

School District of Philadelphia

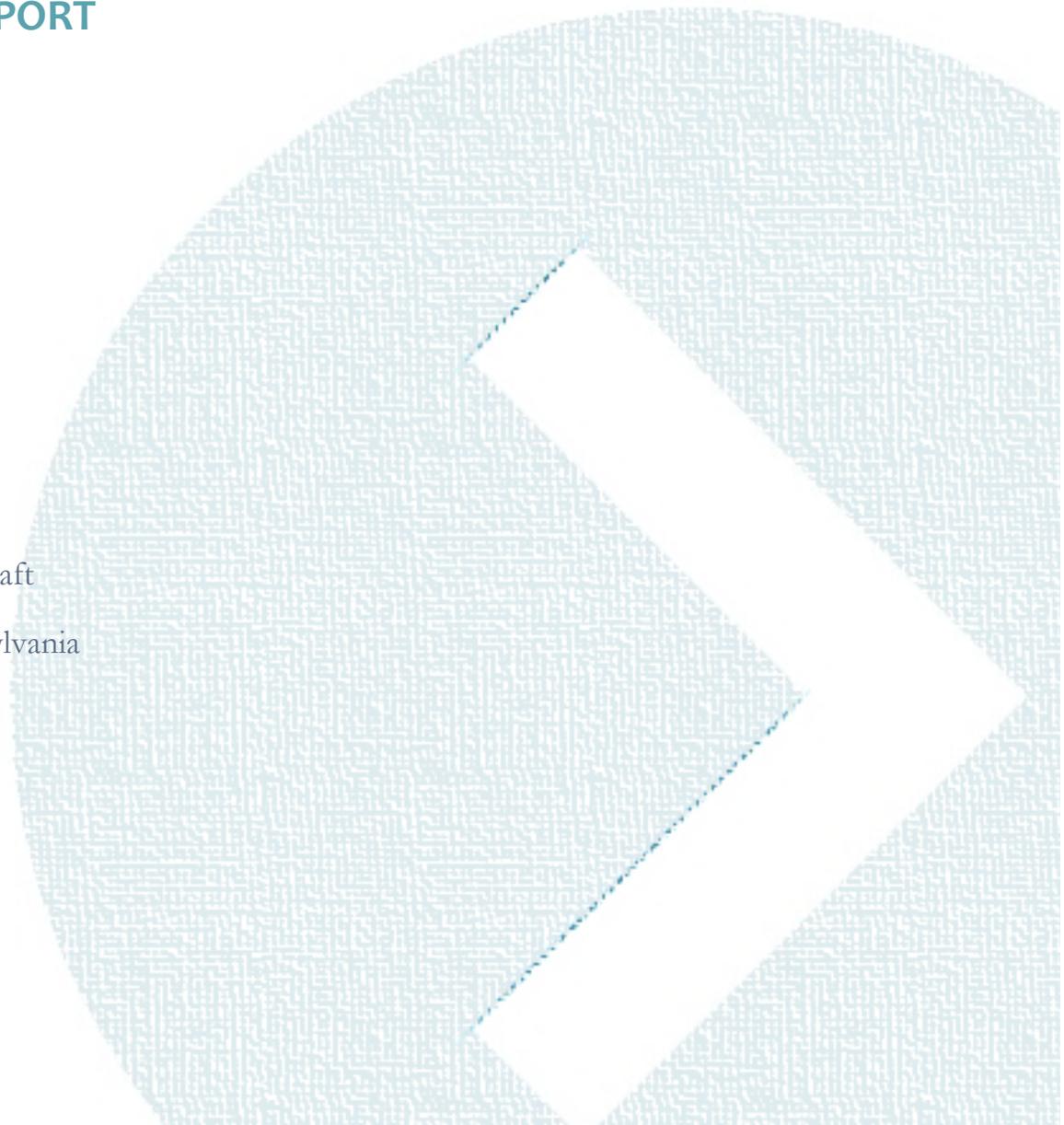
School Redesign Initiative: Implementation Year 1

SUMMARY REPORT

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Introduction

Background

In the summer of 2014, the School District of Philadelphia (SDP or the District) launched The School Redesign Initiative (SRI), a call for talented, committed educators to work with parents and community members to lead the redesign of neighborhood schools. Four neighborhood schools – Chester A. Arthur (Arthur), Laura H. Carnell (Carnell), Jenks Academy for the Arts & Sciences (Jenks), and Tilden Middle School (Tilden)– were selected based on proposals that demonstrated a commitment to the school community, the designers’ ability to lead effectively, and strong instructional expertise. The schools spent the 2014-15 school year working with the local school community to develop a comprehensive plan and academic program to meet students’ needs. The School District provided \$30,000 to each school in funding through a grant from the Barra Foundation to support the design year, networking opportunities, and connections to local and national experts. In 2015-16, the schools officially began the implementation of their new plans.

