ACCOUNTABILITY REVIEW COUNCIL

Report to the School Reform Commission

**Sustaining Efforts to Raise Student Achievement in
Challenging Fiscal Times in the
School District of Philadelphia**

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Accountability Review Council

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Executive Summary

For almost nine years, the Accountability Review Council (ARC) has served as an independent entity that assesses key reform initiatives and their impact on student achievement in the School District of Philadelphia (SDP). The ARC summarizes its findings and recommendations in an annual report to the School Reform Commission (SRC). All ARC reports are available to the public on the SDP website.

As our annual reports have noted, there has been measurable progress in meeting the state's academic proficiency standards. Although questions have arisen recently regarding the integrity of the scores on the PSSA, ARC remains confident that SDP has shown steady system-wide improvement in the overall quality of education in this city. SDP has shown annual improvement in academic performance:

- In PSSA Reading, the percentage of students scoring at the level of Advanced or Proficient for all tested grades combined increased from 23.9% to 51.6% between 2002 and 2011
- In PSSA Mathematics, the percentage of students scoring at the level of Advanced or Proficient for all tested grades combined increased from 19.5% to 57.8% between 2002 and 2011.
- Even when considering the volume of tests flagged at the 53 schools under investigation for cheating on PSSA tests from 2009 to 2011, the District-level trends remain true.

After a decade of active reforms that ranged from core curricula to Empowerment Schools and Promise Academies, the District has evolved a broad portfolio of strategies to improve student learning and performance. Consistent with recommendations in several of its annual reports, the ARC recommends that identification of successful strategies become a key effort of the SDP leadership. After SDP has identified these strategies, they need to develop a plan to preserve and sustain them regardless of who or what administration developed them.

Many of the reform efforts, however, are being terminated or significantly scaled back due to the current budgetary crisis. With a shortfall exceeding $200 million for the 2012-13 school year, the district has implemented three waves of layoffs since September 2011. The district sharply reduced the number of school nurses, police officers, counselors, central office staff, and parent ombudsmen. Furthermore, SRC has charged the Boston Consulting Group to develop strategies for achieving additional savings through changes in operations and labor negotiations. Clearly, ARC will monitor SDP restructuring during 2012-13, a period of retrenchment that may mark a critical turning point for schooling opportunities for all students in the city.

As SDP moves to a new phase of management and fiscal retrenchment under new leadership, ARC urges SRC to reaffirm its commitment to all students in Philadelphia schools, including: accountability for all; sustaining effective practices within fiscal capability; improving equity and access; and broadening public engagement and overcoming public cynicism due to test cheating.

Recognizing the tough fiscal decisions that SRC must make, SDP should still maintain a strong focus on accountability. ARC believes that accountability can be strengthened by focusing on three interrelated sets of strategies:

1) Consistent and accountable implementation of the diverse provider model;
2) Strong commitment to equity and access for all children in Philadelphia;
3) Sustaining effective strategies to build leadership capacity at all levels of SDP.

In considering these strategies, ARC draws from relevant findings and recommendations from several of its own sponsored studies.

Lessons on Diverse Provider Models
ARC reports have identified effective strategies to support the implementation of the diverse provider model at both the system-wide and school levels, namely:

- Develop an overall strategic use of charter and diverse operators, especially in high schools where charters showed positive student performance.
- Take a school-by-school approach, and not just rely on management types, in making decisions on performance contracts with diverse providers.
- Monitor and ensure the quality of instructional practices at the school and classroom under diverse operators.
- Make sure that any additional state dollars provided to diverse operators, including charter schools, result in measurable "added values" for students.
- Allow charter schools to use their flexibility but include them in a system of accountability on schooling indicators, including student attendance, teacher absenteeism, professional development, parental satisfaction, and student disciplinary actions.

Lessons on Narrowing the Achievement Gap
Since its first annual report to SRC, ARC has strongly urged SDP leadership to address the substantial achievement gap among various racial, ethnic, and income subgroups. The urgency of this issue remains, as indicated by the 43% graduation rate for Latino males as compared to the 61% overall graduation rate in SDP. Furthermore, students from alternative high schools who reentered SDP schools had a much lower graduation rate than their peers who stayed in the regular schools (41% as compared to 59%).   In several of its reports, especially its 2010 report on alternative high schools, ARC identified effective strategies that aimed at narrowing the achievement gap at both the system-wide and the schools levels. These included:

- SDP needed to strengthen its accountability system to monitor and report on student progress in each of the alternative high schools. In this regard, we applauded the district for starting a performance contract with school operators in alternative education in 2009-10.
- SDP needed to establish a set of measurable indicators on schooling quality in alternative schools, including truancy rate, suspension and expulsion rate, course taking patterns, percent of students re-entering regular schools, and graduation rate.
- To ensure teaching quality for all students, SDP should implement the key recommendations of the Effective Teaching Campaign, including stronger

incentives to draw teachers to hard-to-staff schools, stronger standards for teacher evaluation, and more targeted professional development for teaching effectiveness.

- The district should establish strong partnerships with community-based organizations and businesses to develop innovative learning programs for high-needs students.

