

Meeting America's Diversity Challenge Through Community Service and Regional Cooperation: The Greater Philadelphia High School Partnership

Ted Hershberg and Carrie Kitchen

This essay appeared in the National Civic Review (Volume 86, Number 3, Fall 1997)

Introduction

Two demographic projections loom large over America's future: In 2020, 45 percent of the nation's youth under 18 years of age will be non-white; in 2050, almost half the nation's population will be non-white.

America faces a fundamental choice in how it deals with this growing diversity. When ethnic, racial, and religious animosities are left unchecked, history records horrific acts of terror and carnage represented by the African slave trade and the Holocaust and by events in Bosnia and Rwanda. Either diversity will emerge as America's great strength or our Achilles heel. Either we figure out how to make it work to our advantage as we did through much of our history, when millions of largely white immigrants from different cultures, religions, and national origins were successfully brought into America's mainstream, or it will undermine us as it has so many other nations.

America's growing racial, ethnic, and religious diversity, while potentially "a great thing," President Clinton recently observed, also could turn into a "powder keg of problems, heartbreak, division, and loss. . . How we handle it . . . may be the biggest determinant of what we look like 50 years from now and what our position in the world is." Speaking to middle-schoolers, the President counseled: "Get to know people who are your age but who are different from you -- people of a different racial or ethnic group, people of a different religion -- because you are going to live in the most multi-ethnic, multi-racial, multi-religious democracy in human history."¹ Few thoughtful people would disagree with the President's analysis or his prescription. The problem is that it is easier said than done. Today's diversity challenge is more daunting because to a far greater extent it involves nonwhites and because the nation is far more economically and residentially segregated than at any time in its history.

Earlier waves of immigrants were assimilated with relative ease. From the early 1800s through the 1920s, our doors were open to people from Western, Northern, and Eastern Europe. The immigrants came from different nations, practiced different religions, and embraced different cultures. Over many decades, the children and grandchildren of Irish, German, British, Scandinavian, Jewish, Italian, Polish, and other diverse Eastern European immigrants were absorbed into the mainstream of American life. To a significant degree, the "Melting Pot" worked, and these generations increasingly worked, lived, and played side-by-side with other Americans. But even for white ethnics, there was greater success within religious subgroups: Protestants from England and Germany intermarried, Roman Catholics from Ireland and Italy intermarried, and Jews from Germany and Russia intermarried.

Part of the reason it was easier for white immigrants to enter the nation's mainstream was timing: they entered America when it was enjoying an extraordinary century of industrial prosperity fueled by the growth of large-scale manufacturing. Entry-level jobs that did not require advanced skills and that paid decent wages were plentiful and provided the bootstraps with which white immigrants pulled themselves up the economic ladder and into the cultural mainstream.

Despite the decline of racial discrimination relative to the past, economic and geographic changes now leave many nonwhites at a significant disadvantage. The new information jobs require much higher levels of skill and education, and most new jobs, unskilled as well as skilled, have emerged in the suburbs at considerable remove from nonwhites who are concentrated disproportionately in the cities. Segregation by race, income, and political affiliation is also much greater now than ever before. In 1880 Philadelphia, the typical Irish immigrant lived in a neighborhood of roughly 30 percent Irish immigrants and their American-born children; similar statistics describe the experience of the typical Italian or African-American in 1930.² But in 1970, the typical African-American lived with 74 percent other blacks, and in 1980, the rate exceeded 80 percent. In 1990, the median family income in Philadelphia was roughly two-thirds that of its suburban counterpart. In current political affiliation, the ratio of registered Democrats to Republicans in the city is roughly 2.5 to 1, and the converse is true in the suburbs.

These differences in race, income, and politics are hardly unique to Philadelphia. They describe many of the nation's metropolitan areas, particularly in the northeast and midwest. One way to recognize how much times have changed is revealed in a consideration of why the tax on residential real estate is under legal challenge in more than a dozen states as an inequitable source of school funding. No one attacked real estate taxes when the baby-boomer generation was coming of age because at the time all Americans -- poor, working class, middle-class, upper-middle class, and the rich -- lived in communities that were heterogeneous by income. In short, the real estate tax was equitable when diverse Americans resided in the same communities and supported the same tax base.

But 50 years of suburbanization -- and zoning laws that sort people according to their ability to afford the lots and the houses built on them -- has created communities with striking income and racial homogeneity. These changes have led to an enormous concentration of poverty and its associated problems in cities, inner-ring suburbs, and small towns across America.

This is the legacy we have bequeathed to America's youth. Unless this generation of young people is more successful than their parents have been in dealing with this new diversity and growing segregation, their future will be less prosperous, more divided, and the prospects for civil society will be seriously diminished.