Overview of Schools

The first cohort of schools participating in SRI includes one K-5 elementary (Carnell), two K-8 schools (Arthur and Jenks) and one middle school (Tilden). The schools are located in neighborhoods across the city, and serve diverse populations of students. Performance across schools also varies widely. The schools are using various instructional models as part of their plans; Arthur and Carnell are using models grounded in project-based learning, Tilden is implementing blended learning, and Jenks is using a Shared Classroom Model and increasing its STEM focus. To varying degrees, all of the schools’ plans include a family and community engagement component.

Demographics ¹				
	Arthur	Carnell	Jenks	Tilden
African American	72%	57%	77%	86%
Asian	3%	9%	0%	9%
Latino	3%	24%	0%	2%
White and other	7%	3%	20%	3%
Economically Disadvantaged	94%	95%	54%	100%
English Language Learners	3%	13%	0%	13%
Special Education (IEP)	21%	18%	14%	18%
School Performance Report (2014-15)				
Overall	11%	40%	41%	6%
Achievement	7%	11%	48%	2%
Progress	0%	72%	14%	1%
Climate	25%	27%	90%	16%

¹ Source: School District of Philadelphia, Open Data Initiative: Enrollment and Demographics (SY 2014-2015). Numbers may not add up to 100% due to small sub-groups not being reported.

Method

The School District of Philadelphia contracted with the University of Pennsylvania to gather information on the first year of Redesign implementation. We immersed ourselves at each of the four Redesign schools for several months in Spring 2016. Our visits included the following:

- **Meetings with Key Stakeholders:** Formal and informal meetings with a variety of stakeholders, including the principal, teachers, parents, and community members/partners.
- **Classroom Visits:** Participation in learning walks and classroom visits.
- **School and Community Events:** Attendance at school and community events, including internal events like presentations of student work and external events like the dedication of a new playground space.

After several months of data collection, we systematically analyzed our results, identifying trends both within – and across – schools. We wrote a case study for each school documenting key findings and shared those case studies with school leadership to ensure our findings accurately captured their school’s process of change.

To accompany these case studies, we wrote several stories profiling individual leaders, teachers, parents, and students and telling the story of their Redesign experience.

Report Overview

This summary report includes an executive summary of the case study for each school and key implications for the District and other schools interested in implementing a redesign and/or similar transformation strategies.

The executive summary of each case study (pp. 4-7) is comprised of the following components:

- **Plan Implementation:** Examines the various elements of the school’s Redesign plan – including the instructional model, talent management, and community engagement – and assesses the school’s fidelity to implementing the original plan.
- **Key Takeaways:** Investigates why a school is successful or struggling at the various aspects of its Redesign plan, looking at key drivers, cultural shifts and alignment of resources to strategies.
- **Implications:** States recommendations for the SRI school, other schools interested in similar work, and the District. The executive summary in this report includes only recommendations specific to the school, as broader implications are discussed in the following section.

The Implications section (pp. 8-10) makes several recommendations in the following areas:

- **Implementing New Instructional Models:** General recommendations and those specific to different models, including (1) Blended Learning, (2) Project-Based Approaches, (3) Shared Classroom, and (4) Online Summer Learning.
- **Talent Management:** Recommendations around various stages of the talent pipeline in Redesign schools, including teacher recruitment, selection, and professional development.
- **Parent & Community Engagement:** Recommendations for engaging parents and community members in transformation efforts, as well as building relationships with outside partners.

Chester Arthur School

Chester A. Arthur, located in the Graduate Hospital neighborhood of Philadelphia, serves 250 students in grades K-8. Principal Kim Newman began her tenure at the school in the fall of 2013. Chester Arthur applied to join the School Redesign Initiative to accelerate their process of providing all students with the academic, technological and social skills needed to be productive and contributing citizens. They sought to establish an Ethic of Care throughout the school as the foundation for all of their Redesign work. In addition, they are implementing a project-based model with Inquiry Schools, building on their Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS) program, and continuing to strengthen relationships with community partners. Teachers and community members were deeply involved in, and supportive of, the Redesign process.

