



Philadelphia's Renaissance Schools: Start Up and Early Implementation Executive Summary

May 2011

Overview

In April 2009, Superintendent Arlene Ackerman announced her reform plan for the School District of Philadelphia (the District) – *Imagine 2014*. Among other major initiatives, *Imagine 2014* laid the groundwork for Philadelphia's Renaissance Schools Initiative. The Renaissance Initiative, set to enter its second year in 2011-12, is an effort to dramatically change student outcomes in the District's lowest performing schools. This document summarizes key findings from RFA's research conducted between March 2010 and January 2011 on start up and early implementation of the initiative.

Data Collection

The report is based on the following data in **Figure 1**:

Figure 1. Data Collection

Start Up March - August 2010	Early Implementation September 2010 - January 2011
Qualitative Data	
Interviews	
7 school principals/assistant principals 13 SAC chairs and members 7 Central Office staff 6 charter-managed school leaders Total: 33 interview respondents	26 school principals/assistant principals 32 other school leaders 13 SAC chairs 6 Central Office staff Total: 76 interview respondents
Teacher Focus Groups	
	14 teacher focus groups 11 returning teacher focus groups Total: 86 teachers
Observations	
7 SAC meetings and trainings 6 Promise Academy data review meetings 2 Promise Academy orientation sessions Total: 15 observations	13 school tours 33 classroom observations 7 school professional development sessions 2 SAC meetings and trainings 1 Promise Academy principals' meeting Total: 56 observations
Quantitative Data	
RFA surveys of 12 SAC chairs, 13 principals, and 86 teachers School-level data from the District and charter managers for the 13 Renaissance Schools and the District's 100 other Empowerment schools on: - student enrollment and characteristics as of November 1 in 2008, 2009 and 2010 - attendance, lateness, and suspensions in the first marking period of 2008, 2009 and 2010 - teacher characteristics as of November 1 in 2008, 2009 and 2010	

Theory of Action

The theory of action that undergirds the Renaissance Initiative focuses on three critical levers for change: creating a positive school climate, cultivating community ownership, and establishing effective leadership and staff. When these levers operate within a strong environment of accountability, the theory posits they will lead to a set of interim outcomes that will ultimately result in dramatic improvement in student achievement.

Our research focused on documenting and analyzing efforts to establish the following aspects of the reform model and key findings from each brief are summarized here:

- Student Enrollment and School Climate;
- School Advisory Councils; and

- School Leadership and Staffing

We examined changes within individual schools, and also compared changes across the two Renaissance School models (Promise Academies and charter-managed schools). Each brief is designed to be a stand-alone document, but the most comprehensive portrait of the Renaissance School Initiative in its early stages can be arrived at by a careful review of all three.

Findings on Early Implementation

Student Enrollment and School Climate

One of the early goals of the Renaissance Initiative was to dramatically improve the school climate, which refers to the intangible tone or feeling inside the school building. Findings in this brief examine student enrollment, climate-related interventions, and student attendance, lateness, and suspensions.

Enrollment:

- The 13 Renaissance schools remained neighborhood schools and served mostly African American, Latino, and low-income students.
- Six of seven charter-managed schools saw an increase in student enrollment, while Promise Academies, on average, did not.
- Charter-managed school leadership reported having difficulty preparing for their students due to challenges in accessing past data on their students.

Climate-Related Interventions and Strategies:

- Five schools (four charter, one Promise Academy) stood out for having school-wide systems for improving climate. Efforts to establish systems at the Promise Academies were affected by the late rollout of the “Promise Academy Way.”
- There were noticeable improvements in the physical appearance of all schools, as well as a messaging strategy that aimed to communicate consistent values, norms, and expectations.
- All schools had a significant number of non-teaching adults present in the building, which appeared to reduce discipline problems.
- Strengthening school-parent-community ties was a goal and a challenge for most schools.

Attendance, Lateness and Suspensions:

- During the first marking period, all but one school saw an increase in Average Daily Attendance (ADA), when compared to previous years and to other Empowerment Schools.
- There was no significant change in lateness in the charter-managed schools from prior years, while on average the Promise Academies saw a noticeable increase.
- Overall, there was significant variation in suspension rates among the charter-managed schools in particular, which suggests that these schools had different disciplinary policies.

School Advisory Councils

School Advisory Councils (SACs) were a central aspect of the Renaissance Initiative. They were designed to address the absence of parent and community engagement in recent reform efforts and to give parents and community a voice in their schools. Overall, a snapshot of the SACs in early winter 2011 showed that they could be characterized in three different ways:

- **Active** SACs, which had a chair, a solid core of members, and an actionable agenda.
- SACs **In Process**, which had been slowed by instability, had a different perspective from the District on their purpose, and/or had not yet moved forward with an agenda.
- **Suspended Development** describes SACs whose activities had been disrupted by changeover and/or had tensions between members and their principal or charter manager.

