

School Reform Commission

Criteria for next SDP Leader

MODERATOR REPORTS

Education First Compact
February 2, 2012

Group 1

Moderator: Jean di Sabatino

Moderator's description of the group:

There were 8 participants in Group #1 that represented a wide variety of educational advocacy groups. Genders were equally represented and the majority of folks were African American (5 AA and 3 Caucasian). The educational advocacy groups included service in support of schools (Children's Literacy Initiative and Free Library), politically oriented groups (Education Voters and Eleventh Ward), groups in support of youth (two participants from the Philadelphia Student Union and Community in Schools), and the Mayor's Commission on African American Men.

Folks were knowledgeable of the complicated Philadelphian educational system and educational politics; past and present. The conversation flowed easily. They were able to build on each others' comments with no posturing or domineering. The fact that these folks meet regularly under the auspices of the First Compact surely contributed to their abiding by the established ground-rules.

Hopes and Fears for next leader of the SDP:

Hopes:

- This process (forum) means the SRC is leaving the "past in the past".
- Several folks stated the hope that the new candidate will take student voice into account. Or, that all decisions will have the students' best interest as a foundation. "Keeping students in the forefront.
- The SRC's choice will move beyond cynicism. That there is hope for a better future.
- The new leader will recognize what teachers and students can do to improve their own schools by building on what is currently working well.
- That the new leader will listen first to all (students, staff, families, communities) voices before taking action and will continue to listen throughout his/her tenure.
- The hope that the leader will work on establishing and keeping a positive image of education in Philadelphia.

- The leader will actively encourage understanding of diversified learning styles as a way to eliminate the academic achievement gap.

Fears

- This superintendent will not represent a different choice type of leader than in the past. “Same old, same old” and “business as usual” were stated.
- That the final candidate has already been chosen and this is an empty exercise.
- Public education might be sacrificed with the selection of a charter-based superintendent.
- That the leadership style of the new hire will want to replicate a business model for improving schools.
- The new leader will not be successful in changing the negative climate that has developed in schools and throughout the system.
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Parts of the Framework that Make sense to participants and why:

#9 – Is committed to actively engaging with students, parents and community stakeholders)

There was some support for the following reasons.

- While this criterion made the most sense to folks, there was a concern that the SRC did not understand the diverse “parent” structures in the city. Therefore, it is essential that, within the criterion, “family” should replace “parents”.
- Student voice should be recognized and engaged because they are the experts about the environment of the school.
- Appropriate and effective decisions cannot be made without an understanding of the real-time experience of the students in the school.
- Must go beyond analysis of test data and towards the qualitative understanding of school climate as seen through students’ experiences.
- In order to have authentic engagement, important that the leader is willing to enlighten and educate families.
- Research can be cited to support a “customer-service” approach.
- Families will feel more comfortable fully participating if leadership sees their role as essential to improving the district and if they are not blamed for a large part of the district’s failings.
- In times of political or fiscal stress, family engagement is the first to be eliminated. This is the wrong approach because families and community, if fully engaged throughout the year, can be strong advocates for education.
- Consider adding “teaching staff” to this criterion.
- There was discussion that criteria #6 and #8 were similar, yet both important.

Relationship builder (#6) is an essential first step towards asserting influence (#8).

- The leader will “have to establish relationships before s/he can influence”.

- In order to understand “mine-fields”, leader needs to make solid relationships and influence “system champions” (those that may exert pressure, policy, opinion on changing the system).
- The new leader must be able to identify all, numerous stakeholders. This means internal as well as external stakeholders. Therefore, it is important to add the word “internal” to #6.
- It is not realistic to under-estimate the influence politics have on education. Leader must be politically savvy.
- Being open to work with others, in a non-threatening way, can only help schools.

#1 – A commitment to education and an overall passion to ensure learning for all children:
Made sense to participants for the following.

