

What We CAN |

A Report on Our Schools, Our and Difficult Beha



*Philadelphia Citizens for Children and Youth
January, 2004*

About PCCY

Founded in 1980, Philadelphia Citizens for Children and Youth (PCCY) serves as the region's leading child advocacy organization and works to improve the lives and life chances of the region's children. Through thoughtful and informed advocacy, community education, targeted service projects and budget analysis, PCCY seeks to watch out and speak out for the children in our region. PCCY undertakes specific and focused projects in areas affecting the healthy growth and development of children, including after-school, child care, public education, child health and child welfare. As a committed advocate for the region's children and an independent watchdog, PCCY accepts no government funding.

Special Thanks To:

To the many people who took time out from their busy schedules to talk about this important issue including: Gwen Morris, Director of the Office of Alternative Education, School District of Philadelphia; staff members and students at Shallcross, Boone, Community Education Partnership - Hunting Park and Community Education Partnership - Allegheny, as well as the Reti-Wrap program; Staff at the Defender Association, Family Court and the Department of Human Services. Also a special thanks to Brandon Carver and Rachel Best for their assistance.

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And To Our Funders

The Goldsmith/Greenfield Foundation
The William Penn Foundation

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Executive Summary

There are more than 214,000 students in Philadelphia public schools. These children, like students across the country, bring their hopes and dreams as well as their problems to their schools. In recent years, these problems have attracted public attention stimulating state legislation, zero tolerance policies, and a growth in the use of alternative schools for youngsters whose behavior does not conform to expectations.

In the last year, State legislation and School District policy combined to create strict disciplinary policies emphasizing arresting students for serious incidents, reporting all incidents and encouraging the removal of students from their home schools. At the same time, more social and health service connections have been developed in schools and new collaborations between the city agencies and the schools have begun. The School District's new code of conduct leaves little discretion at the school level, yet it is at the school level that these actions have the most impact.

In this, PCCY's second report on the subject, we found that there has been improvement in program options in Philadelphia schools, that there is more clarity about procedures, and more collaboration and linkage between students' homes and schools. But there are still far too few prevention and early intervention options in our schools; there are far too few resources for schools, particularly in the remedial disciplinary schools operated by the School District, and far too much pressure to remove kids from their home schools and transfer them to disciplinary schools.

Too often our policies and practices emphasize arrest and punishment and removing the child from the school instead of providing the school with the means to intervene on the students' behalf. We arrest them too much and treat them too little. We send our most troubled youngsters to schools with the least resources; we pay little attention to what happens when they leave these temporary schools. Once students have transferred, there is not enough follow-up. While we see some progress, we fear we are giving up on and losing some of our most troubled children.

We know that there is no quick fix, no one solution that will fit all situations or all children. We know that collaboration with all agencies and organizations as well as commitment to all children are necessary.

Our schools are filled with children with promise and problems. We do not know all the answers but we do know what many of these children need.

It is our responsibility as a community to act on what we know, to do what we CAN do.

Help All Children Feel More Supported in Schools:

- *Develop school settings that are small and able to provide individual attention and social services, counseling and health services as needed;*
- *Develop schools and classes that engage students and respond to different interests and learning styles;*
- *Establish school environments that value children's different interests, respect family cultures and involve families in the growth and development of their children in school;*
- *Help children develop a sense of community with their peers in their classrooms and home-communities;*
- *Develop school-wide behavior management policies with all school stakeholders to provide consistent behavioral expectations throughout the school.*

Help Children Who Are Not Able to Behave Appropriately:

- *Develop health, mental health and social service programs in schools that meet students' needs; develop resources to make the CSAP process work;*
- *Provide counseling and assist teachers with classroom management and supports;*
- *Develop anti-bullying and community building programs;*
- *Provide mental health and family support professional staff in accommodation rooms;*
- *Encourage expansion of consultation and education specialists in every school;*
- *Develop in-school intervention and suspension programs;*
- *Develop partnerships with community-based programs;*
- *Encourage parent involvement in developing the best plans for the student;*
- *Develop flexible schedules to support kids who want to work and need extra credits.*

Make Sure That Kids Who Need to Attend Alternative Schools Get the Support and the Attention They Need:

- *Choose schools for students that respond to their individual needs;*
- *Provide adequate staff and supports in planning and programming , including special education teachers, mental health providers, social workers and counselors;*
- *Develop work experience opportunities and service learning projects;*
- *Keep schools and classes small;*
- *Develop remedial tutoring, with benchmarks for realizable achievement;*
- *Revive vocational technical schools and expand school art programming;*
- *Plan for annual student review to consider transition back to home school;*
- *Allow students and family to determine whether the students stay or leave;*
- *Develop the school program based on the students' needs;*
- *Provide transition support and track attendance and academic achievement of former students so that we can assess what's working and what is not and for what kind of students and what kind of behaviors;*
- *In dealing with all our children, partner, collaborate and design schools and school programs that are able to respond to health, mental health and educational needs.*

*We don't know all the things we can do... but we do know many.
It's time to act on what we know and what we CAN do!!!*

What We CAN Do...

A Report on Our Schools, Our Students and Difficult Behavior

“Barnebey! What are you doing here?” I heard as I went through the metal scanner in the alternative school for disruptive behavior. I turned to see a former student. “Brandon, what are YOU doing here?” I responded.

What was Brandon doing here?

In a Philadelphia elementary school, fourth grader William has poor attendance and is late too many days. In class, he turns away from the teacher at his desk, talks over directions, rarely participates in classroom activities and tries to discourage others from participating. Contact with his home has not changed his negative behavior.

What should we do for William?

Gary was being raised by an elderly relative and doing well in his elementary school. He began to get in trouble in seventh grade, cutting classes, staying out late and stealing bikes. He was expelled from one school due to fighting and then arrested for minor robbery. After being in detention (“locked up”) for three months he was assessed and sent to CEP Allegheny, the District’s private contractor for schooling for youth returning from delinquency placements. He doesn’t look forward to going back to a large high school with a lot of commotion but he’s still angry about a lot of things. When asked what would have made a difference for him, he responds, “I want to know why I couldn’t live with my family. I’m really mad about that.”

What could have been done earlier to help Gary?

Joyce kept having trouble with other girls in middle school. “It was a bunch of ‘he said, she said’ stuff’. I did get in a lot of fights.” Teachers did try to intervene but “they really didn’t know what was going on. My mom tried to transfer me but it didn’t work.” On the way home one day Joyce got in a big fight, got hold of a knife and cut someone on the hand.

What would have made a difference for Joyce?

