

The Ups and Downs of Whole School Reform:
A Case Study of Success and Its Demise

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The research literature is clear in indicating that all students can learn and schools can be successful learning communities, no matter what the socio-economic or race-ethnic make-up of the student body. Yet, achieving this success requires diligent efforts, and this success can be tenuous. This paper describes the history of an elementary school in a low-income community with high proportions of racial-ethnic minorities and a long history of very low achievement. Two widely known reform initiatives were implemented at the school for almost a decade stretching with varying degrees of improvement in student performance. Data were gathered through extensive, in-depth interviews with participants and examination of historical records. Our hope is that, by examining this case study, we can understand more about underlying dynamics that can help other communities.

We begin our story with a description of the community and then describe the role of powerful players. We move to a description of the school that was the focus of the improvement efforts, ups and downs of these efforts at change, how these became largely ups, but then how a change in administration, resulting again from the actions of powerful players, led to the demise of the successful program. At the end we speculate about what we can learn from this story – what this story may imply about the difficulties of producing long-term change in schools, especially those in poor communities.

I. The Community Setting

Our story is set in Chester, Pennsylvania, a community of about 36,000 located between Philadelphia and Wilmington, Delaware. It is an old city, founded in the 1600s and was once home to a prosperous shipyard and auto manufacturing. But, like many cities around the nation, beginning in the 1960s it lost most of this manufacturing. Poverty and crime rose, the population declined markedly, and by the mid 1990s the state of Pennsylvania declared it an “economic opportunity zone.” As often happens, however, development has been slow in coming.

Along with the economic decline came sharp increases in poverty and associated social issues. Table 1 gives basic information on Chester derived from the Census Bureau. For comparison, data are also given on the state of Pennsylvania. Compared to the state as a whole, Chester had far less population growth. The population is decidedly younger than the state as a whole, largely African American (76% compared to 10% for the state), less well educated, living

in homes that are worth far less than the state average, far less likely than others in the state to own a home, with far lower incomes and much more likely to have incomes below the poverty line. By virtually any measure the community is distressed.

One of the informants described the community and its situation eloquently:

Unless you spend a lot of time in the inner city you can't imagine how bad it is for children there. The city of Chester dates back to 1644, when it was founded by William Penn. You can see that at one time it was a thriving, beautiful city; it had 12 theaters. Martin Luther King got his start there as a preacher. There were manufacturing companies, a navy shipyard, a lot of industry, a lot of wealth and just incredibly beautiful old architecture.

Now you see boarded up row houses, burned out, rat infested – a god forsaken ghetto. But, if you look above at the roof lines, at the architecture, you can see how the city must have been in its heyday.

It is located in Delaware County, which is one of the richest in Pennsylvania. It includes Swarthmore College, and also includes Westchester. Swarthmore was an area where Philadelphians had summer home. It is an area that was absolutely beautiful, but it is like they tilted it and all the shit went to the corner.

The shipyards closed gradually after WWII and the Korean War. Then Ford Motor Company had a plant that closed. Then, as the jobs started to leave, there was white flight. As the money came in to fund federally funded retirement homes or housing projects, they didn't distribute it across all of Delaware County – they located into Chester. Chester became the dumping ground.

When you drive north on I-95 everyone to the right (or east) is black. To the west of I-95 in Chester you still have a handful of whites and a handful of other minorities, but our school was 96% black. It was about 3.5% Hispanic, because the school had the district's ESL program, and .5% other minorities. There were maybe three white kids in the entire school. Ninety four percent of the children were on free or reduced lunch. [This refers to the school where the program was implemented.]

I think they had 6 homeless shelters in Delaware County – five of them... county, were located in Chester school system – and 4 were in the catchment area for Columbus elementary [our school]. It also has a lot of mafia-run drug business, with the I-95 corridor main run from Florida to New York

As the quote above suggests, the school that is the focus of our study was what is politely termed “at risk.” In fact, it was much more than “at risk” – it was a failing school within a failing district. Things were so bad that in the mid 1990s, the Chester Upland School District was

termed the worst-performing school district in the entire state. Its tests scores were abysmal, at rock bottom compared to other districts. It also was financially bankrupt, with a multimillion dollar deficit. It had lost a federal law suit filed because it had failed to provide adequate services for emotionally disturbed children. Yet, the district then failed to provide the court ordered services and was appointed a federal court master. Our informants felt that this was the result of mismanagement and corruption within the school, an opinion bolstered by the many news stories that we read.

In the late 1990s the state of Pennsylvania passed a law that allowed it to take over failing school systems, at first limited to those that were financially bankrupt. This applied to Chester Uplands. As a result, the state disbanded the school board and a three member board of control was appointed to run the district. This board hired the superintendent and made all the financial decisions. Around 1998 the board hired a new superintendent, from Prince Georges County, Maryland with hope of turning it around.

