Bartram High School, 29 participants  
 Saturday, February 18, 2012: South Philadelphia High School, 33 participants  
 Tuesday, February 21, 2012: Leeds Middle School, 41 participants  
 Wednesday, February 22, 2012: Young Involved Philadelphians Forum, 39 participants  
 Wednesday, February 22, 2012: Charter School CEO forum, 24 participants  
 Thursday, February 23, 2012: Philadelphia Youth Network Convened Forum, 32 participants

From the outset, the SRC and Search Committee agreed that the community engagement process would be transparent in the following ways:

- Notes from each small group discussion would be posted on the web, and become part of the final community engagement report delivered to the SRC and Search Committee.
- The consolidated report combining the work from each forum would be posted on the web and become part of the final community engagement report delivered to the SRC and Search Committee.
- The SRC and Search Committee would respond to the final report, indicating what they heard from the community engagement process, what they did with what they heard, and why.

This report completes the first and second parts of that agreement. This final report and reports from each of the forums have been posted on the web site of the Penn Project for Civic Engagement at <http://www.gse.upenn.edu/pcel/programs/ppce>, with links from the home page of the United Way of Southeastern Pennsylvania at <http://www.uwsepa.org/>, WHY? NewsWorks at <http://www.newsworks.org/> and The Philadelphia School Notebook at <http://www.thenotebook.org/>

The report that follows is divided into three sections:

- The summary of the findings concerning each criterion **and** whether it matters if the next leader is from Philadelphia.
- A discussion of themes – values-based principles that emerged from across the forums.
- A conclusion.

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<sup>1</sup> The forum with the faith-based leaders was postponed at the request of the participants.

## **2. Summary Of The Findings Concerning Each Criterion and Whether it Matters if the Next Leader is from Philadelphia:**

In the discussion below, we summarize the common ground sense of each criterion that emerged from across all of the small groups from the fifteen forums that were held. This “common ground” does not represent a consensus. Rather, it represents the ideas and directions that emerged as people acknowledged their agreements and worked through their differences as they came to understand each other and each other’s values better. Differences of opinion remain, but the common ground represents agreements on underlying values and overlapping interests, even when participants may disagree on which actions will get us there.

In the first section of the report, we summarize those common ground areas for each of the nine (9) criteria and the question of whether it matters if the next leader is from Philadelphia, acknowledging that there were differences of opinion. In the second section, we report on the themes that emerged across differences, including tensions and trade-offs that people were and were not willing to make.

### **The “common ground” for each of the nine (9) criteria:**

#### *1 – A commitment to education and an overall passion to ensure learning for all children.*

There was clear agreement here that “all” must mean “all children” regardless of race, ethnicity, socio-economic status, community, school type or specific learning need (e.g., special education, English language learners, etc.).

Within this, there was broad agreement that “education” and “learning” must refer to more than test scores. There was agreement that educating the whole child is part of the key here. This would include responding to diverse learning styles and include attention to the “extras” such as art, music and sports.

Importantly, there was more than a little concern about how the search committee, SRC and community might know that a candidate has this commitment and this passion; how to know this was more than a slogan or lip service from the candidate. The answer was clear: they want someone who has a track record that demonstrates this commitment and passion.

#### *2 – Knowledge and Capacity to run a large enterprise or organization*

There was clear recognition that the School District of Philadelphia is, indeed, a large and complex organization or enterprise. As such there was support for this criteria and the need for the leader of the District to have a track record of effectiveness in running a large system/organization.

At the same time, there was significant concern that this criterion (like some of the others) suggests a business model. In some groups, participants objected to the word “enterprise,” arguing that the school system is not just “an enterprise,” but an “educational enterprise.”

A frequent refrain was that “the District is not a business; it’s about learning and you can’t run it like a business because it’s an educational organization.”

Implicit, and at times explicit, was a concern that the next leader must make business decisions while keeping educational priorities at the center of those decisions. This, people seemed to recognize and agree, is a difficult but necessary balancing act.

*3 – A clear understanding of the way management decisions affect teaching, training and leadership development among principals*

There was general agreement that this criterion should be about understanding the ways that management decisions affect teachers, classrooms and school climate (and therefore students), as well as principals. Participants agreed that the principal is key, but that the next leader of the SDP must also attend to professional development throughout the system.

There was also agreement that principals and schools need autonomy, coupled with discussion about the need for the next leader to support strong professional development for teachers and understand the ways that central office decisions impact/improve classrooms.

Further, “understanding” is seen as going beyond some academic or even practical knowledge. Participants argued that effective relationships and emotional intelligence will be a significant factor in all of the above.

*4 – A team-builder able to coordinate and motivate a diverse group of managers and educators of different types of schools in different types of settings*

While there was strong overall support for this criterion, participants also had some significant concerns. The chief concern was that the “team” the next leader would need to build must include the communities within which schools operate, from which they draw their students, and without whose support schools cannot succeed. And this includes the professional and non-professional staff in schools.