***Gary and William and Brandon and Joyce
and their sisters and brothers all come to our schools.***

The Younger Kids: Elementary Schools

Several dozen Philadelphia children in kindergarten and first grade were suspended from school last year. Actions that used to get a child sent to the back of the room now get a child sent back home.

More and more young children are getting in trouble in school and being strictly, and harshly, punished. It's not just in Philadelphia, it's across the country. The increase may be in part a reflection of family or societal problems, of mental illness in children, of a renewed emphasis on reporting, of the zero-tolerance mood of the country or of the decrease in resources and increased responsibilities of many of our schools. We don't know all the reasons why kids have behavior problems, we only know they have them. The incidents range from minor disturbances to dangerous ones.

"It's difficult when the first response of some students is to throw their crayons at someone or threaten to seriously hurt the student sitting next to them. I can't address those issues just through better classroom management or differentiated instruction. We need some help."

- A Teacher

More than 99,000 children attended Philadelphia public elementary schools last year. There were 2,392 serious incidents reported. Almost two-thirds of these were classified as assaults, (which can range from pushing to attacking). There were 336 weapons violations (though rarely guns) as well as 305 "morals offenses" reported (inappropriate touching, sexual misconduct or indecent exposure); and 53 incidents involving drug and alcohol. There were also many incidents unreported, where the child's behavior was inappropriate, challenging the teacher and disrupting the learning environment for the other children.

Some those young children who were suspended last year were on waiting lists for mental health treatment, some were being treated but needed more help, some came from troubled homes and needed family supports, some needed clarity about the rules and better understanding about the consequences of their behavior. We don't know what some of the children needed. The attention the suspensions attracted resulted in the schools' developing better access to mental health treatment, more in-school accommodation rooms and clearer policies about handling behavioral issues. At the same time, a report from a State Legislative committee urging stricter policies, the passage of new legislation, the urging of the teachers' union, as well as the concerns of the new school system leadership combined to stimulate more programs as well as stricter rules for reporting and responding to incidents in all schools and a generally tougher approach to these issues.

What do we do in Philadelphia Public Elementary Schools?

The Code and the Procedures

The School District's code of conduct (distributed to students and parents) spells out expectations and penalties for non-compliance. The schools' central administration emphasizes strict adherence to the rules and has supported an expansion of programs to respond to some of the needs presented by the condition of the children's lives and the demands of school policy. When an elementary school student is disruptive and violates the code, teachers or other staff are to contact the family, arrange a conference to work through the problems and if appropriate and possible, receive assistance with classroom management.

Teachers use a formal process known as CSAP (Comprehensive Student Assistance Process) to share information about a student, review progress and make recommendations for further intervention. Although suspensions are not supposed to be used as a “first line of defense,” they increasing are both nationally and locally.

Responding to Challenging Behaviors

“Is a troubling act an infraction to be punished or a problem to be solved?”
- from a letter of Nel Noddings and Alfie Kohn in Education Week, 11-26-03

The answer in our schools seems to be both. In the last year, there was a major expansion of Consultation and Evaluation workers (C and E’s) who link children and families with social service agencies. These counselor/connectors are now in 163 mostly elementary schools; they are largely supported by the City’s Department of Human Services with a portion being contributed by the schools. These C and E’s act as case managers and link children and families with services. They are based in schools for at least 2 1/2 and sometimes 5 days per week.

Most elementary schools now have accommodation rooms, a time-out space staffed by trained non-teaching personnel. These rooms are an improvement; they keep children in the school rather than suspending them. There are no mental health professionals or social workers assigned to these rooms, and there are limits at least in some schools to the number of times a student can be sent to them. The lack of services and these limits appear to undercut the value of this intervention.

For those students who need the full time individual attention of a mental health worker, there are still Therapeutic Staff Support (wrap-around) workers who provide one-to-one attention to those youngsters for whom there has been a mental health assessment determining the service is needed to keep him or her in the community. There were 1,500 TSS workers in the schools last year. Many believe these wrap-around workers have been over-used because they were available when little else was. As a result, the City and the School District have recently embarked on developing new strategies to deal with children with persistent mental health problems. Twelve schools are now offering a new approach with a team of mental health professionals working with difficult and troubled students. There is also another small magnet program for more troubled children in one of the schools. These programs, which are similar to ones operating in Cleveland, have shown positive results; the District and City are exploring replication of these pilot models.

“A few years ago, the school had a bad reputation in the neighborhood. The mental health team has given us extra people to work with the one or two students in each class who are real handfuls. We’re learning how to help kids in trouble. It’s a much better place. And our test scores are going up!”
- An Elementary School Teacher

The District now offers 21 “SMART” programs (Saturday Morning Alternative Reach and Teach) where sessions on communication skills, violence prevention and problem solving are held as an alternative to out-of-school suspensions. Additionally, the District has hired Parent Truant Officers to visit homes of absent students and encourage good attendance.

Some individual schools have partnered with community based organizations like Physicians for Social Responsibility and the Good Shepherd Mediation Program as well as universities to provide extra hands, more resources and expertise to improve school climate around behavioral issues.

But, still, every day there are incidents, every day children and teachers struggle in our schools. Processes are slow, programs are small, implementing social services in schools is difficult, and budgets are always short. Too often we provide too few staff for too many children. In the end, our “economy” costs us a great deal.

“I know we are supposed to rely on the CSAP process, but we don’t always have time to share information and, quite frankly, the options of what we can do for a kid whose behavior doesn’t change are not very great.”

- An Elementary School Teacher

“I think we need to be able to spend more time working with just socialization skills. But I’m not sure I have the training to do it. And where would we fit it in?”

- An Elementary School Teacher

“I know suspensions don’t solve anything, but I might need a break!”

- One Teacher Said

“Most of our students are alright. They just need lots of help. Some need LOTS of help!”

- Another Teacher Noted

In the absence of the resources or programs to provide that help, the kids as well as the schools suffer. When there is little in our schools to help children, families or staff deal with these issues, schools often turn to suspensions. Yet, research does not suggest that suspensions help the children improve their behavior or academic success.

“Kids are on a path. If they are suspended frequently at the end of elementary school, it’s likely that they will continue in middle school. And when they get to high school, they will drop out.”