- The new leader must embrace equity as an essential value in all decisions.
- Learning for all children is an absolute. It must be the final outcome against which all actions are measured.
- “Passion” within the criterion is an important word because it requires commitment to the best education.
- The leader must understand all the current best thinking about how to improve learning in an equitable system.

Parts of the Framework about which participants are concerned, and why:

#7 Ability to rethink the district’s service model, moving closer to autonomy for individual schools and decrease centralization.

- Where is the research that decentralization works? Where are the current, successful models in large urban systems?
- What does “decentralization” mean? What is being decentralized; finances, curriculum, teaching models?
- Decentralization in various formats has been historically unsuccessful in Philadelphia. Let’s go back and look at why. Remember the recent, aborted attempt via the Weighted Student Funding initiative.
- There is history of principals’ mismanagement of school activity accounts. This does not bode well for the collective ability to handle large operating accounts.
- Greater responsibility re. Operating costs will consume valuable time needed to focus on education, manage staff and involve families/community.
- The trend to decentralize teaching through “teacher-proof curricula” does not trust the educator. This has led to cynicism towards teaching.
- Within a decentralized system, “where does the buck stop”? Where is the accountability when the system breaks down?
- Fiscal accountability across many individual entities (schools) is difficult to monitor.
- There is fear that in a decentralized system, competition for limited resources is accelerated during times of stress. This leads to distraction from education and over-emphasis on managerial and political concerns.

- Among schools and neighborhoods, there is an unequal playing field in terms of school buildings. Some require more resources to update.
- Fear that competition for limited resources will impact equity of services for those that need the most.

What difference it would make if the successful candidate is/is not from Philadelphia, and why:

- The group felt that the most important factor to consider when hiring the new leader was that person's experiences, expertise and CURRENT understanding research about how to improve education. The currency of their knowledge was critical.
- After this, the group felt that being from Philadelphia was important for the following reasons.
 - Shorter learning curve. It is difficult to quickly grasp the "social capital" needed to improve the system.
 - There is a danger of "knight-in-shining-armor" impression that someone from the outside might bring.
 - Someone from Philadelphia understands that Philadelphia is a city of neighborhoods that often means territorialism and insularity. Someone from here can mitigate or perhaps utilize this.
 - A hometown advantage might translate into a more passionate leader, interested in long-term betterment of the system and the city.
 - Important to see if the new leader is willing to educate their children in the public schools here.
- There was also agreement that a candidate from the city might be a problem for the rest of PA (governor, legislation, public opinion) and fuel the impression that Philadelphia "gets so much". This might be seen as further self-serving.

Group 2

Moderator: Josh Warner

Moderator's description of the group:

Group 5 comprised of seven individuals, five male and two female. Two were African American, and five were Caucasian. There was a variety of education advocates in the group, ranging from university students and state education advocates to a charter school operator and a former superintendent of an urban district. The group was quite knowledgeable in the field of urban education, and significant time was given both to the process of discussing the search criteria and also to underlying issues facing the school district and the state of urban education in general.

Hopes and Fears for next leader of the SDP:

Hopes:

- Leader will have a strong commitment to neighborhood public schools
- No "Superstars" (egocentric, national "stars" that are all show with no real/effective leading capabilities)
- Leader will have a firm foundation in reform, and successful experience in changing urban districts for the better
- A leader that can take the district to a new place - the new way that education will look like
- That the new leader stays engaged and continues to connect with various stakeholders

Fears:

- The leader's decentralization effort will negatively impact district-wide efforts such as Career/Technical Education (CTE) programs
- That the new leader and the SRC will have a "who's driving" question, and an extended period of power transfer as duties are handed over (?) to the new superintendent
- The new superintendent will promote the status quo

Parts of the Framework that Make sense to participants, and why:

#8 – Ability to influence the public, business community, higher education community, and legislative leaders on the value of public education and the commitments necessary to achieve notable progress

