

ABOUT THE CHILDREN ACHIEVING CHALLENGE

In February 1995, shortly after the School Board of Philadelphia adopted *Children Achieving* as a systemic reform agenda to improve the Philadelphia public schools, the Annenberg Foundation designated Philadelphia as one of a few American cities to receive a five-year \$50 million Annenberg Challenge grant to improve public education.

Among the conditions for receiving the grant was a requirement to raise two matching dollars (\$100 million over five years) for each one received from the Annenberg Foundation and to create an independent management structure to provide program, fiscal, and evaluation oversight of the grant. In Philadelphia, a business organization, Greater Philadelphia First, assumed this responsibility, and with it, the challenge of building and sustaining civic support for the improvement of public education in the city.

Philadelphia's *Children Achieving* was a sweeping systemic reform initiative. Systemic reform eschews a school-by-school approach to reform and relies on coherent policy, improved coordination of resources and services, content and performance standards, decentralization of decision-making, and accountability mechanisms to transform entire school systems. Led by a dynamic superintendent and central office personnel, *Children Achieving* was the first attempt by an urban district to test systemic reform in practice.

EVALUATION OF CHILDREN ACHIEVING

In 1996, the Consortium for Policy Research in Education (CPRE) at the University of Pennsylvania and its partner, Research for Action (RFA), were charged by the *Children Achieving* Challenge with the evaluation of *Children Achieving*. Between the 1995-1996 and 2000-2001 school years, CPRE and RFA researchers interviewed hundreds of teachers, principals, parents, students, District officials, and civic leaders; sat in on meetings where the plan was designed, debated, and revised; observed its implementation in classrooms and schools; conducted two systemwide surveys of teachers; and carried out independent analyses of the District's test results and other indicators of system performance. An outline of the research methods used by CPRE and RFA is included in this report. A listing of the reports on *Children Achieving* currently available from CPRE is found below. There will be one additional summary report released in the coming months. It will be available when it is released on the CPRE web site at www.cpre.org.

CHILDREN ACHIEVING EVALUATION 1995- 2001: RESEARCH METHODS

The Consortium for Policy Research in Education and Research for Action used the research methods indicated below in their evaluation of the *Children Achieving* Challenge.

1. 1996-2000 school-level data on indicators that made up the District's Performance Responsibility Index including student scores on the SAT-9, student promotion and graduation rates, student attendance, and teacher attendance.
2. Two census surveys of teachers, the first in 1997 and the second in 1999. Teachers were asked about reform implementation, school conditions, and teaching practices. There was a greater than 60 percent response rate on both surveys.
3. School indicators describing teacher and student characteristics in 1996 and 1999 obtained from the School District of Philadelphia's Information Services. These data included school enrollment, number of teachers, the proportion of students qualifying for free or reduced-price lunch, among other indicators. These data were used for descriptive purposes and in hierarchical linear and logistic regression models to help understand the relationships among reform implementation, student outcomes, and school characteristics.
4. Five years (1995-1996 through 1999-2000) of qualitative research in 49 schools (26 elementary, 11 middle, and 12 high schools) in 14 clusters.

Qualitative research included: interviews of teachers, principals, parents, outside partners who worked in the schools, and in a few cases, students; observations of classrooms, small learning communities meetings, professional development sessions, and school leadership team meetings; review of school documents (School Improvement Plan, budget, etc.); and intensive, multi-year case study research in a subset of 25 schools (13 elementary, 5 middle, and 7 high schools).

5. Interviews of central office and cluster staff and observations of meetings and other events.
6. Interviews of 40 Philadelphia civic leaders (including political leaders, leaders in the funding community, public education advocates, journalists, and business leaders).

In addition, numerous other studies conducted during *Children Achieving* informed this evaluation. These included: Bruce Wilson and Dick Corbett's three-year interview study of middle school students; an evaluation of the Philadelphia Urban Systemic Initiative in Mathematics and Science conducted by Research for Action; the Philadelphia Education Longitudinal Study conducted by Frank Furstenberg at the University of Pennsylvania; and the evaluation of the William Penn Foundation's initiative in two clusters, conducted by the National Center for Restructuring Education, Schools, and Teaching.

CHILDREN ACHIEVING'S THEORY OF ACTION

To assess the progress and effects of a comprehensive reform such as *Children Achieving*, it is essential to understand its "theory of action," that is, the assumptions made about what actions or behaviors will produce the desired effects. A summary of the *Children Achieving* theory of action follows:

Given high academic standards and strong incentives to focus their efforts and resources; more control over school resource allocations, organization, policies, and programs; adequate funding and resources; more hands-on leadership and high-quality support; better coordination of resources and programs; schools restructured to support good teaching and encourage improvement of practice; rich professional development of their own choosing; and increased public understanding and support; the teachers and administrators of the Philadelphia schools will develop, adopt, or adapt instructional technologies and patterns of behavior that will help all children reach the District's high standards.

ADDITIONAL READING ON CHILDREN ACHIEVING

The following publications on the evaluation of *Children Achieving* are currently available through CPRE at (215) 573-0700, or email your requests to cpre@gse.upenn.edu.

- Recruiting and Retaining Teachers: Keys to Improving the Philadelphia Public Schools (May 2001)

- School Leadership and Reform: Case Studies of Philadelphia Principals (May 2001)
- Contradictions and Control in Systemic Reform: The Ascendancy of the Central Office in Philadelphia Schools (August 2001)
- Clients, Consumers, or Collaborators? Parents and their Roles in School Reform During *Children Achieving*, 1995-2000 (August 2001)
- Powerful Ideas, Modest Gains: Five Years of Systemic Reform in Philadelphia Middle Schools (December 2001)
- An Analysis of the Effect of *Children Achieving* on Student Achievement in Philadelphia Elementary Schools (February 2002)
- Civic Engagement and Urban School Improvement: Hard-to-Learn Lessons from Philadelphia (June 2002)