The creation of the state board and the hiring of the superintendent set the stage for the implementation of the reform models. The steps leading to the initiation of the first reform model, its abandonment and the initiation of the second reform model involved a number of political players and to understand more about the story, we need to look at the influence of wealth and political influence. We also need to examine the role of political conflict and power at a school of education at a university, often an overlooked, but potentially influential player in school reform efforts.

II. Philanthropy, Political Influence, and Power Plays

Our story also involves “big players”: the politically powerful and the wealthy, as well as the intrigues of national, state, and university politics. One of the players was a philanthropist, who had a longtime interest in education, especially in education programs that can help “at-risk” children and had become very enthusiastic about the successes associated with Direct Instruction (DI), a curriculum with strong empirical support. The philanthropist, whom we will call Mr. Smith (a pseudonym) was so impressed with the capability of DI and what he had seen of its successes that he offered the president of nearby university \$500,000 to set up an institute devoted to DI.

Direct Instruction is a highly structured curriculum and comprehensive school reform model that was developed almost 40 years ago. A very large body of research has demonstrated

its superiority in promoting high achievement and strong self efficacy and self esteem among children from all kinds of different backgrounds. It has also been shown to be very effective in turning around troubled schools.

The University President desperately wanted the money (as do most university presidents) but he didn't want to take the time to walk through the various processes to get consensus or even, apparently, acceptance at the University level. So, he established an Institute of Direct Instruction within the university, but as a separate entity from the university's Department of Education. Not surprisingly, perhaps, the University's Department of Education felt a bit left out of the process, that their power had been usurped, and that their toes had been stepped on. As academics well know, university politics can be very dirty – and the people at the University were apparently not slouches in this area. As we will see later, they were able to translate their feelings into actions that directly impacted the success of children in our poor community.

Of course, institutes can't operate without people on the ground, and a well respected expert in Direct Instruction, who held a tenured faculty position at another university, was recruited to direct the Institute. Unfortunately, and unbeknownst to her before hand, she stepped into what an informant called a "living hell." The education faculty at the University apparently lost no time and spared no energy in finding small and large ways to harass the person who took the position as well as those who worked most directly with children.

We will return to this part of the story in a minute, but let's move beyond university politics to the state level.... Mr. Smith was also good friends with the governor of Pennsylvania, Tom Ridge. At this point (late 1998 or early 1999) Ridge was hoping that he would be the vice presidential candidate with George Bush and was trying to make his name as the education governor. In advising Ridge, Mr. Smith essentially told him, "You have to put your money where your mouth is. There are educational programs that are known to be effective and those are the ones you should support."

Well, Ridge listened to Mr. Smith and turned to the secretary of education of Pennsylvania, Eugene Hickok. According to our informant:

Mr. Smith is good friends with the governor, and the governor puts pressure on the secretary of education who then turns to his second in command and says "make it happen." So the "make it happen person" is in contact with Indiana

University and says to the Center for Direct Instruction East, “Put together a proposal. What would it cost to do this?”

So the Center Director pulls together a proposal for changing schools in Chester. She goes to the National Institute for Direct Instruction (NIFDI) and works with them in developing resources and a proposal for change. NIFDI is very experienced in turning around failing schools and has a decades-long track record of successful work in several different communities. They have strong curriculum and strong methods of training and supporting teachers.

The resulting arrangement was a three-way partnership between the Pennsylvania Department of Education, the University, and Chester Uplands School District. The state department of education, which had the legal authority over the school district, was pushing for this reform and the DI institute at the University was contracted to explain it to the district and implement it. One of our informants was at the early meetings between these partners and explained the dynamics by suggesting that Chester was “essentially over a barrel. They weren’t enthusiastic about a change, but what could they do? They had the lowest performing district in the state and they were not in charge of their own fate.”

On the other hand, an informant described continuing resistance from the district. Even though they would allow the reform to be implemented, the district officials were not going to do very much to help it succeed. Here is how that informant described the situation.

[They] weren’t given a choice of adopting the program. Instead it was imposed on them. They were told that they would have to do a DI project, but they were given a choice of where to put it. At first they were going to put it in a smaller elementary school next to the district offices. But it was also across the street from Widener University – which is a school with an excellent reputation in the Northeast, an expensive private University. ... The only nice areas in Chester are around the University and the only whites left in Chester are right around the University. So this school saw themselves as the premier school in the school system – and had the highest ses group. ... [W]hen word got out the teachers revolted – and the district rethought it [and decided to put the program into Columbus Elementary].

