

Delaware Valley Grantmakers PROGRAM SUMMARY
“Critical Dialogue with Paul G. Vallas, CEO of the School District of Philadelphia”
September 6, 2002
First Union National Bank building, Philadelphia

Greeting– Dale Mitchell, Executive Director, DVG

Welcome—Denise McGregor Armbrister, Director, First Union Regional Foundation and Member, Delaware Valley Grantmakers Board of Directors
Ms. Armbrister referred to Vallas’ professional biography, which follows below:

Paul G. Vallas served as chief executive officer of Chicago Public Schools from 1995 to 2001. During his tenure as chief executive, Mr. Vallas was responsible for the development, implementation, supervision and management of numerous reform measures within the city’s public schools. Mr. Vallas’ accomplishments in education led to the transformation of the third largest school system in the nation from being branded as “the worst in the country” to becoming “a model for the nation.”

As chief executive, Mr. Vallas initiated a broad series of educational reforms to reverse the persistent failure in Chicago Public Schools. He eliminated a projected four-year shortfall of \$1.3 billion within two years and balanced the system’s budget each year thereafter. Mr. Vallas fully restored financial credibility to Chicago Public Schools which earned thirteen bond rating upgrades from three bond agencies within a six-year period. During his term, he also implemented an unprecedented capital improvement program through which 76 new buildings were built and more than 500 existing buildings were renovated. This program produced a vastly improved learning and teaching environment for the school system. Ultimately, Mr. Vallas streamlined the system’s administrative organization by eliminating 1,700 duplicative non-teaching positions and replacing inefficient operations with privately managed services, in areas such as real estate and property management, construction and repair, and custodial and food services.

Mr. Vallas is also credited with ending social promotion, the reorganization of Chicago’s high schools, and establishing the largest after school and summer reading programs in the country. Between 1996 and 2000, student test scores improved by virtually every academic indicator, including six consecutive years of improved elementary reading scores.

Prior to serving as chief executive for Chicago’s public schools, Mr. Vallas was budget director for the city of Chicago. While budget director, Mr. Vallas closed the City’s \$125 million budget gap and received the first unanimous city council vote for passage of a city budget in over 40 years. Mr. Vallas also served as revenue director for the City of Chicago from 1990 to 1993.

Mr. Vallas was executive director of the Illinois Economic and Fiscal Commission from 1985 to 1990. In his capacity as executive director, Mr. Vallas was responsible for reviewing and analyzing legislation and for assessing the legislative impact of state finances on state and local taxes as well as economic development.

Before joining the Illinois Economic and Fiscal Commission, Mr. Vallas served as a policy advisor to the Illinois State Senate. As policy advisor, Mr. Vallas was the principal advisor to the Senate Elementary and Secondary Education and Appropriations Committees.

Ms. Armbrister noted that while Mr. Vallas “may be a Chicago native, it is our hope that he will become a Philadelphia legend.”

Remarks: Paul G. Vallas, CEO of the School District of Philadelphia

-Thank you to funders for the wonderful work you have been doing on behalf of the schools. Funders support many important projects and programs in the public schools and your support is critical.

-Comparisons to Chicago Public Schools: Philadelphia’s schools are similar in many ways to Chicago’s several years ago, but the advantage here is that the school district is HALF the size of the Chicago school district, so change could come even faster.

-Major accomplishment in Chicago – test scores rose for 3 years consistently, and also showed that the longer a student was in the Chicago public schools (once reform was taking place), the better

their test scores became. The opposite is true in Philadelphia schools currently—the longer a student is in the school system, the lower their scores become, or at best, they remain flat. Tripled the number of African-American and Hispanic children in Advanced Placement classes. There was an absence of honors classes in public schools in Chicago—changed that, and plans to change that in Philadelphia as well.

