



LEFT TO RIGHT: AMY SIANO, CANDACE DICARLO, AMY SIANO, CANDACE DICARLO

Acting Locally

By Nancy Brokaw

President Amy Gutmann’s vision to propel the University from excellence to eminence, the Penn Compact, identifies local engagement as one of Penn’s guiding principles. With its deep connections throughout Philadelphia’s educational community—from partnerships in neighborhood schools to research collaborations with the school district—Penn GSE sets a high standard for involvement with the local community.

Community engagement, both local and global, is one of the pillars of the Penn Compact. The document that outlines President Amy Gutmann’s vision for the University’s future, the Compact speaks of the power of collaborative engagement to advance the central values of democracy, strengthen neighborhood ties and economic development, and provide opportunities for service and learning. The faculty, students, and staff of Penn GSE know the wisdom of President Gutmann’s vision firsthand: they put their knowledge and experience to work by reaching out to communities around the globe. It is no surprise, though, that some of the School’s closest collaborations are with its next-door neighbors.

GSE has a decades-long history of preparing teacher education students for work in the classroom and a roster of distinguished alums who dedicated their careers to teaching in Philadelphia’s schools. In recent years, Penn GSE’s teacher education program has deepened its commitment to the city by requiring all students in the master’s program in teacher education to spend at least one semester student-teaching in the Philadelphia public schools.

Take Alison Berenback. One of the cadre of Penn GSE student teachers placed into the Philadelphia schools in the 2005-2006 academic year, Berenback is teaching and learning all at once. The recent Brown graduate is student-teaching in the science classroom of Richard Staniec, the Penn Alexander teacher who’s the driving force behind that School’s annual science fair.

When she first arrived at Penn Alexander, Berenback, who hopes to teach middle school science when she graduates, devoted much of her time to observing Staniec in action and helping students with lab work. Toward the end of fall, she had the opportunity to teach her own class: an eighth-grade, general science class that started out with physics and is now studying earth science.

In the late January and early February, though, she found herself caught up in the preparations for the Penn Alexander Science Fair. “In the weeks leading up to the fair,” she explains, “I was pitching in whenever students needed help on their projects—I was assisting in the com-

puter lab, advising kids on how to formulate hypotheses, on the right direction for their research. Whatever the kids were working on, I was helping out.”

Reflecting on her experiences in the classroom, Berenback says, “It’s a *lot* of work. I thought I would be a little more used to it because of my workload in college”—she was a double major in geology and biology—“but being on stage all day can be exhausting.” That said, she adds, “I love being at Penn Alexander. It’s a great atmosphere, and every single one of those kids is a great person.”

Penn’s Most Important Urban Move

One of the highlights of the Penn Alexander school year, the Science Fair supplements the School District’s science curriculum and inspires students to get more involved in actively learning about their world. According to Richard Staniec, the fair is designed to get kids applying scientific method to questions they find perplexing—like why pickles are smaller than cucumbers or what effect temperature has on the bounce of a tennis ball.

“It gives kids the chance to apply what they’ve learned about scientific method and experimental design to projects of their own design,” explains Staniec. Kids develop their own projects, some of which may be inspired by District topics. Other students, though, take the opportunity to pursue projects that reflect their personal interests—like sixth-grader Keaton Naff, a tennis player curious about heat and the bounce of his tennis ball.

The ultimate goal, explains Staniec, is to get kids excited about learning. “When the science fair first started, kids grumbled about it,” he adds, “but this year I didn’t hear much of that. When they’re working on their projects, some of them stay after school until five or six o’clock—flying airplanes, sinking boats. You can always tell when it’s Science Fair time.”

Established in 2001, Penn Alexander is the result of a one-of-a-kind partnership that brought together three powerful players—the School District of Philadelphia, the Federation of Teachers, and, of course, Penn. Their purpose? To draw on the collective resources and expertise of



MAUREEN HELWIG

Jeanne Vissa visits the playground at the Henry C. Lea Elementary School, at 47th and Locust Streets in West Philadelphia. Along with Penn GSE Associate Dean for Educational Practice Nancy Strain, Vissa oversees the Penn Partnership School initiative.

the university, school district, and teachers to create an outstanding urban public school for a population of students that had not, up until then, been on the receiving end of the best that the American educational system has to offer.

Since the Penn Alexander School opened its doors, local civic leaders and national education experts have watched as the university-supported elementary school transformed its West Philadelphia neighborhood. Most recently, the *Philadelphia Daily News*, describing Penn Alexander as “Penn’s most important urban move in decades,” observed that “the university has shown ... that effective investment in a public school can quickly build value in even the most distressed urban neighborhood.”

