



Listening to Urban Kids

school
reform and
the teachers
they want

Bruce L. Wilson ♦ H. Dickson Corbett

LISTENING TO URBAN KIDS

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*School Reform and the
Teachers They Want*

Bruce L. Wilson
and H. Dickson Corbett

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INTRODUCTION

The premise of this book is a simple one: If substantial reforms to improve what and how much students learn actually occur in schools, then students' descriptions of their classroom experiences should reflect those changes. Reform, in other words, should become noticeable in what students say about school.

For example, a central feature of most urban education reform initiatives these days is increasing students' sense of belonging at school and, thereby, their commitment to coming to and working at school. It should be heartening, then, to hear a student explain that she was getting a good education in the following way, as one from the study on which this book is based did:

My teacher know how to talk to you, like when you having a problem. Instead of having a temper or nuttin', they just be nice. You can go to them and ask a question. They just don't want to hurry you up and get you out of they class.

Similar comments from a sizeable number of students could lead one to assume that such changes as looping, schools within a school, respect training, and the like had taken hold and woven themselves productively into daily school life.

On the other hand, if after having made those changes and emphasized their importance for several years, educators heard an equal number of students still making statements such as the ones below (again, as our study participants did), then they may want to revisit the strategies they are using to create a feeling of belonging.

My other teacher is always saying: "Didn't you hear me!?"
Didn't you hear me!? I'm not repeating it!"

I think teachers should treat all (students) equal, but they treat some like better. If a kid do something wrong, the teacher treat him like bad and don't care about him; and then will treat another kid like he the world. The teacher like one student better than the other.

The students, of course, may be blithely unaware of intentional investments in planning and training intended to enable their teachers and administrators to act differently and, thus, may gaze blankly at direct inquiries about “the Goals 2000 initiative,” “Success for All,” or, in our case, Philadelphia’s “Children Achieving.” But regardless of students’ familiarity with the particulars of a reform, their accounts of what they and their teachers do in class should serve as indications of whether the reform has penetrated to the classroom level. These indications, while not carrying the political weight of supposed “objective” measures like standardized test scores, should provide a school system with valuable information about whether changes in test scores accurately reflect any substantive changes in teaching and learning.

Acknowledging the merit of this proposition, the Philadelphia Education Fund (PEF)—with funding from the Pew Charitable Trusts—supported a three-year study of students in five Philadelphia middle schools. (A sixth was added in the last year of the study for reasons detailed later.) The five served some of the city’s poorest neighborhoods and had long histories of poor attendance and low achievement. The research plan was to select a representative cohort of fifty sixth graders from each building to follow through their middle school years. PEF would use the interviews conducted in the spring of each year as one of several contributions to its efforts to supply feedback to the District about its reform progress.

We fully understand that in this age of accountability students’ depictions of their classroom experiences will not be widely accepted as compelling evidence of reform’s impact. The use of standardized test scores as a proxy for school quality has become too common a feature of the educational landscape for us to be so naïve to think otherwise. Still, we would argue, the converse should be true as well. If test scores improve without students noticing much different in school, then people would be justified in regarding the supposed quantified improvement suspiciously.

At the time of this study, the Philadelphia School District’s accountability system portrayed both good and bad news. The good news was that student performance in the high poverty sections of the city was showing

signs of significant gains; the bad news was that this performance remained woefully low when compared to the more well-to-do areas inside and outside Philadelphia's boundaries. The students in our study sided with the less sanguine view of the District's efforts. They recounted far too readily and frequently tales of classrooms in which little, if any, learning occurred.

In the following pages, we share these inner-city students' comments about a host of topics that had direct relevance for the status of Children Achieving, and reform in urban schools in general. In chapter 2, we address the changes students said they had seen during the three years—in their educational plans and experiences, their schools, and their classrooms. The extent of the changes were identified in two ways: (1) having students in the third year reflect on any differences in their experiences that were obvious to them and (2) comparing what students said about their classrooms, teachers, and classmates from one year to the next. On the whole, continuity rather than change was the norm.