- Linda Raffaele Mendez, University of South Florida

The Older Kids: Middle and High Schools

Although best practices urge the opposite, most middle and high schools in Philadelphia are large...over 1,000 students. Large schools, particularly old large schools, are difficult for staff to administer and for students to grow up in. Philadelphia's middle and high schools, which had more than 100,000 youngsters on roll last year, reported 4,830 serious incidents last year with many of them resulting in arrests. Over half of these were assaults. Middle schools reported 238 morals offenses, while the high schools reported 196. High schools had 393 drug and alcohol incidents while the middle schools had 68. There were over 600 weapons offenses, with the high schools reporting twice as many as the middle schools, (though guns are very rare). Box cutters, knives, pen knives and nail files are common weapons. Although clearly different in both damage potential and intention, a box cutter and a nail file are both considered weapons to be reported and cause for arrest. The Administration's emphasis on reporting incidents is at least partially responsible for the large number of incidents reported.

What do we do in Philadelphia Middle and High Schools?

The Process and Programs

Like the elementary schools, middle and high schools follow the CSAP process for dealing with difficult behaviors, use the SMART program as an alternative to out-of-school suspensions, and access wrap-around services for students with demonstrated mental health needs. While these schools generally have access to a student assistance program (SAP) professional for between one and two days a week, their time and therefore service is very limited. Our middle and high schools have few if any social workers, C and E's, mental health services or other supports for students. Students in trouble usually have few avenues for assistance other than the possibility of a friendly teacher, the nurse, or the counselor, who is assigned to 400 other students. The combination of the No Child Left Behind law, which puts pressure on schools to meet annual yearly progress goals and the School District's core curriculum and testing requirements give additional impetus to removing troubled students from schools.

"What's maddening is that lots and lots of Philadelphia students are in trouble. Students who live in suburban areas find ways of getting help. We catch the ones who have acted out, arrest them or send them to disciplinary schools, but we don't necessarily address their problems"

- A DHS Worker

The Climate: Zero Tolerance and Testing

"The wave of school shootings fed [the public's] concerns and states went wild with zero tolerance... Now zero tolerance is fed less by fear of crime and more by high-stakes testing. Principals want to get rid of kids they perceive as trouble."

- Mark Soler, Youth Law Center, President

In response to a string of violent incidents in schools across the nation, many states and school districts developed zero-tolerance legislation; "one strike and you're out" laws meant to send a message to students and families that weapons and violent behavior will not be permitted. Philadelphia responded to disruptive and violent behavior in middle and high schools by taking a very hard line. The District has "one of the most aggressive discipline policies in the nation," said Greg Williams, Deputy Chief Academic Officer, School District of Philadelphia, (Philadelphia Inquirer, 11/7/03). While state law (Act 26) requires arrests for weapons found in schools, the District has expanded its reach to include most Student Code of Conduct Level II violations, including behavior on the way to and returning from school as well as the behavior on school grounds.

Philadelphia students are being arrested at a record number. Half of the students involved in the 7,200 serious incidents were arrested. While taking a hard line may make sense to those who have had little support in dealing with troubled behavior, there are many critics of the zero tolerance climate.

“A few years ago some of the things we see would be considered a prank. Now it’s against the law. We can’t treat them all like criminals. We don’t want them to get a record if we can help it. It keeps them from getting a job. It hardens them at an early age.”

- A Juvenile Lawyer

“If anything, zero tolerance breeds failure among the most vulnerable students and puts kids on a path to prison... even if we say these are bad kids, zero tolerance doesn’t do anything too help them. It’s placing a higher proportion of students at risk for jail.”

- Russel Skiba, Director for Safe and Responsive Schools Project, Indiana University

Zero Tolerance: Racial Impact

In almost every state, Skiba found suspension, expulsion and incarceration rates were higher for African-Americans than for the general student population (The Nation,12/15/03). While most children in Philadelphia public schools are African-American or Hispanic, the percentage of students in the remedial discipline schools as well as the young people who went to Court in Philadelphia last year were overwhelmingly children of color.

Alternative Schools

In Pennsylvania, the passage of zero tolerance legislation was combined with the offer of state grants to *“help get disruptive kids out of the regular classroom and into settings where they can get extra help and the rest of the students can focus on learning.”* (Secretary of Education, Edward Zogby, Philadelphia Inquirer, 7/19/02).

The School District’s policy ending lateral transfers from one school to another and state legislation combined to foster growth in the number of students who have been sent to disciplinary schools. Nearly 3,000 students were expelled from neighborhood schools and sent to alternative sites last year, an 84% increase in one year! These schools were seen as opportunities for some students and nothing more than punishment for others.

“Some kids need alternatives...Some kids need time to take a breath for a while and go back, some kids need to go to a different kind of school. It should not take an arrest to get them there. The choice should be based on THEIR needs.”

- A Teacher

“You begin to wonder if the school system is turning its behavior problems to the Courts.”

- A Philadelphia Parole Officer

Some students are sent to a remedial school because they are returning from delinquency placements; some are sent directly to the schools following a hearing because their behavior is unacceptable or they have violated the weapons code.

Some end up in alternative schools through voluntary placement:

“When my mom found out I was cutting classes at my old school, she signed me up here and didn’t even tell me!”

- An Alternative School Student

To some school staff, the development of these alternatives seems like a good idea:

“I know the District is making a new effort at removing the students who create behavior problems, but we are spending much too much time responding to behavior problems instead of real educational issues.”

- A High School Administrator

To others, it does not:

“One of my students was caught with a knife in our school. He had never been in trouble and was really a fine student. But he got arrested and was sent to one of the RD schools. I think we could have handled the situation here by dealing with the reasons why he was carrying a knife in the first place.”

- A Middle School Teacher

Reti-Wrap and After: The Process

When students return from delinquency settings or have been otherwise involved with the juvenile justice system, they now go to Reti-Wrap (Re-Entry Transition Initiative-Welcome Return Assessment Process), a 10 day assessment program that places most students in alternative schools. Last year, 1,059 students were returned from court-ordered placements into the school system following this new program. The Reti-Wrap program is supported by the Court, the Department of Human Services and the School District. The program, which is housed at William Penn High School, provides education and social counseling and is staffed by a social worker, parole officer, two teachers and an administrator, but there are no special education personnel. From Reti-Wrap, most students are assigned to one of the alternative schools, CEP Allegheny, Shallcross, Boone or one of the city’s Educational Options Programs which function after regular school hours for students who are over-age, have some credits, and need a minimum number of credits to graduate. Most students are assigned to CEP Allegheny. Students with special education needs go to the Shallcross or Boone programs.

Comment: The Reti-Wrap process, requiring support and collaboration between the school system, the juvenile justice system and other social services, was generally viewed positively as an important transition step by the professionals with whom we spoke. Yet the promise of individual attention and assessment for students often is not fulfilled due to the large number of students and small number of staff.