- Understanding of the bigger picture
- Knowing state legislators and influencing state policy
- "The value of public education" is an important piece of the #8 framework

- The funding situation in Harrisburg can be influenced
- The district needs an advocate
- The point ties into point #1
- A strong partnership with the mayor is necessary to get things done
- The candidate will be operating in a “policy arena”
- Superintendent will be operating on many different “levels”

#4 – A team-builder able to coordinate and motivate a diverse group of managers and educators of different types of schools in different types of settings

- Motivation is key, and leader must be a good motivator
- “Unifier” was mentioned as something important to add to this one

#6 – A relationship builder who is able to build creative partnership with numerous external stakeholders to bring resources to individual schools and groups of schools

- District will absolutely need partnerships to survive and improve
- Leader cannot operate in a vacuum
- Engagement is key here. Should be added

#7 – Ability to rethink the district's service model, moving closer to autonomy for individual schools and decreased centralization

- Question: re-think or re-tool?
- Flexibility is important
- Realization of and proactive steps toward changing models of education
- Times are changing
- Make a plan and follow through with it

Parts of the Framework about which participants are concerned, and why:

#9 – Is committed to actively engaging with students, parents and community stakeholders

- Engagement is not enough (in the case of parents). Teaching will be necessary to help parents navigate, given the changing nature of the district/system
- Engaging staff and teachers is extremely important (professional development)

#7 – Ability to rethink the district's service model, moving closer to autonomy for individual schools and decreased centralization

- Changes need to be made in a smart, incremental manner, otherwise chaos would ensue
- The accountability model(s) must be re-thought as well (accountability referring to teachers and district officials, as well as accreditation / student standards)
- Re-thinking the district management/administration model as well (*the group was in complete unison here*)

#8 – Ability to influence the public, business community, higher education community, and legislative leaders on the value of public education and the commitments necessary to achieve notable progress

- That this influence should not come with political ties or special interests the leader is beholden to

#5 –Embraces the idea of a portfolio of schools and advocates for high-quality schools regardless of the provider (district or charter)

- Accountability is missing from this point
- Strong leadership will be necessary for district-wide programs, given the fractured portfolio situation

What difference it would make if the successful candidate is/is not from Philadelphia, and why:

(The group was fully “pro from Philadelphia” for this portion of the discussion)

- Having internal knowledge of the district will be helpful
- The leader can grow successors in-house
- Leader would be invested in the city
- Being from here provides a foundation of good relationships
- Philadelphia people and politics are very different compared to other cities

Other important ideas:

- There is an inherent tension between points #5 and #8. Either the leader is moving the district toward a more private/portfolio model, or the leader is advocating for, improving, and providing more funding to public education
- The leader will be serving “many bosses”
- Is the Philadelphia system failing? Are radical changes and actions needed? Can a new leader do this, or will they be allowed to do this?
- Can one leader serve all these roles and embody these points? Or is it a team of people, rather?
- Can the superintendent serve a 1-2 year “probationary period” before full pay and larger benefits kick in?

Group 1

Moderator: Gwynne Smith Scheffer

Moderator's description of the group:

Group 3 consisted of nine participants – all female (three African American, six White), representing a wide range of groups: Philadelphia Citizens for Children and Youth, Association of Philadelphia School Librarians, William Penn Foundation, Philadelphia Education Fund, Philadelphia Young Playwrights, Mayor's Office of Education, Temple Education Leadership, Parents Group. Participants were very engaged in discussion. Since they all provide resources/support to the district in some capacity, some were more focused on the perspective the organization they represented. The group members seem to be very familiar with each other so there were a few short sidebar conversations that emerged during the discussion prior to providing input on some areas of the Framework. Due to time constraints, the group opted out of the numbers 7 and 8 and we briefly touched on number 9. At the start of small group, William Penn and Philadelphia Education Fund inquired about the number of participants in the first forum at Gratz. They were pleased to learn that we had very good attendance.

