

## Questions & Comments from Franklin Conference: March 28<sup>th</sup> World Café Live

### School Design

Littleton is not Philadelphia- can you give us some large city examples of successful local planning?

What is the role of environmental sustainability both as a demonstration of principles and a didactic tool for students?

Of the 250 +/- pre-approved design firms qualified to do work for the school district, how many have actually been contracted with?

- what do you think the issues are that are keeping more local A/E firms from participating?

The open classroom movement of the 70s failed – why should it work now?

What are examples of space layout which encourages student voice in school governance? Not just space for students to control, but to use for group discourse- uncensored.

Key to these capital improvements is **facility management**. Who is looking out for that during the budget & design stage?

Nowhere in the discussion of school layout was the topic of school governance approached. President Guttman made the connection between education and democracy but where is that message evident in the principles of school design and management?

Schools need designated space for student assembly, unmonitored by adults, where they can evolve their own civil society and formulate ideas that can inform school administration. A Commons, a Lounge, a place without computers, books or other designated purpose. A mini Independence Hall.

[The presenters] were architects who wanted to build wonderful buildings. Their buildings were decided on by the community, including, I assume the local school district. The local school district, I assume helped build structures which would enhance the local curriculum. The school facilities and the curriculum have to be worked on together. When building, do you have a computer lab or only computers in the classrooms? Is art going to be included in the curriculum? Then we need an art room, or not. Are world languages going to be taught? The building and curriculum have to work together.

I know these buildings could be built and/or renovated to use dramatically less energy while providing better levels of classroom lighting & acoustics, healthier indoor air quality and lower maintenance cost. A thirty percent reduction in energy use is readily achievable even without any additional capital investment; fifty percent is accomplished in climatically similar regions. ....

These savings continue through the lifetime of the building & its systems; therefore if the current stock of buildings are “average” for today’s K12 building type, and if we could implement changes to increase their quality it might slow down the construction by a year or two as the district gets its act together (they’re already running about 3 years behind their original schedule). Perhaps the SDP has done preparatory work that will have to be trashed, but a quick check will show this to be a very very small percentage of the cost of a building over its lifetime, while the savings and improvements will continue forever...

It will be a challenge to adapt the strategies discussed that were successful with West Coast schools to old industrial cities like Philadelphia. Here we are faced with the problem of taking a system and trying to fix it, rather than having the opportunity to create an environment anew. We were disappointed that there was little emphasis on physical design of the schools. Since the issue at hand is a capital budget (and not a retooling of the District's strategic plan or curricular focus, for example), we need to keep the discussion centered around the actual outcome of the district's initiative--i.e., what will the schools look like, and how will they fit into our communities. We liked the idea of office space for students. One group member acknowledged that at his suburban Philadelphia school, many students did extracurricular activities that gave them office space in school (e.g., newspaper, school tv studio, yearbook, tech support, library support, etc.) Those students stayed late at school, using their desk space for homework.

School District business practices regarding architecture and design are peculiar.

Many architects and engineers will not work with the SDP because it has, for reasons that have never been made public, insisted on writing an amateurish professional services contract that is uninsurable and fails to protect the students from the very risks that it attempts to transfer to the design professionals. (In its one sided attempt to make design professionals responsible for many events that they do not control, it attempts to coerce professional services firms into providing a form of insurance-- this is simply not a business that design professionals are in. The result is an illusory transfer of risk to underfunded "insurance" providers (namely your design firms). Many of the risks of project approvals and schedules are those that any institution that builds must accept. This is a big topic and I would be pleased to put you in touch with people who know more about it. The key point is that the SDP is losing access to many of the creative firms that it needs to be successful, and is creating an image of an institution that is out of step with the realities of the modern marketplace as a place to do business.

Table members wanted to make sure that accommodations for those students that are disabled (including but not limited to those that are autistic, those identified with ADA needs, etc.) within schools were addressed. It was added that such accommodations applied equally if not more so to the Charter schools as many of those schools exist in facilities that were adapted for school use and were not originally designed with the necessary accommodations in mind. Members also noted the liability issues associated with relocating school locations/functions to local businesses as discussed in one of the case studies. While fine in theory, there are obvious challenges in a city like Philadelphia, which can be known to be fairly "litigious" at times.

