

## Youth leaders carry on campaign for small schools: *Two student organizations imagine a different kind of high school*

“In big high schools, there is so much chaos and noise. You can’t accomplish anything. But with small schools, you can learn a lot,” says Sida Din, a senior at Olney High School and member of Youth United for Change (YUC) for three years.

Through their involvement in YUC and the Philadelphia Student Union (PSU), students such as Din are leading campaigns to re-envision and transform their high schools. They propose small schools characterized not only by their size, but by rigorous education, increased sense of community, and democratic decision-making.

Tiffany Fogle, a new member of PSU and ninth-grade student at West Philadelphia High School (“West”), describes the promise that small schools hold: “My vision for small schools is a new environment – not just a new building but a better education.”

For these students, an improved education includes improved relationships with teachers.

“In small schools, the teachers and the students get to know each other better,” comments Mary Wells, a senior at West and member of PSU for three years. Wells also foresees members of the school community becoming part of a shared school governance process.

PSU and YUC are not just talking about small schools; they are at the forefront of organizing around the issue. Students have done research and written proposals for small schools at Kensington and West. For each site, they envision that the existing large high school would be replaced by a campus of four small autonomous schools with no more than 400 students each. These small schools would share some facilities, but would have their own faculty, administration, curriculum, and governance structure.

Students involved with YUC at Olney High School are now putting together their proposal and hope to see six small schools built.

### Two years in the making

Youth leaders of PSU and YUC have shown their determination to have a voice in decisions about the future of their high schools. Two years ago, they began conducting “listening” campaigns, surveying other students about their ideas for the design for a new high school. PSU and

YUC members have read literature about small schools and have traveled to small schools in Oakland, Chicago, Rhode Island, and New York City.

Jennifer Howell, a senior at Kensington and member of YUC for four years, says she hopes creating small schools will make Kensington “better in all aspects of education, such as teacher quality and having personal relationships with the principal.”

Both YUC and PSU are pursuing and securing the support of parents, advocacy groups, local community organizations, and local and state politicians. For example, through the Cross City Campaign for Urban School Reform and the Education First Compact, they have enlisted the support of veteran education reformers in developing a districtwide small schools policy paper. PSU has won backing from a number of neighborhood and faith-based groups in West Philadelphia.

“It’s an inspiration to see young people so involved in bettering their education system, not just for the betterment of themselves but for others,” says Rev.

Rodney Rogers from the Christ of Calvary Church in West Philadelphia.

The students’ proposals leave room for further community participation such as deciding on programmatic themes for the schools and holding positions on local school governance councils. For Kensington and West, the community will be invited to participate in the planning at forums facilitated by Concordia, a community planning, design, and architecture firm, through funding from the William Penn Foundation.

Bobbie Hill, Concordia’s director of planning, explains, “We will work closely with YUC and PSU, community organizations, and local leaders to recruit a broad base of participants to think and plan for how these schools can become centers of their communities.”

Many adults are impressed by students’ knowledgeable commitment to bringing small high schools to Philadelphia. Jolley Christman, a principal researcher at Research for Action, says, “The adults are hopeful that the students’ leadership will accomplish the kinds of high school reform that have eluded Philadelphia for years.”

YUC and PSU students have had a broad impact on School District discussions of small schools. In February, District officials announced that “Phase Two” of their high school reform plan

would focus on creating dozens of new, small high schools. However, it is not yet known to what degree the District’s reform will reflect the principles and visions of the students’ campaigns.

The District, which made a commitment two years ago that it would rebuild Kensington and West Philadelphia high schools and do major renovations to Olney, now says that all three high schools will get new buildings, and Kensington and Olney are targeted to be divided up into separate, smaller schools. Students at West are still negotiating to see the District formally commit to transforming West into multiple small schools.

### What the future holds

Students have successfully maintained their organizing efforts not only because of what they are working towards, but also for whom they are working. Many current leaders will have graduated before the first bells ring in any of these new small schools. Says Din, the senior at Olney, “I will fight for this school and for future generations of students. It is important for us to have an equal education.”

There remain many challenges. It is difficult to sustain momentum as experienced student leaders graduate. In addition, it is a challenge to keep aligned the sometimes differing visions of “small schools” held by various advocacy and community groups – as well as the District.

However, both YUC and PSU expect to continue their efforts, through additional listening campaigns, visits to successful small schools, meetings with design teams, and cultivation of adult support. The big prize and improved futures of those who will benefit from smaller schools are never too far from view. In the future, says Din, “I will be happy to look at the small schools and see what I have accomplished.”

– Kristine S. Lewis, research associate, and Gretchen E.L. Suess, senior research assistant, are with Research for Action, which is documenting the students’ small schools campaigns. This work is part of “Learning from Philadelphia’s School Reform” – a research and public awareness project examining Philadelphia’s current wave of education reform.

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