Lessons on Effective Practices for School Leaders

Regardless of the overarching reform approach that SDP adopts during 2012-13, a key condition for success is the quality of the human capital at the school and classroom levels. In several of its reports, ARC examined the extent to which school leadership, culture, and organizational practices contributed to the academic success of high-needs students in middle and high schools. Among the lessons on effective strategies were:

- Principals, teachers, parents, and other school-based educators needed to be fully informed of evidence-based effective practices.
- Exchange of good practices must not be constrained by management and governance arrangements. Exchange should be promoted across different management types throughout the district.
- Parents and the public must be engaged in the process of selecting turnaround school operators, including proven leadership team and models within SDP. School Advisory Councils in the Renaissance Schools Initiative, for example, should be strengthened.
- If principals were held accountable for school performance, they must have access to a wider range of leverages, including teacher selection and budgetary flexibility, among others things.
- School leaders, regardless of management types, needed to focus on a more supportive learning climate for all students.

Sustaining an Independent Assessment Center: Role of ARC

Finally, as an independent assessment center, ARC reiterates the importance of conducting ongoing studies on key investment and reform initiatives in SDP. Specifically, ARC urges SRC to continue to support different types of evaluation studies even in the context of budgetary constraints, namely:

- *Process evaluation* that monitors reform implementation and examines whether the reform activities meet the statutory, regulatory, and professional expectations as well as client satisfaction;
- *Outcome evaluation* that assesses the extent to which reform activities accomplish the outcome-oriented objectives, including unintended consequences;
- *Impact evaluation* that specifies the net effect of a particular reform or program intervention by estimating what would have happened in the absence of the reform.

The combination of these different types of evaluation studies will form a credible knowledge base for a strong system of public accountability as SDP advances to a new phase of reform.

Introduction

In fall of 2001, the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania asserted its intention to take control of the School District of Philadelphia (SDP) to improve management and academic achievement. To avert the perception of a "hostile" takeover of SDP, the Governor of Pennsylvania and the Mayor of Philadelphia entered into a unique partnership to jointly manage SDP. The reform legislation enacted by the Commonwealth created the five-member School Reform Commission (SRC) and also mandated the establishment of an "independent assessment and reporting center" to evaluate the outcomes of the district's reform efforts. The statutory obligation to establish an assessment and reporting center was fulfilled by SRC when it created the Accountability Review Council (ARC), an independent entity composed of national experts charged with monitoring the District's reform efforts.

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After a decade of active reforms that ranged from core curricula to Empowerment Schools and Promise Academies, the District has evolved a broad portfolio of strategies to improve student learning and performance. Consistent with recommendations in several of its annual reports, the ARC recommends that identification of successful strategies become a key effort of the SDP leadership. After SDP has identified these strategies, they need to develop a plan to preserve and sustain them regardless of who or what administration developed them.

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2011. The district sharply reduced the number of school nurses, police officers, counselors, central office staff, and parent ombudsmen. Furthermore, SRC has charged the Boston Consulting Group to develop strategies for achieving additional savings through changes in operations and labor negotiations. Clearly, ARC will monitor SDP restructuring during 2012-13, a period of retrenchment that may mark a critical turning point for schooling opportunities for all students in the city.

As SDP moves to a new phase of management and fiscal retrenchment under new leadership, ARC urges SRC to reaffirm its commitment to all students in Philadelphia schools, including: accountability for all; sustaining effective practices within fiscal capability; improving equity and access; and broadening public engagement and overcoming public cynicism due to test cheating.

Recognizing the tough fiscal decisions that SRC must make, SDP should still maintain a strong focus on accountability. ARC believes that accountability can be strengthened by focusing on three interrelated sets of strategies:
1) Consistent and accountable implementation of the diverse provider model;
2) Strong commitment to equity and access for all children in Philadelphia;
3) Sustaining effective strategies to build leadership capacity at all levels of SDP.
In considering these strategies, ARC draws from relevant findings and recommendations from several of its own sponsored studies.

ARC's findings on these issues are particularly relevant in the current context of accountability challenges. These challenges include an urgency to restore public credibility in light of recent exposure on test cheating in some of the SDP schools, ongoing efforts to broaden public understanding of accountability, the need to hold all school operators accountable as SDP expands its diverse provider model, and the growing demand for all graduates to become college and/or career ready. This report will first highlight these challenges, followed by a summary of ARC's findings and recommendations on these strategies.

Meeting the Challenges of Accountability: Perspective from ARC

Eliminate the Conditions that Led to Test Cheating

During fall 2011, ARC reviewed the district's analysis and a news account on PSSA (Pennsylvania System of School Assessment) cheating in Philadelphia schools. The news account reported a single year analysis of the 2009 test result files, which were shelved at the Pennsylvania Department of Education (PDE) for two years. In the test result files, every response sheet was analyzed. According to the technical forensic report by Data Recognition Corporation (PDE's vendor for the PSSA), there were 28 schools that showed 3 or more instances of irregularities (such as a high number of erasures or unexpected change in proficiency rate) in a single grade. The account cited a need to conduct further analysis at the individual student level. Upon the release of the report, the district's response to PDE regarding the forensic report also found that 28

schools were cited for grade levels with aberrant PSSA data, 13 schools had grade-levels with an insufficient amount of data to explain aberrance of data flagged in the state data report, and 6 schools were found to have questionable changes for the purpose of AYP reporting.   The district has subsequently developed a close working relationship with PDE to institute stronger procedures on test administration and monitoring, focusing on the 53 schools that PDE identified with high level of erasures in 2009, 2010, or 2011 PSSA.