## School Curriculum

Do you think that there is or would be a concern that general liberal arts teaching is proposed to be replaced by "teaching what the students want to learn." Don't you think that the average teenager is too young to pre-determine a level of interest and needs [where] exposure to a variety of potential different fields

What is "working" well in Philadelphia public schools?

- Is direct input from teachers being solicited in addition to input from PFT union representatives?

How can the Philadelphia School system address the inherent contradiction between meeting “no child left behind” and individualized learning (or serving learning)?

Where are the teachers? Where are the plans to address the “Philadelphia students?” Many of the ideas presented tonight are ideal for dealing with motivated middle class students. These plans have ignored where students come from.

How can one plan without knowing the graduation requirement?

Childhood literacy efforts need to begin far earlier than kindergarten

How do we measure success in a learning environment?

Education theory changes every 5-10 years. Can schools be designed to accommodate these changes?

If you educate based on student’s interest, how do you introduce new disciplines/ideas to students?

How does “all of this” relate to the new IDEA Individuals with Disabilities Educational Improvement Act? (especially with 1 in 166 being diagnosed with autism, plus other developmental & physical challenges)

If a school is an institution that engenders democratic orientation and citizenship development, then there should be a healthy role there for students to help govern operations.

Many innovative ideas were shared in the spirit of rethinking school design along dimensions of physical space, social arrangements, use of time, types of learning materials, etc. - the new core curriculum in the district appears to place a fairly tight set of constraints around how those things might be rethought. If we are so truly constrained in this regard, aren't we likely to continue "business as usual" within slightly newer and potentially more "beautiful" buildings? (emphasis in Gutman talk)  
\* Discussion of opportunity to engage youth in this process - as indicated by several panel members - excitement and agreement around the value in this approach

We are not convinced that traditional school models are inherently flawed, and that the solution is to rethink the entire educational structure and methodology. Most of Philadelphia's suburban schools, as well as several outstanding urban schools, function on a very traditional methodology and curriculum and their students succeed at a high level. The more critical factors involve parental involvement, community safety, and economic development around the schools.

An interesting component was the idea of having user (or in this case student) input into this planning process including the design portions. .. students should be engaged even earlier than the panel suggested high school age. ... it was noted that it is actually the earlier school years that tend to be more receptive towards inputting and are the least inhibited with respect to constructively participating (e.g. 3rd to 4th grade)

## Public & Community Involvement

Is direct input from parents being solicited in addition to input from Home & School Associations, Right to Education Task Force, etc?

I look forward to follow up sessions when the citizenry can weigh in more.

Our schools need to be places that all people feel welcome, accommodated and included. If every school had the "public" incorporated into the environment, with opportunity available from birth through death we would be educating ourselves to be more prepared to be the well rounded students of life that we have been claiming for years to be educating!

I was confused about the continual reference to "We look forward to building a high school in West Philadelphia." Parkside is very much in West Philadelphia, and there is a nice high school being built here right now. I don't like the implication that West Philadelphia = U. Penn. For what it's worth, however, the High School of the Future in Parkside is in Penn's mortgage area.

One of the group members is an administrator for the Phila. office of Teach for America. She says, "want to reach nearly 200 SDP teachers? Teach for America!"

The School District's elaborate building and curriculum plans omit one major need. Vallas especially should be aware that in Chicago and Baltimore, the libraries, schools and community centers are combined in one area. The Philadelphia School District itself did a study a few years ago that said where there are school libraries and school librarians and students read for fun, students do better in all their subjects. Mark Twain and James Baldwin did not finish formal schooling because they had to go out to work. However, they were all great readers and undoubtedly the libraries were open all the time (unlike Philadelphia's public libraries at present). Public school libraries are shamefully either non-existent or closed at present. The Philadelphia School District could combine in their school building plans, a community center-neighborhood library would make the vital connection of the fun and importance of reading to all learning.

**NEIGHBORHOOD:** advertise aspects of school buildings that impact on neighbors & neighborhood, rather than just advertising within the school family itself (e.g. like local shopper, Daily News, Al Dia, Tribune, native language papers for ethnic neighborhoods, and so on...)

**VIOLENCE:** engage people in eliminating violence. Period. Use schools & school-related meetings to address violence at all levels of society including familial, gangs, police, bullying in and out of schools, etc.

**JOBS:** use schools as job-base; job training site; etc. Especially bring construction and building-operating jobs to the 'hood (facilities management, logistics, deliveries, job incubators, office machine use & maintenance, office systems & records management, etc.).