These early developments were affected by several key areas: leadership and core membership, understanding of goals and roles, and access to resources.

Leadership and Core Members:

- SAC chairs frequently identified themselves as long-time members of a school's community, and half of the chairs were a parent or guardian of a child in the school.
- SAC chairs from both the Promise Academies and charter-managed schools used similar words to describe SAC members: "energized," "committed," "enthusiastic," "amazing," "hopeful," and "diligent."
- Reaching the required 51% parent participation has been a particular challenge for some SACs.

- Almost every SAC chair reported a falling-off in membership in the fall, which created the need to recruit again, especially parents.

Understanding of Goals and Roles:

- Relations between principals and SACs, and SACs and charter managers, were generally positive.
- Principals, SAC chairs, and District administrators had different perspectives on the role of SACs. Some principals doubted that SACs had the capacity to carry out their responsibilities, while SAC chairs saw themselves as critical players in supporting school improvement.
- The District, especially with charter-managed schools, saw the SACs as their eyes and ears in the school. The role of the Promise Academy SACs, however, was less clear.

Access to Resources:

- Many SAC members believed they should have received a budget and resources, as well as additional training, to execute their responsibilities.
- Support for the Promise Academy SACs was distributed among a number of school-based and central office staff.

School Leadership and Staffing

As part of the Renaissance Initiative, the district implemented a number of interventions designed to strengthen leadership, put in place committed teachers, and ensure that staff had the tools and supports needed to enhance instruction. This included bringing in new leadership, replacing at least 50% of the existing staff and giving the principal the autonomy to hire new staff, as well as instituting systems for instructional improvement.

School Leadership

- New principals were put in place for 10 out of 13 Renaissance Schools, and many principals were relatively new to the principalship in general.
- All principals had a vision for turning around their respective schools. However, they differed in their ability to create a positive mission-oriented school culture, which contributed to variation in the level of teacher morale and buy-in across schools.

Teaching Staff:

- Promise Academy principals and charter managers sought committed, energetic teachers, and expressed excitement about their staff's potential.
- A compressed timeline made the teacher selection process challenging. By the time hiring efforts began, many current teachers had already sought new positions, leaving a large number of inexperienced teachers in the recruitment pool.
- There were significant changes in the characteristics of teachers in the Renaissance schools from previous years and in comparison to similar schools (called Empowerment Schools) not in the Renaissance Initiative.
 - **Full certification.** The percentage of fully certified teachers in both the Promise Academies and Charter-managed schools was significantly lower than the percentage at the Empowerment Schools, and decreased from previous years.
 - **No certification and intern certification.** Charter-managed schools experienced a 21% increase in the percentage of teachers who were not certified. Promise Academies did not employ any teachers lacking certification, but the percentage of teachers with intern or emergency certification rose markedly.
 - **Experience level and age.** Teachers in the Renaissance Schools were less experienced and younger than those in Empowerment Schools. The experience level and average age decreased from previous years.
 - **Racial composition.** Charter-managed schools had an increase in the percentage of white teachers, while Promise Academies had a decrease. There were no changes in racial composition in Empowerment Schools.
- Staff in all schools cultivated strong collaborative relationships, though some teachers reported collaborating during structured time while others had to develop their own systems.
- The presence of a significant number of new teachers was seen as a challenge by more experienced teachers.

Instructional System:

- Student achievement was frequently monitored across all schools through a benchmark assessment system; however, few schools reported using data to drive changes in practice.

- Most schools had prescribed curricula focused on reading and math; however, the amount of flexibility reported by teachers in curricular use varied across schools.
- Despite the existence of processes for teacher evaluation across all schools, teachers in most schools reported that instructional feedback was rare and expectations were often changing.
- All schools had systems of distributed leadership and common planning time for collaboration, but in the majority of schools, these structures were not consistently used to drive instructional improvement.

Recommendations

Student Enrollment and School Climate

- The District should ensure all principals have early access to the school building and that student performance and special needs data are available well before the school year begins.
- The District and charter managers should establish an early focus on establishing a school-wide system of behavioral support so that summer orientations give sufficient time to explicate both instructional and behavioral support systems.

School Advisory Councils

- More training and resources are needed for SAC chairs, principals and charter managers. These trainings should occur at school sites and be targeted based on need.
- The Promise Academy SACs would benefit from a single source of Central Office support that is dedicated to making certain the SACs function well.
- Conflict and tension should be anticipated, and the District should have in place mechanisms for working through differences before problems debilitate and/or delegitimize either the District or the SAC.

School Leadership and Staffing

- The District and charter managers should develop a strategy for meeting the needs of a teaching force that is significantly younger, less experienced, and alternatively certified.
- The District and charter managers should establish clear performance expectations and provide consistent feedback.