Plan Implementation

- **All science and social studies classrooms, as well as the after-school STEM program, employ project-based learning (PBL).** Teachers attended a Summer Institute from Inquiry Schools, which supported them to make pedagogical shifts.
- **PBIS has changed the culture at Chester Arthur, and SRI accelerated this cultural change.** The staff and students have adopted common language around behavior expectations, and staff consistently gave out Arthur Bucks and Red Tickets, which students were able to redeem for incentives.
- **Arthur partners with more than a dozen community organizations.** About 70% of the middle school students at Arthur attend after-school programming provided by external partners. The school also relies on significant private financial support from the surrounding community.
- **Arthur shifted their professional development to weekly 1-hour meetings and used Redesign funds to support an external coach from Inquiry Schools and a site based teacher leader.** The one-on-one coaching with the Inquiry Schools coach was elective and utilized by some, but not all, staff.

Key Takeaways

- **Community Partnerships have been critical to bringing hands-on learning to Arthur.** Arthur partners with over a dozen community organizations and is a proof point for how partnerships at multiple levels of the system – city, district, community and school – can work together.
- **The process of change was accelerated by building on past successes and resources.** Arthur used Redesign to accelerate a process of change that already had significant momentum.
- **Designing PBL opportunities was labor intensive and required sufficient professional development and time for change.** The switch from a traditional textbook based curriculum to an inquiry driven, project based approach requires extensive professional development and ongoing support for staff.
- **Arthur had flexibility to make adjustments to the instructional model.** Though Inquiry Schools recommends implementing the model school-wide, Arthur opted to implement in science and social studies classrooms in the first year of Redesign.

Implication for Arthur

- **Arthur should ensure all teachers have sufficient training and coaching to implement PBL.** Arthur should seek ways to provide teachers with continued access to training on the inquiry-driven project-based approach to instruction.

Carnell Elementary School

Carnell is a K-5 school in the Oxford Circle neighborhood of Philadelphia that serves a diverse student body of 1,025 students. The school is led by Principal Hilderbrand Pelzer III, who arrived in 2012. At that time, the District described the school as being "in crisis." Indeed, the school consistently performed poorly on state assessments and experienced repeated behavioral and organizational issues. In response to these challenges, Carnell submitted its School Redesign application with the primary goal of every student achieving academic growth and engaging in an inspiring, challenging, and personalized project-based learning environment that prepared them for success. Specifically, it is partnering with Expeditionary Learning (EL), a national organization that supports schools to increase student engagement and achievement in three core areas: mastery of knowledge and skills, character building, and high-quality student work.

Plan Implementation

- **The Expeditionary Learning (EL) curriculum was used for ELA in grades 3-5, though the quality and extent of implementation varied.** In addition, all grade levels engaged in experiential case studies that culminated in a Celebration of Learning.
- **Parents, community members and external organizations have been central to Carnell's Redesign, and the school has fostered an open and welcoming culture to encourage participation.** The school opened a Family Resource Center, offering a popular ESL class for families, and parent engagement has increased across the school.
- **Ensuring staff fit has been a central component of Carnell's successful Redesign efforts.** The school replaced more than half of the staff this year, which helped to increase teacher buy-in to changes.

Key Takeaways

- **The school culture and staff mindset created a strong foundation for transformation.** The Carnell staff entered the Redesign process with a shared understanding that change was needed and imminent.
- **Recruitment of "best fit" teachers helped to increase adoption of Expeditionary Learning.** New teachers (including veteran teachers from other schools) specifically sought out Carnell because of the model, and these teachers have been more enthusiastic and successful compared to teachers placed at Carnell.
- **Distributive leadership increased buy-in and collaboration.** Teacher leaders helped inform the Redesign plan and worked with the principal to build support across the school community. The team still meets regularly to shape the vision of the school and craft professional development.
- **The transformation was limited by the lack of capacity and budget flexibility and relied heavily on external support and partners.** Carnell benefits from the support of EL, but was unable to allocate resources for EL professional development, as they were required to purchase a second counselor instead.

Implication for Carnell

- **Carnell should continue to empower teachers through distributive leadership and offer consistent teacher development including expanding EL support to the lower grades.** The summer PD and learning walks should continue, and the leadership team should consider how to differentiate support for teachers who join the team after summer PD or are having more significant implementation challenges.