Questions about the viability of the ideas were expressed by the students and underscored this group of participants belief that student input and an active high school student board should be an essential part of the planning process. Student representatives from many high schools could form a board that becomes involved in the decision making process. Planners could make presentations to this board and get valuable user/student feedback.

In addition to a board of high school students Dr. Rayala felt that students from his school could play a part in many phases of the process. Teachers may not be able to add it to their set curriculum but a group of students from CHAD could both learn and contribute to the task facing the city of Phila. CHAD should be fit into the planning process in a separate, structured way.

Relationship with NTI seems to be underdeveloped.

NTI will have a significant impact on the demographics that the SDP is trying to get a handle on for school planning. Many observers of the Philadelphia architecture and planning scene believe that the key link is the Planning Commission, which is now in the process of looking for new leadership. But to get more out of the Planning Commission, the SDOP needs to have its own engagement in community building and, as the conference demonstrated, an openness to building schools engaged in their communities.

## School District of Philadelphia

Is there a consortium of experts to assist community groups in developing innovative schools? Particularly in Philadelphia?

We, the public, need a “1,2,3” to use when we talk with those are not here. Words, examples, results that can sway the frustrated & hopeless. So much water is over the dam, what can be effective?

Philadelphia school district presentation makes it seem like a done deal. Already budgeted. How open is the administration to our deliberation?

Why has school district set up its work (decision) so it can't be insured? Not in real world, not business-like.

It appears that many decisions related to this initiative are already decided upon and well under way - what opportunity is there to make this a civic engagement activity in practice as well as theory?

Who's paying for all this? i.e. debt service on this gigantic bond must dramatically increase annual operational costs to the SDP. How can Philadelphia's size as a district be used to advantage (rather than an obstacle to inclusive planning?)

I found the conference useful, but was disappointed that the 'district' team' left before the panel and had no interaction with them.

Is there any possibility to influence the design of the schools which are currently in the planning stages? How are results of the conference being conveyed to the School District, and is there any hope that these discussions will have any real impact on current or future projects? Will the event be covered in the media to increase the discussion of this topic among all invested and interested Philadelphians? How can one find out about specific projects, so that we can get involved in a more direct way and locally at the neighborhood level as well as having continued broad district wide planning discussions?

What is behind the resistance to change at the level of the SDP? Has a systemic analysis been made or is it just opinion & seat-of-the-pants judgements?

- e.g. the School Reform Commission came in with a mandate to change things. So they brought in new superintendent Vallas. He brought in his own new high-level staffers. Thus it can be seen as imposed from above which doesn't usually engage cooperation / collaboration.

- But is this actually known? How extensive is/are the areas of resistance? It takes knowing what people are feeling, how they are reacting, in order to address those barriers.

We heard what most at our table observed was an incredible level of same-old, same old from the only two representatives of the SDP who were present. Why? Here they had an opportunity of a lifetime to make change & have an impact on improving the city & the children but their manner & use of language was totally like "Just kindly step aside and we'll tell you what we're doing to you."

Although I was glad to attend a conference on this issue, I found the evening disappointing largely because there was no connection between the first and second parts of the programs. There was no dialogue between the planners with the vision and the people responsible for allocating the resources, Penn's administration, the school district, PSIT and school reform commission. Without a real dialogue, nothing will change and we are all wasting our time. The PSIT and school district personnel administering the capital improvement projects have no vision and their policies hinder innovation. If this approach to renovating and building new schools is not changed, a great opportunity will be lost.

Yet while the adding and encouraging of students to be part of the early input process was brought up, some at the table noted that although the school district was represented by one of its Commissioners as well as some from the Capital Program, because of the conference's high profile, they were surprised that Paul Vallas did not attend. And, considering that the capital program would undoubtedly have a large impact at the neighborhood-level and thus collectively an impact on the city itself, it was surprising that representatives from such agencies as City Planning Commission, etc. were not evident at the conference either.

In closing, table participants expressed an interest in learning more about such things as:

- making sign-in/attendee lists for the conference available as a resource
- hearing a briefing from the educational-side of the Phila. Public Schools system and not just the capital program
- having more project examples that were more similar to Philadelphia situation - i.e. urban with an older infrastructure
- hearing about any additional Franklin Conference meetings planned? If so, when and where?