Chapter 3 highlights the students' descriptions of the differences in pedagogy, subject content, and learning environment they experienced as they moved from classroom to classroom. The magnitude of within-school variations in these critical aspects of school functioning was the most startling product of the interviews. It was not unusual for a student to move from a classroom exemplifying the best in urban education to one reflecting the worst in the brief span of a five-minute class change-over.

We emphasize in chapter 4 the value of students as constructive education critics. Students vividly portrayed not only the teachers they wanted to avoid if they could but also the ones they desperately wanted to have. That chapter is the heart of this book. It attends to the teacher actions that students reported as best improving the level of their learning—most notably:

- Pushing students to complete assignments
- Maintaining order
- Being willing to offer help whenever and for however long it was needed
- Going to great lengths to explain assignments and concepts
- Varying classroom activities
- Respecting students and their outside-of-the-school worlds

Students seemed to be saying that they most highly valued teachers who refused to allow them to fail and rendered harsh judgment on those who

did not. They recognized that they gave teachers many excuses for giving up on them. The teachers who taught them best did not accept these excuses. In the process, the most valued teachers came across as strict, even annoyingly so, but, as one student argued, they did so because “the whole point of it is to keep you from failing.”

The fifth chapter discusses students’ experiences in a sixth middle school. It troubled us that after the first two years of the study we could detect little that had changed in the five schools. While we had no reason to discount the accuracy of students’ comments, it was possible that either our original premise or our style of talking with students was not suitable for the purpose of using students as windows through which to view a reform’s evolution. Thus, PEF supported fieldwork in another site, one that had already been working closely with a major research and development (R&D) center as one of its pilot demonstration schools. The R&D center sought to create a “strong learning” environment in urban schools through intensive staff development and a challenging curriculum in the core subjects. Available research indicated that the school had implemented certain changes that should have made its educational program markedly different from the ones in the other five schools, even though the school was demographically similar (see, for example, MacIver, Balfanz, & Prioleau, 1999). We felt, therefore, that including eighth graders from this school would give us a better basis for judging the value of using student talk as windows into reform.

Our efforts were rewarded. The students in the school painted a much more balanced and brightly hued portrait of their educational experiences, imbued with greater instructional consistency and more uniform expectations for student performance than we heard about in the other schools. These additional students, thus, not only boosted our confidence in the research strategy, but also lent considerable credence to the suggestions of students in the five schools about how to have a positive impact on learning.

Finally, we reflect on two topics in chapter 6: (1) the implications of the students’ descriptions and insights for educational reform, and (2) the value of using students as sources of feedback on the progress of reform. Ultimately, we conclude that for reform to be successful it has to touch students’ classroom lives **noticeably**—and students are in the best position to let us know that this has occurred.

The remainder of this chapter provides some brief background about the reform context in Philadelphia during the 1995–1998 school years, our rationale for using students’ descriptions as indicators of the

impacts of reform, and an overview of the study and the participating schools.

THE REFORM CONTEXT

Philadelphia seemed to provide an appropriate reform context for using students' comments as windows through which to view reform. Both symbolically (Children Achieving was the umbrella label for a package of changes) and substantively (through committing a major portion of the reform's resources to classroom-focused activities), the District emphasized student behavior and performance as the primary targets of reform. In addition, the initiative had been launched two years prior to the study's beginning and increased in its organizational and political intensity during the three years of the study. Thus, it was entirely reasonable for us to expect that by the end of our study—five years into the reform—we would begin to see classroom-level effects showing up in students' descriptions of what they did each day in school.

According to the District (Philadelphia School District, 1999), through Children Achieving, Philadelphia's administrators, teachers, and staff:

1. "Set high expectations for all children and all schools."
2. "Developed tough, new standards, more effective teaching methods and better ways to hold ourselves accountable."
3. "Found ways to make the system 'feel' smaller and more user-friendly."
4. "Expanded teacher and leadership training dramatically."
5. "Expanded full-day kindergarten programs to every child in Philadelphia."
6. "Broadened and reinforced the safety net for children."
7. "Increased student access to books and computers and build and renovated schools."
8. "Engaged the public as partners in school improvement."
9. "Vigorously pursued more adequate and equitable resources and worked to use them effectively."
10. "Instead of choosing among these strategies to improve our schools, we have pursued all of them at once—and for a sustained period of time."

