



PARTNER OR PERISH

COLLABORATION SAVES A HISTORIC URBAN DISTRICT FROM EXTINCTION

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PASBO 62ND ANNUAL CONFERENCE AND EXHIBITS, PITTSBURGH March 2017

WELCOME AND INTRODUCTIONS

- Panelists
- Overview of Today's Presentation
- Purpose: Share a Viable Option for Public School Management
- Q & A

MARCH, 2013: STATE'S EARLY WARNING SYSTEM

THE SITUATION

- AKA "The Watch-list"
- Negative Fund balance (\$4 million)
- Needed to borrow \$3 million to meet operating expenses
- Delinquent RE taxes 24%
- Highest tax rate in Allegheny County

STRATEGIES

- Implemented tax indemnity program
- Sold off tax liens
- Sought WEA approval for higher furloughs than CBA allowed
- Prioritized bills to be paid

Receivership by December 2014 appeared unavoidable. Strategies above merely bought us time.

OCTOBER, 2014: BOARD WORKSHOP #1

SITUATION

- Superintendent #5 in two-year period
- Previous board had borrowed \$10 million for capital campaign. \$6.5 million remained with 3 months left before default
- Charter payments ballooned to almost \$5 million of a \$28 million budget

DELIBERATIONS

- Real projections on finance and enrollment
- Sense of urgency and creating a vision
- Three options on capital fund:
 - A. \$10 million for PreK-6 system
 - B. \$18 million PreK-8 system
 - C. \$35 million for PreK-12 system

December 2014: Board chooses Option A.

JANUARY, 2015: WORKSHOP #2

FOCUS ON SECONDARY

- Limited educational opportunities due to enrollment
- Limited student activities
- Deteriorating 100-year old building
- Board's reluctance to raise taxes
- Downward spiral: exodus to charter schools exacerbates crisis

STRATEGIES TRIED

- iPad initiatives
- Launched new electives, honors courses
- More after school tutoring
- Added varsity and JV teams
- Partnering with neighbors for electives

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FOUR OPTIONS IDENTIFIED AT WORKSHOP #2

Guiding Principle: Our Students Deserve Opportunity Parity with Other Allegheny County Districts. Our Challenge Was As Much Moral As Financial.

FOUR OPTIONS

1. Maintain Status Quo
2. Merger/Consolidation
3. Tuition Plan
4. Partnership

WHY PARTNER?

- Maintaining our identity and history
- Invest in and focus on what we can do well: PreK-6
- Academic and extracurricular opportunities beyond our capacity
- Lower hurdles/fewer barriers
- All secondary students in one place
- Authentic collaboration = win-win

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FEBRUARY 2015; A TRIP TO HARRISBURG

WSD SAID

- We needed help to help ourselves.
- We lacked credibility and needed PDE endorsement and support.
- Big picture: secure secondary partner and build quality feeder system at elementary level
- Wanted to act before too late.
- Local legislators had expressed initial support.

PDE SAID

- Idea of partnership and re-envisioning WSD was appealing.
- Sought a model that could be replicated.
- Outcome must be entirely voluntary, not legislated or coerced.

THE RIGHT PARTNER

WE IDENTIFIED CRITERIA OF THE “RIGHT PARTNER”

- Geographic proximity
- Diverse demographics
- Breadth and depth of academic and extracurricular opportunities, including student support programs
- Realistic financial plan
- Demonstrated openness to authentic collaboration on details and transition, resulting in
- Shared vision for educating urban youth

WORKING WITH PITTSBURGH PUBLIC SCHOOLS

- Initial meeting: May, 2015
 - PPS leadership fully open to concept. Moved to drafting initial agreement.
 - October 2015: Boards voted on agreement.
 - November '15 – August '16: full blown transition plan and implementation
- PPS All-In:**
- Commitment and involvement from Superintendent and all staff levels.
 - Access to all support services of a major school system were deployed.
 - PPS Board held long, deep deliberation on welcoming Wilkinsburg students as full equals (magnet schools, CTE).

WILKINSBURG'S INTERNAL CHALLENGES

- Perceived history of bad relations between communities
- Predictions that students would clash
- Public hearings to inform community:
 - Reasons for Partnering
 - Closing historic high school
 - Formal closure of secondary program
- Community and clergy wanted voice at the table on safety and transportation.

TRANSITION CHALLENGES

- How to pay for a successful transition program
- PPS concerns over WSD special needs students
- Curriculum alignment required individual audits of 220 students
- Summer school programs to address deficiencies
- Hearing the students: building leadership, learning the ropes, addressing concerns
- PDE provided expertise: steering committee, Special Education audits, safety audits, curriculum audits, PD for Westinghouse faculty

BUDGET AND FINANCE ISSUES

- Savings and costs associated with closing a building
- Agreement with WEA on extraordinary furloughs
- PDE one-time grant for transition costs
- Partnering with PPS on additional staff needs and budgets for services
- Concurrent progress on renovations to Kelly and Turner Elementary Schools
- PSBA-managed superintendent search to fulfill commitment to strengthen elementary education.

OUTCOMES TO DATE

- First day of school generated immense media attention.
- Predictions of clashes between communities did not materialize.
- Students already in magnet programs.
- Fifty-five students on honor roll or high honors first grading period
- Attendance and GPAs up, truancy down,
- Positive reporting from generally critical media
- Crowning achievement: Pittsburgh Promise offers equitable access.
- Wilkinsburg has dramatically reduced debt and positive fund balance is predicted for 16-17.

QUESTIONS FROM THE AUDIENCE