“I was at Shallcross, then I got sent to St. Gabriel’s. Then I spent six months at Abraxis in Pittsburgh. Now I’m at Reti-Wrap and have to be sent to another school before I can get back to my regular school. I don’t really care about any of this. I just have to get through it.”

- A Student at Reti-Wrap

We also heard criticism about youth returning from placement not being allowed back into their school.

“It’s outrageous that students who have already done time assigned by the Court, some of whom had positive experiences in their placements, have to go to yet another setting before returning to their regular school. We need them in their communities so we can attach them to available services, not another temporary setting.”

- A DHS consultant

Alternative Schools - A Promise or a Sentence?

The term “alternative schools” once referred to places that emphasized more creativity, more engaging students around their own individual interests and different styles of learning. Today, the term has taken on a new meaning. Our public schools have many different forms, from magnets for the academically or otherwise talented, to charter schools which build on the interests or needs of the child or the parent, to neighborhood schools, to those schools which take in the youth who cannot, or will not, get along and/or behave in school. These last schools, now called alternatives, are viewed with suspicion by some and needed respite and support by others. **The challenge these schools face is to assure that they are meeting the students’ needs, not serving as a dumping ground for those students who arrive at their door.**

Currently there are five such schools in Philadelphia. Boone and Shallcross are School District-run Remedial Discipline (RD) schools, Community Education Partners (CEP) is a for-profit company which directs two sites and is expected to take over the ES Miller site during the current school year. Delaware Valley High school is a small alternative high school which is beginning to accept Philadelphia students this year. More contracts with outside agencies are being considered. These schools together often are viewed by the sending schools as a relief valve for disruptive students. How they work for the children in their care has not been adequately monitored or tracked.

These schools generally are not designed for students to graduate from; students are to return to a regular neighborhood school after improved behavior, attendance and, hopefully, academic progress. But academic success is not a familiar experience for these students. Most of the children who attend our remedial schools are very behind academically - and graduation is elusive at best. Further, many of the students in Boone, Shallcross, or Miller (temporarily merged with Boone), which are operated by the School District, are special education students, and need more support. In general, the schools that are managed by outside companies (CEP and Delaware Valley) do not accept students with major special education needs; this results in an over-representation of children with special education needs in Shallcross and Boone schools.

The School District has developed another set of programs for older or over-age students who need to make up credits to graduate. These Educational Options Programs, which operate several hours in the late afternoon, are not designed for youngsters with behavioral problems. The District has attempted to isolate the discipline problem students from those students who are older and primarily need a few credits to finish high school: *“RD students belong in RD settings, not in regular school.”* (Greg Williams, Deputy Chief Academic Officer, School District of Philadelphia, correspondence 12/03).

A Closer Look: Community Education Partners Schools

CEP Allegheny

The facility stands like a stone monument to a neighborhood developed over 100 years ago. The aging building, once an elementary school, has doors that are hard to open and floors that creak under foot. To house this program of 300 students returning from court-ordered placements, classrooms have been modified to allow students to pass from class to class without entering the hallways, and computers are a regular part of instruction allowing individualized progress. There are two adults in every classroom and more adults in the building than in most district schools. These adults include non-teaching assistants, coordinators for each floor, assistant principals, and a family services coordinator. Students seem to appreciate the efforts to talk to them, not just order them around. The program is 80% male, includes both middle and high school students, and offers support and education catch-up along with social development for these students who are returning from court ordered placement, who have “done their time.”

The atmosphere is controlled, and out-of-compliance behavior is not permitted. Yet, events like Monday morning pancake breakfasts, cooked up by one of the assistant principals for anyone who gets there on time, help break down some barriers. For students returning to a neighborhood school, CEP Allegheny makes an effort to offer transitional services, makes contact with the school and tries to follow up on the student's progress. Most students stay in the program for one year.

CEP Hunting Park

The recently renovated building sits on a busy street; the reception area is welcoming; carpets have taken the place of the more typical gray metal cabinets, painted walls and linoleum tiles found in other schools. The building has been designed for its specific purpose: pods of four classrooms surrounding a common space for each team of 100 students. Everyone is in uniform. Rules are strictly enforced. No one is allowed to enter the building with watches, jewelry, coins, or food. Students spend their day in their team areas. They have lunch together in the common team space. The exception is when they are escorted to a half hour physical education class.

Some students don't mind all these restrictions. *"There aren't any distractions. You can be into your work and there's more help."* With two adults in every classroom of 25 students, *"we can get more attention here."* Others balk at the level of control. *"I can hardly wait to get back to my own school so I can wear jewelry and see more people!"*

The school is computer-rich, with instruction designed around technology that permits individual progress. Instruction is focused on the major subjects. Sixty-five percent of the student body is male.

Unlike most other schools designed for students with difficult behaviors, CEP is large, with a capacity of 1,500 students, currently at 1,300. By breaking students into groups of 100 (separated by gender except for the 'honors' group) students are still connected to a small group within the school. CEP services both middle and high school students. The contract with the School District expects students to stay for at least a full school year before returning to a regular school program. CEP has no certified special education teachers on staff and is unable to accept special education students who cannot be mainstreamed. According to the School District, only three percent of CEP's population is in special education. As noted, this compares to 20% at Boone or Shallcross. The school has an energetic attendance initiative; however, if the school is unsuccessful in getting students to attend, they are returned to School District-run RD schools. In addition to the efforts on truancy, CEP has a large support staff: three assistant principals, a team of six to eight therapists, hired through an outside agency, who can handle a caseload of 20 students each, and six behavioral specialists who fulfill the role of counselors in other schools. There is also a family-community coordinator who offers programs and workshops that involve parents on issues of concern to them.

Comment: The presence of two adults in one classroom, a large complement of support and social service staff and computer rich programming suggest improved chances for success for many of these children than are present in the resource-poor School District operated programs. Although the school divides the students into pods and creates a team-like atmosphere, the size of the building and the inside school control have been blamed for troubles occurring between these students and others at dismissal time. CEP offers its program to troubled students who can be mainstreamed and who follow the school's rules. The idea that the children who do not attend school in spite of CEP's anti-truant efforts or that those who have serious mental health problems will be sent to the schools with fewer staff, fewer programs and fewer resources to deal with them, begs rethinking. CEP has begun a study of the students' experiences when they return to their neighborhood schools. Whether CEP is meeting the challenge of assisting these youngsters in improving their educational achievement and behaviors must be tested after the students have returned to his/her home school.

Closer Look: The School District Remedial Discipline Schools

Shallcross

Shallcross is a long ways away from the homes of most of the student body, about as close as you can get to Trenton and still be in Philadelphia. Originally a family farm, Shallcross became a residential school for juvenile delinquents; now its buildings serve various purposes for the School District.