I honestly believe the district did everything either by omission, commission, and/or deliberate sabotage [to try to make us fail]. [T]hey could not have done a better job of trying to sabotage the project if they had done it openly and deliberately. [It is] hard to fathom if they were just that stupid or that conniving. Some of it I know was conniving. Some of it was stupidity. Some of it is just the way dysfunctional systems work.

So, let's move now to looking at the school itself and what it was like when DI first came in.

III. Columbus School

Columbus Elementary was the lowest performing school in the district. Remember that the district was the lowest performing in the state – and this truly put Columbus at the bottom of the pack, the “last of the last” as one of the informants put it. The school also housed the ESL program and the programs for students with behavior disorders. It was a very large school – a huge concrete building with very large, long hallways. It had about 800 students from grades K-5 and the school was simply out of control. Even the physical structure made things difficult.

All of the informants commented on the building. One of them said it was the ugliest school he'd ever seen, saying it looked like a prison. “The school is not attractive. The playground is bare, one rusty basketball hoop with no net.” (js memo) Another person said that, “When you looked down the halls, they were like a highway. From very large hallways, they went into pods, labeled a, b, c, d – and each had 16 classrooms – 8 at top and 8 at bottom. It was just a nightmare, with many entrances into the building.” (rg interview). And from another, “It was a huge elementary school, but so poorly designed, very spread out, every classroom had a door to the outside. So you had 65-70 doors in the building that could be used to enter or leave the building, which was an incredible security issue.

The issue of security was not minimal. As one person said, “Before we came in, equipment was continually walking out the doors?” (DD) This was related to issues of student behavior. One person reported her visit in the spring before implementing the new program:

I visited this school and saw the administrators just sitting there and eating doughnuts. Any time of day 50-75 kids were running in the hallways. Teachers locked their classroom doors. When a child misbehaved they threw them out in the hallway and wouldn't let them back in. So there were these marauding bands of students. The year we took over the school the maintenance person said they had \$60,000 of broken windows. The teachers would never send one child to office by himself. They would always send 2-3 so if one got hassled others could get help.

Another informant confirmed these observations,

It was just a nightmare. Given the nature of the building kids could hide anywhere. And with the long halls, they told us stories of how kids would take utility carts and would ride down the hall on them. They would take younger kids

hostage. Teachers were afraid to take children out of the rooms and kept their doors locked

One other element complicated matters at the school. Two other elementary schools in the district only went to third or fourth grade, and after that point their children went to Columbus. As one informant described it,

Those kids would come to our school for one year before they went to high school. So here we had fifth graders who had not grown up on our campus or known our teachers and didn't have any sense of belonging to the school. We had ten classes of fifth graders from 3 different schools – so they ganged up on each other with rivalries based on different parts of the city and where they came from in the city.

In short, there seemed to be consensus from every corner that the school was extremely difficult and very high risk.

IV. The Introduction of Direct Instruction (1999-2000)

The usual model of implementing Direct Instruction in a troubled school is to have an intensive period of teacher training in the summer coupled with on-going coaching and training amounting to about 30 days throughout the school year. Given the fact that the reform was essentially imposed from outside and the very serious achievement and behavior problems, the director of the DI institute at the University decided that a more intensive system of support was needed and two highly experienced people were hired to be on site full time. One was to be the administrator and run the project and the other was to be the reading coordinator. All of the informants uniformly praise the dedication, professionalism, and skills of these women. They were highly experienced and very successful in previous work.

Because the school district was in such financial straits, the two in-school people were officially hired by the University and given faculty positions. They had previous experience in similar positions, so one would not have thought that this would be a problem, but, as we will see, it is part of the political maneuverings we'll talk about below.

Training sessions were held in the summer for the teachers but, because of the delays in selecting the school and notifying teachers, only about one-third of the staff actually were able to attend. Thus, the school year began with the need to provide initial training during the first weeks of school. A complex curriculum like Direct Instruction requires a lot of skill and help and is not

easy to implement, so this lack of training was very problematic. There were also issues with changes in administration that could have produced more problems for the school. The likelihood for successfully implementing DI seemed to be low, but in fact, though not highly successful, provided some positive achievements.

The person hired to administer the program at the school described what happened. She was hired to be the administrator for the reform program and there was also a school building principal named by the district:

They had transferred a new principal in, who had been with the district for some time. He had been very happy over in a little neighborhood school, one of the last in Chester Uplands. But there were some strong black women on his faculty who ran the school, had a common vision, and did a good job of running the school. He was the figurehead. He was transferred to our school because they didn't want me as an outsider having total control of the school. So he and I were set up initially to be co-principals. I wanted to take care of all instructional stuff. He took care of the cafeteria, the buses, the custodians – not that I didn't have interaction with that, too, but we divided up the responsibilities. He had the title of executive principal.

