

Philadelphia School Chief Faces Down Budget Cuts and Crises

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William R. Hite Jr. said he wants to reverse the cuts in his district, but state legislators and the governor would prefer to see an increase in charter schools. Mark Makela for The New York Times

PHILADELPHIA — William R. Hite Jr., superintendent of schools here in [one of the nation's poorest cities](#), is known as a man who prefers collaboration to confrontation, but he has spent the academic year taking no prisoners. He laid off almost 4,000 workers to close a \$304 million budget gap and threatened to keep school doors locked until [officials found stopgap money](#) to ensure what he considered a basic level of security for students. He says he was just warming up. Since joining the district in October 2012 from his previous post as superintendent in Prince George's County, Md., Dr. Hite has battled what he called a perfect storm of cuts, in which state reductions coincided with the ending of federal stimulus dollars.

He had to close 24 school buildings, forcing the relocation of thousands of students to unfamiliar schools that often lacked basic personnel like guidance counselors and secretaries. Only about a quarter of the laid-off staff members have been rehired.

He endured night after night of personal attacks from hundreds of angry parents, teachers and students at public meetings as he tried to explain the closings last winter.



One of the 24 closed schools in Philadelphia is now littered with debris. Mark Makela for The New York Times

Then he faced a huge [cheating scandal](#) from before his tenure in which dozens of teachers, principals and administrators were accused of inflating grades on students' standardized tests. So far three principals have been dismissed.

He says he remains unfazed. He wants to reverse the cuts and raise the educational standards in a district where only 65 percent of students graduate in four years.

"The optimism is, we believe we can do this work," Dr. Hite said in an interview. "The concern is if we are going to have the investment that we need to do this work."

Others say that while they admire his pluck and drive, he is fighting a lonely and probably unwinnable battle.

James H. Lytle, a former deputy superintendent here and now a professor of educational leadership at the University of Pennsylvania, put Dr. Hite's chances of getting the money he wants at "close to zero" because of a lack of support from state legislators and the Republican governor, Tom Corbett, who prefer to see an increase in charter schools.

To ease the pressures of the job, Dr. Hite, 52, a bald and muscular 6-foot-2, swims four times a week — a routine he started since arriving in Philadelphia — and sometimes goes bike riding with his media spokesman, Fernando Gallard.

Dr. Hite lives in Philadelphia with his wife, a health care administrator, while his two daughters, ages 19 and 24, remain in their hometown, Richmond, Va., where both attended public schools. Michael Casserly, executive director of the [Council of the Great City Schools](#), an advocacy group for urban school systems, has high praise for the Philadelphia schools chief.

"I think that Bill Hite is the right person at the right time in the right place," Mr. Casserly said.

He argued that Dr. Hite has used his political, financial and management skills to stabilize the district's finances and build support among the public and civic leaders. But he declined to predict whether Dr. Hite will succeed in getting the public funding he wants. "If anybody would be able to do it, he's the right guy," Mr. Casserly said.

For his part, Dr. Hite argued that Philadelphia should be getting more money since it has the highest proportion of students in poverty of any city in Pennsylvania, the most minority students, and the largest percentage of English-language learners. Eighty-three percent of students are economically disadvantaged, according to district statistics.

Dr. Hite, who is African-American, particularly wants to improve opportunities for black students, who represent 53 percent of the district's 135,000 students.

But Mr. Lytle, the former deputy superintendent, said Dr. Hite was taking the wrong approach given what he was up against. Rather than seeking to re-establish a traditional model of publicly funded education, Dr. Hite should be working with private nonprofits to provide services such as nursing or guidance counseling that the district can no longer afford, Mr. Lytle argued.

For all his personal charm and management skills, he added, Dr. Hite will probably not be able to prevail against state authorities who favor the continued creation of charter schools, which have been a significant drain on the district's funds.

"You could make the reasonable argument that the district is being completely deconstructed outside charter schools and perhaps for-profit schools," Mr. Lytle said.

In a characteristically evenhanded approach, Dr. Hite blamed state lawmakers, the city teachers' union, and Philadelphia's City Council for contributing to the crisis. While the state has cut funding, the union has not agreed to cut generous health benefits for its members, and the council has failed to appropriate \$120 million in sales-tax revenues for the district even though the money was authorized by the state last summer, Dr. Hite said.

"We're still fighting last year's battles," he said.

But he says he still has plenty of fight left in him.

"I didn't go through the hell I went through in Year 1 to leave in Year 2, 3, 4 or 5," he said. "The point of all that we've gone through in Year 1 is to ensure that the citizens of Philadelphia have the schools that they deserve; that the citizens of this city have a future set of leaders with the type of skills that they need to also run the city. That's why I came here."