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Posted on Thu, Apr. 16, 2009

### New school plan ready, but opponents say to wait

By MENSAH M. DEAN  
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Some embraced, others battered the final version of the Philadelphia School District's proposed five-year strategic plan, which district officials formally presented to the School Reform Commission during a spirited meeting yesterday.

Superintendent Arlene Ackerman, architect of the "Imagine 2014" plan, said that it would bring the basics to schools that lack them while transforming other schools that have failed to make progress for years.

"Show me an alternative to 'Imagine 2014,' because I'm not going into another year with no plan," Ackerman told reporters after the meeting. "I don't want to do that to our children."

Ackerman and her plan got an impassioned endorsement from state Sen. Anthony Hardy Williams, D-Phila.

"This is a plan that has been created by a leader, and we frankly need to get out of the way, step back and let her do her job," Williams said.

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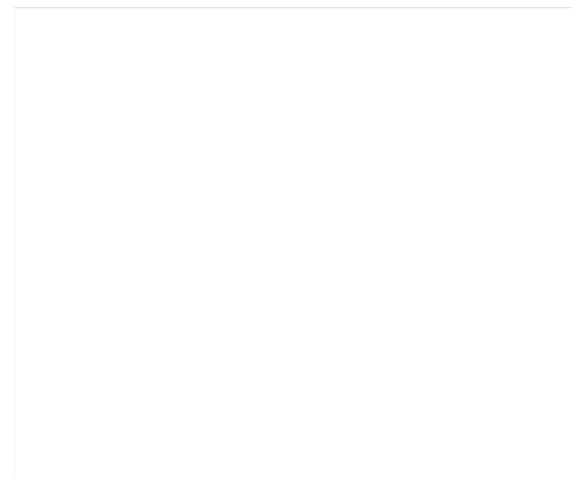
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But critics, including members of advocacy groups Philadelphia Student Union, Youth United for Change, Philadelphia ACORN and JUNTOS, called for the commission to postpone next Wednesday's vote to give the public more time to study the final draft.

They also asked that the most controversial part of the plan - turning over failing schools to outside managers - be dealt with separately.

The critics noted that a recent study found that test scores at a group of district schools run by private managers since 2002 have not improved as quickly as schools run by the district.

"Why is it that the district thinks outside providers are a solution to low-performing schools and neighborhood schools become just a dumping ground for ignored potential?" Eric Yates, a West Philadelphia High senior, asked the commission.

Ackerman said that neither postponing the vote nor changing the outside-manager provision was on the table. The plan has been presented to more than 3,000 people at numerous community meetings, she said, and the time has come to act.

"The commissioners will vote it up or vote it down, but we need to get on with doing something for these kids," she said.

In a joint statement, the critical groups said that they had questions and concerns about "supports for English-language learners, strengthening career and technical education, creating equitable small schools, the implementation of weighted student funding and equitable distribution of qualified teachers."

Students from the groups hoisted an assortment of signs during the meeting such as: "Too Soon to Vote" and "Welcome New SRC Members . . . Are You Really Ready To Vote?"

The latter sign was a reference to Chairman Robert Archie and Johnny Irizarry, who were attending their first reform-commission meeting.

After Ackerman and her team presented the plan's highlights, just one of the four commissioners had questions.

Heidi Ramirez asked why the plan did not address ways to more equitably distribute qualified teachers to schools and to recruit more math and science teachers.

Ackerman said that the district could not address teacher-quality issues alone, but rather needed to work with the Philadelphia Federation of Teachers, due to contractual provisions.

"I want to make it clear that we want qualified, experienced teachers in all of our classrooms, but we can't do that by ourselves," she said. "Right now we can't transfer teachers from one school to another. We can't transfer them from one grade to another."

Ramirez also asked how much the plan would cost. "I've read in the paper, for instance, that it's a \$50 million plan. I haven't seen any numbers," she said.

"It's about \$160 million over five years," Ackerman awkwardly responded.

When she released a first draft in February, Ackerman said that the plan would cost \$50 million. Following yesterday's meeting, she backed away from the \$160 million figure, saying that the final amount would be made public Wednesday, when the plan is voted on and the district's preliminary \$3 billion budget for next year is released.

"It's not like we've been trying to hide the money," said Ackerman, who noted that the four commissioners would be briefed individually on the plan's finances. "We've just gotten clearance about the [federal] stimulus money and how we can spend it." \*

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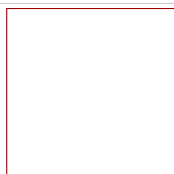
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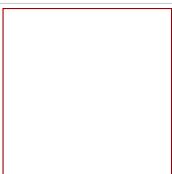
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Posted by **MCaesar** 09:45 AM, 04/16/2009

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The cost of the plan is not the issue. Of course we need to spend more money to fix the school and anyone saying otherwise is a liar. Every major problem that this country has tackled, from terrorism to bank failures, we have thrown money at! If you look at the actual dollars spent on instruction in our schools it is well below the suburbs. Remember the old schools in the city have very high upkeep and utility costs. The far bigger issue than cost is effectiveness. I don't think this plan will work because it doesn't go far enough in changing the WAY we educate students. It doesn't do enough to make students WANT to come to school. That is where it drops the ball.

Posted by **Sina** 11:15 PM, 04/16/2009

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Repeat of Ackerman's San Francisco and Washington DC fiascos, anyone?

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