There were also two other assistant principals....The district told them I was a white woman from Hickory North Carolina, - trying to portray me as “white, southern honky telling us what to do” – trying their best to set it up where no one could be successful. But when the reading coordinator and I got there and met with the principal and the assistant principals they quickly realized that we were all on the same page – that we all cared about the same things, and that we cared about the kids. After working together a short amount of time we established real rapport and real support for each other.

We worked together as a team and that surprised the district. We had a lot of problems with the faculty not wanting to do implement important parts of the DI Model. For instance, the third grade team didn't want to group the children for instruction or send them to another classroom. [This grouping is part of the DI model and is designed to help students learn as fast as they can – most efficiently and effectively. In contrast to tracking it is very flexible and changes often.]

But, bottom line, all the administration hung together and that finally died down. That whole year was one traumatic thing after another – just trying to get a lid on the place with things like making teachers unlock their classroom doors.

So, we got it going – got it through the first year.

Another informant echoed these comments about the first year, describing how attitudes of the community changed as time went on.

Parents started coming by to see what was happening. The first contacts weren't great. There were allegations and attacks and resistance, except for those who knew change had to come. They accused us of using the students as guinea pigs. But this changed when they started to see the progress of the children. They could see them read, see them stay in chairs and get properly taught. When they saw us really working hard and sticking with it, their views changed. Definitely after the first year it got better. About three-quarters of the way into the first year things began to soften.

The reports of progress also came from outside observers. Here is an excerpt from a report written by one of our informants, a specialist in school reform with decades of experience with very difficult settings. He visited the school in December, 1999, just a few months after work started.

I visited Columbus School in Upper Chester in late December. There is progress, especially in kindergarten and first grade. Most teachers in kindergarten and first grade are making efforts to teach the program and there is progress. Overall behavior management in the school is improved...Although a good number of children still come late to school, teachers tell me there is big improvement from last year due to effort by the new administrative staff. (December 21, 1999)

As part of the effort to get the district on board with the change, the Director of the University DI Center and NIFDI arranged for officials to visit schools implementing DI in other parts of the country – high poverty schools that had turned around and in which the students were achieving well. One of my informants suggested that these visits really helped turn the corner. They saw how well schools can do, even in the worst environments. But, even seeing how well things can work well elsewhere isn't enough.

V. University Politics Interfere

Henry Kissinger has been quoted as saying that “university politics are so vicious precisely because the stakes are so small.” Sometimes the stakes can seem small, but they can also produce a lot of harm, especially, perhaps, to those with the least power. Politics at the University was not helpful to the educational process at Columbus Elementary.

One of the elements of the DI educational reform program is keeping track of how well students are mastering the curriculum and progressing through lesson sequences. Teachers record

children's performance on progress-monitoring assessments and examine the data so they will know if a student needs extra help or if the student is moving so quickly that the student should go on to a higher group. This method of monitoring achievement is a well established part of the curriculum and its importance in accelerating achievement has been well documented.

Instructional leaders within a school, such as the reading coordinator and the principal, are also involved in these decisions, for moving children from one group to another of course requires coordination.

Yet, university politics intervened in this usual instructional process. A wily professor, apparently still upset over the establishment of the Institute and perhaps harboring other types of theoretical or philosophical issues, used the IRB (sometimes called the Committee for the Protection of Human Subjects) to accomplish his goals. Because the reading coordinator and the principal technically worked for the University they were under its organizational control. As one of the informants explained it,

There was a professor at [the University] who taught research classes – thought he was “Mr. Research” – he started creating problems with their review committee saying we [the principal and reading coordinator] should not be privy to any of the data. Of course he didn't understand that our jobs involved looking at data on a daily basis to make decisions. He started causing all kinds of problems, saying that we shouldn't have access to data without parents giving signed permission. This was something that was totally out in left field. The problems became so intense that the Director of the Institute left and another person was appointed.

At the end of the first year we had a meeting in Chester with this new director from the University and the state department representative that we worked with. The University representative informed us that because we were technically employees of [the University] we couldn't have any access to data. If we were to continue to have access to data then [the University] couldn't be a part of it.

So [the University] pulled out, left us high and dry. We then had to set up a company and get paid directly by the school system. They [the school system] were always 2-3 months late paying us. On top of the other stress there was always the stress of not knowing you were going to get your pay check.

Recall that the plan was a three-way partnership between the University, the state of Pennsylvania, and the school district. The people who were directing the implementation of the reform were employees of the University, but the support from the University was totally withdrawn and they had to devise other organizational ways to support themselves and even get

paid. One leg of the three-legged stool, always quite wobbly in terms of institutional support, had been totally cut off.