Penn subsidizes the school with an operating contribution of \$1,000 per student—an amount that helps to keep the student-teacher ratio low (17:1 for kindergarten and 23:1 for grades 1-8). University involvement is more than merely institutional, though, and Penn people from across campus are making a personal investment in the school. Penn vet students teach about animal care, Penn music students give instrumental lessons, undergraduates from Riepe College House tutor in math and literacy, and Penn law students lead a social justice seminar.

For Penn GSE, curriculum development has been an important part of its contribution to Penn Alexander. Associate Professor Larry Sipe and doctoral student Susan Lea, for example, teamed up with five second- and third-grade teachers to design an arts and literacy curriculum. The teachers, who received academic credit from GSE for their work, learned how to draw on Philadelphia’s rich store of public murals as well as art-themed picture books to

pique their students’ interest in art. In the classroom, they saw their students were getting excited by the artwork they studied, particularly when they got the chance to take a class trip to see some murals firsthand. And they learned about more than art. “The children had some remarkably sophisticated things to say—about tone and mood and color,” says Sipe. “And the teachers saw what great writing and thinking their students could do, and they also saw payoffs in terms of critical thinking and analysis.”

It’s that kind of collaboration that has helped Penn Alexander students accomplish so much. Of the 18 Penn Alexander Science Fair participants who went on to the citywide George Washington Carver Science Fair, 12 came out winners. Two PAS students—sixth-grader Farzana Rahman and seventh-grader Lixia Deng—took home first prizes for a study on filtering pollutants out of drinking water and the pickle experiment, respectively. All told, Penn Alexander students performed impressively, with winners in every grade, including two first-place, four second-place, one third-place, seven honorable mentions, and four special awards.

And the larger picture of academic performance at PAS is equally impressive. In 2005, 68 percent of eighth-graders scored at or above grade level in reading and 73 percent at or above grade level in math on the state assessments—this after only three years at Penn Alexander. Perhaps the most eloquent statistic, though, points to the powerful difference Penn Alexander has made for its students’ future educational opportunity: 72 percent of the school’s first eighth-grade graduating class has been admitted to one of Philadelphia’s selective public or private high schools.

In the Neighborhood

Penn Alexander is only part of the extraordinary investment that the University—with GSE very much in the lead—is making in its West Philadelphia neighborhood. As Jeanne Vissa, a practice professor at Penn GSE, explains, “We always envisioned that Penn Alexander would be the anchor in a network of schools affiliated with Penn.” That network includes two neighborhood elementary schools, Henry C. Lea and Alexander Wilson, and it is ushering in steady improvement to student performance.

Penn GSE’s involvement with those two schools came about under an agreement with the state-mandated Philadelphia School Reform Commission (SRC). One of the Commission’s first acts after taking over operation of the School District of Philadelphia in December 2001 was to assign the administration of 45 low-performing schools to outside managers. Unlike the for-profit concerns that were selected to run many of those schools, Penn GSE is not operating its schools. Rather, its primary role is to assist in the areas of professional and leadership development, curriculum development, student academic support, and assessment. “Our goal” says Nancy Streim, associate dean for educational practice and director of the Penn Partnership Schools Network, “is to build the capacity of the school staff to achieve and monitor academic success without the need for an outside manager.”

As with Penn Alexander, the University’s contributions to the Partnership Schools extend across campus. According to Vissa, “GSE plays the role of a broker, bringing the resources of the University to improvement at these schools.” Those resources have come from, among others, Children’s Hospital of Philadelphia, the Dental School, the School of Engineering and Applied Science, the Annenberg Center, Kelly Writers House, and Penn Recreation. Student mentors from Riepe College House have stepped up to the plate as well by “adopting” Wilson: this year, freshmen fellows organized book drives to benefit Wilson’s understocked library—that, in addition to the three hours of one-on-one time they devote each week to Wilson students.

But, again as with Penn Alexander, the heart of the work in Lea and Wilson lies with Penn GSE. Given their proximity, Penn GSE has had a relationship with these schools over the years, but the agreement with the SRC called for a much higher level of collaboration. GSE faculty work with the two principals in designing year-long professional development experiences that focus on improving student achievement and strengthening the schools’ learning climate. GSE doctoral students have proven an invaluable resource in supporting these efforts. Diane Santori and Jodi Duffy (from the Language and Literacy in Education division) along with James Poinsett

(Foundations and Practices of Education) lead professional development seminars and work directly with teachers and students on actual classroom lessons.