Given the seriousness of this matter and its potential adverse effect on public trust, ARC endorses a collaborative process for examining, in a highly transparent fashion, the alleged cheating issues raised regarding the district's test scores on the PSSA over the past several years. We encourage the district to collaborate with key stakeholders, including members of the teachers' union (Philadelphia Federation of Teachers) and the principals' association (Commonwealth Association of School Administrators), and commission an independent investigation to help build public credibility.

Broaden Public Understanding of Accountability

SDP needs to communicate with the public so that they are well-informed about the vision of the leadership regarding the performance of the school system. ARC suggests an aggressive and clear public engagement effort to broaden stakeholders' understanding of what accountability and success encompass. This would include a more diligent effort be made by the District to clarify and explain to the public, elected state and local officials, taxpayers, parents, and students the multiple aspects of "Accountability." An emphasis on standardized test scores and a primary focus on compliance with NCLB may have contributed to the overall climate on test-driven accountability, leading to some of the alleged abuse in testing practices. Therefore, the general public needs to be informed about the whole learning and teaching environment and processes, such as knowledge retention, persistence in learning, and successful application of knowledge and skills to solve problems. Not only should SDP expound upon the measures of accountability, they also need to promote a better understanding of the significance of these indicators.

Hold all School Operators Equally Accountable

Philadelphia's diverse provider model, with a strong focus on charter schools as a "turnaround" strategy, has grown substantially over the last decade. Public funds now utilized to support charter schools are substantial. However, the accountability system for charter schools seems inadequate, particularly when they are expected to play a growing role in the city. ARC has recommended that charters be responsible for providing the data necessary to evaluate, in an open and public fashion, the degree of success of the teaching and learning process in these environments in a form comparable to district operated schools. For assessment purposes, there is clearly a need to integrate the total picture of the Philadelphia educational system, especially when transparency is better served by including the complete set of charter data. This recommendation is not

an attempt to question the charter movement but rather to enable appropriate assessment of the use of public funds to provide quality education to the children of Philadelphia.

Align Performance Measures to Ensure College and Career Readiness

Over time SDP has developed multi-faceted approaches to assessing student progress. The ARC believes that the public's and the nation's preoccupation with compliance and success and/or failure to meet the standards of the NCLB statute tend to narrow our understanding of successes or failures of educational strategies. ARC believes it is time that SDP identify "Accountability" more comprehensively than just PSSA results. Accountability should be defined in a more comprehensive fashion, taking into consideration the interrelated aspects of teaching and learning. We encourage SDP to include elements of the "School Performance Index" and perhaps other sophisticated indicators which better define the "outcomes" of the strategic efforts to improve learning in the schools.

A review of the graduation rates suggests that SDP high school students fall short in approaching the expectations of college and career readiness. For example, for the first-time 9th grade cohort of 2005-06 (graduating class of 2009), only 56% were graduated in 4 years and only 61% graduated in 6 years or less. Furthermore, substantial racial and gender gaps exist:
- 50% of Latinos and 61% of African Americans graduated in 4 years as compared to 68% of Whites and 81% of Asian Americans
- 54% of males graduated in 4 years as compared to 68% of females
- 43% of Latino males and 53% of African American males graduated in 4 years as compared to 64% of White males and 76% of Asian American males
- In contrast, 57% of Latino females and 69% of African American females graduated in 4 years
- Students with special education status had a lower graduation rate than their non special education peers (46% compared to 64%).

Also, dropout rates have risen for first-time 9th grade cohorts between 2003-04 and 2007-08 (graduating classes of 2007 through 2011):
- Latino males and Latino females experienced an increase in their dropout rates from 43% to 48% and from 29% to 35% respectively
- African American males and African American females experienced an increase in their dropout rates from 32% to 36% and from 22% to 24% respectively.

SDP schools are not as competitive as their peers in other urban districts. A review of the National Assessment of Educational Progress-Trial Urban District Assessment (NAEP-TUDA) suggests much room for improvement when SDP is compared with other large urban districts. NAEP-TUDA is a nationwide assessment given to a representative sample of students in 21 urban districts. SDP started participating in TUDA with the 2009 assessment. Every 2 years, reading and mathematics are assessed at grades 4 and 8. Considering the statistical significance of the 2011 NAEP scores by grade and by subject, SDP falls within the lower middle group in the NAEP-TUDA sample:
- On 4th grade mathematics, SDP performed lower than 13 of the other 20 districts

- On 8th grade mathematics, SDP performed lower than 13 of the other 20 districts
- On 4th grade reading, SDP performed lower than 16 of the other 20 districts
- On 8th grade reading, SDP performed lower than 13 of the other 20 districts.