The Greater Philadelphia High School Partnership: Students United in Service

To address this diversity challenge, the University of Pennsylvania's Center for Greater Philadelphia created the Partnership with funding from the Pew Charitable Trusts, the William Penn Foundation, and the Philadelphia Foundation. Our goal is to provide high school students across metropolitan Philadelphia with a mechanism to build personal bridges of trust and friendship over the barriers of race, class, and politics that divide them. The thought is to reach young people while they are in high school, when they are more likely than their parents to be open-minded.

The Partnership does this by combining city-suburban cooperation with community service. Since the Center's mission is to promote regional cooperation among governments and the private sector in metropolitan Philadelphia, it has extensive experience with the substance and process of city-suburban interaction. Given the growing awareness of the value of community service among educators, and the pressing need to address the challenge of diversity, the Center tapped into the desire of area schools to provide their students with service experience in the context of a university-based program of regional cooperation.

Valuable lessons were learned during a 1995-96, pilot-year program that involved 100 students from 30 city and suburban high schools in 12 community-service projects. We discovered the importance of requiring each school to appoint a faculty advisor for their students, meeting with these advisors at the start of the school year to explain the program's overall goals and design, bringing the students together early, and offering a variety of options to meet the Partnership's community-service requirement. These lessons helped us restructure the program.

In the Partnership's second year, 1996-97, 500 students from 63 high schools -- divided evenly among city and suburban schools, with a good mix of public, private, and parochial institutions -- participated, and the city-suburban teams into which they were grouped completed 19 community-service projects. Last year's program consisted of three phases over the course of the school year.

Phase One: Recruitment and Orientation

From June through October, focus was on recruitment, student networking, and the selection of community-service projects. To participate, each school appointed at least one faculty advisor for their students. In September, 70 advisors attended a reception and dinner at which the Center described the Partnership and reviewed advisor responsibilities.

Roughly 100 advisors and 500 students made initial contact with their suburban and city counterparts at two Networking Sessions held the following month. These sessions provided background information about the Greater Philadelphia region and paired participants in twenty Impact Teams, each consisting of faculty advisors and students from four or five city and suburban schools. After getting acquainted, team members

discussed issues facing the region, explored service projects they might carry out together, and considered recruiting additional students to join their project teams.

Phase Two: Community Service

From November through April, Impact Teams designed and carried out their community-service projects along either of two tracks. Some teams invented their own projects from scratch, while others contributed their volunteer efforts at community-service programs throughout the region. The Center assisted students in developing their own projects. It also identified many volunteer opportunities and helped teams link-up with community-service organizations. Each team was invited to draft a budget and apply for a grant from the Center for up to \$300 to help cover project costs, such as transportation and materials. The Center also encouraged and advised teams how to engage in fundraising activities.

Two AmeriCorps* VISTA Volunteers from the Corporation for National Service worked full-time with the Center on the 1996-97 Partnership program.³ The concept here is one of leverage -- using the efforts of several full-time volunteers to catalyze the efforts of many hundreds of part-time volunteers. The VISTA Volunteers were the primary contacts for Impact Team members, advisors, community-service agencies, and others interested in the program. In addition to attending team meetings and project activities, the VISTA Volunteers helped teams troubleshoot problems and move their projects forward while looking for opportunities to develop bridge-building initiatives between city and suburban students, including in-school exchanges, after-school visits, and other special events and activities.

In January 1997, Impact Teams were invited to participate in the "Martin Luther King Day of Service," an effort to encourage students and the public-at-large to undertake community-service activities honoring Dr. King's life and teachings. The Center partnered in this "Day of Service" with the Corporation for National Service, and many other Philadelphia organizations. Partnership students were urged to participate not only to recognize Dr. King's memory, but to increase interaction among team members and to strengthen their commitment to the Partnership and to community service in general.

Phase Three: Annual Convocation

In the Partnership's third phase, Impact Teams showcased the results of their community-service projects and celebrated their efforts at the second annual Convocation, held at the University of Pennsylvania on April 15, 1997.

Teams spent the month of April drafting their project descriptions and preparing displays for the 750 students and their faculty advisors from over 90 high schools across the region who gathered for the Convocation. Using a "science fair" format, they showcased the city-suburban, community-service projects on which they had worked during the year.

Written project descriptions were compiled and distributed at the Convocation, giving each Impact Team an opportunity to explain their experiences and project results. As expected, their projects were of all types. Wanting to address the effects of hunger and

poverty, one team organized food and personal hygiene products drives on behalf of homeless shelters in the city and the suburbs. Another created an AIDS quilt and used it to lobby legislators for increased AIDS education funding in Pennsylvania schools. Some students, interested in video and drama, produced educational videotapes and skits about conflict resolution and drug abuse for junior high and elementary school students. Other teams, through grit or creativity, cleaned parks or painted murals in the city and the suburbs. Two-thirds of the 750 students and advisors who attended the Convocation were participants in this year's program. Another third, accompanied by faculty, were freshmen, sophomores, and juniors from area schools who came because of their interest in participating in next year's Partnership.