There are also special events where everybody works together. For example, this winter, both Lea and Wilson, with support from Penn GSE, held school-wide measurement festivals. The three-week festivals were designed to reinforce students’ skills in engaging and creative ways. For the students, an unexpected bonus was how much fun they had as they immersed themselves in the measurement activities developed by their teachers, in consultation with Vissa.

“Since all of the work is driven by Pennsylvania content standards,” explains Vissa, “the Penn GSE staff researches extra books or activities to augment those provided in the school district’s curriculum. We provide a range of proactive and responsive interventions, including collaboration, coaching, and direct teaching. The aim has been to build each school’s capacity to reflect on progress and to structure continuous improvement on their own.”

The work has more than paid off. When Penn GSE began working with Lea and Wilson, demonstrated student achievement on state tests was among the lowest in

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Philadelphia. At Lea only eight percent of students could read at grade level; at Wilson, the number was even lower, at six percent. Math scores were worse: three and four percent, respectively. After three years, those figures have soared. Wilson has seen an impressive fivefold increase in student achievement in reading (with 28 percent now reading at grade level) and more than sixfold in math (25 percent at grade level). Lea’s numbers are even stronger, with 39 percent of students reading at grade level and 30 percent with similar math skills. In fact, with these showings, both Lea and Wilson can celebrate making Adequate Yearly Progress—a major achievement benchmark under the No Child Left Behind Act.

Doing the Math

Maria Palaitis Ottinger, a second-grade teacher at the Penn Alexander School, represents another kind of connection with Philadelphia’s public schools. A Penn Alexander teacher since 2003, she is currently a MetroMath Teacher Fellow at Penn GSE.

Established as part of a three-university/four-school

district partnership focused on helping urban students succeed in mathematics, MetroMath is led at Penn GSE by Associate Professor Janine Remillard. The MetroMath Center: The Center for Mathematics in America's Cities, as it's officially known, takes a three-pronged approach to its mission—with a vibrant research agenda, strong professional development offerings, and rigorous graduate program.

At Penn GSE, the MetroMath research agenda focuses on math in the community. Remillard and colleagues from Mathematics, Cognitive Science, and Urban Studies have begun preliminary data collection on a project examining the connections between students' everyday use of math and the math curriculum. Going to community-based organizations like the Enterprise Center (Wharton's accelerator for minority entrepreneurship), the researchers hope to gain a better understanding of the relationship between what students can do contextually and the mathematics they can do in academic settings. Says Remillard, "Then we want to figure out how everyday math can inform how we teach math in the classroom."

For Maria Ottinger, it's the linkages between what she's learning in her MetroMath studies and what she's teaching at Penn Alexander that make the program so rewarding. "I take what I'm learning to work everyday, and it's like hav-

ing a living lab, where I can see the things we've been discussing play out."

When she signed up for MetroMath, Ottinger—a one-time mathphobe—had already taken two on-site continuing education classes Penn GSE offers to PAS faculty. She found MetroMath's MILE summer institute for professional development intellectually stimulating—"it caused me to rethink the way I teach problem-solving in the classroom"—and, in January 2006, began the even more rigorous μ -Seminar program. (μ , the Greek letter MU, stands for "math urban.") A four-semester graduate-level seminar/practicum, that program introduces students to research as it relates to the everyday issues they face in their classrooms.

Her class with Remillard, co-taught by Chris Massey, a researcher with the Institute for Research in Cognitive Science, looks at math learners and learning and addresses the learning theory as well as the psychological and social frameworks for math learning in urban settings. Ottinger's first project for the class was a close observation of students as they worked on a lesson about symmetry. "Then we analyzed *how* kids learn this kind of concept," she explains.

"The curriculum we use at Penn Alexander," she continues, "has a big hands-on component. And what we observed was that, while young kids know intuitively about symmetry,

Exploring the Power of Shared Leadership

With its deep local connections, Penn GSE is always looking for new ways to collaborate with its Philadelphia neighbors. In February 2006, the Penn Center for Educational Leadership received a major grant to launch another partnership with the school district—the Distributed Leadership Initiative.



John DeFlaminis

"Like many districts, Philadelphia has made educational leadership a significant part of its improvement plans," explains John DeFlaminis, executive director of the Penn Center for Educational Leadership (PCEL).

And like many districts, it has been hampered by a high rate of turnover among school leaders. In a traditional model of leadership, such changes at the top disrupt entire organizations, making it difficult to maintain continuity and momentum for any beneficial practices or reforms.

PCEL is working to help Philadelphia

address this problem by providing an alternative model—one that explores the potential of shared leadership. Through a \$4.9 million grant from the Annenberg Foundation, PCEL is launching the Distributed Leadership Initiative, a four-year project that will implement the idea that school leadership is a collaborative endeavor.