-Snapshot of plans for Philadelphia (“very aggressive”):

- Increase public safety in schools
- Build and renovate facilities (school buildings)
- Balance the school district’s budget by 2007
- Create mandatory summer school/ after-school quality programs for children who need more instruction—no child who is performing below grade-level will avoid these programs

-Privately managed (Edison, Victory) and charter schools will be measured by the same accountability standards as publicly-managed schools in Philadelphia. Those that do not perform well will be dismissed or have their charters revoked.

-The Philadelphia community is focused on education reform—all of the media attention has galvanized the citizens for change and expectations are high. The legislature at both the city and state level are working together—this is a unique opportunity

-“Education is the great national security and civil rights issue of the 21st century.”

Question and Answers:

Q- What about the children who are excelling in the public schools?

A- Have to seed the schools with more Advanced Placement and Gifted programs. A few select magnet schools are great, but then the regular schools become “remedial” schools. Have to “magnetize” our neighborhood schools. In Chicago we instituted medical career academies, international baccalaureate academies, etc. Any school in Chicago that had 10 honors classes or more received special subsidies—will probably be seeking corporate or foundation funding for this kind of thing in Philadelphia. Olney High School, for instance, only has one honors class in the entire school—we must do better than that. For the kids who don’t belong in honors classes, in Chicago we forged partnerships with technical schools like DeVry Institute to give students a chance to begin learning a trade after-school. Important to teach teen mothers parenting skills—had tremendous success with a program in Chicago that we plan to replicate in Philadelphia—and investing in teen mothers’ parenting skills helps improve early childhood school-readiness. For those students who are academically struggling, schools must become all-day, year-round programs. Summer school this summer (2003) for all students in Philadelphia grades 3 through 9 who are behind grade-level. Will be seeking funding for A/C and ventilation in the buildings that need it. Need to expand the number of high schools to make the existing ones smaller—the goal is to open up extraordinary schools, and to dramatically improve the existing schools, both structurally and academically, with multi-media libraries, etc. Quote from Chicago school-student: “The school used to be a dungeon, but now it’s a castle.”

Q- What do you want from grantmakers?

A- 1) Want your help in identifying those programs that are really working, so we can learn about them and take the best ones to scale. Want to learn which funders are actively funding in the schools and see how best to partner. Continuing dialogue with foundations and corporations is needed.

2) Will identify a number of initiatives – such as the neighborhood mapping program—that can use support. Will also bring such programs as Healthy Kids/Healthy Minds and Fast Forward to Philadelphia (working in Chicago).

Q- Can you comment on the structure of Public Financing for Schools in PA?

A- It’s terrible. Illinois and Pennsylvania are near the bottom in nationwide levels of school funding. Pennsylvania needs to make more funding available for early childhood education. I have already met with both Mike Fisher and Ed Rendell and both have promised to work with me and the School District if elected.

Q- How will life be different THIS YEAR for high schoolers in Philadelphia?

A- Public safety is the chief concern right now. There are approximately 5000 serious offenses committed in the Philadelphia public high schools per year, and addressing this is critical at this juncture. In addition, the physical structure of the school buildings themselves is horrendous, so that will be a high priority. A new uniform discipline code will be enforced. Students who are dangerous will be expelled to alternative placement centers that are of decent quality and afford these children a quality education, but they cannot be permitted to remain in the mainstream schools if they pose a danger to others.

Additionally, all high schools will receive funding for extended after-school programs. Plans to target freshmen so English and Math will be double-periods, and those students who do not test well will go to summer school. It will take a year to transition to that program. Increased tutoring and mentoring help this year. Over the course of this year, will work with funders and nonprofits to determine those programs that are working in the schools, and to take those that are most successful to scale.

Plans to equip all teachers with a superior training model, a curriculum training program to be distributed to all teachers as a guide for best practices in teaching their subject areas. Currently there is no uniformity of instruction. This is not rocket-science. We know what translates into higher academic performance—our challenge is to do it.

Q- Who is on your “team”?