J.S. Jenks Academy for the Arts & Sciences

J. S. Jenks Academy for the Arts & Sciences, located in the Chestnut Hill area of Philadelphia, serves 450 students in grades K-8. The school is located in a low density, wealthy neighborhood where just 10% of the residents live below the poverty level. However, the school serves a student population that is 54% economically disadvantaged; about half of the school's students live outside of the catchment area and enroll through voluntary transfer. Jenks consistently performs above the School District of Philadelphia (SDP) average on the PSSAs and ranks well in comparison to its peers on the School Progress Report (SPR). They applied for the School Redesign Initiative to accelerate their process of moving “beyond the walls and beyond the bells” and expanding their Shared Classroom Model. Teachers and community members were deeply involved in, and supportive of, the Redesign process.

Implementation

- **The Shared Classroom Model allowed teachers to better meet the diverse academic and social needs of students, although success varied depending on teacher fit.** This year, three of the six teaching pairs had solid working relationships and implemented the model with fidelity. Two teams struggled to implement the model but made progress during the year, while the final team was not invested in the approach.
- **Science and math teachers built an engaging STEM program that involved students in real world problem solving.** Grades 4 and 5 used an integrated STEM shared classroom, while middle school students were offered optional after-school enrichment programs.
- **IGNITE, an online learning platform developed by teachers to address summer learning loss, was slow to get off the ground due to scheduling challenges.** The program was redesigned with support from external consultants for the summer of 2016.

Key Takeaways

- **Shared classroom teachers need the freedom and flexibility to adapt their practice to meet the needs of their students.** The model works when teachers are given flexibility and use it to differentiate student learning, but teachers need the ability to experiment and adapt to meet student needs.
- **Collaboration and trusting relationships fuel an entrepreneurial approach.** Jenks is able to innovate by fostering a culture that mirrors a design thinking model – ideate, prototype, iterate.
- **External partnerships are incredibly valuable but require significant resources.** The STEM programming and enrichments are heavily reliant upon out-of-school time and experiences outside of the building.
- **The transformation effort relied on significant staff investment and unique physical resources.** For example, Jenks benefited from external consultants to develop a user-friendly IGNITE 2.0 product. While the specific conditions at Jenks have supported successful positive changes at the school to date, it is unclear if this type of transformation is sustainable or scalable.

Implication for Jenks

- **Jenks should formalize partnerships, structures and reliable funding streams for the after-school and STEM curriculum.** In addition, teachers would benefit from more formalized support systems and professional development for implementing the shared classroom model.

Tilden Middle School

Tilden Middle School, located in Southwest Philadelphia, serves 470 students in grades 5-8. The school is located in a high-poverty neighborhood, and more than 95% of its students are considered economically disadvantaged. The school population has significantly changed in recent years, including the addition of students from Shaw and Pepper Middle Schools and expanding to add grade 5 in 2013-14. The school persistently struggles in its performance. On the 2014-15 School Progress Report, Tilden ranked 36th out of 36 middle schools on the School Progress Report. In response to persistently low academic achievement and ongoing challenges with school culture, Tilden submitted its School Redesign Initiative proposal with three main goals: individualized instruction for each student, continuous improvement in instructional practice and data use, and a safe and supportive environment for all students. The school is implementing a blended learning instructional model, as well as using a new Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS) program.

Plan Implementation

- **Blended learning has produced a significant change in Tilden's instructional culture, despite varying degrees of implementation across the school.** While some teachers report higher levels of student engagement and investment in their classes as a result of blended learning, technological challenges and staffing limitations have slowed Tilden's progress in implementing blended learning.
- **Professional development is a critical piece of Tilden's Redesign process.** Professional development practices for teachers have mirrored the school's instructional approach for students, and a partnership with PHMC has led to improved professional development.
- **PBIS early implementation was inconsistent, but it has now taken root in the school's culture.** The school's behavior data points to an improvement in student behavior, and anecdotally, teachers report that PBIS has led to those improvements.
- **Tilden has developed and strengthened partnerships with several external organizations.** These partners support PBIS, a parent resource room, and a mentoring program.