Students are here for a range of reasons, from carrying a knife in a backpack, to accusations of assault (*“he just fell and twisted his ankle and tried to blame me”*) to carrying illegal items (*“guns and drugs and s...”*) Some are quick to blame antagonistic school personnel for being sent to Shallcross: *“I beat some kid up and got caught with marijuana, but the deans were always trying to kick you out anyway.”* Still others seem there by mistake, caught with a metal hair pick (considered a weapon under current guidelines), or turning in a knife that was found, or being accused of being in a fight far from school.

Shallcross houses nearly 300 students, 85% of them are male, predominantly African-American, a few white and Latino students. Since Boone and Shallcross are staffed with special education teachers, the percentage of students coming with IEP's is much higher than the district average, about 20%. Students with severe emotional and mental health issues here are found in separate classes. There are many complaints of students arriving with incomplete records and out-of-date IEP's.

The main building houses the office and the middle school students. The high school classes are housed in two buildings 100 yards away. Students who have been unable to follow rules and procedures are assigned temporarily to a classroom that sits apart from the others. The school's atmosphere is friendly, even relaxed, as students are cajoled into proper behavior rather than ordered.

The grounds are spacious, but offer few amenities. The school has been promised a computer lab, but it is not completed. The library shows signs of serious neglect. Teachers have the opportunity to meet weekly to discuss student progress, using the CSAP process. There is one counselor and one social worker, but psychological services are available only two days a week, similar to most other schools.

Class sizes are small, around 15, and students seem to appreciate the friendly approach of their teachers. Some students we spoke with see the school as a better, safer place than the school they came from; others say the open spaces make it dangerous and difficult to monitor. The school uses a point system to determine whether or not a student is ready to return to the regular school, but there is an effort on the School District's part to restore students only at semester breaks so that students have a better chance of success. While smaller classes permit a friendlier atmosphere, the difficulty of meeting a wide range of academic abilities is apparent. Most students are academically far behind and teachers are often adapting materials to meet the demands of the core curriculum. Some students, however, are disappointed at the slow pace of classes. *“Classes are easier 'cause they have to deal with students with disabilities.”*

Daniel Boone

Boone, located in North Philadelphia, is a 50 year old, relatively small, three-story facility with a basement lunchroom. Middle school students are located on one floor, high school on another. As with the other alternative programs, students assigned here sometimes travel long distances to get to the school. While the building is in relatively good repair, the institutional feel comes from lack of amenities to soften the brick walls, hard floors and the needed upgrade of the original features. Like Shallcross, Boone has a relatively large special education population, 20%, and a high percentage of special education teachers on staff, which does allow smaller class sizes.

Classes are not all self-contained, particularly in the high school; when movement is required, the students are escorted from room to room. The school is well-equipped and instruction is aligned with the School District's core curriculum and PSSA testing standards, but students usually arrive with poor academic skills. There is a full time nurse, a social worker on staff and a counselor, but no mental health services available. A community family center that was located in the building last year, which offered some added resources, has been closed due to budget cuts. Males and females are scheduled separately to be part of a counseling program brought in from outside, as part of their school schedule. Last year, the school's enrollment increased to 400 students as more students were sent from their neighborhood schools. Enrollment this year has been close to 600 students as a result of a temporary merger with the E. S. Miller RD school which is being renovated and reorganized to be managed by CEP. The large number of students and new staff being sent to Boone this year due to the renovation and the zero-tolerance climate have presented major challenges for the school.

Comment: The fragility of progress is seen in Boone's recent history. Over the last five years, Boone achieved some stability with a principal who had rebuilt the faculty, developed good working relationships among the staff and initiated new programming. This year, the principal was transferred to a comprehensive high school, as students and staff from ES Miller were added, leaving Boone with an expanded student body, staff with little experience working together and a new leader. The change has crowded the building and discouraged staff and students. This leadership change and combining of schools would be difficult in any school, but such instability is nearly impossible to handle in a school dealing with students assigned due to behavior problems. Some have questioned the safety of the building in this transition, others are suspicious of the reasons that Boone was left to flounder. Boone, one of the District's stepchildren, had begun to make progress, but this year it appears to have gone backwards.

Apart from the current situation at Boone, both Shallcross and Boone have smaller class sizes, but struggle with only the normal minimal allotment of psychological services. There are few, if any, connections to needed mental health services. The open spaces at Shallcross and the crowded hallways at Boone make quality programs difficult, and the lack of an enriched curriculum, with adequate library or computer access, diminishes students' chances of being engaged or catching up academically. Unfortunately, the School District has made no effort to monitor students who leave these schools to determine their future progress. Without this information it is impossible to adequately determine how effective the schools are in improving a student's chance of success.

A Closer Look: Delaware Valley High School

Delaware Valley High School, located in Northeast Philadelphia, has been a private provider of alternative high school education to the surrounding suburban districts for over 25 years. This year Philadelphia has contracted with Delaware Valley to add 100 students as part of the School District's network of alternative schools. Its physical plant is small, with only two buildings of a few classrooms in each. Unlike the other alternative programs in Philadelphia, most students are there by choice. Roughly half of the current students pay tuition to attend the school of 180 students. The school offers more personal attention in small classes, a shortened school day of four classes, and courses geared to meeting students' graduation requirements. While the school is tightly monitored, its small size and academic high school curriculum makes it a different kind of alternative from the other School District programs. Most students intend to graduate from Delaware Valley and they have a number of students accepted into colleges; Philadelphia students sent there are still expected to return to their regular school.

A Closer Look: Alternative Programs Within District Schools

A large high school in Philadelphia is making special efforts to improve opportunities and programming for students with behavior problems. A social worker is hired over the summer to meet with incoming ninth graders who are over-age or who have failed classes in the past. The staff makes contact with parents and, where possible, puts supports in place to assist the student in the forthcoming year. Perhaps most importantly, adults are attached to students before problems occur. During the school year, the social worker is available after school and into the evening hours to continue parental contacts and follow-up with students who are having a hard time. This is also one of the few high schools to hire a consultant and education specialist (C and E) to help coordinate services for students and their families. *“The trick is to catch problems before they happen and this seems to be working,”* says the principal.

The opportunity also exists for repeating ninth graders to participate in a 3-6 PM program, along with a Saturday class, to make up missed credits. Students opting for this program are expected to stay in it for the year. The program is an attempt to address the needs of students who have not done well and for whom the seven hour day is too long. The educational program comes in smaller doses, among fewer students.