VI. The Second Year (2000-2001) Involves Even More Changes

So the second year of implementation began with one of the major partners – the University – withdrawing and the two implementers having to set up their own private consultation company with the school district. Another potential difficulty was an even further expansion of the student body. After the close of school in the spring of 2000 the district decided to close another elementary school and move all of its children to Columbus. (The building had been condemned and they decided it would be better to close it rather than remodel and rehabilitate it.) Recall that Columbus was already very large – with 50 teachers and 800 students. This merger resulted in adding another 20 teachers and 300 students. To add to the issues, 6 weeks after school began in the fall, the district decided to move even more fourth graders into the school. (The fifth graders from the school were already attending Columbus.) Unfortunately, no extra teachers were assigned so moving, and regrouping had to occur. Here is how an informant described it:

We had to collapse groups, and reassign teachers. Our teachers were hysterical. Our parents were pissed off and angry. If you had tried you couldn't have fucked it up more. But, basically we got over that hurdle, and our scores still increased.

In spite of these problems, the DI staff and the school administrators took important steps to support the implementation of DI. Some of these involved staffing. For instance, they hired another reading coordinator – something that was sorely needed given the size of the student population. In addition, they set up a “time out room staffed by a certified mental health person.” As an informant explained, this was needed “because we had kids who were so out of control when they would go off that it would take an hour and a half to get them back under control. There were some very, very extreme kids.”

Physical changes were made to the school. Over the summer there was a lot of construction. The informants explained how they used the large open spaces in the hallways to build offices. As one person said, “We changed everything at the entire school.” And another said, “We were trying to rearrange the whole school.” But the changes also involved achievement – the children’s learning and the teachers’ skills.

VII. A Huge Turnaround in Achievement and Teacher Skills

The changes that began in the first year in student achievement and behavior continued. With the ability to provide more training and support, the skills and attitudes of the teachers improved. The students were learning more because the teachers were teaching well. The teachers were thrilled to see their children achieving. They always had cared deeply about the children and now they had children that were doing well in school and could feel safe and cared for. It is important to emphasize how caring and concerned the teachers were. One of our informants eloquently described the teachers and their work, and how they cared so much for their students.

We served a school where 94% of the students were on free or reduced lunch. The kids were inadequately clothed. They came from large families with multiple behavior problems and extreme poverty. The first year we were there we had started a clothes closet, made arrangements with other agencies in Delaware County to get donations, and had set up organization for all sizes of clothing. Teachers would buy children clothes.

They were some of the most incredible people I've ever worked with. They really cared about their students. Of all the teachers we worked with there were only 3 who shouldn't be with children. The rest were those who were the best we could ever hope to work with. They cared about the kids, they were there for them, they cared for the whole kid, they wanted to teach but they also really cared about them as people.

It was just phenomenal what they did above and beyond their jobs. Everyone had food in their classroom for a snack if a child hadn't eaten. If a kid showed up without clothes or in filthy clothes we would take them down there [to the clothes closet] and get them clothes to wear, which were theirs to keep, of course also checking with parents.

We also had a social worker who was a contact person with churches and constantly got us resupplies.

We had this up and going – We had people who really cared.

Most importantly from a political perspective, there were significant improvements in standardized test scores. An outside evaluator tracked the changes in standardized achievement scores, comparing the achievement of students in Columbus to achievement in another school within the district that was selected based on its

demographic characteristics. At entry to school the students in Columbus were performing as low as or lower than students in the comparison school. Yet, the students at Columbus made substantially greater progress over the school year than students in the other school. These gains were even stronger for students who had started at Columbus and not transferred in at some point during the school year; in other words for those who had the full dose of treatment.

In short, it sounds like the type of school that legislators, the governor, philanthropists, and people in schools of education would want – a caring environment where children truly learn. The teachers had developed very effective means of teaching and working with students and the school appeared to be on a strong trajectory of success. Things were not perfect. The great gaps in achievement had not been fully or even more than somewhat closed, but all of the informants, as well as the report of the evaluator indicate that the improvements were noticeable and significant.

VIII. Enter Big Business

But Chester Uplands school district was still ranked at the bottom of the pack in the state. Even though successes were apparent in this one school, the improvements were just emerging and were just a small part of the larger district picture. And, in the midst of the changes at Columbus Elementary other, larger legislative and administrative changes were happening.

