

Hornbeck's school reforms beset by familiar problems

By William C. Kashatus

When the Quaker philanthropist Robert Vaux established the Philadelphia public school system in 1818, he viewed his efforts as a moral and social imperative. While the city was growing rapidly in population and commerce, crime (including juvenile delinquency) and poverty were increasing apace. Vaux persuaded wealthy businessmen — despite fierce opposition to tax-supported schooling — that it was in the public's interest (and theirs) to create a system that would educate the greatest numbers of poor children in a cost-efficient manner.

The educational reformers who composed the city's first school board believed individual behavior could be shaped to meet the demands of the marketplace and the poor children who dominated these schools would eventually assume their place in society as constructive citizens and productive workers.

They established a "monitorial" system placing upwards of 300 youngsters in a large classroom, then subdividing them by subject into groups of no more than a dozen. The system was characterized by continuous inspection and examination, allowing for the promotion of those who earned it. Every detail of the curriculum conformed to the values of competition, self-discipline, emulation and personal industry.

Critics of David Hornbeck's "Children Achieving Plan" and the ambitious \$150 million private sector campaign to help fund it have much to learn from the early history of the city school system.

Studying the past would reveal some hard and inescapable realities that serve to explain why the current criticism of private business partnerships with public education is simply naive.

History shows, for example, that government is rarely willing or able to fund educational reform. Vaux had just as much difficulty securing financial aid from the city as Hornbeck. He learned early on that

Perhaps that is why the city currently spends about half the money per pupil that is spent in some suburban districts — even though our children need it much more.

State funding was just as elusive. Vaux had to engage in a decade-long struggle with Harrisburg before he could secure any regular financial aid for the district. The state preferred to contract with the city's religiously affiliated private schools to educate limited numbers of poor children.

Today, Gov. Ridge advocates much the same strategy, only he re-

fers to it by the more democratic name of "choice." Thus, it is difficult to understand how Hornbeck can be criticized for appealing to the private sector when it appears to be his only real option.

Opponents consider Hornbeck's appeal to the private sector as "checkbook democracy." They claim that this threatens to remove tax dollars from the control of the public school system, which would fall under the discretion of the Pew Charitable Trusts. They fear the foundation would then impose its own standards on the system, notably those espoused by the business community. Productivity would become the primary concern rather than personal development.

But there's nothing new about such concerns. Economic considerations were just as closely tied to Vaux's schools. Education has always been considered an elixir for the needs of the economy. Schools are expected to provide a competent workforce that will be able to compete in an increasingly technological society.

No wonder Vaux's monitorial system anticipated many elements of Hornbeck's initiative, especially K-12 clusters, performance driven assessment and rigorous graduation standards.

While Philadelphia's magnet schools such as Central and Masterman provide a quality education to achieving students, the rest of the Philadelphia public school system is in a crisis situation — one not much different than it faced back in 1818, when it was established.

Whether we agree with Hornbeck

Government has long been stingy, forcing appeals to business.

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Commentary