They believe this “team-builder” must develop strong relationships by listening to, reaching out to and respecting the diverse communities, neighborhoods and businesses across the city. It will not be enough for the next leader of the SDP to reach out to those who lead different kinds of schools – both district and non-district schools. Rather, the next leader will need to be involved with all constituents to engage them and build a broad base of support for those schools.

*5 – Embraces the idea of a portfolio of schools and advocates for high-quality schools regardless of the provider (district or charter)*

Participants had mixed reactions to this criterion. On the one hand, some participants liked the idea that a portfolio approach might enable the District to build on strengths and that this might improve schools. On the other hand, this criterion, along with criterion #7 below,

raised the most concern among the broad range of participants in the fifteen forums – from those in the neighborhoods to those who lead charter schools.

In the communities we heard more than a little concern about the “business” model that is implied in the term “portfolio.” The concern seemed to be that “portfolio” connotes more than having different kinds of schools to manage. Rather, it seemed to connote that some parts of the portfolio would get more investment than others.

Indeed, the idea that this criterion might imply an inequitable distribution of resources came up frequently; for example, that “charters are squeezing resources from school funding.”

Another frequent concern was the need to hold all schools to the same standards. Charters must, some argued, be held to the same standards of transparency and student performance as other schools. Others argued that non-charter public schools should be held to the same standards charter schools are held, for example, by closing those public schools that do not perform as well as charter schools.

At the same time, there was agreement that the next leader, as well as the public in general, understand that “one size does not fit all” and that an internal “portfolio” of schools is one way the SDP addresses that reality.

*6 – A relationship builder who is able to build creative partnership with numerous external stakeholders to bring resources to individual schools and groups of schools*

Participants were clear that partnerships – both internal within the District and external with a broad range of stakeholders – would be crucial to any success the district achieves particularly in these tight economic times. Internal partnerships are essential for buy-in and strengthening practice. Community partnerships are key to building stronger community support for youth. Corporate and business partnerships are key for additional resources: human, physical and fiscal resources.

At the same time, there was broad recognition that the District has a history of being terrible at cultivating such partnerships. District policies and practices create barriers to all kinds of partnerships. Equally, the District and some principals seem not to recognize the crucial role that schools play in developing and building communities, and to the important role that parents and other adults play in the lives of students. Participants noted that the next leader will have a lot of work to do to fix/repair some “burnt bridges.”

*7 – Ability to rethink the district's service model, moving closer to autonomy for individual schools and decreased centralization*

Overall there was common ground that this criterion recognizes the importance of addressing the specific needs of individual schools and communities, that each school and principal must address the needs of the students in that school. Philadelphia is, people

argued, a city of neighborhoods, and neighborhood schools need to address the needs of that community and of the students from that community.

And there was broad agreement that schools are strongest when there is a capable principal, when funding resources are equitable across schools, and when there is accountability at the school level.

At the same time, there was broad concern that decentralization and increased autonomy across schools might increase inequities of resources and of results. Autonomy might increase competition for limited resources, increasing inequities across schools and perhaps even within schools as different programs in a school (e.g., special education) vie for those limited resources.

This was particularly worrisome because, in the eyes of those participating in the forums, not all principals have the knowledge or expertise to succeed with more autonomy. And participants were not sure how, or who, would monitor accountability in those and other areas.

Participants were also concerned because “decentralization” has been tried and abandoned before in Philadelphia. Moreover, others asked, where is the research to support decentralization? Are there successful urban models of decentralization?

*8 – Ability to influence the public, business community, higher education community, and legislative leaders on the value of public education and the commitments necessary to achieve notable progress*

There was broad agreement with, and support for, this criterion. Across the spectrum, participants think the next leader must be an advocate for public education while working to build the credibility of the SDP. And participants thought that credibility was not just about test scores and making annual yearly progress (AYP). Credibility is about being a cheerleader for successful programs within each school, where success refers to both educational *processes* and the product that emerges from those processes.

Participants also acknowledged that being a “system champion” with all of the stakeholders noted, as well as with internal stakeholders, is important to being able to increase fiscal and other resources for the district.

*9 – Is committed to actively engaging with students, parents and community stakeholders*

This criterion generated significant discussion, and agreement. There was broad common ground that this commitment is important, and even broader common ground that the *only* way to measure this commitment is in a track record of effectiveness in engaging the full range of stakeholders productively.

Participants in the forums also noted that the stakeholders listed in this criterion should be broader, including the family, neighborhood and social system that students rely on. The next leader must demonstrate sensitivity to, and respect for, the diversity of student body and parents and other care-givers/care-takers.