Key Takeaways

- **The principal's vision and mindset drive intentional changes to staff culture and buy-in.** Under Principal Johnson's leadership, the school is embracing an entirely new way of teaching students while acknowledging that changes of this magnitude come slowly.
- **Shifting teachers' practice requires building trust and buy-in.** Tilden benefits from a balanced combination of veteran teachers and the ability to hire new mission-aligned staff.
- **Blended learning requires substantial technological and staffing support.** Technology challenges have slowed the progress of the blended learning rollout, as teachers who are already grappling with the magnitude of the changes to their instructional practices also confront significant disruptions to their lessons.

Implications for Tilden

- **Tilden must maintain a consistent focus on steady, incremental growth, and continue to ensure teacher buy-in.** In addition, while some gaps in technological and staffing support for blended learning will likely persist, the school will continue to rely on partnerships and external resources.

Implications

This section discusses key implications for the District and other schools interested in implementing a redesign and/or similar transformation strategies in the following areas: (1) Implementing new instructional models, (2) Talent management, and (3) Parent/community engagement.

Implementing New Instructional Models

- **Increase teacher buy-in to major changes through teacher leadership.** New instructional models will succeed only if their teachers are able and willing to execute the changes. Therefore, teachers should have a central role in designing and shaping major changes at a school. While principals are able to inspire some buy-in, Redesign schools relied on teacher leaders to build systemic cultural acceptance of the changes. For example, Jenks has achieved buy-in by fostering a culture of trust and collaboration and enabling teachers to continually refine their teaching practice and develop new ideas. At Carnell, inviting teachers to participate in Redesign and meeting regularly throughout the implementation process contributed to early success.
- **Build schools' capacity to implement curricular changes.** To ensure successful implementation, the District will need to consider how best to support schools engaging in curriculum transformation. This could be achieved by better aligning existing District personnel to support school needs, hiring additional district-support staff to oversee project-based schools, and/or supporting schools to identify external support for Redesign implementation. For example, Carnell greatly benefited from the support of an external EL designer throughout the implementation process. Conversely, Tilden had planned to hire a retired teacher to become its blended learning coach, but had challenges hiring this coach due to PSERS restrictions. As a result, the principal became teachers' primary resource for blended learning support, in addition to all of his other roles.
- **Foster school leadership that embraces continuous improvement.** Schools are most open to significant changes when the leader creates a culture that embraces failure as a learning opportunity. For example, the willingness of Tilden's principal to acknowledge that change takes time is expressed explicitly by referring to the first year of implementation as "Year 0," rather than "Year 1." Jenks' greatest strength is perhaps its ability to innovate through an iterative trial-and-error approach. The District should consider replicating the approach by training other school leaders to adopt a similar culture to support transformation efforts.
- **Offer budget flexibility to SRI schools.** In order to fully implement a new model, schools need the ability to allocate resources to meet the needs of staff and students. For example, Carnell has been unable to invest the resources needed for professional development and curricular materials because it could not secure budget flexibility to reallocate funding.
- **Allow for flexibility in the school calendar.** Schools would benefit from some ability to alter the school day schedule and yearly school calendar in order to provide external enrichment programming and professional development. Arthur was able to restructure professional development to offer weekly sessions. However, at Jenks, the originally planned out-of-school time activities were limited due to constraints of the school calendar.

✓ Specific to Project-Based Approaches

- **Invest in expert support to transition to project-based learning.** Arthur benefited from a partnership with Inquiry Schools and Carnell relied upon a design coach from Expeditionary Learning to provide critical ongoing support for implementing the new curriculum. These were significant financial investments for both schools.

- **Dedicate significant time and resources to professional development.** Beyond the financial cost, the process of adopting a new student-centered curriculum takes significant time investment in the first year. Schools interested in adopting PBL, or similar models, should ensure there is sufficient time for ongoing professional development during the year in partnership with outside organizations to provide external support. For example, Arthur is currently dedicating one hour of every Wednesday afternoon by banking professional development time.
- **Develop a common understanding of goals and language between staff and external partners.** It is important for school leaders, staff and external partners to norm around expectations and the goals of the specific project-based approach. There are different models – such as Inquiry Schools and Expeditionary Learning – and it is critical that schools choose the model that is the best fit for their needs.

✓ Specific to Blended Learning

- **Ensure school buildings are ready for blended learning.** Many aging school buildings may lack the physical capacity to support hundreds of computers, all connected to the Internet. Schools implementing blended learning need technology and security upgrades and help ensuring the physical capacity to support the technology overhaul. Tilden’s efforts were often stalled by technical challenges.
- **Blended learning is more than just a technology upgrade.** In addition to planning for the hardware and software to be used, schools that are interested in implementing a blended learning program must recognize and plan for the significant instructional and cultural changes the program will require as well.

