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Posted on Thu, Feb. 26, 2009

Phila students challenge 'Imagine 2014' plan

By Kristen A. Graham
Inquirer Staff Writer

Waving signs, chanting, and pumping fists in the air, more than 50 high school students gathered outside Philadelphia School District headquarters yesterday to air their concerns about a sweeping blueprint to remake city schools.

"Imagine 2014," Superintendent Arlene Ackerman's newly introduced strategic plan, calls for the district to shutter up to 35 failing schools and reopen them as charters or under outside management.

That worries Mason Tyer, 18, a senior at West Philadelphia High School and member of the Philadelphia Student Union, which organized the demonstration. He doesn't believe his school is hopeless, and he doesn't want the district to give up on it, he said.

"We need more help," Tyer said. "Doing this to us, we feel like we're being kicked to the curb."

Tomas Hanna, the district's chief of school operations, said it was too early to say which schools might be closed, and stressed that no action would be taken without input from affected neighborhoods and students. But allowing a failing model to continue is not acceptable, he said.

"This is not about displacing young people," said Hanna. "Our dropout rates are high, and achievement has been low in some schools. We have to do something to fix that."

Hanna said that he was pleased to see so many students turn out to air concerns about the plan. A group from the Philadelphia Student Union will meet with Ackerman today to discuss the strategic plan, district officials said.

Timothy Veal, 17, is glad to have the opportunity, but the Lambertson High senior is still wary of what could happen if a new crop of charter schools creates two school systems - one for people who can get into them, and one for the others.

According to the district, students who attend the schools that are to be closed will all be admitted to the new schools that replace them.

"Even though I'm a senior, I still care about what happens," said Veal, who wore a silver knight costume, held a cardboard horse, and brandished a plastic sword to dramatize the "false promises" of a Chicago plan some say is the basis for Ackerman's blueprint. "This is not fair."

Renaissance 2010, the Chicago plan, set out to close 100 struggling schools and replace them with 60 charter schools. Critics say the plan has pushed poor students out and that the new schools have not produced better results than traditional public schools.

Ackerman has said that she does not know much about the Chicago plan, and based Imagine 2014 on other reform models from around the country, plus district task forces, reports, and community input.

The students said they agreed with some parts of the plan, including a call for more counselors and an expansion of "student success centers" - resource rooms where students can get help preparing for college and dealing with high school.

Helen Gym, a founder of Parents United for Public Education, reminded the students that they had a chance to affect change, and asked them to press for it.

"This is a chance to do it right," Gym told the students. "We've got a chance to have students engaged, parents engaged, teachers engaged in the process."

When the state took over city schools in 2001, the district began using a "diverse provider model," handing over management of some public schools to outside groups, including for-profit companies. At the time, many felt that change was imposed on them.



DAVID M WARREN / Staff Photographer

Lamberton High senior Tim Veal wears a knight costume in the protest. Olicia Stephen, Bodine 10th grader, had her mouth taped and held a sign: "It's not a choice if we have no voice."

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Hanna said that would not be the case with Imagine 2014.

"This process is about engaging the community, hearing everyone's thoughts and concerns," he said. "We're going to look at lessons learned in the past."

Contact staff writer Kristen Graham at 215-854-5146 or kgraham@phillynews.com.

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|--|--|
| <p>Posted by Mommiekins 08:31 AM, 02/26/2009</p> <p>It is good to hear that students are interested in what happens to their public schools. Now, if only we could capture that energy and have some of these students become wonderful teachers! I like the idea of following promising young people and offering them the help they need to teach the next generation. We need a good mentoring program to guide these young folks and lead them back to the classroom. How can we offer them the incentive to go into teaching? How can we give them the role models they need to become leaders in the field? We have got to do a better job than we are doing right now. I liked Ackerman's idea with regard to trying to get new teachers. It sounds like a new effort is being made. At least it is a start. We can do more!</p> | <p>Sign in to report abuse</p> |
| <p>Posted by aliveandwell 10:00 AM, 02/26/2009</p> <p>Unfortunately, the school district does very little to attract and retain new teachers. The pay is low, the support is non-existent, and the harassment is very high. Students see how their teachers are treated by the administration and they do not want those working conditions for themselves. Who can blame them? Philly hires Teach for America kids who are not certified to teach, throws them in a classroom with no supports in place, then wonders why they quit when their two year commitment is up. I wouldn't encourage any young person to become a teacher in Philadelphia today unless NCLB is revised and top CEOs like Ackerman stop blaming the teachers for all the ills of society.</p> | <p>Sign in to report abuse</p> |
| <p>Posted by Teddy Beckerstead 12:20 PM, 02/26/2009</p> <p>They should take these 50 students -the ones who really care- and let them go to private schools for free. The other thousand idiots who decided to completely waste their lives and tax payers money should be put on a rocket ship and blasted to the moon...at least thats just a one time cost.</p> | <p>Sign in to report abuse</p> |
| <p>Posted by westbrookmp 01:44 PM, 02/26/2009</p> <p>aliveandwell - Those teach for America teachers are some of the most highly qualified, most motivated teachers there are in this entire country my friend. But, like any right minded person, after their commitment is up, they leave. Why? Pay is horrible. Harassment is high. But, I promise you, they are very good teachers.</p> | <p>Sign in to report abuse</p> |
| <p>Posted by Teddy Beckerstead 01:59 PM, 02/26/2009</p> <p>PS- Headlines on Philly.com tomorrow: "Kid Dressed Up as Knight get an Epic Beatdown on his Walk Home from School".</p> | <p>Sign in to report abuse</p> |
| <p>Posted by aliveandwell 02:48 PM, 02/26/2009</p> <p>westbrookmp - We wish your promises had some basis to them. Unfortunately, the TFA "teachers" we've encountered have not lived up to your promises. They weren't education majors, have minimal or no educational training and they're teaching subjects other than their majors. Some are motivated, but few are qualified. This is what happens when you give college grads a summer crash course in teaching in the inner-city. They start out bright-eyed and motivated in September, are shell-shocked by November and burned out and ready to run for the hills by June. The bottom line is... they aren't teachers. They're college educated babysitters.</p> | <p>Sign in to report abuse</p> |
| <p>Posted by ThomasWPaine4 04:49 PM, 02/26/2009</p> <p>Teddy Beckerstead: Classic post!</p> | <p>Sign in to report abuse</p> |
| <p>Posted by gtown_teach 06:50 PM, 02/26/2009</p> <p>You know that Ackerman is shooting for an 8-period school day. With a whole extra period, the district will have to hire hundreds of teachers for the Fall... I'm foreseeing massive teacher shortages come September.</p> | <p>Sign in to report abuse</p> |
| <p>Posted by knwmn 09:30 PM, 02/26/2009</p> <p>Didn't you quote Ackerman as saying last week that if it works in Chicago it can work here? Now that she realizes it isn't working in Chicago what is the new plan?</p> | <p>Sign in to report abuse</p> |
| <p>Posted by littleonions 01:01 AM, 02/27/2009</p> <p>Aliveandwell, you are 100% right. TFA is nothing but a way to hire amateurs on the cheap to fill vacancies. Can anyone think of any other profession that allows college grads of another discipline to enter their ranks with a crash orientation course? How many law firms are hiring not clerks but actual licensed lawyers from such a program without passing the bar? How many hospitals are hiring nurses off the street with just a few weeks orientation. Would a medical practice hire someone who had not graduated from medical school and passed all the internships and exams. It is an outrage and an insult to the teaching profession to pretend that just anyone can teach. I am tired of it.</p> | <p>Sign in to report abuse</p> |

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