As DeFlaminis explains, "Distributed leadership is an effort to create more leaders in complex urban schools to improve instruction and advance student achievement."

This initiative will build distributed leadership teams in 16 Philadelphia public

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the experience of *making* things is a powerful one for them and helps them understand the underlying concept.”

According to Remillard, the professional development component of MetroMath seeks out practitioners interested in taking the next leadership step in their district. “And by that we don’t necessarily mean the next career move,” she says. “One of our Teacher Fellows is already a principal; she is leading the way in improving math teaching in her school.”

A dedicated teacher, Ottinger admits to a growing interest in curriculum development. “As a graduate student,” she explains, “I had the eye-opening experience of having to relearn math—something I had never understood. It made me wonder, ‘Can we make this more accessible for kids?’”

“What I really like about the curriculum we use,” she continues, “is that it puts kids in the position of being mathematicians. They’re solving problems and inventing



CANDACE DICARLO

Maria Palaitis Ottinger in her second-grade class. A full-time teacher at Penn Alexander, Ottinger is also studying for her graduate degree through Penn GSE’s MetroMath program.

schools as models to show how instructional leadership is the shared work of everyone in a school. Instead of relying on a single administrator to be a director, an organizer, and a decision-maker, this structure recognizes that teachers can bring their expertise and leadership skills to bear on the issues faced by schools.

To translate that theory into practice, the project plans to train more than 80 teachers in the 16 partner schools to be instructional leaders who will work collectively with their principals. These distributed leadership teams will establish building-level learning communities that pool resources to identify and employ best practices in instruction, foster analysis of student data, and encourage further professional development.

PCEL will select teachers to serve on the teams based on their exhibited leadership abilities, supply a stipend for all participants, and provide coaching and mentoring to help schools institute the changes in their leadership structure. Participants will also receive graduate continuing education and Act 48 credit for their training from the University of Pennsylvania.

In partnership with Temple and Lehigh Universities, as well as the University of Pennsylvania and community organizations, PCEL also plans to create a regional leadership development center that will support distributed leadership schools and aid in disseminating effective practices. Once successful teams are established in model schools, those teachers and administrators can be a resource for sustaining current

distributed leadership efforts and replicating the structure in other sites.

With the frequency of changes in educational programs and personnel in today’s schools, maintaining effective leadership is a significant concern. By re-envisioning the role of school leadership in the overburdened and complex urban schools of Philadelphia, the Distributed Leadership Initiative aspires to prepare a new generation of leaders with the skills and strategies necessary to sustain high-performing standards-based schools.

—Wayne Kobylinski

A Kids-Eye View of the World

Penn GSE's local partnerships aren't limited to the hands-on work of teaching. Rather, much of the School's work focuses on the kind of academic study that you'd expect from a major research university like Penn.

One such partnership—created by faculty from GSE, the School of Social Policy and Practice (SP²), and the School of Medicine working with the City of Philadelphia—has yielded a powerful new research tool called the Kids Integrated Data System (KIDS). The brainchild of Penn GSE Professor John Fantuzzo, SP²'s Dennis Culhane, and Center for Mental Health Policy Director Trevor Hadley, KIDS is an archive that links the records of individual children maintained by separate municipal agencies. KIDS serves as a kind of uber database: instead of keeping information isolated in separate silos maintained by individual departments of different agencies, KIDS has the power to integrate information into one large-picture view.

“What this project has done is to create a single mechanism,” explains Culhane, who as director of Penn's Cartographic Modeling Lab provided the technical expertise behind KIDS. That single mechanism gives researchers and city officials a richly detailed picture of a particular cohort of children through their interactions with official Philadelphia. “In working with the City of Philadelphia to look at the data they have from the school district, the child welfare agency, the homelessness agency, and the public health programs,” he continues, “we can see if there are particular kids who are vulnerable and who are in multiple systems and being served by three or four case managers. And we can then look for ways to improve services for those kids.”

To date, KIDS has enabled Fantuzzo's team to look deeply into the effect of early childhood experiences on school success and to examine the impact of foster care on school adjustment, while researchers at SP² have been studying which combination of city services provides the best educational benefit for special needs children. KIDS is playing a key role as well in another major GSE effort, a \$5.8 million federal project to develop an integrated curriculum for Head Start preschoolers. This project, according to Dean

Fuhrman, “builds on GSE's considerable theoretical work in understanding the development of young children and how their cognitive skills get developed along with the affective and social skills.”