Hopes and Fears for next leader of the SDP:

- Thoughtful options, e.g., charters
- Don't throw out the good with the bad/keep what's working
- Good manager
- Minimum five year commitment
- Focus on special education
- More in-depth teacher evaluation system
- Accountability with integrity
- Treat all school equally
- Navigate the political landscape
- Generous with autonomy, e.g., student voice in learning
- Respect for people with institutional memory

Parts of the Framework that Make sense to participants, and why:

#1 – Commitment to Education

- Valuing special education
- Alternative ways of learning
- Tighter commitment and capacity, demonstrated ability
- Assessing commitment, e.g., past performance
- Knows something about education/background in education

#2 – Knowledge and capacity to run large enterprise

- Understands/has experience in education but doesn't need to be from larger district
- Large and diverse experience with large district
- Demonstrated ability/credibility
- Practical knowledge of decision making/how decisions are made and they play out at the various levels – teacher, classroom, principal

#3 – Clear understanding of the way management decisions affect teaching, training and leadership development among principals

- Covered in #2 – practical knowledge on policies and experience in playing them out
- Leadership development and support – more action oriented – commitment and plan

#5 – Embraces portfolio of schools and advocates for high quality schools

- Thoughtful, deliberate, equitable distribution of resources among the portfolio
- Equitable treatment across the whole portfolio
- Transparency and follow through

#9 – Actively engaging with students, parents and community stakeholders

- Include teachers and support staff/school-based personnel and caregivers

Parts of the Framework about which participants are concerned, and why:

#1 – Commitment to Education

- Can't be hollow
- Nice political statement but how will you operationalize – what does “all” mean
- Passion doesn't equal respect or knowledge
- “Apple pie”
 - Resurrect Policy 102 (1970s) that addressed the isms in our work and spell out superintendent actions
- If they were in another district, a truthful assessment of their track record

#2 – Knowledge and capacity to run large enterprise

- Don't come from the ranks – managing a large enterprise requires experience, strong and effective e.g., managing budgets, HR, etc.
- Thorough understanding of organizational dynamics with some education, not mutually exclusive
- Pennsylvania State provides a definition of superintendent
 - Business part needs to be knowledgeable
 - Use support from their team in business knowledge
- Organizational chart that allows those who have knowledge of education are parallel with the superintendent

#3 – Clear understanding of the way management decisions affect teaching, training and leadership development among principals

- No attention to teacher development, career lattice, principal training – hard wire it

- Leadership development and support – more action oriented – commitment and plan
- Strategic plan includes teacher training/development
 - Is it articulated as a priority area supported by the superintendent as a priority item
- District thinks there is professional development
 - Is it quality
- Stop buying from vendors
- Follow through on professional development so that its sustained/supported in the classroom
- Mentors for new principals
- Re-educate existing principals in instructional leadership
- Principals understanding they are not “hero” leaders and should utilize internal (school-based) personnel
- Training is data-driven

#5 – Embraces portfolio of schools and advocates for high quality schools

- Advocate for district schools not charters
- The bar – hold everyone accountable to the same standards
- Don’t forget the traditional public school
- Union protocol and principals not doing their jobs makes it difficult to get rid of poor performing teachers

#6 – Relationship builder – creative partnerships with external stakeholders for resources

- There is a list of 300+ resources and principals are rejecting free help – should enforce the use of resources and provide training on the resources available
- Do not put up walls – develop a streamlined way/discreet process for partnerships
- Lousy with partnerships based on history at the school level – it’s a citywide problem but there are pockets of entrepreneurialism

What difference it would make if the successful candidate is/is not from Philadelphia, and why:

- Five group members believe the candidate should be local, one not local and three believe it doesn’t matter (last minute vote with no time to discuss)

Other important ideas:

Key Points:

- Build on strengths/what’s working
- Meaningful professional development with follow through that impacts students (top priority)
- Accountability/held to the same standards for entire portfolio

Group 4

Moderator: Ed Battle

Moderator's description of the group:

The group had 9 participants, 7 women and 2 men. All were highly knowledgeable and vocal about educational issues in Philadelphia. They represented: long time community education supporter, a local university's graduate school in education, a union representative, The Kimmel Center and Compact. The conversation was lively, well thought out and fast flowing. Participants are supporters and advocates of quality education in Philadelphia's public schools.