Philadelphia Mayor Ed Rendell emceed the Convocation awards ceremony; and Richard Jackman, noted motivational speaker, and All-Pro Philadelphia Eagle Irving Fryar entertained and challenged participants to commit themselves to community-service activities over the course of their lives. The Convocation agenda also included entertainment and educational activities to help students learn more about the Greater Philadelphia region, city-suburban cooperation, and community service.

Improving the Partnership

Although students, faculty advisors, and the Center's staff were quite pleased with this year's program, a review of the evaluation forms and brainstorming at several debriefing sessions have identified several ways to improve the 1997-98 Partnership.

Service Learning and School-to-Work

Many schools now engaged in educational reform are looking for ways to help students better apply the academic curriculum to employment and other post-K-12 endeavors. Some are encouraging or requiring service learning in which students undertake community-service projects along with a course of study that ties their experiences back into classroom learning. Others are attempting to connect high school to the world of work through school-to-work programs in which students gain first-hand experience with careers in which they are interested.

In the same way that standards are being developed in academic disciplines such as math and science, they are also being developed in a field called "applied learning." This area covers the key competencies required in the world of work. In reviewing this literature, we learned that among the essential skills identified there were three that every participant in the Partnership program practices: teamwork, project design, and leadership.⁴ Next year, we will add a series of workshops to make these skills explicit at the start of the program. All faculty advisors will participate in two workshops, followed by similar sessions with each student team before its community-service work begins.

We are also exploring the possibility of developing projects that would bring together city and suburban high school students who share similar career interests. We hope to develop joint projects in such areas as health care or the hospitality industry that would combine community service with the opportunity to learn more about prospective careers and the skills they require.

Building a Stronger Bridge

The differences of race, ethnicity, class, and politics that characterize our highly segregated metropolitan areas and divide today's young people are formidable. Helping students to build personal bridges of trust and friendship over these barriers is a time-intensive exercise, and the Partnership is now engaged in finding ways to increase the number of hours that city and suburban students work with each other. One way to accomplish this -- asking students to devote even more after school hours to their team projects -- has borne little fruit. Although intentions are admirable, the other commitments that students have prevent the large majority from devoting more time to the Partnership.

As a result, the Partnership is now experimenting with a range of options to piggyback on existing classroom hours and graduation requirements. We are working with faculty at city and suburban high schools to develop joint classroom activities in four subject areas -- history, geography, economics, and environment -- that lend themselves easily to study on a regional basis. We expect these efforts will include exchange visits to each other's schools, shared classes and shared field trips to important area sites, and joint research papers.

The state of Pennsylvania has also mandated high schools to introduce a "senior project" -- often community service -- as a graduation requirement. We believe that many students would find the Partnership an attractive way to meet this requirement, and we are presently exploring this opportunity with the faculty advisors.

Replicating the Partnership

Harris Wofford, CEO of the Corporation for National Service (CNS), was instrumental in helping us launch the Partnership and supported our application for AmeriCorps*VISTA volunteers. He immediately appreciated the program's unique marriage of community service with city-suburban cooperation and its potential to serve as a model for other regions of the nation. Just prior to this year's Convocation, Senator Wofford urged us "to bring the project to scale . . . to take it national." In keeping with the process of the Presidents' Summit on America's Future, held in April in Philadelphia, Wofford made a commitment to help us do so. We are now working with him, national foundations, and corporate sponsors to take the Partnership national, and we are seeking organizations in different regions that have the capacity to play the same role in their metropolitan area as the Center for Greater Philadelphia plays in metropolitan Philadelphia. Our efforts are bolstered by a Brandeis University study done for the CNS that found that students who do community work "have better grades, feel better about school, and are more likely to attend four-year colleges."⁵In sum, the Greater Philadelphia High School Partnership weaves together five themes -- diversity, city-suburban cooperation, community service, service learning, and school-to-work -- in a unique and successful program, and our experience suggests that our approach is applicable to other regions across the nation.

Endnotes

1. "Clinton sees a challenge in diversity," Philadelphia Inquirer (April 12, 1997), section A, p. 1.2. Theodore Hershberg, Alan Burstein, Eugene Ericksen, Stephanie Greenberg, William Yancey, "A Tale of Three Cities: Blacks, Immigrants, and Opportunity in Philadelphia, 1850-1880, 1930, 1970," in Hershberg, editor, Philadelphia: Work, Space, Family, and Group Experience in the 19th Century (Oxford University Press, 1981).
3. The volunteers were Michelle Korejko, a graduate of Rutgers University, and Erika Putinsky, a graduate of the College of Wooster.
4. Applied Learning Standard (The New Standards Project,).
5. "Educators Urge Volunteerism In School," St. Louis Post Dispatch (April 15, 1997).

For copies of this piece, please contact cgpinfor@pobox.upenn.edu