In May of 2000, as folks at Columbus Elementary were ending their first year of reform, the state of Pennsylvania passed the “Education Empowerment Act,” described by Governor Ridge as his “top legislative priority” (http://www.accessmylibrary.com/coms2/summary_0286-27739539_ITM). (Recall Ridge was still probably hoping to be named as a vice presidential candidate.) This act was designed to put teeth into school reform. It identified “struggling school districts” as those in which 50% or more of the students scored in the bottom quartile of math and reading of the state standardized tests for two years in a row. These districts were required to develop school improvement plans. Nine Pennsylvania districts were placed on a list of districts in this category, but Chester Uplands was the only one initially certified as an “Empowerment District.”

The legislation required that, instead of the previous school board, a new three person board be appointed to direct the district and that an 11 member team of parents, community

members, and administrators develop a district improvement plan that would be approved by the state. The plan was announced in December, 2000, and involved a request for private companies to submit bids for contracts to manage the district's schools. A news article in early December noted that three companies were poised to make bids:

“Edison Schools, a New York based management firm, has held public information sessions in Chester. Other companies expressing interest are LearnNow and Masaica Education Inc. Some of the companies have pledged to immediately pump millions of dollars into the district.”

There were a lot of concerns in the community and a lot of pressure to choose more than one provider so that families had a choice. And, of course, those involved at Columbus school hoped that they would be able to continue what was looking like a very promising turnaround. Even though the two DI staff people had formed a private consulting firm after losing the contract with the University and were having clear success at their school, they had no other business history and so weren't allowed to apply to continue to work at Columbus on their own. As an informant explained,

We applied to try to run Columbus as a school by itself when they put out an RFP for educational management companies. At that point NIFDI wasn't into managing schools, so Rosella and I put together an application to try to take over the running of Columbus as a private management. We had to submit an initial proposal and then they could tell you if you could go forward with the process. Even though we had shown we could manage the school we didn't have any business history to support us – so we couldn't get the contract to run Columbus.

And at that time the school management systems [in the running] were Advantage, Mosaic, Learnnow, and Edison. All of these were allowed to move through the first step of the process and submit a proposal. We then went to Learnnow and said please, please, please put in a bid to run Columbus Elementary. We had them come observe and showed them what did and stressed that we wanted to continue the project at the school.

In any case, since the state department had given us a three year contract they had to honor the third year of the contract, which was the first year they would have an external management program....So, whoever was going to get our schools was told they had to allow our project to finish the third year. But, we, of course, were lobbying for Learn Now so that the project could continue. For the data were very promising and looking good. And we were still breathing.

The results of the bidding were announced in late March. LearnNow was given four schools (but not Columbus) and Edison was given four elementary schools, including Columbus, as well as two middle schools. Masaicca was given one elementary. At the end of the news article regarding the awarding of bids the reading coordinator at Columbus was described as wondering if her school would be able to continue using a teaching method called Direct Instruction, which she said made remarkable improvements since being introduced there two years ago. ‘We’ll be elated if we can keep our program,’ [she] said. “Sad if we can’t.”

The multiple contractors didn’t last long. In early summer it was announced that Edison had purchased LearnNow. While Edison was given a five year contract for running the schools, Masaicca was only given a one year contract and was not allowed to control the curriculum. It then withdrew and the entire management of the district was in the hands of Edison. One last attempt was made to allow Columbus school to remain as it was, but this attempt failed. As an informant told us,

We went to the district and asked them to let the project just run Columbus, but Edison didn’t want to let go of us because it would be letting go of money.

Before returning to the story of Columbus Elementary it should be noted that early 2001, when it got the Chester contract, was probably the high point for Edison as a company. It was traded on NASDAQ for as much as \$40 a share – but then it totally tanked – to \$0.14. The Securities and Exchange Commission accused it of misrepresenting its revenue – and it eventually went private – at a price of \$1.76 a share. One of the buyers was a group called “Liberty Partners,” which purchased Edison on behalf of the Florida Retirement System, which handles pensions for Florida public school teachers – and the trustees of the system at that time were Florida Attorney General Charlie Crist, Florida Chief Financial Officer Tom Gallagher, and Florida Governor Jeb Bush. (Crist is now the governor of Florida, Gallagher is a long time politician who ran against Crist in the primary for governorship but lost.)

Recall briefly the tripartite agreement that began the endeavor at Chester between the University, the state of Pennsylvania, and Chester School District. The University had dropped out at the end of year 1. At the end of year 2 (spring of 2001) Ridge’s attempt to become vice president as the “education governor” had not come to fruition, and his secretary of education had moved on to Washington, D.C. as a member of the Bush administration. Thus, while there

was still some support for DI from the state capital it was not as firmly established as it might have been. The political winds had shifted with attention going to the private contractors. As a result, the situation at Chester School District had changed dramatically, with a different school board and with all administrative authority going to a corporation with no avowed interest or desire in using a curriculum that it did not own, no matter how effective it might be. So, the three legged stool was pretty close to having only one leg, and that one was fairly wobbly.