*Does it matter whether the next leader is from Philadelphia?*

Groups were split, but not divisively so, on this question, with a slight advantage on the side of those arguing that the next leader should be from Philadelphia.

All agreed that the skill set – expertise, experience, understanding of education and of running a complex organization, particularly in an urban setting – was the most important. People acknowledged that “talent is talent” and that they “want the best person.”

Beyond that, people reasoned that the next leader understand and value Philadelphia, its culture and the values of residents. The next leader must value the city’s neighborhoods and diversity as well as what some referred to as the “territorialism and insularity” of neighborhoods, and that Philadelphia-specific strategies might be necessary to build on local strengths and address local challenges.

It was also considered important that the next leader understand what currently works here and what has been successful, and build on that.

There is common ground on the concern that the next leader will have a steep learning curve re: social capital, history, culture of neighborhoods, resources and the positive history of education innovation. This served as a common reason for those who argued that the next leader should have roots in Philadelphia.

### 3. Themes/values-based principles that emerged from across the forums.

Several themes emerged as participants worked their way through, around and into the nine criteria. Those themes are described briefly below.

- **Even business decisions must be made for education reasons**

Most of the participants seemed to understand the economic realities facing the district. And they understand the need for responsible fiscal stewardship and accountability. At the same time, they don't want the district "run like a business." Business decisions have, they seemed to reason, to be made with clear understanding of the impact of those decisions on learners and the learning environment. And they want the educational rationale for those decisions to be explicit. Don't, in other words, just make cuts, but be clear how those cuts will impact students and, in cases where trade-offs were made, explain how and why those trade-offs were made.

- **Decentralize for autonomy and creativity, but retain centralization for equity**

While there was significant support for giving more autonomy and responsibility to school principals, there was widespread concern that decentralization would lead to exacerbating current inequities across schools, would increase competition for limited resources across schools, and would fail unless there was a way to ensure school principals got the training and other supports they need to succeed. This same training would help those principals add or strengthen the programs most needed in their particular settings.

- **Transparency, honesty and openness will build support among all stakeholders**

There's a palpable sense that people believe the district is like a black hole into which peoples energies and ideas go and out of which comes very little, if anything, in return. This was clear when people would say "I don't want to come to another meeting where we give our ideas, someone writes them on flip chart paper, and nothing happens." It was also clear when people said, "I don't think this process is real. The SRC already knows who it wants." Such people are wary of giving input and of supporting an organization that is opaque, closed and seems driven by hidden agendas. They'd rather be supporters, but need evidence that their engagement makes a difference. Transparency, honesty and openness would provide that evidence.

- **Engage us, all of us, for collaborative action with *all* stakeholders.**

There was a clear sense that participants – from students and staff to community members to "Young Involved Philadelphians" to the business community – want to be seen as potential partners in making schools work for all in the city. They see themselves as partners; not silent partners, but partners with physical and social capital to offer in support of school improvement and student achievement. They want to be engaged in that work and want the district to reach out to them and to make it easy for them to reach out to and work with schools and students.

As one part of this, there was no appetite for someone who would come here with a clear plan for how to change the district. But there was strong support for someone who would come in with a background and structure for how to collaborate with all stakeholders to learn about current strengths and to develop collaborative plans for district improvement.

- **A team, not a single leader**

Over and over there was a common refrain: this job is too big for one person. We don't want a superstar who will try and do it alone. We need someone who can build a team; a team whose members bring expertise the leader does not have; whose members are also committed to Philadelphia and who can work together so that the team is greater than any of its members. As one charter school leader said: the next leader should come here with a strong sense – perhaps even a playbook – of how that team will be constructed and some ideas of who will fill each role.

- **It's about this job.**

When people spoke about whether or not it mattered if the next leader were from Philadelphia, many of their responses included the notion that they want the next leader to be “vested in the success” of the district. They want someone for whom this job is more than one of a string of superintendentcies or CEO positions. Rather, they want someone who wants to be *here*, not just in a large urban school district; someone for whom Philadelphia means something personal, and who has a personal stake in the success of the students.

#### **4. Conclusion:**

We would like to thank the SRC and Search Committee for the opportunity to support them and the school district in their efforts to learn from the broad range of stakeholders that make up the community for the School District of Philadelphia. The United Way of Southeastern Pennsylvania and the University of Pennsylvania greatly appreciate the opportunity to create a community engagement process that included a broad range of stakeholders from across the city in meaningful deliberations. Together we were able to create an open and transparent process; a process that enabled us to tap into the passion and creative energy of those stakeholders. Throughout the process, we have been impressed by the quality of stakeholder interest and see it as a clear indication that people care deeply about their public schools. We believe that passion, concern and creativity are deep resources upon which the SRC, Search Committee and the School District can draw in their efforts to best serve all of the children in the City.