Designed to address the academic challenges faced by disadvantaged children, the Evidence-Based Program for the Integration of Curricula (EPIC) will bring together literacy, numeracy, and both school and social readiness skills into one unified curriculum. EPIC's design has been based on empirical research in early literacy and language, early numeracy, and social/emotional adjustment. At work since spring 2004, the GSE team, led by Fantuzzo, has completed the first two phases of the experimental study and will be ready to roll out the fully integrated curriculum in six Head Start classrooms next year, with some classes assigned as a control. To ascertain the longer-term impact of the curriculum, the final two years of the project will follow the progress of the young participants from pre-kindergarten into kindergarten.

Throughout the complex evaluation process, access to KIDS is enabling researchers not only to study the impact of the curriculum on individual children, tracking their progress through the system, but also to control for what happens *outside* the classroom—in the family and around the neighborhood. The database gives researchers a kid's-eye view of the world, revealing such influences as parental characteristics (ages, education level) and environmental factors (the level of gang activity in the neighborhood, crime and drop-out rates, etc.). This information should demonstrate the impact of environment on the effectiveness of the curriculum.

It is that kind of detailed analysis that will reveal just how well EPIC plays out in the real world of Philadelphia classrooms. If it succeeds, preschoolers enrolled in Head Start and comprehensive day care programs throughout the city will reap the benefits of a program designed to address all their developmental needs—academic, social, and behavioral.

—Nancy Brokaw



John Fantuzzo

TREVOR DIXON

strategies for doing computations. And I would like to spend more time thinking deeply about curriculum and how it can help students to think like mathematicians.”

Teach for America

As a first-time teacher, Wilson Boyd pulled an assignment in one of Philadelphia’s most troubled high schools: Olney West, a place so marked by violence and academic failure that this fall the district hired an ex-Marine to restore order in the beleaguered school. The challenges confronting Boyd—kids with reading skills that lag far behind their grade level, kids with disengaged parents, kids who’ve given up on school—are typical for urban schools like Olney East. Boyd, on the other hand, is something of an anomaly.

A Teach For America (TFA) corps member not long out of college, Boyd is also a master’s student at Penn GSE. During the day in his 10th- and 11th-grade English classes, he works hard to improve his students’ reading skills: “I’ll have made my measure of success,” he says, “if I’ve moved the student averages up two grade levels.”

“In the near term, I’ll be a classroom teacher, but eventually I’d like to dig deeper into the larger field.... I’m hoping to use my connections at Penn GSE to learn about new models of schooling.”

But one night every week, Boyd joins 115 fellow TFA corps members for an inquiry seminar offered as part of a new Penn GSE master’s degree program. The latest addition to the School’s work in the Philadelphia school district, the program is the product of an unconventional partnership designed to bring high-quality professional development to a group of young teachers brand-new to the classroom. In summer 2005, Penn GSE entered into an exclusive contract to provide in-service learning to qualified members of Teach for America serving in the School District of Philadelphia.

“Now everybody who works for TFA in Philadelphia comes to Penn,” says Dina Portnoy CW’69 Grd’98 GEd’01, director of the Penn GSE/Teach for America Program. (The only exceptions are special ed students, who take courses conducted by Chestnut Hill College but



HARVEY FINKLE

held at GSE on the same schedule.) The program offers two tracks: certification only, which is required of all TFA corps members, and the MEd degree. According to Portnoy, more than three quarters of this year’s TFA teachers in Philadelphia chose to pursue the master’s.

Based on the executive-education model, the Penn GSE/TFA program gives people like Wilson Boyd the opportunity to hone their teaching skills while working full time in the classroom. The curriculum includes two summer sessions, the weekly seminars, and monthly weekend methods courses that address pedagogical skills such as curriculum design, assessment, literacy, and technology.

Founded in 1989, Teach For America is a national corps of recent college graduates who commit two years to teach in low-income urban and rural public schools. But like Penn GSE itself, TFA aims to do more than prepare first-rate teachers. Both organizations are dedicated as well to producing education leaders for the national stage, people with the passion and knowledge to be lifelong activists for educational equity.

Wilson Boyd exemplifies both those objectives: “In the near term,” he explains, “I’ll be a classroom teacher, but eventually I’d like to dig deeper into the larger field—whether from an ed school perspective or even a business school perspective, I’m not sure. Schools are filled with well-meaning people who care about kids, but the educational bureaucracy is a mess. And as I become more and more efficient in the classroom, I’m hoping to use my connections at Penn GSE to learn about new models of schooling.” ■

Wilson Boyd, in his first year as a Teacher For America corps member, is working toward his MEd through the Penn GSE/TFA graduate program.