The NAEP-TUDA assessment also shows substantial achievement gaps in SDP in 2011:
- On 4th grade mathematics, the White/Hispanic gap is 10 score points, the White/Black gap is 13 score points, and the income group difference is 28 score points
- On 8th grade mathematics, the White/Hispanic gap is 25 score points, the White/Black gap is 21 score points, and the income group difference is 28 score points
- On 4th grade reading, the White/Hispanic gap is 26 score points, the White/Black gap is 22 score points, and the income group difference is 22 score points
- On 8th grade reading, the White/Hispanic gap is 25 score points, the White/Black gap is 20 score points, and the income group difference is 31 score points.

Relevant Lessons from ARC-Sponsored Studies

Sustain Effective Strategies

As previously stated, ARC believes that SDP should maintain a strong focus on accountability, regardless of budgetary decisions made by SRC. This can be accomplished by focusing on three interrelated sets of strategies:
1) Consistent and accountable implementation of the diverse provider;
2) Strong commitment to equity and access for all children in Philadelphia;
3) Sustaining effective strategies to build leadership capacity at all levels of SDP.
ARC recommends these strategies based on the results from several of its own sponsored studies.

Table 1 identifies the specific ARC reports that address each of the three reform strategies, namely, the diverse provider model, equity and access for all students, and effective practices for school leaders.

Table 1. Selected ARC-sponsored Studies on "What Works," 2007-2012		
Diverse Provider Model	**Equity and Access**	**Effective Practices**
Assessing the Performance of EMO-Managed Schools(2007)	*Urgency of Closing the Achievement Gap(2009)*	*Considering Organizational Effectiveness in Middle and High Schools (2009)*
Assessing Charter School Performance (2008)	*Reform Needs to Yield Strong Academic Gains for All Students (2010)*	*Lessons on the Early Implementation Phase of the Renaissance Initiative (2011)*
Assessing First-Year School Performance in Renaissance Schools (2012)	*Academic Performance in Alternative High Schools (2010)*	*School Leadership Practices in Promise Academies (2012)*

Lessons on Diverse Provider Model

The School District of Philadelphia has been at the nation's forefront in promoting the diverse provider model in managing some of its lowest performing schools. The first generation of Philadelphia's diverse provider models started shortly after the state and the city entered into a joint partnership to take over the district in late 2001. In September 2005 there were 19,000 students in grades 1 to 10 enrolled in schools managed by contracted service providers, and 16,700 students were attending charter schools in the District.

ARC has a long history of assessing the diverse provider model in SDP. In 2007, ARC commissioned the RAND Corporation and Research for Action (RFA) to examine the performance of the district's first-generation diverse-provider model, namely education management organization (EMO)-managed schools between 2002 and 2006. This analysis used student-level data to look at student achievement gains for four years as measured by scores on the PSSA and TerraNova. In 2008, ARC commissioned the RAND Corporation, Research for Action and Mathematica, Inc. to conduct an independent assessment of student achievement in charter schools in the District. Then, to develop a more complete understanding of the early implementation of the Renaissance Initiative, ARC commissioned Research for Action (RFA) to conduct a study in 2010-2012 on this important reform process.

ARC reports have identified effective strategies to support the implementation of the diverse provider model at both the system-wide and school levels:

- Develop an overall strategic use of charter and diverse operators, especially in high schools where charters showed positive student performance.
- Take a school-by-school approach, and not just rely on management types, in making decisions on performance contracts with diverse providers.
- Monitor and ensure the quality of instructional practices at the school and classroom under diverse operators.
- Make sure that any additional state dollars provided to diverse operators, including charter schools, result in measurable "added values" for students.
- Allow charter schools to use their flexibility but include them in a system of accountability on schooling indicators, including student attendance, teacher absenteeism, professional development, parental satisfaction, and student disciplinary actions.

Assessing the performance of schools under management contracts (or EMO-managed schools)

In its February 2007 report, ARC examined the performance of EMO-managed schools between 2002 and 2006. ARC commissioned the RAND Corporation and Research for Action to use student-level data to examine gains in PSSA and TerraNova for four years.

In reviewing student achievement in schools that were managed by different types of providers over four years, ARC offered the following recommendations:

- ARC found that many EMO-managed schools were not making academic gains that were comparable with the 21 District-restructured schools. ARC recommended that SRC undertake a major review of the schooling and organizational conditions that contributed to the academic successes of the District-restructured schools. Even when the District phased out the Office of Restructured Schools in 2005, the 21 restructured schools continued to improve in student performance.
- Regarding the 45 EMO schools, ARC encouraged SRC to take *a school-by-school approach* in deciding the future of using EMO management as a reform strategy. For EMO schools that persistently performed below the District average over the four-year period, ARC saw no justification for relying on the same EMOs to manage these schools. SRC should not allow ineffective practices in any management contracts.
- ARC encouraged SRC to rethink the appropriateness and the magnitude of relying on EMOs as a strategy to turn around low performing schools. First, SRC should reconsider the policy conditions that shape management contracts for schools. Second, SRC needs to ensure the quality of the instructional practices implemented by the EMOs. ARC encourages SRC to monitor the kinds of instructional benefits for students that additional state aid was able to purchase in EMO-managed schools. In short, ARC recommended that SRC provide greater transparency in its strategy to engage the EMOs and the efficacy of greater resource allocation to EMOs and other District schools.