Comment: There are many students for whom alternative schools, even those that are designed to be both remedial and disciplinary, can provide a respite, a breather, a needed different setting for learning. For other students these schools are just one more action that will not help them, one more turn in their downward spiral, one more place where their needs are not met. In order for Philadelphia’s remedial disciplinary schools to work for the students they serve, they must be able to provide an educational setting with adequate attention and supplies, a curriculum that recognizes and responds to different student interests and to the obstacles they face, and professional staff who are prepared to treat students’ social, health and educational needs. The District must pursue the students’ transition back to their regular schools, provide education and social services support, and track their academic, attendance and behavioral experiences. All our schools should be able to engage students, to provide them with opportunities and attention.

The students with serious special education needs, intensive mental health and social service needs, and poor attendance records are being sent to schools that are incapable of responding to these needs. The difference in programming, facilities, supplies and supports between the publicly run schools and those that are contracted out seems unacceptable. But leveling these offerings is not enough. Our children need far more than they are being provided.

George has a history in his alternative school. He was sent there originally after being caught with a knife. After being restored to his high school, he returned a year and a half later after getting into a fight and cutting school a lot. He likes that there are fewer kids in his classes, but it’s still school, “and I don’t like school. There’s nothing interesting. No art or language classes. Some of these things you need to graduate...I guess you just gotta do what you gotta do to get out.”

“Alternative schools can offer positive development for adolescents, but done poorly they can be training grounds for violence and crime.”

- Hamilton Fish Institute

What other School Districts and Schools are Trying

In Milwaukee...

Maryland Avenue Elementary School is small, just under 300 students. Seventy-three percent of its students are African-American, 16% white with smaller numbers of Hispanic, Asian and Native American students. Eighty-three percent of its students live below the poverty line. A history of poor performance led to it being targeted for a special program which reduced class size to 15 students in K-3. A "Character Counts!" curriculum was brought in to develop school-wide engagement in developing more positive character traits. Classes put together lists of characteristics of a successful community and the behavioral traits needed to achieve that community. As the year goes on, students evaluate how they are doing and a new characteristic is emphasized each month, reinforced through the whole school community including art classes and information sent to parents. Classroom activities stress collaboration instead of academic competition, and if a child moves out of the neighborhood, an effort is made to keep the child in the school. Parents are included in the process through workshops that encourage their input and response to the character traits being stressed in school, along with efforts to coordinate programs with community-based organizations. A "pending suspension" category has been created in an effort to bring parents in to resolve conflicts and problems. School clubs are organized around encouraging a sense of citizenship. In-service training for the staff focuses on anti-violence curricula, peer mediation skills, and programs to help young children develop strong decision-making and coping skills. The school has been able to make guidance counselors and a school psychologist more available.

Madison High School has 1,600 students - 83% African-American, 9% White, with small percentages of Asian and Hispanic students. It was one of the lowest performing schools in its district with attendance rate dropping to 43%. Under new leadership the school's climate has improved dramatically. Like the policy in Philadelphia schools, suspension is not meant to be a first option. A process very similar to the CSAP is used to document efforts being made by teacher to resolve problems first. A "Transition Academy" has been set up, similar to a Twilight Program, where students who need a different setting may attend (though it is consciously being used for behavior as well as academic problems). It added classes with higher academic standards, like the International Baccalaureate program, similar to some Philadelphia high schools. The school uses the block roster, also like a number of Philadelphia high schools. What makes Madison High School different from those in Philadelphia?

- The school leadership has been consistent and visible, visiting classrooms to keep tabs on how things are going.
- All staff members receive training in a program that focuses on classroom organization and management. The goal of the program is to be able to defuse potential serious incidents before they erupt and maintain a relationship of mutual respect.
- Assistance is offered to new teachers through support group meetings. Experienced teachers are also offered a support program when and if necessary.
- The block roster is modified to permit a "mid-block" period in the middle of the day. Students can choose from a wide range of activities during the mid-block, effectively making possible the "extracurricular" clubs many of our neighborhood high schools have lost over the years. Young Lawyers and the Health club meet. Teachers staff "chat rooms." Movies are screened. Counseling and tutoring services are available. Teachers and students alike speak positively of the relaxed time in the middle of the day, with few discipline problems.

- In order to be in the Transitions (Twilight) program, used as an alternative to suspension and expulsion, students must apply and meet with parents and teachers to set academic goals. Teachers are expected to work one-on-one as much as possible in this program to strengthen low academic skills and offer assistance in a smaller environment.
- There are regular contacts with parents, even directly from the classroom. On the second Saturday of the month, the principal holds parent meetings.
- Every program tries to find a community partner to work with.
- Staffing includes 11 Safety Assistants (NTA's).
- A "Triage program" holds students from the hallways until they can be sent to class without interruptions. Students late to first period are expected to attend a special program sponsored by a community based organization, "YMCA Black Achievers."

In Massachusetts...

A middle school in Lowell was suffering from too much disruptive, angry, behavior, with large numbers of referrals to its "Behavior Modification Center." The teacher who staffed the room rarely had time for a break during the day. The administration chose to hire a trained specialist in behavior who, along with the administration, could supplement the counseling staff. Instead of waiting to see students who have already gotten in trouble, he roams the hallway sometimes counseling kids on the spot, and meeting with students over lunch, trying to defuse problems before they occur. At the same time, the staff was trained in a Respect and Responsibility curriculum which involved each class in creating, debating and writing down its rules, agreeing to consequences (from apologizing to suspensions), reinforced with assemblies which mix critiques of student behavior with reports of good deeds. Parents and teachers both seem to be pleased with the improved environment.

In Maryland...

A middle school in Maryland is using its security cameras as a discussion-starter for small groups of students to critique their own behavior. Organized discussion takes place over what they observe as positive and negative behavior.

In New York...

The New York City Department of Education and Good Shepherd Services jointly run the South Brooklyn Community High School that provides researched-based academic instruction to students who are behind in basic skill areas while offering a full range of social service connections. The social service agency is the first contact for any student problem in the school. Teachers consult with social workers on behavior and academic progress. Understanding that many students have a variety of obstacles to their success, every effort is made to address those obstacles, with an expectation that the student take his or her job as a student seriously.

New York City is breaking down some of its large high schools into small, independent schools, some with as few as 120 students, up to 400. The schools function as a community, with classes sometimes across grade levels. The small numbers of students allow more flexible scheduling and personal attention. Students become attached to the school through curricula which encourages close interaction with teachers and other students.

In Illinois...