A- Brought most of the finance and operations team with me from Chicago. For the education team, brought about half of the members from Chicago and the other half are being promoted from within Philadelphia school system.

Q- What are your plans for teacher training and recruitment?

A- Will begin to recruit year-round, as opposed to once-a-year as has been the practice in Philadelphia. Institute an Ambassadors Program, where people within the school system are given incentives to recruit. Incorporate additional bonuses for those teachers who will teach in the worst neighborhoods. Moving towards alternative certification programs. Teach for America came to Philadelphia years ago and was turned away—want to bring them here. (Chicago used 70 teachers from TFA with great success.) Recruit English-speaking foreign teachers. Institute a program to offer retired teachers to take their pension but continue working as consultants for additional years. Give teachers free training on the curriculum development models in their areas of focus—increase the professional development opportunities available to them.

Q- How will tutoring and mentoring factor in?

A- Always eager to learn about new and successful mentoring and tutoring programs. Parents will be hired to serve as truant officers, as aides in the classroom, etc. The biggest welfare-to-work program in the state of IL was the Chicago Public Schools hiring of parents to work in their kids' schools. It gets the parents involved in their children's education, and also fills needed gaps in the schools.

Q- What will be the role of technology in the schools?

A- All schools in Phila. Public Schools are wired, but only 33% are electrified, so much of the internet technology that is installed is sitting dormant and unused. Plans to wed technology to the curriculum instruction models so teachers and parents can access them online. Despite poverty, most homes have internet access today. In Chicago public schools, 84% of the homes were at poverty level or below, and yet 47% had internet access. Can use this as a powerful tool. Drexel University has become a partner in helping the school district with curriculum involvement—will be able to access a Drexel student/instructor who can help you with your math homework online, etc. Early childhood help desk model from Chicago; special TV channels that teach important tips and to which you can plug-in online; have a technology supplement to every instructional activity, so every night the student can do something using the computer that relates to the curriculum. Looking to partner with companies that will translate the curriculum materials to technology programs—this was done in Chicago.

Q- How do nonprofit programs that are working in one or two schools get to scale in multiple schools throughout the district?

A- Want to learn from foundations the best practices and the most effective programs that are out there in the schools and find out how to build them out to scale, providing government funding. Would like to assemble a working group of foundations from DVG's membership to help develop this inventory of successful programs. Goal is to have an office that works exclusively on Partnerships

and will keep up a dialogue with grantmakers. Currently a great team with Marcia Schulman who is Grants Coordinator, Ken Holdsmen who is Director, Service Learning, and a point-person for partnerships; Tim Spreitzer who is Deputy Chief of Staff; and Michael Karloutsos who will serve as liaison to corporate grantmakers.

Q- How do you reduce class sizes?

A- Incrementally. The Literacy Intern Program is successful in Philadelphia, where you get a second teacher in the classroom and therefore reduce student to teacher ratio. Summer School and After-School programs will be smaller. This will all happen one grade at a time.

Q- Will charters and privately managed schools be responsible for teaching the same curriculum?

A- They can determine their own curriculum, but they will be required to adhere to the same standards (both financial and academic) as the other schools, and if they fail to perform well, they will be taken over. Two thirds of charter schools in Philadelphia are performing worse than neighborhood schools—there will be more scrutiny and tougher standards for renewing charters and for granting new charters.

Q- How can we be of most help to you?

A- This is a very important first meeting and I want to meet many more times to learn from you what is working in our schools and to partner to make this reform possible.

RESOURCES:

For more information about grantmaking opportunities, contact Marcia Schulman, Grants Coordinator, 215/299-7842. To contact Paul Vallas' office, call 215/299-7823. For information on how to become involved with the working group of grantmakers from DVG's membership who will advise Vallas' office on effective programs in our public schools, contact Dale Mitchell, DVG's Executive Director, at 215/790-9700 x4.

Many thanks to First Union National Bank for its generosity in hosting this Critical Dialogue for DVG's members.