Assessing Charter School Performance

Recognizing charter schools' potential for innovative practices, ARC conducted an analysis of charter schools' AYP status and PSSA proficiency rates, and commissioned the RAND Corporation, RFA, and Mathematica Inc. to study student achievement in charter schools. ARC combined these two studies in its 2008 report that examined issues that pertained to charter school performance at two levels: Charter schools as a group and individual student academic gains over time. The issues included:

- Did charter schools produce better student achievement than traditional public schools?
- Did charter schools recruit students who were academically better prepared?
- Was charter school performance associated with a particular type of charter schools?
- Did students in charter schools show stronger academic gains over time?

In reviewing the evidence of charter school performance, ARC took a cautionary approach as the issue was complex and multifaceted. Charter school performance was simultaneously shaped by a combination of factors, including composition of student enrollment, the quality of instructional implementation, principal leadership, and school

autonomy, among others. On balance, ARC saw a cautiously promising trend. From a positive view, charter schools continued to make measurable progress in meeting the AYP. In 2007, two-thirds of the charter schools did make Adequate Yearly Progress. Furthermore, there were ample examples of innovative practices and high-performing charter schools in Philadelphia.

In light of these findings, ARC made several recommendations to SRC:

- Charter schools should not be treated as a homogeneous group. Given the range of academic performance among charter schools, decisions regarding the authorization (and re-authorization) should be made on *a case-by-case basis*. ARC recommended that SRC focus on what works for all students, including those who transferred from District schools. In this regard, SRC should monitor school-by-school progress on an annual basis. When charter schools failed repeatedly, SRC needed to reconsider their contract.
- In addition, SRC needed to pay attention to the types of students who were left behind within charter schools, including those that made AYP at the aggregate school level. Paying attention to the achievement gap among subgroups on specific subject areas would enable SRC to take timely action to monitor and support charter school improvement.
- ARC encouraged SRC to continue to allow charter schools to use their autonomy to design and implement innovative practices. However, that did not mean that SRC should take a permissive role in monitoring charter school performance. It did mean that in addition to student performance, SRC needed to collect a broader range of indicators on charter school performance, including student attendance, teacher absenteeism, professional development activities, parent satisfaction, and student disciplinary actions. These measures of progress should be made available to the public. In that regard, SRC should expand the authority of the Office of Accountability, Assessment and Intervention to collect schooling indicators on charter schools on an annual basis.
- ARC encouraged SRC to develop a comprehensive plan on charter school strategy, including considerations for the pace and type of new charter approvals.

Assessing First-Year School Performance in Renaissance Schools

Given substantial SDP investment in the Renaissance Schools Initiative, ARC commissioned Research for Action (RFA) in 2011-12 to conduct an examination of the first-year performance of the 13 first-cohort Renaissance schools. The first-cohort school group included 6 Promise Academies that remained under district management but underwent "turnaround" reforms. The first-cohort group also included 7 Renaissance charter schools that operated with substantial autonomy from SDP. In addition to descriptive, trend analysis, RFA assessed the difference between the Renaissance schools and a group of comparison schools on various school performance outcomes. The comparison schools included 72 K-8 and 19 high schools with roughly comparable School Performance Index scores (which ranged from 7-10 at the end of the 2009-10 academic year).

The RFA analysis showed promising first-year outcomes for Renaissance schools. On average, students in grades 3 through 8 in the first-cohort Renaissance schools:

- Improved the proficiency in the Math PSSA from 30% in 2010 to 44% in 2011
- Reduced the percentage of students scoring below basic on the Math PSSA from 45% in 2010 to 32% in 2011
- Improved the proficiency on the Reading PSSA from 24% in 2010 to 32% in 2011
- Reduced the percentage of students scoring below basic on the Reading PSSA from 52% in 2010 to 41% in 2011.

These descriptive trends suggested that Renaissance schools outpaced their peers in the comparison schools in the first-year academic gains. However, it should be noted that despite the measurable one-year gains, Renaissance schools remained substantially below the district average on student performance outcomes. Equally important, high school performance in the Renaissance schools did not produce measurable improvement.

Lessons on Equity and Access

Since its first annual report to SRC, ARC has strongly urged SDP leadership to address the substantial achievement gap among various racial, ethnic, and income subgroups. The urgency of this issue remains, as indicated by the 43% graduation rate for Latino males as compared to the 59% overall graduation rate in SDP. Furthermore, students from alternative high schools who reentered SDP schools had a much lower graduation rate than their peers who stayed in the regular schools (41% as compared to 59%). In several of its reports, particularly its 2010 report on alternative high schools, ARC identified effective strategies that aimed at narrowing the achievement gap at both the system-wide and the schools levels. Among these include:

- SDP must strengthen its accountability system to monitor and report on student progress in each of the alternative high schools. In this regard, ARC applauded the District for starting a performance contract with school operators in alternative education in 2009-10.
- SDP should establish a set of measurable indicators on schooling quality in alternative schools, including truancy rate, suspension and expulsion, course taking patterns, percent of students re-entering regular schools, and graduation rate.
- To ensure teaching quality for all students, SDP should implement the key recommendations of the Effective Teaching Campaign, including stronger incentives to draw teachers to hard-to-staff schools, stronger standards for teacher evaluation, and more targeted professional development for teaching effectiveness.
- The District should establish strong partnerships with community-based organizations and businesses to develop innovative learning programs for high-needs students.

