

Time's Up: Applying Teacher Management Skills to Solving Philadelphia's Problems

Zach Lax

On the first day of my tenure as a Philadelphia School District Teacher, I made the following observations. 1. I don't have a desk in my classroom. 2. There are also not enough desks for my students. 3. I have been assigned to teach a subject completely different than the one that I took the state test for. 4. It's 7:45. The bell just rang and I can hear my new students coming down the hall.

Over the past two years, I was force-transferred to four other schools in the city. Each school to which I was transferred was unique. One was an alternative school. One was a vocational school. And still another was a K-12 school. Two of those schools will be closed by the end of this year. I taught different subjects and different populations at each of them. Every time I was transferred, I found myself in yet another situation where I seemed to have five different problems to solve at once. Once those problems were solved, there was a new set that came along just as quickly.

This level of daily problem solving is part of being a teacher. We are constantly juggling situation after situation and running rapidly out of time in which to make decisions. In a school district like that of Philadelphia, where public education is dealing with a variety of serious far-reaching issues, teaching is probably as much about crisis management as it is about effective pedagogy. Teachers are responsible for defusing potential problems on the clock all the time. Whether it's breaking up a fight or reshuffling a lesson because your projector doesn't work, teachers are constantly creating solutions as the clock ticks.

In moments like these, teachers don't have time to ask, "Why?". This makes finding a solution the first priority. Why a last minute assembly was called is less important than figuring out how you're going to teach your lesson in half the class period. Why your classroom is flooded is less important than finding an empty classroom you can use.

Teachers are naturals at this. Problem solving is a skill we have developed so well that there are times no one even knows there was an issue because our execution was so smooth. We should be using this quality to our advantage when it comes to solving the systemic issues that plague Philadelphia's education system.

Many of the articles posted here have already gone into great detail about what is happening in Philadelphia. Torch Lytle has provided a summary of the recent reforms put forward at the local and state levels of government by various leaders of a wide variety of nonprofit institutions, political organizations, and private corporations. We are in crisis mode. Debating whether the motivations of special interests are about power, or money, or reproducing racial or economic inequities is no longer a productive use of our time. If we continue to have these debates, we will find ourselves left behind with all the decisions made for us.

Instead, we need to act. If we can find it within ourselves to devise solutions a minute before the first bell rings, we should be able to work together and fight more effectively to save our schools. With that objective in mind, here are some suggestions for those looking for a way to get involved.

Ask Questions. Get answers from your district and congressional representatives. Call their offices and request answers from their Constituent Liaisons individually or in groups. If you bother them with enough calls, emails, or letters, you will start to see results. Listen to the opinions of others. Be curious. Who, for example, was behind promoting the Boston Consulting Group as an authority on urban schools and reform? Some of these questions will be left unanswered, but if enough people ask, the truth will emerge. Again, do not focus so much on why things are happening, but how they are happening.

Educate Yourself. Do not simply take others' word as fact. Look for balanced media sources that cover multiple sides of every issue and offer multiple perspectives. Use respected and trusted journalistic sources. Check information from more than one news outlet. Ignore opinions offered without evidence, but always consider conversations that include more than one perspective. Local education news sources and blogs like The Philadelphia Notebook (www.thenotebook.org) and Chalk & Talk (www.chalkandtalk.wordpress.com) are good places to start.

Build and Join Partnerships. There are some existing activist groups already out there, both online and off. Teacher Action Group/

Philadelphia (www.TAGPhilly.org) has numerous initiatives to get people involved, including their widely publicized Faces of the Layoffs project (www.facesofthelayoffs.org). The Badass Teachers Association (www.badassteacher.org) amassed over 20,000 teachers in just a few weeks. Diane Ravitch – a prominent teacher advocate – publicized the group on her own blog, getting them additional publicity. You can join these or other groups or start your own. It could be as simple as setting up a community Facebook group or Twitter feed. You could start an online petition on sites like www.ThePetitionSite.com or www.GoPetition.com. You can even use www.act.ly for people to tweet petitions directly to the Twitter accounts of individuals in power. If you prefer face to face, plan meetings in your neighborhood or use sites like www.Meetup.com to find organizations already in your area.

Launch Solutions. Be proactive. You don't need to tackle the whole mess at once. Pick a problem that really irks you and focus on it. MIT offers a whole set of strategies and tools on their Community Problem Solving page (http://web.mit.edu/cpsproject/strategy_tools.html). This will help you narrow down specific issues and focus on manageable next steps. Put together a team of people if you don't have the time or knowledge to do it all yourself. Sometimes it's as easy as starting a www.Wordpress.com blog or building classroom tools on sites like www.lifehacker.com or www.DIY.org. Have bigger ideas? Reach out to sites like www.gofund.me and get others to support your project and help you move on with financial support.

My own involvement in the fight for Philadelphia's education system has led me outside the classroom. For National Teacher Appreciation Week, I launched Teaching Is Power (www.teachingispower.com), a website for teachers to talk about the profession from a perspective of strength and expertise rather than the usual message about poor pay and long hours. A few weeks later, the project was named a finalist in Microsoft's Challenge for Change social entrepreneurship competition. This fall, Teaching Is Power will be re-launched as the world's first social network completely dedicated to teacher innovation, research, and advocacy.

Your own solutions and initiatives do not have to be monumental, especially when you are just starting out. Everyone has time and budgetary constraints. That said, there are ways for everyone to get involved on a smaller basis. The tips shared here are meant to serve as a starting point so that your involvement is both meaningful and manageable. I didn't begin with building a website; my journey started in a completely different place. It was only after a series of smaller steps and actions did I even think about creating an online tool.

As you start to collect more information, you'll start with brainstorming ways to tackle the issue. You might launch a solution or you might discover a deeper problem that needs fixing. You may meet other teachers who add to your perspective and convince you to focus elsewhere. The important thing to remember is that solution building and community problem-solving is a nuanced process that evolves over time rather than always following a strict set of instructions or a clearly defined timeline. Your commitment to fixing Philadelphia's education system will be enough to guide you forward and keep the process moving, even if it seems like progress is really slow.

Most teachers have become familiar with the infamous Do Now. It is a smaller activity that is set to a time limit meant to get students settled into the classroom and immediately on task and focused. We Philadelphia teachers also have a Do Now.

The School District of Philadelphia faces a serious financial and operational crisis. We are failing to properly provide a quality education for all of our students and special interests dominate the decision-making process. Teachers and staff are being laid off and services are being cut. Brainstorm at least one possible doable action on your part that could help solve one of these problems. You have seven minutes to write down an idea, and then time's up.

Zachary Lax is the founder of the website Teaching Is Power, a recent finalist in Microsoft's YouthSpark Challenge for Change social innovation competition. Teaching Is Power, the world's first social network completely dedicated to teacher activism, research, and innovation, will launch its new beta version in early fall. Subscribe for TIP news and updates at www.teachingispower.com.

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