

Remarks of Michael Churchill to the School Reform Commission

May 18, 2011

I want to thank the Accountability Review Council and School District for releasing their report in advance of this meeting so the public would have an opportunity to review and comment on it.

The Council's reports are important for their consistent attention to the basic issue facing this School Reform Commission—how to improve the academic performance of students in the Philadelphia School District. It is clear that the perception that public schools are failing to adequately prepare students is part of the political push for increasing use of public funds for non-public schools through vouchers and educational tax credits and also for expanding charter schools.

Therefore this Report showing the substantial progress in improving educational outcomes—where now more than half of the district's students are performing at proficient and advanced levels – is welcome.

The Report's attention to the gap in outcomes between African-American and Hispanic students on the one hand and White students is equally important and sobering. Despite the overall gains, the gap is largely undiminished, with virtually no change in the last three years.

As I understand the SRC's strategy to deal with this persistent problem, an important element is to address the gap by fixing the 14 worst performing schools, with 8300 students, who are over 97 percent minority. Additional

schools are being added this coming year. That strategy is the focus of the second part of the ARC report on the initial implementation stage of the Renaissance Schools.

Unfortunately it is way too soon to see whether the extra investments in those schools and the differing ways those investments are being used, will pay off in increased student achievement. While I believe the report focused on many interesting questions in the early implementation, the important analysis must come next year with individual school by school reports of before and after achievement changes, and examinations of programmatic differences between the schools, including differences in staffing patterns (like use of librarians, aides, and support personnel), differences in instructional practices, differences in use of arts and extra-curricular activities, including sports, to help form school cultures and motivate students, differences in school safety strategies as revealed in both the District's January report and the ARC's Report, and differences in the professional development support given to teachers. No less important is how did the school leaders differ in what they did in mobilizing the resources of the entire school community.

In times of tight budgets we all need to learn which components are driving success when it occurs and what elements don't seem to make much of a difference. Hopefully next year we will be able to have a discussion about what hasn't worked and can be abandoned, and what we should push forward with. At the moment it is too soon.