A school in Peoria found great success with failing and disruptive students by reducing class size to 1:15 and allowing a maximum of 100 students in the program. Teachers receive special training and are expected to serve as counselors for part of their day. Team building and goal setting activities are built into the curriculum, with time devoted for each. All-school discussions are held on issues of concern to the whole body, creating a family atmosphere. Attempts are made to find needed services for students such as in-house infant care. The school uses an extrinsic reward system to encourage students who have had little success in school. While increasing a student's self-esteem is seen as a major goal, it is not an end in itself. "Increased self-esteem, especially in the areas of academic achievement and social acceptance, is an outgrowth of students experiencing success in academic pursuits and in social interaction." Attendance averages 90%.

In Cleveland...

Cleveland schools are expanding the range of options for alternative schools, all of which are small, between 200 and 300 students. Some schools are for students with behavior problems; others for students who are not necessarily disruptive but need other assistance. Both will offer additional support including counseling, mental health services, and partnering with outside agencies to offer students and families a wide array of supports. Parent involvement is a requirement. Still other schools are intended to function as magnet schools with a professional or academic specialty to accommodate students whose behavior problems may stem from lack of engagement or challenge in the traditional setting.

Children "must have sustained, caring relationships with adults; receive guidance in facing serious challenges; become a valued member of a constructive peer group; feel a sense of worth as a person; become socially competent; know how to use the support systems available to them; achieve a reliable basis for making informed choices; find constructive expression of the curiosity and exploration that strongly characterizes their age; believe in a promising future with real opportunities; and find ways of being useful to others."

- Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development

Recommendations

The focus of this report is how Philadelphia public schools do and should handle student behavior problems. Schools should have the programs to prevent problems as much as possible, to intervene early when children show the first signs of trouble. Schools must then develop responses that provide respite and different settings if necessary, but always working toward responding to child's needs in school and life.

We recommend that the School District work together with the health, mental health and child welfare agencies to:

- **develop more appropriate programming within schools and connected to schools.**

Nationally, one in ten children experience significant emotional or behavioral impairment, but only 25% get the help they need. Ignoring students' life circumstances while attending to an academic curriculum will not yield success.

"It's been amazing. Now, with these service here, on site, ready for parents and ready for children to avail themselves of, the school staff can focus on what they're here for, and that's instruction. And because of that we've seen continuous progress. Parent involvement has also increased dramatically."

- Mary D'Ovidio, Principal at a Maryland School that provides mental health services and family assistance on site.

- **build capacity to provide early intervention programs in schools.**

The CSAP is important but often lacks time and resources to be effective. Health care professionals, C and E workers and family members need to be involved early and have the resources to connect the child to the services.

"We took time to go through all the CSAP levels. Then we were told, 'Thank you very much. You've done all you can do.' What was the point?"

- High School Team Leader

- **incorporate socialization skills, anger management, and anti-bullying efforts as an integral part of the school's over-all mission.**

Schools established with the intent of developing those skills, using curricula designed to address these issues have proven to be more successful at reducing juvenile delinquency than those that deal with problems as they arise.

"The reason a student is placed is a result of problems with the school system, but the resolution of these problems often becomes the responsibility of the courts and social service agencies. We cannot separate education from delinquency prevention programs."

- A Juvenile Justice Worker

- **significantly expand counseling services.**

Students in many Philadelphia schools suffer major traumatic experiences, but never have the opportunity to talk to anyone about them. Most counselors have hundreds of students who need them; there is not enough time, not enough staff and not enough resources.

“We should have more counselors who had time to really listen to me and these other guys. They should have somebody we can talk to, not just do a 9 to 5 thing, but get involved. Teachers should be trying to understand where kids are coming from.”

- Alternative School Student

- **develop the potential use of accommodation rooms as an early warning system and improve their staffing.**

By strengthening the professionalism of staff, counseling could occur; programs to screen students for signs of future problems could be put in place. Some kind of therapeutic intervention should be part of a visit to an accommodation room.

“Schools need to establish relationships with health and social agencies so they can refer students with disciplinary problems before they are removed from school.”

- American Academy of Pediatrics

- **increase support of and information about special education services.**

Special education issues were raised in every site visited. There is great difficulty in keeping IEP's current as well as creating programs that successfully accomplish the goals of IEP's. The high transiency rate of students only exacerbates the problem of keeping track of their records. Time to review IEP's with appropriate resources and personnel to accomplish their goals is essential.

“A large percentage of kids we get are in special education. They haven't taken their medication; lots of times their IEP has not been reviewed or needs updating. The number of kids in special education classes has been raised, so they aren't being taken care of well. The services the school can offer doesn't match what they might need.”

- A Parole Officer

- **provide more decision making power to principals and school personnel in dealing with troubled students.**

Principals and other school personnel need greater latitude in making decisions on arresting students or referring them to alternative settings or programs.

“We had a student who's been in many foster homes, a hard family life. He got into a fight with some kids outside the other day. He's never been a problem before. He just got tired of being picked on. I think we could resolve the problem here, but I expect he'll be transferred to a discipline school.”

- A High School Principal

“Where does a kid who has witnessed serious violent incidents, or is worried about parents they haven't seen for a long time, go to talk? We can't just hope school will take their minds off these things.”

- An Elementary School Counselor

In assessing or recommending where a student should be sent, the District must be mindful of the racial and special education impact of its selections. When it is clear that a child must leave the home school, the focus on the child's needs must determine what setting is appropriate.

We recommend that the School District:

- **improve the capacity of the alternative schools' network to respond to the needs of the child, not those of the sending or receiving schools.**

"We get kids who carried a 'weapon,' sometimes a small knife, who are scared to be here, and kids who have jumped their teacher and aren't afraid of anything. How do we really help either of them? It's a real challenge."

- An Alternative School Teacher

- **increase the supports, programs and resources to respond to the child's needs.**

The current uneven distribution of school resources in relation to student needs is unacceptable. School District Remedial Discipline schools offer very little therapeutic support services for students. Mental health and social workers must be an integral part of the school's operation. Some students may need a restrictive, tightly-controlled environment. Others may need mental health services, or drug and alcohol counseling. Some may need a more rigorous curriculum than others. Some may have just messed up and need a break before going back to their school. The "alternative" must be ready to consider what is needed.

"We're a 'one size fits all' school, which doesn't make a lot of sense, given the wide range of reasons students are sent here."

- An Alternative School Teacher

- **develop alternative schools in which students may choose to stay to graduate.**

Sending a student back to a neighborhood school where failure and problems began may not be the best route if the alternative is working better.

"I don't really want to go back to my old school. I can't handle the noise and commotion. It might work better for me to stay where I am."