IX. Columbus Elementary under Edison (2001-2002)

Other studies of the implementation of school reform indicate that things usually start to settle down a bit by year three. Teachers know what they are doing, students understand the system, and achievement gains are showing so that folks are encouraged. These steps were happening at Columbus, but with the advent of the Edison administration, events were changing yet again.

Edison had promised that teachers could keep their jobs, and, in fact, this seems to have been a key element in their gaining the support of the teacher's union in their bid to get a contract to run Chester. Yet, they made no such promises about administrators. Here is an informant's description of what happened.

So we ended up under Edison's control. They fired our assistant principals and our principal. They couldn't fire me (the DI coordinator) because of the original three year commitment t – so they had to allow me and our reading coordinators to be there.

They put in an unbelievably green principal, one who had never been a principal of a school before. She was younger than most of our teachers. We had a lot of teachers who had been in that district 20 to 30 years, and very few young teachers.

Conflicts and difficulties with the Edison management group seemed to involve several issues. For instance, a key element of the improved learning of the children with DI was the time that they spent in instruction and the schedule for the instructional day. But this was a source of conflict, for many DI scheduling and grouping practices that were working did not match the corporate protocol.

Another, quite sad, example involved school uniforms. One of the informants explained:

In the first year of Edison's management they said that all the children had to wear a uniform. Uniforms are good if you have a diverse community, with a lot of social class differences. But all of our children were poor and they couldn't afford the uniforms. It was more critical that our kids have clean clothes, and no one had washing machines. All of a sudden we had kids coming to school with the same clothes all five days for no one could go to the Laundromat to wash the uniform.

Then they became very restrictive. For instance, Edison decreed that children couldn't participate in the Christmas program if they didn't have a uniform on. They couldn't even come to the movie or watch the program if they didn't have the uniform.

The teachers were furious. We had a kid who came to school with his mother's nightgown and blue jeans because he had nothing else to wear. And he wasn't allowed to go to the movie because he didn't have his uniform on.

So we (the reading coordinators and the DI principal) went out to Target and got all the uniforms we could buy – and we literally brought the kids into our office, put their uniforms on and sent them down to the performance. Then the kids would come back and would change out and we would put the uniforms on another one and send them to the performance.

Edison soon made it clear that it would not continue the implementation of DI. Like other “failing” schools and districts, Chester and Columbus Elementary often have a history of changing curricula and, in many ways, having to adjust to Edison was something the community had lived through many times. As one informant put it,

They had new curriculums every other year, they would switch as the wind went. They never gave anything a chance to work. This (DI) was the first thing to last three years. [As the third year went on] it was interesting, we had a new principal, everyone was pretty much on board – but tense because teachers didn't know what was going to happen. DI was going away. Teachers didn't want it to go away because people were achieving as they never had before...and behaviors were in check. We had changed everything at the entire school. [Yet] they thought “here we go again” as they had to switch. They just had to “go with the wind.”

The final legs of the stool supporting implementing Direct Instruction at Chester had, by the end of year 3, totally disappeared. The association with the University was long gone, the school district had been given to Edison to control and they had no interest in maintaining DI. High level political support had vanished, for the governor had moved on to other things. September 11 (9/11) happened at the beginning of year 3 and Tom Ridge, who had not been chosen as vice president, was instead tapped to be the Director of Homeland Security. At that

point, the last high profile member of the original partnership was gone and there was probably no hope of maintaining Direct Instruction at Columbus Elementary. Some of the staff, including a reading coordinator, moved to a charter school in Chester that continued to use DI, and many of the children also went there. But the changes that had been developed at Columbus Elementary over the previous three years were left to wither. In a rather dramatic show of the change, all the Direct Instruction books were discarded at the end of the year, but, illustrating Edison's lack of efficacy, new curricular materials didn't arrive until the following November.

X. Maintaining Class Privilege – The Children Always Seem to Lose

Did Edison make a difference? Did they reach their five year goal of increasing achievement dramatically and moving Chester Uplands off the list of Empowerment Districts? After their first year in the district they requested and received an altered contract that provided a flat management fee, rather than a per-pupil rate, and gave them substantially more money. But Columbus Elementary has not turned around and the trajectory that was started during the DI years ceased. In the spring of 2005 Edison announced that it would leave Chester Uplands, one year ahead of schedule. Chester Uplands remains under the control of the state and controversy and talks of reform continue to circle around it. (Partway into year 3 Edison received a contract to manage schools in Philadelphia. This was a big project, much bigger than Chester, and, probably the prize they had really wanted. At that point, they shifted much energy and attention to Philadelphia.)

