

HOW PHILLY WORKS

The Role of City Council in Public Education

City Council is holding a public hearing tomorrow on education funding – a hot topic with the schools still mired in crisis.

But what can Council do about the schools besides holding a hearing? Sell off school buildings? Raise funds from the city's sales tax? Make curriculum changes?

*This edition of **HOW PHILLY WORKS** discusses the role of City Council in public education.*

--November 19, 2013

How much of a role can Council play? I thought you recently told me that the School Reform Commission is in charge of the schools.

Thanks for noticing. In an October edition of [HOW PHILLY WORKS](#), we asked “Who’s in charge of the Philly Schools?” Answer: the School Reform Commission (SRC), a politically appointed board responsible for the “operation, management and educational program” of our public schools.

What about the Superintendent?

The superintendent, Dr. Bill Hite, reports to the SRC and is under their policy direction but makes most of the decisions about how the district is run. He is tasked with carrying out the administration and supervision of the district. This includes implementing new reforms in curricula and programs, directing and assigning teachers, principals, and other employees, and submitting the annual budget.

Where does that leave City Council? Do they have a say in how our schools are run?

Let’s actually start with what they can’t do. Council cannot legislate policy in terms of what is taught, how schools are operated, or labor relations for teachers. In other words, they can’t make laws that direct the school system.

So if they can’t create laws to govern the schools, what can they do?

City Council’s fundamental role in public education is as keeper of the purse. Each year Council must approve the city’s budget, which is presented by the mayor and includes revenue for the district. As we noted in our [HOW PHILLY WORKS](#) on school closings, City Council also makes important decisions about tax dollars that flow to the schools and whether to give schools additional revenue. (By law they cannot reduce the amount.)



You said something earlier about selling school buildings and the sales tax?

[Mayor Nutter agreed](#) at the end of October to a deal in which the District would sell off [school buildings](#) to cover its request for \$50 million from the city. Council and the mayor had been at odds for several months over whether the \$50 million from the city would come from the sale of vacant school properties or from an extension of the city's sales tax.

I've heard about the funding crisis plenty but still get lost in the numbers...

Going back to the [HOW PHILLY WORKS](#) from this past summer that broke down the funding crisis will help with that. Council has had a more prominent role in the district's finances because of the crisis; however, prior to this year, Council voted three years in a row to raise taxes to provide more money for schools.

Can Council tell the District how to spend the money?

No. Council's role is to pass the city's budget which includes funds for the schools (a third of the district's budget comes from local taxes), but they can't dictate how money is spent. The SRC is responsible for overseeing the school system's budget. Council members have expressed their frustration that the district does not fully disclose how the money is spent.

Ok, so besides money, are there other ways that Council can influence our school system?

Yes. Just because Council cannot create policy does not mean that they don't try to shape it. One way they can try to influence the policy decisions of the SRC and the superintendent is by holding a public hearing. Such hearings on matters relating to the city schools (like the one tomorrow) are usually held before Council's eight-member Education Committee, chaired by Jannie Blackwell.

What happens at a hearing?

Council members hear testimony and can ask questions of individuals, often public officials or experts, who were asked to speak on the topic. Members of the public can also request to speak or may be invited to speak to give their perspective. Hearings are a way for Council to draw attention to an issue, bring stakeholders together, gather information, and increase transparency by including the public in policy discussions. After tomorrow, Council will have had six hearings on education. This is more than it's had in recent years – the Committee had two hearings in 2008, one in 2009, zero in 2010, three in 2011 and four in 2012.

Besides hearings, is there anything else Council can do to influence the schools?

They can pass a non-binding resolution. As noted in our [HOW COUNCIL WORKS](#), a resolution is a type of legislation that deals with Council-related matters but does not create or amend city law. Though they can recommend a certain action, they are often used for ceremonial purposes, draw attention to an issue or as a way for Council to voice its opinion.



What hearings or resolutions have there been recently given the ongoing financial crisis?

In recent months, the Education Committee has held hearings on integrating STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics) into early childhood education, the transition plan following recent school closings, and returning governance of the District to a local school board. Non-binding resolutions cover a wider range of topics, from policy issues of broad interest like those of the hearings, to more narrow ones, like a recent resolution requesting that Howard Zinn's *A People's History of the United States* be included in the high school curriculum.

How impactful can hearings or resolutions be?

Depends on the topic. In January 2013, Council adopted a resolution calling for a one-year moratorium on school closings to allow input from Council and citizens. It subsequently held multiple hearings where Superintendent Hite was questioned on the district's plan to close schools and SRC members were present. In part because of this scrutiny, the district ultimately revised its plan and decided to close fewer schools.

With the financial crisis continuing, what's next for City Council and the schools?

Remember that the Education Committee is holding a hearing tomorrow at 10:00 a.m. in Room 400 at City Hall to hear testimony on Pennsylvania's approach to education funding. If you're a Philadelphia resident or taxpayer and would like to comment, see [Council's website](#) for instructions. With the debate over the state's funding formula intensifying, stay tuned as Seventy keeps up its coverage of the Philadelphia public schools.

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