- An Alternative School Student

- **improve communication and transfer of information from school to school and agency to agency.**

Too often records aren't sent, or arrive late. Students arrive at alternative schools without IEP's and return to their home school with little or no information shared. Students move through court appearances and alternative schools, each with a different set of adults.

"Many of our students are 'serviced up'...Parole officers, case workers, truant officers...but there's no coordination and they don't necessarily talk to each other, let alone us."

- A High School Counselor

- **provide after care or transition support for students after they leave alternative schools.**

The School District must provide aftercare and transition supports for students as they navigate the reentry process. Every effort must be made to avoid their dropping out or getting lost or in trouble upon restoration.

“We get many students returning from therapeutic centers, so we know mental health issues were being addressed, but we don’t know what has made them ready for public school. What makes our school an appropriate setting for them? No one explains.”

- A High School Administrator

“I was in one school where the principal sat down with the returning student, talked to him about the programs that are offered and what was expected of him and how he could take advantage of the school. He welcomed the student and his parents. Usually there is no time for this kind of interaction.”

- A Child Advocate

- **expand alternative schools to include less traditional and hands-on programs that will engage students in different ways. Offer more choices for students who do not fit into the magnet school stream; expand vocational technical offerings and involvement in the arts.**

Arts programs can engage troubled students in different ways. One alternative school in New York State uses art as a way to practice positive social skills and anger management skills. Another in Washington focuses on art and performance as service to the community. Expanding the job training programs, beyond the Voc-Tech schools, allowing students to find the things they love to do, engaging them in the learning process, could provide new opportunities for students currently disinterested and disconnected from positive adult interaction.

“There isn’t enough variety in what is offered in our schools, especially with the new ‘double dose’ of Math and English. If kids get an elective, they don’t choose it, we assign it. Kids come and go but aren’t really engaged. I wouldn’t have liked to go to this school when I was young either.”

- A High School English Teacher

- **develop more small schools allowing student choice beyond the traditional magnet and special selection schools.**

Schools of 400 students or less, including student, parent and community involvement are decreasing drop-out rates and violent behavior. Particularly for students with academic difficulties, small school settings can make a difference. Teachers and students working in teams and groups over an extended time and involving students in project-based learning, internships and service learning opportunities in the older grades are models that can effectively change a student’s view of him or herself.

“The kids have value, and the work they do is valuable to others. They get to engage themselves in a practical kind of hands-on operation which, for many of these kids, seems to be the way they learn best. And, finally, they have a set of caring adults in their lives that really pay close attention to them.”

- Stephen Rollin, Florida State University

- **monitor, follow up and provide transition support after students have left the alternative school to determine the success or failure of students or schools after the student leaves them.**

The School District has undertaken a great many efforts in responding to the real and perceived problems of disruptive behavior in the classroom. The failure to monitor the results of the experiences of these student after they leave the alternative schools and to provide transition or after care undermines these efforts.

- **collect data on student experience after leaving the alternative schools to access what kind of programs worked, or didn't, for different youth.**
- **explore a variety of strategies to respond to these children's needs including:**
 - developing schools that are jointly run between the School District, mental health and social service agencies;
 - replacing out of school suspensions with one to three day "crash interventions" using DHS services.

"It's amazing! My school (Columbine) got lots of counselors, Philadelphia schools got metal detectors"
 - Former Columbine High School student commenting on Philadelphia schools.

- **reject a policy emphasizing arrests as an appropriate response to children with behavior problems.**

"In the past a lot of these kids would have been referred to specialists within the school or the school district. The juvenile justice system has become the dumping ground for poor minority kids with mental health and special education problems."

- Dr. Laurence Steinberg, Professor of psychology, Temple University, Director of MacArthur Foundation Research Network on Adolescent Development and Juvenile Justice, (NY Times, 1/4/04)

What Makes Sense for Schools Handling Troubled Students

- **Small schools and reduced student-teacher ratios allowing students to become part of a school community and providing some flexible scheduling.**
- **Specially trained staff to meet the needs of their particular students. Poor readers need teachers trained in reading development. Students with anger problems need mental health specialists.**
- **Engaging curriculum and teaching styles.**
- **Administration and staff committed to and supported in the mission of the school.**
- **A pleasant environment. The school building should not reinforce the students' view of themselves as "losers."**
- **Where possible, students and parents should be able to choose a school program.**

- **Staff that includes “transition specialists” so that students who return to regular schools do so with support and knowledge by the receiving school.**

What Doesn't Make Sense

- **Schools without mental health services and counseling support for troubled students.**
- **Policies that don't allow discretion by school leadership in handling discipline.**
- **Poor information flow concerning students from one setting to another.**
- **The absence of special education professionals to provide educational assessments.**
- **Students with the most severe problems being sent to the least-resourced schools.**
- **Inadequate computer or library resources in remedial discipline schools.**
- **Insufficient efforts to engage troubled students through the arts or vocational education programs.**
- **Accommodation rooms staffed by persons who are not qualified mental health professionals.**
- **Inadequate monitoring or tracking and supporting students after they leave the alternative settings.**

*Our schools are holding the future in their walls;
they are not holding pens, but launching pads.*

Acknowledgments

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Linda Wright Moore, Communications Director
Shelly D. Yanoff, Executive Director
Steven E. Fynes, Publication Design and Layout

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Our work is supported by hundreds of individuals, organizations and foundations throughout the region including: The 1957 Charity Foundation, Inc., The Barra Foundation, Butler Family Fund, Prudential Foundation, Thomas Skelton Harrison Foundation, GlaxoSmithKline, The William Penn Foundation, The Shefa Fund, Robert Wood Johnson, Merck & Company, Claneil Foundation, Inc., The Annenberg Foundation, Zero To Three: National Center for Infants, Toddlers and Families, Samuel Fels Fund, The Fourjay Foundation, Goldsmith-Greenfield Foundation, Phoebe W. Haas Charitable Trust, AMJ Foundation, The Independence Foundation, The Pew Charitable Trusts, The Philadelphia Foundation, Alexis Rosenberg Foundation, The Seybert Institution, The November Fund, Sovereign Bank, United Way of Southeastern Pennsylvania, Henrietta Tower Wurts Memorial Fund, Cohn Family Trust, McKesson Pharmaceutical, Greater Harrisburg Foundation, the Tabitha Foundation, the Ametek Foundation, Dyson Foundation, Foundations TAC, Lincoln Financial Group Foundation, Pennsylvania Health Law Project, the Connelly Foundation, Dolfinger/McMahon Foundation and The Eagles Youth Partnership.



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