

February 9, 2016

Dear Members of the School Reform Commission and Superintendent Hite,

We are professors from different Philadelphia-area institutions and from different fields, including political science, education, urban studies, and law. All of us study, write, and teach about the role public education plays in the United States and in Philadelphia. We share a commitment to the value of public education as a public good that is essential to a functioning democracy. In that context, we write to express our deep concern over the SRC's recent decision to privatize three more neighborhood schools—Wister, Cooke, and Huey. The views we express are our own; we are not speaking on behalf of our institutions.

Too many of those who demand privatization of public schools in the name of “choice” completely dismiss the choice of parents who want a neighborhood public school. Before the SRC vote on privatizing Wister, Huey, and Cooke, Jonathan Cetel of PennCAN argued that Wister parents weren't being heard—but he ignored the strong voices of Wister parents who rejected charterization of their school. By his own data, a strong majority of the in-catchment families have not opted out of their school—66% to 34%--according to him. Parents of Wister, Cooke, and Huey were not even given the respect of being allowed to vote on who should run their schools.

Then the SRC adopted Commissioner Simms' last minute, unannounced resolution to privatize Wister even after Superintendent Hite determined that Wister should remain a public school. Simms asserted that she was moved by parents who supported privatization—but she never met with the parents who opposed the move or attended any of the community meetings on Wister's future. No one on the SRC ever offered the parents the option of voting, which would have been a more democratic means of allowing parent voice than simply listening only to a select group of parents. Senator Anthony Hardy Williams' recent op ed similarly lauded parental choice—while totally ignoring the fact that Wister, Huey, and Cooke parents were given no choice in this process.

Cetel pointed to last year's test scores to justify the charterization of Wister, asserting that Mastery's track record is clearly superior to Wister's. Is it? If the School Progress Report categories have any meaning, then a fair comparison of Wister and the existing Mastery Renaissance schools is called for.

Wister

Overall	33%	Watch
Achievement	7%	Intervene
Progress	68%	Reinforce

Mastery Cleveland

Overall	20%	Intervene
Achievement	12%	Intervene

Progress	0%	Intervene
Mastery Clymer		
Overall	19%	Intervene
Achievement	13%	Intervene
Progress	0%	Intervene
Mastery Harrity		
Overall	22%	Intervene
Achievement	16%	Intervene
Progress	5%	Intervene
Mastery Mann		
Overall	30%	Watch
Achievement	28%	Watch
Progress	8%	Intervene
Mastery Pastorius		
Overall	35%	Watch
Achievement	10%	Intervene
Progress	50%	Reinforce
Mastery Smedley		
Overall	41%	Watch
Achievement	29%	Watch
Progress	31%	Watch
Mastery Gratz Middle School:		
Overall	26%	Watch
Achievement	2%	Intervene
Progress	52%	Reinforce
And what about Gratz High School's results under Mastery, which Cetel touted at the end of his post?		
Mastery Gratz High School		
Overall	12%	Intervene
Achievement	3%	Intervene
Progress	17%	Intervene

Even Mastery's non-Renaissance Middle/Elementary charters struggled based on the SPR data:

Mastery Pickett MS

Overall	11%	Intervene
Achievement	5%	Intervene
Progress	3%	Intervene

Mastery Shoemaker MS

Overall	28%	Watch
Achievement	13%	Intervene
Progress	8%	Intervene

Mastery Lenfest MS

Overall	16%	Intervene
Achievement	7%	Intervene
Progress	0%	Intervene

Hardy Williams Mastery K-8

Overall	39%	Watch
Achievement	17%	Intervene
Progress	41%	Watch

Mastery Thomas K-8

Overall	48%	Watch
Achievement	31%	Watch
Progress	43%	Watch

Cetel and others have pointed to the Intervene category as justification for privatization and turnaround efforts for traditional public schools. But, along with the six Mastery schools noted above, another 18 charter schools fell into the Intervene category. Should they be closed as well?

It is unfair to condemn Wister, Cooke, Huey, and other public schools for their test scores on a test that was planned to be more difficult and in a year when the devastating funding cuts continued to undercut all schools' efforts to educate our children. It is perplexing that the SRC does not consistently rely on its own data, which does not support the Wister decision.

Cetel argued that money doesn't matter. However he didn't mention that the Mastery schools receive millions of dollars in contributions and grants beyond the per-pupil funding they receive from the District. According to the 2014 990 tax returns on guidestar.org, the Mastery Schools Foundation's income was \$12,006,597. In addition, individual schools received the following in additional contributions and grants:

Cleveland	\$1,999,476	
Clymer	\$912,164	
Gratz	\$2,961,229	(presumably MS and HS)
Harrity	\$1,446,278	
Hardy Williams	\$3,110,776	(presumably ES and HS)

Mastery HS	\$8,731,368 (presumably Lenfest)
Mann	\$1,147,877
Pastorius	\$1,596,417
Shoemaker	\$1,868,623 (presumably MS and HS)
Smedley	\$1,340,309
Thomas	\$3,846,908 (presumably ES and HS)

Mastery schools impose a rigid climate on their students. The disciplinary code allows for demerits that can build to detention and expulsion for a wide variety of behaviors including exhibiting disrespect by rolling one's eyes or sucking one's teeth. Not every parent wants that climate for their child, especially when the Mastery rates for out of school suspension are high. Nine percent of Wister students experienced OSS last year according to the SPR. The contrasting rates for the Mastery K-8 and middle schools are much higher:

Mann	18%
Smedley	11%
Cleveland	15%
Clymer	11%
Harrity	21%
Pastorius	20%
Gratz MS	42%
Lenfest MS	39%
Shoemaker MS	36%
Pickett MS	45%
Hardy Williams K-8	20%
Thomas K-8	6%

At Gratz High School, 54%--a majority of students- experienced an out of school suspension last year according to the SPR.

If parental choice matters, then the decision to privatize these schools should have been based on a transparent and open vote of all of the families now in the schools and a full and complete consideration of how the resources available to these schools affect the data on which the SRC is basing its decisions.

Sincerely,

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