

Universal Enrollment
by Ken Derstine
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Parents of Philadelphia students and prospective students should know their right to choose a school for their children is under attack. Several weeks ago the SRC held round table discussions about Universal Enrollment. We were asked our opinion about a system where parents would go to a central location when they wanted to choose a school. Participants were asked their opinion about a system called PhillySchoolApp where parents submit school requests to a central location. For high schools for example, parents would submit ten choices including public, charter and parochial schools. An administrator would then run a computer algorithm which, using a student's personal data, would select one school. From everything I heard at the meeting and have read in the notes about this meeting, there was overwhelming opposition to having a Universal Enrollment system.

When the expansion of charters began over the last ten years they were touted as giving parents choice. Universal Enrollment does the opposite. It takes away choice and gives the choice to a bureaucrat in an office who does not even know the child but is looking a spreadsheet. The overriding concern is not the interest of the child, but the demand of the market, whether this be a traditional, charter, or parochial school.

We are told that we are now in the "listening phase" of implementation of Universal Enrollment. First of all, it was already announced by Mr. Mark Gleason at the beginning of September in testimony before City Council that plans for Universal Enrollment have been made. So this meeting a few weeks ago was just an attempt to sell to parents what has already been decided by the SRC. In Newark, New Jersey they are already farther along with the same Universal Enrollment plan and it is one of the issues that parents have been opposing which led to the arrest of a parent leader who tried to post flyers opposing the turning of community schools into charters.

We have been through the listening phase before. At the beginning of last year, Dr. Hite and SRC members held community meetings about the proposed closing of schools. For hours, students, parents and teachers lined up to plead for their schools. When the vote was finally taken on March 7th, it was clear that the decision had been made to close most of the schools before there were any community meetings and 24 schools were closed in June. These meetings were little more than a facade of democracy and now the same method is repeated with Universal Enrollment. It is clear that despite community opposition the community will be ignored.

Ever since the state takeover of the Philadelphia School District in 2001 there has been an ever increasing colonization of the School District by the state. The community has been systematically excluded from decisions about schools and treated as little more than customers and the students as products. Like a medieval village under siege, the School District has been invaded by outside corporate interests and gradually starved of resources even as charter schools are expanded. A few weeks ago the High School for Creative and Performing Arts announced that they may not be able to put on the Spring Show again this year, like they were not able to last year, because they were short of funds. In one day, the community raised \$10,000 so they could have their Spring Show this year.

At the same time, the Performing Arts Charter School was running full page color ads in community newspapers encouraging high school students to enroll in their school in September. There is obviously not shortage of funds there. This school is part of a 2012 \$1.5 million grant from the Philadelphia School Partnership. Traditional schools cannot run ads because they do not have the funds. Teachers must spend hundreds and even thousands of dollars to have the supplies they need to give their students a bare bones education.

Traditional schools have 14 librarians in the entire District. Nursing has been cut in half so most schools have a nurse one or two times a week. High schools with 3000 students have two full time counselors so students must wait weeks to get help with college applications. Yet at the same time we see ads for charters boasting that that have nurses and counselors every day and fully staffed and supplied libraries.

In September, when the School District was in crisis with the layoff of over 3800 employees, the federal government advanced \$45 million to ease the crisis. Governor Corbett held this money up in an attempt to pressure the teachers into making concessions. He only relented after the outcry after the death of Laporsha Massey which may have been caused by the lack of a nurse in the school who would have recognized the asthma symptoms and would have told the parents to get Laporsha to the hospital or called 911 herself. I consider this holding up of funds for the education of thousands of children for a political agenda to be more serious than the trouble New Jersey Governor Christie is in for holding up traffic on the George Washington Bridge for a political vendetta.

It is ironic that this colonization of our School District is happening in the city where ten blocks from here, a little more than 237 years ago, the American colonies declared their independence from England. This document has been an inspiration to democratic movements all over the world ever since.

We are very familiar with its opening sentence, "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness."

But do we listen to the rest which says in part (and I hope people will go home and read the entire paragraph):

"That to secure these rights, Governments are instituted among Men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed, --That whenever any Form of Government becomes destructive of these ends, it is the Right of the People to alter or to abolish it, and to institute new Government, laying its foundation on such principles and organizing its powers in such form, as to them shall seem most likely to effect their Safety and Happiness."

It is time that Philadelphia schools be returned to the people of Philadelphia. We do not consent to the privatization of our public schools. We need an elected school board with taxing powers so we can fix the schools for our children and the future of our city.

I have included with my statement an article from a few weeks ago in the Washington Post. It is written by James Meredith, the Civil Rights pioneer who risked life and limb to integrate the

University of Mississippi in 1962. He has issued an 'American Child's Education Bill of Rights'. His reason for issuing this document? I quote:

““We are losing millions of our children to inferior schools and catastrophically misguided and ineffective so-called education reforms. Our schools are being destroyed by politics, profit, greed and lies. Instead of evidence-based practices, money has become the engine of education policy, and our schools are being hijacked by politicians, non-educators and for-profit operators. Parents, teachers, citizens and community elders must arm ourselves with the best evidence and take back control of our children's public education before it is too late. We all must work together to improve our public schools, not on the basis of profit or politics, but on the basis of evidence, and on the basis of love for America's children.”

Since only three minutes are allowed for statements, this is an abbreviated version of a much longer statement. It can be read here with links:

[**Is the School District of Philadelphia a colony of the state of Pennsylvania?**](#)