How do we make sense of this sociologically? What do we know about how the world works that can help us understand why all of these events transpired? Our thoughts on this are still evolving, especially because we have more interviews to do and more evidence to sift through and, most importantly, think about. But, there are two points that could be made.

First, we know that organizational change, especially of complex, multi-faceted systems such as schools and school districts, is difficult. But we also know that a key element of successful change, especially comprehensive school reform such as that attempted at Columbus Elementary, is the role of supportive structures, especially from central office administrators (see Mac Iver 2004, also Stockard and Mayberry). As we have described in this paper, support for the change at Columbus was always a bit wobbly and, over time, gradually eroded. Even though goals were being achieved, there were no powerful champions who pointed to these successes

and who provided the political and organizational support to keep the programs going. We know that such successes can be attained and the irony is that these results can occur with far less money than went to the Edison Corporation.

The second point that seems important is that this story can be seen as a tale of class privilege and the ways in which it is maintained. The children in Columbus Elementary came from poor families and, chances are, they will continue to be poor in the future. A large amount of sociological literature documents the extent to which educational achievement (not just attainment but actual learning and achievement) is a very strong predictor of ultimate earnings (e.g. Farkas, etc.). If DI had been allowed to continue and the children had been allowed to reach their full potential, they would have much greater chances in the adult occupational world. Because this did not happen, the current class system and the current arrangement of the haves and have-nots have not been challenged. In other words, every time a school reform effort fails, class privilege is maintained.

By making this point I'm trying to point to the deep structural pressures that militate against strong and systemic organizational change. The demise of comprehensive reform at Columbus Elementary did not result simply from political differences such as those between Democrats and Republicans, for some of the strongest supporters of change were Republicans. It also is not as simple as the differences between the rich and the poor, for some of the strongest supporters were very rich. Instead, I suggest that the failure resulted from a series of decisions that cumulated in ways that systematically disadvantaged the poor. If our own children were in a school such as Columbus we would move mountains to change the situation. But the children at Columbus Elementary, and poor children in general, are not our own and their parents are not part of the decision making structure at universities, school districts, or state departments of education. Thus poor children are less likely to be on the radar screen when we, and people like us, make decisions, no matter how insignificant they might be – whether it is in deciding to vote a certain way on an IRB case, to assign (or not assign) responsibilities in a state department of education, to help out a friend or acquaintance in a business deal, or to choose to ignore an issue or wait a bit to deal with it. Each decision by itself may not seem significant but when the majority of these decisions lean against the disadvantaged, even a little bit, the eventual outcome is guaranteed. This is the insidious way in which class privilege is maintained.

There is no better way to end this paper than with the words of one of our informants. Her statement illustrates the incredible dedication shown by those who work for comprehensive school reform in poor communities as well as the sadness that accompanies such attempts that end as our story does.

I just think about the children, and it seems no one ever does. It is a shame that when something begins to work, why is it snatched? It seems like successes sometimes never matter. I'm not a political person, but my thought is that the children always lose – especially where DI is involved and where kids start doing very well.

I don't understand it. I don't think anyone understands why. Something's wrong, that's all I can say, when you can ignore data, what you see, and just switch over. And the honest thing is, things didn't get better [after we left]. [They] left them high and dry.

It is heartbreaking, it just is.

Table 1: Census Information on Chester and Pennsylvania, 2000 Census

People QuickFacts	Chester	Pennsylvania
Population, 2006 estimate (1000's)	36.8	12,440.60
Population, percent change, April 1, 2000 to July 1, 2006	0.1%	1.3%
Population, 2000 (1000's)	36.9	12,281.1
Persons under 5 years old, percent, 2000	8.4%	5.9%
Persons under 18 years old, percent, 2000	29.8%	23.8%
Persons 65 years old and over, percent, 2000	11.8%	15.6%
White persons, percent, 2000 (a)	18.9%	85.4%
Black persons, percent, 2000 (a)	75.7%	10.0%
Persons of Hispanic or Latino origin, percent, 2000 (b)	5.4%	3.2%
High school graduates, percent of persons age 25+, 2000	68.7%	81.9%
Bachelor's degree or higher, pct of persons age 25+, 2000	8.5%	22.4%
Homeownership rate, 2000	47.7%	71.3%
Median value of owner-occupied housing units, 2000	\$43,100	\$97,000
Persons per household, 2000	2.64	2.48
Median household income, 1999	\$25,703	\$40,106
Per capita money income, 1999	\$13,052	\$20,880
Persons below poverty, percent, 1999	27.2%	11.0%
Land area, 2000 (square miles)	4	44,816
Persons per square mile, 2000	7,598.8	274

Source: US Census Bureau State & County QuickFacts