Urgency of Closing the Achievement Gap

In its 2009 report, ARC called attention to the challenge of the achievement gap. The report found that Philadelphia's school reform continued to bring about measurable progress in student achievement:

- When compared to 2002, there were 91 additional District schools and 20 additional charter schools making Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) in 2008.
- For the first time, over 50% of the 3rd and 8th grade students met the PSSA Reading proficiency standard.
- On the Math PSSA, grades 3 and 4 had over half of the students meeting the proficiency standard, and almost half of the students in grades 5 though 8 were at the proficiency level.
- In contrast, 37.4% of grade 11 students achieved proficiency on the Reading PSSA and 32.6% achieved proficiency on the Math PSSA.

- Notwithstanding overall improvement in the elementary grades for the district as a whole, there remained a substantial achievement gap among subgroups within the system. In both math and reading for 2008, the percentages of Latino students scoring Advanced or Proficient were substantially below that of White students (24.6 percentage point gap in reading and 23.1 percentage point gap in mathematics). The percentage of Black students scoring Advanced or Proficient also remained substantially below that of White students (22.7 percentage point gap in reading and 24.8 percentage point gap in math).

These trends suggested an urgency in addressing the challenges that various subgroups face in middle and high schools.

Reform Needs to Yield Strong Academic Performance in Alternative High Schools

ARC commissioned Mathematica Policy Research Inc. (MPR) during 2009-10 to conduct a descriptive study of student characteristics and student outcomes in all the alternative schools.

- The MPR study analyzed student-level records for the school years 2001-02 through 2008-09.
- In addition to annual cross-sectional analyses, the study tracked cohorts of students from their entry into 9th grade by school types.
- Student cohorts that entered 9th grade in 2003-04 were tracked for a six-year period.

Furthermore, the MPR study compared enrollment and student performance between non-selective neighborhood schools and the two types of alternative schools. This comparative approach provided a necessary reference point for understanding the progress or lack of progress in the alternative schools. Specifically, the study examined

three groups of students: (1) those who enrolled in neighborhood schools and never attended an alternative school (referred to as "neighborhood students"); (2) those who enrolled in alternative accelerated schools; and (3) those who enrolled in disciplinary schools. The latter two groups were combined to form the alternative education student population.

Having reviewed the MPR study on alternative education, ARC cautioned that the study was descriptive in nature. There were, nonetheless, important lessons that could be drawn from the analyses. A key ARC concern was: What were the key policy conditions at the district level that encouraged alternative schools improve student outcomes? With this question in mind, ARC encouraged SRC to consider several policy recommendations.

Based on the analysis conducted in the MPR study, ARC saw a substantial gap between the district's vision and the reality in alternative schools. Student performance in alternative schools was significantly lower than the district average. The achievement gap posed a major concern as alternative schools enrolled a large number of African American male students. While 59% of the students in regular schools graduated, only 41% of the reentered students did. ARC strongly urged the district to implement strategies that are aimed at closing this graduation gap.

Equally important, ARC encouraged SDP to work closely with alternative schools to develop strategies to improve the pace of sending reentering students to regular schools. The district's alternative education program had shown some promise in addressing the academic needs of some of the most challenging students in high school. However, according to the ARC study, only 32% of the students in disciplinary schools reentered regular schools. Even less encouraging was that only one out of four alternative students graduated from alternative high school in six years.

In light of the relatively low graduation rate in the alternative schools, the district must strengthen its accountability system. The district should focus on program quality, student attendance, and academic performance on a school-by-school basis. As begun in the 2009-2010 contracts with the private providers, performance data must be used as the basis for contract decisions. For ELL students, support services must be fully provided and monitored for consistency of implementation. Since alternative schools were managed by private providers, contract renewal must be based on student performance on an annual basis.

The relatively low performance of alternative schools called for stronger school leadership. In this regard, ARC encouraged the providers of alternative education services to apply the recommendations of the Effective Teaching Campaign to their programs and schools. Key recommendations that were particularly relevant include: (1) *Better incentives to draw teachers to hard-to-staff schools*. Incentives would include both salary increases/bonuses and other mechanisms that improve working conditions (such as reduced course load). (2) *Enhanced standards and fair evaluation*. There remained a need for using performance-based contracts with teaching and administrative

staff in alternative schools. (3) *More targeted professional development.* Alternative schools should reconsider their professional development activities in terms of their effectiveness.

