

City needs to promote its schools

By Kevin and Nancy Peter

Philadelphia's new mayor and school district CEO have an opportunity to generate fresh interest in our public schools. The city can change how residents think about its schools, and it can attract more middle-income families who would help transform the district into the successful system Philadelphians need and deserve.

Since 2002, we have hosted monthly meetings in our Mount Airy home for parents considering school options. More than 150 racially and economically diverse families have joined us to discuss our neighborhood public school, C.W. Henry. Many of these families can afford private school tuition, and they can afford to move to the suburbs if they think their children would be better educated.

Although more than 50 families have enrolled in our neighborhood school as a result of our meetings, most have not. Their reasons point to changes that are necessary if we are to attract more middle-income families to Philadelphia's public schools.

It's a buyer's market. For many families, schools are a consumer decision. Often, the school district does not treat parents like customers with choice. Instead, it operates as if families have no school options. The district's pervasive take-it-or-leave-it attitude convinces parents that they would not be well served. Consequently, most families who can afford it take their "business" to private schools, or to the suburbs.

Class size is key. Class size is the most common reason why parents do not choose our neighborhood school. (Our K-4 classes average in the low 20s.) Parents believe their children would receive more attention in the smaller classes of private and suburban schools. Even when faced with the reality of our neighborhood school's high test scores and top secondary-school placement, many parents opt for private or suburban schools because of class size.

Make it easy to choose a school. The district's disinterested approach to communicating with parents who request successful schools turns away many families. Families applying to successful public schools cannot get a response until late winter or spring, even though many private schools demand commitments by February. In 2006, parents did not get a first response until June. As many as a quarter of the families who attended our meetings, but ultimately chose private schools, did so because they could not pass up known private-school offers to wait for potential public-school offers.

Highlight successful schools. The common perception of Philadelphia public schools is that they are dismal environments where poor children of color don't succeed and children aren't safe. That's why we believe most middle-income families, of all races, don't consider our public schools. Philadelphia has several schools that perform on par with and above many private and suburban schools. But because the district does not showcase its successful schools, parents assume every neighborhood school is plagued by all the problems they see in the news.

Set a goal for racial balance. Our agenda is to attract middle-income families into our school. Although we are white, ours is a pursuit of resources, not skin color. We do not believe that more white families will improve our school, but that more families with resources will strengthen it.

Racial balance is a sensitive topic, but one the district must address in neighborhoods with diverse populations. Many white families do not consider our neighborhood school because they do not want their child to be "the only white kid in class." In Mount Airy, where diversity is highly valued, most white parents are willing to have their children in schools with diverse populations, and even to have their children in the minority - but not an extreme minority. With Henry's 90 percent African American student population, most white families don't look beyond skin color before turning away. Without pandering to unfounded fears, the district must foster an environment where white families see themselves as part of the mix.

The district needs to focus on these areas to make our schools work for all Philadelphia families. A key ingredient is making our successful schools more attractive to families who can afford to choose. With more

affluent, networked, active parents invested in our schools' success, the district will have more partners working to make our schools work for all our kids.

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