



## HOW PHILLY WORKS

### *The Growing Divide Over the Future of Public Education in Philly*

We were puzzled by some prominent ads that popped up a few places yesterday.

According to the [ads](#), sponsored by FundPhillySchools.com, wealthy donors gathered in town this week “behind closed doors” to “sell a school privatization scheme that doesn’t work.”

The ads didn’t reveal who these donors are or who FundPhillySchools represents. Because the Committee of Seventy favors transparency, we decided to do some homework.

This **HOW PHILLY WORKS** shares what we learned. And explains the deep ideological divide over the future of the Philadelphia public schools.

--October 3, 2013

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#### **Are the ads just another missile in the public schools’ funding crisis?**

Actually the concerns reach beyond the current funding crisis. While the crisis that jeopardized the opening of public schools this fall and resulted in an unprecedented number of school closings is FPS’s immediate concern, the tagline on its website forecasts a longer-term mission: “Reclaim the promise for public education in Philadelphia.”

#### **What is FPS?**

According to its website -- [www.fundphillyschools.org](http://www.fundphillyschools.org) -- FPS is made up of a group of organizations that includes some you have probably heard of (such as the Philadelphia Federation of Teachers, American Federation of Teachers, Philadelphia AFL-CIO and the Philadelphia Home and School Council) and others you may not know (such as Youth United for Change, UNITE HERE Philadelphia and the Media Mobilizing Project).

#### **Is FPS a non-profit advocacy group?**

We’re not sure how to best describe it. We called the PA’s Bureau of Corporations and Charitable Organizations to ask. FPS is not registered as a charity or non-profit. The website has no organizational history or staff information.

#### **Who are the wealthy donors FPS is targeting?**

The details are provided in a September 29 *City Paper* story, whose headline prominently appears in FPS’s ad. They are individuals who make at least \$50,000 in education-related charitable donations who were expected to attend a two-day conference in Philadelphia earlier this week entitled “All of the Above: How Donors Can Expand a City’s Great Schools.” Above the title are pictures of a charter, district and Catholic school. You can see the conference agenda [here](#).



### **Do we know who these individuals are?**

We don't know who actually showed up at the conference. We weren't there, and it was closed to the media. *City Paper* speculates some attendees might be members of the Board of the Philadelphia School Partnership (PSP), which through its Great Schools Fund "invests in the incubation, startup, growth and transformation of high-performing K-12 schools of any type -- district, charter, and private -- with the capacity to deliver outstanding educational outcomes for children in the city." PSP is one of the lead presenters at the conference. You can visit its website by going to: [www.philaschoolpartnership.org](http://www.philaschoolpartnership.org).

### **If the conference is about "Expanding a City's Great Schools," why is FPS so concerned?**

The organizations behind FPS believe the not-too-hidden purpose of the conference, and also PSP, is to convert as many traditional public schools as possible into charter schools and other private schools controlled by people who have given up on the city's public schools.

### **You told me which groups are behind FPS. Who supports PSP?**

PSP has many private funders, many of which are very well-known, such as the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, Cigna, JP Morgan Chase and Lincoln Financial Foundation. One of PSP's initial supporters, and also a conference presenter, is Jeremy Nowak, the former President of The William Penn Foundation. Nowak has said he supports expanding the number of great schools, no matter what type they are – an issue that might have had something to do with his break from the foundation after only 17 months as its president.

### **Let me see if I understand: FPS says expanding "great schools" is code for getting rid of traditional public schools?**

Right, that's the ideological divide we are talking about. The groups behind FPS are especially troubled by the billions of dollars they say wealthy donors have directed to one type of school: charters. Yesterday's ads showed four newspaper headlines pointing out fiscal, ethical and academic issues plaguing state and city charter schools. For the most part, charter school teachers do not belong to teachers' unions – a sore point, for sure, with some FPS members.

### **Does FPS target anyone besides wealthy donors?**

Enemy #1 is Governor Tom Corbett. On its website, FPS holds Corbett primarily responsible for killing public education (with the Philly schools the state's hardest-hit) by favoring tax credits for corporations and low taxes for natural gas producers (a.k.a. frackers) in an effort to boost his bid for reelection in 2014.

### **The state controls the city schools, right?**

Yes, through a five-member School Reform Commission, three of whose five members are appointed by PA's Governor (the other two are appointed by Philadelphia's mayor), FPS says the SRC and School District Superintendent William Hite are in cahoots with Governor Corbett to "starve our schools and hurt our kids." Its website cites millions of dollars given by the SRC and Hite's predecessors for "outside, for-profit vendors" to operate non-traditional public schools.



### Are Mayor Nutter and City Council spared FPS's wrath?

Council, yes. But not the mayor. You may remember FPS's TV and radio ads in August featuring a public school mother taking the mayor to task for not prying enough funds from Governor Corbett and the state treasury. FPS also says Nutter should raise revenues for public schools by forcing the wealthiest tax-exempt city non-profits to pay for the public services they receive.

### What's next?

In the short-term, we expect a lot more of the same vitriol as long as the PFT's 15,000 members' contract remains unresolved, several thousand School District employees remain without a job, promises of \$50 million in city funds by Mayor Nutter and City Council remain unkept, Governor Corbett remains unwilling to release \$45 million in state funds without significant assurances of operational, educational and fiscal reforms, the General Assembly remains unwilling to approve a \$2-a-pack cigarette tax for the schools, the public schools remain under state control, and the list goes on.

### And in the long-term?

The bitter ideological divide over what type of education is best for Philadelphia's kids will continue to grow long after the current funding crisis is resolved.

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