Lessons on Effective Practices for School Leaders

Regardless of the overarching reform approach that the District adopts during 2012-13, a key condition for success is the quality of the human capital at the school and classroom levels. In several of its reports, ARC examined the extent to which school leadership, culture, and organizational practices contributed to academic success of high-needs students in middle and high schools. Among the effective strategies were:

- Principals, teachers, parents, and other school-based educators needed to be fully informed of evidence-based effective practices.
- Exchange of good practices must not be constrained by management and governance arrangements. Exchange should be promoted across different management types throughout the District.
- Parents and the public must be engaged in the process of selecting turnaround school operators. School Advisory Councils in the Renaissance Schools Initiative, for example, should be strengthened.
- If principals are held accountable for school performance, they must have access to a wider range of leverages, including teacher selection and budgetary flexibility, among others things.
- School leaders, regardless of management types, must focus on a more supportive learning climate for all students.

Considering Organizational Effectiveness in Middle and High Schools

ARC's focus on organizational conditions in middle and high schools in 2009 was timely as the SRC, students, parents, and the general public in Philadelphia engaged in a district-wide, strategic planning process. The 2009 ARC report served as a useful baseline for that phase of Philadelphia school reform.

Having reviewed the findings on effective school-based practices in the ARC-commissioned study by RFA, we cautioned against too much generalization of the findings as it was a qualitative study. There were, nonetheless, important lessons that could be drawn from the case analyses. A key ARC concern was: How did middle and high schools in Philadelphia gain traction in implementing effective strategies with the goal of improving student performance? With this question in mind, ARC encouraged SRC to consider the following recommendations:

- *Principals, teachers, parents, and other school-based educators needed to be fully informed of evidence-based effective practices.* As a first step, schools and the public must have access to the ARC-commissioned study on effective practices

in Philadelphia schools. SDP's central office could encourage schools to utilize these research-based practices by developing and disseminating guides on best practices. Professional development activities must be aligned with the study's findings.

- *Exchange of good practices must not be constrained by management and governance arrangements.* The RFA study gathered evidence on what works from not only district-managed schools but also charter and EMO-managed schools. Knowledge on good practices must be shared, refined, and exchanged across different management types throughout SDP. After all, improvement in school quality, regardless of management type, would benefit all the children of Philadelphia.

- *Transparency matters.* In order to facilitate the timely flow of professional knowledge, ARC saw the need for growing transparency on school practices across all management types. The public must be informed about the school operators in the next round of reform, including the potential establishment of school networks.

- *Strengthening school leadership teams is urgent.* ARC saw the urgency in strengthening the leadership capacity of school principals and school leaders. In strong school communities, the teacher leaders/principals worked with their teachers on analyzing and discussing student data, leading professional development sessions, and addressing academically struggling students. At the same time, if principals were to be held accountable for school quality and performance, they must have access to a wider range of leverages, including ongoing central and regional office support, budgetary flexibility, and site-level selection of teachers.

- *Students must come first*. To sustain school improvement, the school community must commit to all children in the city. In examining the evidence in the RFA study, ARC observed that higher performing schools were those whose teachers and principals engaged deeply and intensively in a focused set of practices to meet the educational challenges of their students.

- *Implementing accountability throughout SDP*. ARC encouraged SRC and key stakeholders, especially the Philadelphia Federation of Teachers, to work together to support teachers to accelerate the academic progress of all students.

Lessons on the Early Implementation Phase of the Renaissance Schools Initiative

To develop a more complete understanding of the early implementation of the Renaissance Schools Initiative, ARC commissioned RFA in 2010-11 to conduct a study on this important reform process. The RFA study examined several questions:

- How were Renaissance Schools governed? What was the role of the School Advisory Councils (SACs)? Did they have the capacity to participate effectively during the early implementation phase?

- What were the processes and criteria for school and provider selection for the Renaissance Schools, and how, and to what extent, has the community been involved?

- What planning activities occurred in the different models across different providers in preparation for the 2010-11 academic year? What school-level changes (administrative/ teacher/facilities/curriculum) occurred at the beginning of the 2010-11 academic year?
- What was the leadership model in the Renaissance Schools? How did the school principals and charter managers exercise their autonomy?
- How did site selection affect teacher recruitment in Renaissance Schools? What were the teacher characteristics?
- Did Renaissance Schools create a supportive learning environment for students? What were the early findings on student behaviors?

The RFA study team collected data on the Renaissance Schools from March 2010 to August 2010 and during the early implementation of Renaissance Schools during September 2010 through January 2011. In each phase, both qualitative and quantitative data were collected and analyzed.

Having reviewed the RFA findings, ARC proceeded with caution in its review and discussion of the study because it was largely descriptive in nature. There were, nonetheless, important lessons that could be drawn from the analyses. A key ARC concern was: What were the key policy conditions at the district and school level that enabled Renaissance schools to improve student outcomes? With this issue in mind, ARC urged the SRC to consider several policy recommendations.

