



WORKING WITH SCHOOL Leadership

AN INTERVIEW WITH DAVID W. HORNBECK

David W. Hornbeck, chair of PEN's Board of Directors, is former superintendent of the school district of Philadelphia where his Children Achieving program raised student achievement by 40% while expanding volunteer and philanthropic resources. A firm believer in the need for community involvement and public participation in the schools, Hornbeck offered valuable insights about Philadelphia's experiences, as well as suggestions for other districts and the national movement to improve the schools.

Q. During your tenure in Philadelphia, there was a dramatic increase in volunteerism and community support for the city's public schools. What exactly did you do to encourage the community to step forward and become more involved, as individuals and as a community?

A. We took several major initiatives to increase volunteerism and community support for the city's public schools.

First, we set an early goal of increasing the number of school volunteers by 10,000 in five years. We actually increased the number by 15,000 in three years. We used three primary strategies: a) we simply asked people to help us; b) we had training for the volunteers; and c) we had important things for the volunteers to do.

Second, we established school councils and gave parents a major role in this important governance structure. The parents selected their own representatives. No Council was certified until 35% of the children's households had participated in its election. We also established Cluster Resource Boards comprised of businesses, community groups, and educators. The chair always came from a major Philadelphia corporation or university. We were not interested in their money as much as in their willingness to provide ideas for the improvement of schools.

We established strong relationships with hundreds of businesses that provided thousands of internships, apprenticeships, and summer jobs for students that were tied to the regular curriculum. 25,000 students were involved in student service learning for credit. Many worked in community placements whereby the community became deeply involved in the school and learned that students really are able and responsible.

Also, every school in Philadelphia established a partnership with one or more faith communities in the area of the city served. Those partnerships took many forms from advocacy to after-school programs to safety corridors for students to go to and from school.

Q. Was there any strategy that you wished you had tried to reach deeper into the community? And do your experiences in Philadelphia offer any lessons for Local Education Funds or other school leaders?

A. I regret we were not more aggressive in building an advocacy infrastructure, block by block, of support for children and schools. Parents, faith communities, and others who believe in children should have the opportunity in an organized fashion to advocate for children in the halls of government and to insist that their schools produce good results with their children. This advocacy should arise out of a simultaneous, hands-on engagement with the school to help the educators get the job done.

In a similar vein, I particularly regret not moving earlier into seeing students as vehicles of change, not just the objects of school change. In the fourth, fifth and sixth year, we created huge numbers of opportunities for students to be engaged in student service learning. We set service learning as a promotion requirement from elementary school, from middle school and as a graduation requirement. We supported and encouraged student advocacy groups. We provided the opportunity for hundreds of high school students to be Freedom School leaders. We simply did not take these initiatives as early as we should have.

Q. What's the best way for LEFs and other community organizations interested in improving the quality of education to approach a school superintendent and seek to build a two-way, working dialogue?

A. Assuming the LEF agrees with the basic agenda of the superintendent and/or district, the LEF should work with the superintendent to agree on particular

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pieces of the agenda to which the LEF can make a significant contribution. If the LEF has important differences with the superintendent, they should try to find areas on which they do agree and work on those, hoping that the superintendent will then listen a bit more attentively to their opinions in the areas where they disagree. In both of these first two situations, the LEF ought to look for ways to fight for or defend a superintendent or district publicly around controversial issues. If the superintendent/district are simply going, hopelessly, in the wrong direction, fight them aggressively in order to secure leadership with a vision that will work for children.

Q. Given all that is going on in schools—from increased public interest in quality to concerns about high-stakes testing—do you think this is a good time to be a school superintendent or to be involved in efforts to revitalize and transform public schools?

A. This is a magnificent time to be a superintendent or to be involved in school transformation efforts—but you need to have a strong stomach, persistence, and an abiding belief in children, including those with whom we have historically failed. There has never been more interest in education; nor has education ever been more at a crossroads. Now is the time we must be involved for—if public education is seriously eroded in the name of alternative education schemes, however well intentioned—it may be generations before we recapture the vision of an educational system that is for all students. In saying this, I do not mean public education as we often practice it; I mean it as we know how to practice it on behalf of all children.

Q. From your experience, what do you think is the link between community involvement and improved student achievement?

A. The community, through businesses providing worksite learning opportunities tied to the school curriculum, helps kids learn how to read, write, and do math and science—that is they support regular academic achievement. Student service learning teaches citizenship skills, but it also, if done correctly, will contribute to regular academic performance.

Community advocacy for public education is the only way real support will be generated. Democracy actually works pretty well. For better or for worse, our elected officials do reflect the wishes of people. We have given them permission to have low expectations of students. We tolerate underfunding poor children or not providing quality preschool. When we withdraw that permission they will stop the mistreatment of children. To paraphrase Ron Edmonds, we can educate every single child we decide we want to educate.

Q. You've been a state superintendent, developed state improvement plans that really launched the standards movement, and you've served as superintendent of one of the largest school districts in the country. What's next for you?

A. I will have two major areas of involvement over the next two or three years. I am going to do some writing. I am working on a book about school and school district transformation. I will also do some writing in the student service learning student-as-citizen arena. Finally, I want to reflect more about and, perhaps, write about the variety of ways that faith communities and schools should be connected.

The other part of my time will be devoted to helping build a movement for children nationally and in Pennsylvania. Nationally I will do that through PEN and my role as board chair at the Children's Defense Fund. In Pennsylvania, I will be working with people across the state who seek to establish fair opportunities to learn for children in high-poverty districts throughout the state.