✓ Specific to the Shared Classroom Model

- **Carefully consider fit for the teacher pairing to allow teachers to differentiate learning with the shared classroom model.** If two teachers are open-minded and willing to be flexible, students and teachers can benefit from the opportunity to differentiate learning in a shared classroom. However, it is important to consider the right fit for teacher pairings and allow for some trial and error as teachers develop the right way to use the model to meet their students’ needs.
- **Investigate the shared classroom as a potential model for schools facing similar challenges with students at varying academic levels.** While the outcomes from the shared classroom are still uncertain, teachers at Jenks attest to the early benefits from combining two classrooms into one. The District should continue to monitor results and take lessons learned from Jenks before scaling the model to other schools.

✓ Specific to Online Summer Learning

- **Provide external support for design and development of customized learning platforms.** After Jenks’ staff’s initial attempt to develop their own online platform was unsuccessful, they engaged an external consultant to support the development of IGNITE and teachers report they have developed a much stronger program as a result.
- **Evaluate IGNITE to determine effectiveness at addressing summer learning loss.** Given that IGNITE is formally relaunching in 2016, it is not possible to know if it will be successful in decreasing learning loss over the summer. The District should assess participation and evaluate the impact on student outcomes after the first year of implementation.

Talent Management

- **Provide schools with the autonomy to hire teachers that are a good fit for their model.** School leadership should understand which personalities, skillsets and priorities align with specific instructional models. To this end, finding teachers with matching interests and skillsets is important for successful implementation of redesign efforts. Carnell and Tilden heavily relied upon their ability to replace more than half their staff to ensure teachers were bought in to the EL and blended learning models.
- **Support teacher recruitment for SRI schools.** Currently the Redesign schools do not have a systematic way of publicizing their unique models. For example, prospective teachers with experience or interest in areas such as blended learning would not easily know to apply to Tilden. To help schools ensure that all teachers are opting into the model, the District should provide SRI schools with additional recruitment support, such as offering schools opportunities during the site selection process to promote their specific models.
- **Invest in targeted and consistent professional development.** Schools need to provide extensive and sustained support to teachers to make fundamental changes to instructional practice. Professional development over the summer is important, but insufficient; teachers need continued support throughout the year to make significant changes in their classrooms. In addition, it is important to ensure that all teachers participate in summer and ongoing professional development; the District should investigate ways to ensure all teachers participate, either by increasing incentives or making sure trainings are mandatory.
- **Help address coverage issues in schools.** The District's lack of substitute coverage limited the time teachers and teacher leaders had to meet and collaborate this year. Given the significant investment in Redesign schools, the District should consider how it can ensure that these issues do not stand in the way of transformation by prioritizing their staffing needs.

Parent & Community Engagement

- **Create a transparent, welcoming, and responsive environment to garner support from external organizations and community members.** To varying degrees, the SRI schools benefit significantly from external partnerships and community support. In order to increase engagement, Carnell invited parents and partner organizations on “learning walks” of the school, which established a unified sense of buy-in from community members beyond the school. Arthur cultivated extensive partnerships by ensuring leadership was responsive to community – and partner – needs. Other schools' leadership should be welcoming, responsive, and ensure parents and community members play a meaningful role in the school improvement process.
- **Support development of neighborhood groups at other schools.** Some SRI schools rely on parent and community groups to provide extra resources and programming for students. For example, The Friends of Jenks group provides significant financial and logistical support for Jenks, and makes it possible to continue the out-of-school enrichment activities and field trips. Similarly, the Friends of Chester Arthur fundraises and provides volunteer and marketing support for the school.
- **Partner with a dedicated community organization to create a successful Family Resource Center (FRC).** Redesign schools benefit from an external partner to collaborate with staff and families to develop and execute on a shared vision.

As the School District of Philadelphia embarks on another year of the School Redesign Initiative, it will be essential to learn from the early successes and challenges faced by this first cohort of schools. The case studies profiled in this report provide rich examples for other schools interested in implementing school transformation efforts. In the future, it is important that the District continues to track implementation efforts in this first cohort of Redesign schools and explores how variation in implementation influences student learning results over time.