

# Public Education In Private Hands

By William C. Kashatus

**T**he cradle of American liberty, which championed education for all children, now finds itself in a situation that generations of its educational reformers never would have anticipated. Philadelphia's public schools are broke, the State of Pennsylvania has taken them over, and everyone expects they will soon be run by a private company, Edison Schools Inc.

Most Philadelphians hardly wanted it this way. But after years of financial trouble in the schools and declines in school performance, the city — despite its historic and proud tradition of public education — has been forced to try something radical.

When William Penn founded Pennsylvania in the 1600's as a society dedicated to the Quaker ideals of religious toleration and participatory government, he realized that the success of his vision would require what he called a "virtuous education of youth." He established a Friends

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Out of step with  
Philadelphia's  
history.

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Public School system in Philadelphia that was unique for its time: it provided a universal education for all children, rich and poor, to the age of 12; and all were required to be educated. Families that could pay tuition were expected to do so, but poor children attended free, with Quaker philanthropy providing support. Community-supported education — which became tax-supported in the early 19th century — has been part of our earliest heritage.

This is not to say that the public schools were always without problems. In the 19th and early 20th centuries, politicians and businessmen of 24 ward boards controlled curriculum, hiring and budgets. The subsequent reform of centralization brought bureaucratization that could be rigid and stifling. And by the 1960's, the city schools, like other school systems elsewhere in the country, were weakened by urban problems of white flight, increasing crime rates and greater poverty.

Even so, the district was still able to balance its budget until the early 1990's. Then Pennsylvania changed its school financing formula, no longer tying funds for districts to their poverty levels and tax bases. Philadelphia was the district hardest hit by this change, even though most of its schools, overcrowded and with a largely poor or working-class enrollment, had become temporary way stations for the disadvantaged before their entry into the work force or the unemployment line. Meanwhile, private, parochial and magnet public schools served students from largely white, advantaged backgrounds and had better resources.

After a long funding battle with the city schools superintendent, David Hornbeck, who had finally threatened to close the schools in midyear for lack of operating money, state legislators enacted a law allowing Pennsylvania to take over the district's schools. When Mr. Hornbeck resigned in 2000, the city abolished the office of schools superintendent and divided the position's responsibilities between a chief executive, who handled finances, and a chief academic officer. At the same time, the state hired Edison Schools as a consultant to examine the district's finances and academic performance.

In December 2001, the state announced it intended to take over the district and give Edison a significant role in governance. Outraged, the chief executive resigned. Mayor John Street refused to turn the district over to the state, and angry students and teachers protested. Only when the state agreed to let Mr. Street appoint two members of a five-member state commission taking charge of the schools did he agree to a city-state partnership.

What will happen next? How will the school system be governed? Who will provide social services in the schools? What role will Edison and privatization play in the future of these schools?

Despite the rocky transition, this experiment may actually reinvigorate Philadelphia's long tradition of public education. The test will be whether the new partnership can increase academic achievement and parental involvement, improve student discipline, reduce class size, and make financing more equitable. □

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