



## **ELEPHANT CORNER: Philly's Young Future Won't Wait Around For Better Schools**

January 31, 2014

With the appointment of **WILLIAM GREEN IV** and **FARAH JIMENEZ** to the School Reform Commission, I believe it will be more difficult for the opponents of the fundamental reforms needed to improve K-12 education in this city to prevail.

Although a Democrat, Green's views on public education echo those of the Governor and many of the city's Republicans. He believes strongly in charter schools and is open to vouchers, especially for students in underperforming public schools to attend private schools. Similarly, Jimenez believes public education includes a mix of traditional public schools, charters and vouchers to attend other schools.

A recent study by the Pew Foundation noted roughly one quarter of Philadelphia's population is in the age range 20-34 ("millennials"). This is a desirable demographic for our city, as this a taxpaying group that does not on the whole put a drain on city resources. The Pew study noted many of the millennial-survey respondents noted our poor schools are a major reason that they would consider leaving the city.

The hue and cry by many is that our public schools are woefully underfunded. Yes, any school district could do more with more money. Is the financial crisis due primarily to a need for more money, or to rather a need to run the schools better?

A recent report by the Cato Institute notes, "Philly's 2013-14 budget is \$3.03 billion, of which \$862 million is for charter schools. The district serves 136,000 students in its regular public schools and another 63,000 in charter schools." That means that the district public schools, which are being destroyed according to many on the left by GOV. TOM CORBETT'S insufficient funding of our schools, will spend \$15,941 per pupil. According to Cato, that is roughly \$3,000 more than the national average. It should be noted that Washington, D.C. spends \$8,000 more per student yet test scores show that those students are behind ours.

Thus, is the problem one of solely funding, or is it that we need to reward teacher for performance, not seniority? We should be closing under-capacity schools, thus spending money on the children and not bricks-and-mortar and redundant administrators.

The city's charter schools receive about \$2,300 less than the regular public schools, yet their graduation rate is better. District schools, according to the Notebook, graduate roughly 60% of high-school students within six years of their freshman year. The city's charter schools are at 75% and the Archdiocese's rate is over 90%. Additionally, over 92% of the Archdiocese's students go on to post-secondary education.

Tuitions at Archdiocesan high schools vary slightly but are mostly in the \$6,000 to \$7,000 range. The opponents of vouchers and charter schools claim it takes funding away from the school district. Even if the voucher was for 100% of the tuition at the Catholic school, it is still less than half of what we would be spending on the student if he/she remained in the public system.

A voucher system similar to that proposed by Pennsylvania SB 1 (which failed to get traction) would only allocate state funding to economically challenged families to send children currently in underperforming schools to private schools. Wisconsin has a similar program for students in Milwaukee. It covers roughly 25,000 students who receive roughly \$6,500 each in state-funded vouchers. Last year, the program was expanded to 500 more students in underperforming schools in the rest of the state.

Sadly, the Milwaukee school district and other city agencies have policies that attempt to curtail charter and private schools. In particular, they prohibit these schools from purchasing or leasing the 15 vacant public-school buildings which the City pays \$14 million annually to maintain according to the *Wall Street Journal*.

Green and Jimenez cannot enact a voucher system (that would need to be done by the Commonwealth's legislature with the approval of the Governor). However, they may be able to curtail the efforts of those in Philadelphia who would want to take a page out of the Milwaukee bureaucrats' playbook as it relates to charter schools.