

Editorial | Philadelphia's Public Schools

What's been done, and still to be done?

Doing better than most think.

Not as good as they need to be.

In sum, that's the paradoxical story of the Philadelphia public schools.

That has basically been the story since an era of increased investment and hyperkinetic reforms began with the state takeover in 2001 and the arrival of Paul Vallas as CEO.

Progress and problems inside the city schools are the backdrop for every other issue that has taken center stage in the mayoral election.

Street violence? Job growth? Taxes? Neighborhood revival or government reform? All these issues rise and fall based on how well city schools educate young people for citizenship and work.

That's why Great Expectations, a joint project of the University of Pennsylvania and The Inquirer, decided Thursday to take stock of where the Philly schools really are.

In citizen forums around the city this year, we've discovered two things: (1) Nearly everyone gets the connection between the state of education in the city and the other issues they care about. (2) A surprising number of people hold outdated notions and factoids in their heads about the schools.

Hearing the folklore about the schools aired at these forums, it was almost as though the state takeover never happened; nor the resulting uptick in state aid; the rise of charter schools; the experiments in having nonprofits, universities and private companies manage schools, and Vallas' frenetic curricular reforms.

We held Thursday's event, attended by 150, to lay out the best and latest information on the schools. We recruited an expert panel that included Michael Masch, state budget secretary, and Jolley Bruce Christman of Research for Action, who coauthored a recent major study on academic achievement in the schools. Two members of the School Reform Commission, Chairman James Nevels and Sandra Dungee Glenn, responded with candor to questions from the audience.

Audio of the presentations and a live blogging report on the evening's discussion by Editorial Board education writer Carolyn Davis can be found on the project Web site, <http://go.philly.com/greatexpectations>. More material flowing out of the forum will be added soon.

Highlights included this view from Michael Casserly of the Council of the Great City Schools: "Philadelphia has tried reforms consistent with, and in some cases more aggressive than, the best practices happening in other cities. These reforms are clearly producing results."

As Christman reported, test scores are up dramatically since 2002 for fifth and eighth graders, but high school scores - as well as dropout rates - still lag in dreary zones. Masch charted the sharp growth in state

aid since the takeover, which has raised per-pupil spending to a level (\$10,748) far higher than many city residents suspect, but still only on par with the statewide average.

But charter advocate Sharmain Matlock-Turner argued eloquently that the district still has not done all it could to provide true school choice to the city's working-class parents.

This event whetted appetites for the mayoral forum on education to be held at 7 p.m. Thursday at Congregation Rodeph Shalom, 615 N. Broad St. It is cosponsored by Great Expectations and the Cross-City Campaign for School Reform.