- *Strengthen the Capacity and the Accountability of School Advisory Councils.* ARC commended SDP's efforts to promote community engagement through the creation of the SACs in the Renaissance schools. SACs were found to play an important role in planning and monitoring the start-up phase of the Renaissance Initiative.
  - There were, however, several areas in need of improvement to strengthen the role of SACs in school governance. First, SDP should make a serious effort to broaden the pool of participating parents and community members for SAC membership. As the RFA study suggested, several SACs had difficulty in meeting the requirement of 51% parental representation. A District-led outreach campaign on parental recruitment should be conducted on an ongoing basis so that SAC membership vacancies would be filled by parents in each Renaissance school community.
  - To ensure meaningful parental participation, SDP should revisit its support and training programs. In addition to providing direct training support to SACs, the District should work closely with school principals and charter managers regarding communications with SACs. In particular, SDP should support SAC chairs in their effort to play a meaningful leadership role in articulating community preferences in the decision-making process at the school site.
- *SDP Should Provide Ongoing Support for School Leadership.* Given the younger and less experienced teaching force in the Renaissance Schools, as indicated in the RFA study, ARC recommended that SDP monitor and support their work.

Newly recruited teachers were highly motivated and were a strong presence in their school. Consequently, the District needed to explore innovative ways to keep them in the school for several years to ensure stable support for student learning.

- o During the early implementation phase, very few of the Renaissance Schools used data on a frequent basis to guide changes in instructional policy and priorities. ARC saw the need for SDP to make sure that the Renaissance Schools accelerate data use to support policy decisions. In this regard, there was a need for school principals and SACs to receive ongoing training in data use for decision-making. SDP should include leadership skills training on how to set a clear school-wide vision, communicate with diverse stakeholders, sustain professional collaboration, and leverage instructional systems to improve practice and policy.
- *Focus on Student Learning Climate.* ARC urged school leaders to create a more-supportive learning climate for all students. For example, there was a need to establish a school-wide strategy for promoting a positive climate at the Promise Academies where tardiness increased from 10% to 14%. There were also variations in suspension rates among charter-managed schools, including a school with a 27% suspension rate (27% of students had been suspended at least once).

Assessing School Leadership Practices in Promise Academies

Case studies of Promise Academies conducted during 2011-12 suggested several effective strategies that seemed associated with positive academic gains in elementary and middle grades. The promising practices included:

- Principal leadership in teacher selection at the school sites
- School culture that promoted and reinforced teacher learning and professional growth
- Frequent assessment of student work and use of data on student progress to inform instructional decisions
- Promise Academies received extra resources and SDP attention that garnered public interest.

These promising outcomes notwithstanding, the current budgetary crisis and the new *Blueprint for Transforming Philadelphia's Public Schools* have shifted the focus away from the Promise Academies. As SDP rapidly moves forward with the new structure in Fiscal Year 2013, ARC urges SRC to look at the evidence on "what works" as summarized in this report. The evidence on school leadership practices in the Promise Academies may offer a knowledge base as SDP expands the pool of high-performing schools. Indeed, based on ARC's studies on "what works" over the last several years, the district-managed, turnaround schools (such as Promise Academies) seem to provide a promising strategy at the K-8 level. ARC's 2008 assessment on charter schools suggested that high schools tended to benefit from charter reform.

Conclusions

The School District of Philadelphia has led the nation in its implementation of the diverse provider model. SRC has recently considered an expansion of the diverse provider model as proposed in the *Blueprint for Transforming Philadelphia's Public Schools*. As the *Blueprint* suggested, SDP schools could potentially be restructured into several networks that are all governed by performance contracts. These new networks could be led by different types of operators: (1) schools in the "Best of the District" network could be managed by current district staff; (2) schools in the "Best of SDP plus New Recruits" network could involve a combination of current district staff and external providers; and (3) schools in the "Partner-operated" network could enter into contract with Charter Management Organizations (CMOs), universities, and other non-profit organizations. Any school operators that do not meet the contractual targets would be replaced. The extent to which this new phase of extensive restructuring is fully implemented will be jointly shaped by the hiring of a new school superintendent as well as the severe budgetary challenges.

In light of these significant changes in school governance and accountability in SDP, ARC urges SRC to focus on building the capacity to ensure reform implementation. In this report, ARC has revisited some of the key findings and recommendations that are still relevant to the current reform discussion at both the system-wide level and at the school and community level. Drawing on its independent assessment of SDP reform for almost 10 years, ARC recommends that SRC invest in building the leadership quality at all levels. Only with a critical pool of strong leaders at both the system level and the school level, can we be assured of academic success for all children in Philadelphia.

Finally, as an independent assessment center, ARC reiterates the importance of conducting ongoing studies on key investment and reform initiatives in SDP. Specifically, ARC urges SRC to continue to support different types of evaluation studies even in the context of budgetary constraints, namely:

- *Process evaluation* that monitors reform implementation and examines whether the reform activities meet the statutory, regulatory, and professional expectations as well as client satisfaction.
- *Outcome evaluation* that assesses the extent to which reform activities accomplish the outcome-oriented objectives, including unintended consequences.
- *Impact evaluation* that specifies the net effect of a particular reform or program intervention by estimating what would have happened in the absence of the reform.

The combination of these different types of evaluation studies will form a credible knowledge base for a strong system of public accountability as SDP advances to a new phase of reform.