Hopes and Fears for next leader of the SDP:

- The next Leader will be open to others
- Less negativity from the Leader
- The Leader will stay long enough to implement the plan
- Able to work with various groups
- "It's hard to get the right Leader"
- Manage the "web of complex relationships"
- Make positive change
- Put students in the forefront
- Make tough decisions on unions, pensions, etc.
- Build on the good things from the past
- Address labor issues
- Scale up the positive
- "Take academic advances from the past to the next level"
- Need a strong leadership and team approach to address future problems

Parts of the Framework that Make sense to participants, and why:

- Over all the 9 points of the Framework are straight forward and comprehensive.
- Bullet #1, it is important for the next Leader to have commitment and passion for children. Why? Without commitment and passion for children, the next Leader fails.
- It is important to know what the Leader has done in the past. Why? It's an indicator of what the leader will do in Philadelphia.

Parts of the Framework about which participants are concerned, and why:

- Ability to work with unions
- Bullet #2, missing the words public institution and unions. Many in the group wanted to substitute large public institution for large enterprise and unions for organization. Why? These are areas the next Leader needs to address and include when managing the school district.

- “I want an educator for the next Leader.” There was much back and forth among participants as to having an educator as the next Leader. In the end, having an educator was preferred slightly.
- Bullet #5, add alternative and accelerated schools to “portfolio of schools. All schools must have a minimal level of resources.
- Bullet #5, concerns about the portfolio model, define it more
- Bullet #5, add all publicly funded schools and programs.
- Bullets #5 and #7 should be re-worded and combined into one statement
- Bullet #6, “does not work for me, no mention of fiscal matters, money or funding”
- Bullets #7, needs to be re-worded. Add training of school principals is needed to create better organizations in schools. Better organized schools are important for the future.
- Bullet #8, substitute the words elected officials for legislative leaders
- Bullets in the Framework lack priority or ranking

What difference it would make if the successful candidate is/is not from Philadelphia, and why:

- The candidate should get experience outside of Philadelphia and then come back to Philadelphia. While away, the candidate should keep ties or relationships with Philadelphia.
- “There are plenty of smart people in Philadelphia.” Participant believes it’s important the candidate be from Philadelphia.
- Being from Philadelphia is important because “they understand the culture, knows families and people in Philadelphia.”

Other important ideas:

- The Leader must be able to manage complex relationships within the school district.
- “Going to hell, that’s what it’s like coming to the school district. Kids without books.”
- Must be able to stay long enough to implement the plan, “no hit and run”, “staying power”
- “Implement a long term agenda”
- There should be an agenda [from the SRC] before the Leader arrives.
- The past (history of problems in the school district) may hamper the future affords or work of the Leader.
- The portfolio model is not inclusive enough

Education First Compact

Closing Plenary: Similarities Noted

Importance of external partners:

- They are not now being embraced and can bring added value to schools and programs
- Need to recognize those that already exist

Should be a leadership team

- Superintendent is only one person
- Needs to share the work load, delegation is one way
- The district needs a full set of strengths

Union environment in a public setting

- 95% of our staff are unionized
- Working in a public organization in a unionized environment is very different politically than working in a private corporation

For criteria #9: It's family not just parents.

- Children are raised by aunts, uncles, grand parents, older siblings, and others.
- Could also include business, labor and educators

Clarify what you mean by "decentralization" in this context. Specificity is important.

- Also important to know why the report on decentralization was buried