

A Teacher Activist's Response to Schools Closing

Sam Reed III

Accidental Activist

As a 15-year veteran teacher, I became an accidental teacher activist. When I say accidental activist, I recognize the very public position teachers hold. Teaching and learning are not passive acts, and being an activist could be considered a natural response to redress the issues of educational access and relevance for 21st century learners. Prior to becoming a teacher I was in the Peace Corps and ran my own information service and training company in Botswana. Over the years, my teaching stance has become that of a teacherpreneur. Teacher activism is at the heart of being a teacherpreneur. In this moment in education reform, where teacher agency meets opportunity, it became important for me to embrace my role as a teacher activist.

I teach my middle school students to critically read, write, think and make sense of the world. Following the fall out from the recent turmoil in the school district, I was compelled to immerse myself in understanding the mass school closing process. The decision to close, relocate, or consolidate schools would have a major impact on the teaching and learning conditions for my students and the community-at-large. As a Teacher Consultant with the Philadelphia Writing Project I embrace an inquiry stance for teaching and learning. This inquiry stance is instrumental in my teacher activist role and supports my teacher research, which values the roles of students, teachers, parents and community empowerment.

Facilities Master Plan

During the academic calendar year 2012-2013, the District's original Facilities Master Plan (FMP) called for closing 37 schools. During this process some schools were removed from the closing list while a few were added. In the end 23 schools were closed, leaving many communities devastated. According to the District's website, the intended goal of the FMP process was to create efficient use of school facilities that aligns programs and resources to the greatest benefit of students. Unfortunately, many of the directly and indirectly affected school communities did not feel that the district engaged in a process that explored, envisioned, and enacted educational principles that served the best interest of students.

I attended several of the FMP community meetings across the city and in the neighborhood where I both teach and live. I testified at city council hearings, I blogged, tweeted, marched in rallies, worked with parents, students and community members to develop alternative proposals.

Schools As Ecosystems

During this entire process, what became evident to me was that the complexities of school reform should be viewed from the metaphor of schools as ecosystems. Schools just like ecosystems are dynamic organisms, and decisions made about one school community would have long-lasting effects in that community and neighboring communities. Close one school down, and what impact will it have on the educational, social and economic sustainability of the community and city-at-large.

Furthermore, the community-at-large was not convinced that the District engaged in a school design process that met the social, emotional, and environmental needs of students and their families. There is a lot to learn from viewing schools from an ecological perspective. According to Andy Hargreaves, author of *Sustainable Leadership* (2012), ecosystems are the foundational web upon which the elements of nature make order out of chaos. Schools as ecosystems take on a shared and sustainable vision. It does not unduly deplete human or financial resources, and cares for and avoids exerting damage on the surrounding educational and community environment.

If District officials had used an ecological model to decide how many and which schools should be ultimately closed, I wonder what the process would have looked like.

Rippling Effects of Closing Schools

Beeber Middle School, where I teach, experienced the roller coaster effect of the school closing process. Beeber was not on the initial closing list but was eventually put on a revised closing list, along with M.H. Stanton Elementary School in North Philadelphia, very late in the process. The original PMP proposed to convert Beeber Middle School into a K-8 school, while closing its traditional feeder neighborhood schools, Gompers and Overbrook Elementary. Parents, students, teachers, and community members understood the ripple effects that closing these community anchors would have. In the plans, it was not clear how the District would transition the physical plant or make the cultural shift from a middle school to a school that would have to cater for much younger children.

While the district was considering shuttering Gompers and Overbrook Elementary, parents, students, teachers, and community members came together and developed The Wynnefield and Overbrook Community Alternative Education proposal. I endorsed this plan because it represented a sustainable design process that sought to leverage community partnerships to expand pre-K and kindergarten offerings at Gompers and Overbrook Elementary and re-imagined Beeber Middle School as a community school.

The FMP community meetings, which the district used to shape its final recommendations, created unhealthy tensions. At community meetings, certain factions or individuals, for self-preservation or self-interests, pitted their schools against receiving schools. This was very evident at one meeting, when a volunteer from Gompers Elementary School announced, “the elephant in the room is that Beeber needs to be shut down and turned into a recreation center.” This community member further noted that the District would not get any resistance if Beeber was shut down.

I was surprised, but not shocked by this utterance. I had attended many community meetings and felt they were often venting sessions where districts officials just listened and took notes. But in all the meetings, there was no sense that the FMP process was “ecosystem” centered. There was no concerted effort to collectively figure out a sustainable way to leverage our human capital and financial resources to minimize harm to the most venerable schools and communities.

The District decided to nix the plans to close Gompers and Overbrook Elementary and to convert Beeber into a K-8 school. Instead, the District moved to close Beeber and relocate its seventh and eighth grade students and expand the neighborhood school, Overbrook High School into 7-12 school.

In fixing one problem, the ripple effect created greater problems.

Beeber’s Response to School Closing

Beeber, at this point, had to mount its own campaign to keep its doors open. In some ways, Beeber was fortunate that it was put on the closing list in the later stage of the process. Teachers, parents, students, and community members were able to take lessons learned from other school communities and mobilize an effective campaign to save their school. Many members of the community passionately offered reasoned and emotional appeals to protect the viability of Beeber, the only neighborhood middle school in the area. Often the most effective arguments were waged not by the loudest or most seasoned activists, but by students. Young students argued how closing their school would be akin to separating them from their family. Others said that the District's decision to shutter schools would result in “post-school closure trauma”. One 7th grade student at Beeber who spoke at the community meetings and at the formal SRC hearing, demurred, “think about the little people” in making her arguments against sending 7th and 8th graders over to Overbrook High School.

Ultimately, the district rescinded its recommendation to close Beeber, in part because of safety issues and lack of other alternatives for families. There was a confluence of other factors that influenced the decision to keep Beeber doors open. The tragic death of a 17-year-old Overbrook student, Bernard Scott, who was shot and killed on his way home from school, buoyed the safety concerns regarding sending Beeber students to Overbrook. Prior to Scott’s untimely death, parents had been actively lobbying about safety concerns.

Another variable that contributed to saving Beeber and has interesting sustainability implications was the plans to co-locate Science Leadership Academy’s expansion on to Beeber Campus. This co-location should provide synergistic opportunities for Beeber’s plans to be repurposed as a Science Technology Engineering Arts and Math (STEAM) based academy.

Why Did We Save Our Schools?

After waging the fight to save Beeber, the district announced its doomsday budget, resulting in the 3,783 staff losing their jobs. If the district does not secure funding, from the state, city, and major concessions from the teachers union, the district will open schools in the fall with fewer teachers, no counselors, secretaries, assistant principals, noontime aides, and other valuable support staff. Even the small funding the city recently received from Harrisburg has done little to stabilize the drastic labor cuts. This latest churn and disruption effectively squashed the momentum parents, students, staff, and the community felt from saving their school. When the doomsday budget was announced some teachers and supporters appeared fatigued from all the reform efforts and I wondered, “Why did we save our school?”

Implications and Conclusion

I have not lost hope. I feel resolved by the way the Beeber community came together to envision an alternative school-led turnaround plan. I am even more confident that the resilience of young people facing all the uncertainty of school closing and massive budget shortfalls will face these threats by pushing back and adapting at the same time.

As a teacher activist deeply committed to transforming the landscape of education reform in my city, I think this moment offers opportunities for the District to support sustainable school-led transformations. The lessons learned from fighting to save schools could be used to renew struggling schools.

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