These ambitious and costly steps hoped to break the decades-long history of student failure in the city.

Philadelphia's then-new superintendent launched Children Achieving in 1993 in an atmosphere charged with cynicism about the prospects of accomplishing much of substance with the District's more than 200,000 students. However, the effort received a much-needed boost from the Annenberg challenge grants. Annenberg invested \$500 million in some of the country's largest and most needy school systems (Cervone, 1998), and Philadelphia was one of the first recipients, matching Annenberg's two-for-one offer of \$50 million with \$100 million from other sources.

This development immediately put the national reform spotlight squarely on urban education. New York City used much of its funding to create small, "excellent schools of choice" (with over 140 having been created by 1999). Chicago, which married an earlier state legislature initiative with the Annenberg challenge, supported small networks of three or more schools and an external partner (such as a community group, nonprofit organization, cultural institution, or university) to improve teaching and learning. Philadelphia initially concentrated these modest resources (by large-city standards) on several clusters composed of a high school and its attendant feeder elementary and middle schools and eventually shifted its focus to the entire district. While reform observers like Shields and Knapp (1997) caution that the most promising systemic reforms tend to have a more modest scope, the District faced overwhelming political and educational pressure to extend Children Achieving to benefit all children. Thus, all six of the schools in which we interviewed students were a part of Children Achieving. However, only the one that partnered with the R&D center received significant resources beyond what most schools in the District got to engage in reform activities.

By 1998, the District reported progress implementing several of the structural and organizational elements of its reform plan. These included the institution of school clusters within the district and small learning communities (SLC) within buildings (Christman, Foley, Passantino, & Mordecai-Phillips, 1998), the development of a system of performance indicators (Luhm, Foley, & Corcoran, 1998), and the establishment of instructional standards (Simon, Passantino, & Foley, 1998)—all three of which were in tune with changes being advocated widely around the country. The District's administration felt that the SLC arrangement facilitated school-based decisionmaking, collegial sharing, and students' sense of belonging. In response to heated criticism of the accountability

measures from both inside and outside the system, the school board commissioned an external review by a panel of educational assessment experts. This panel basically approved of the system, offering only a few minor suggestions for revision. The standards, the District believed, brought coherence to a rambling, patchwork curriculum that had been decades long in the making.

Corresponding gains in students' standardized test scores encouraged the District to continue on its reform path, and, despite perennial funding shortages, in the fall of 1998 the District announced another set of changes directly aimed at improving these student results further. Staying in touch with national trends, the District proposed ending all vestiges of social promotion and raising the standards necessary for students to move on to higher grade levels. Recognizing that increasing expectations without correspondingly enriching the instructional support for inner-city students would be a hollow and futile endeavor, the superintendent stated that more would be demanded of students only if additional funds for professional development, staffing, and curriculum were forthcoming from the Pennsylvania State Department of Education.

Despite this acknowledgment that the District's schools needed more resources to reform successfully, the schools found themselves in a high-stakes accountability environment. Efforts to reconstitute the staff of a couple of low-performing schools engendered impassioned support and resistance. Although reconstitution was rare, its threat continued to hang over the schools whose students had a long history of failure, including the schools in our study.

None of the five middle schools chosen to be in the study originally received resources for reform above and beyond what other schools got. They all immediately reorganized themselves into SLCs, although in most instances this change amounted to re-labeling already existing "houses." Both teachers and principals in each school participated in mandatory staff development geared toward creating instructional environments that promoted learning, jointly devised school improvement plans to serve as their blueprints for change, and girded themselves for the onset of the District's accountability system that was anchored by a heavy dose of standardized testing in the spring of each year.

One could have argued, convincingly and correctly, that the available resources and strategies were too scattered and weak to be expected to have much substantive impact. Children Achieving, however, had the political backing of all the major players in education in Philadelphia, including the teachers, administrators, school board, business com-