

Philadelphia Accelerated Schools 2004-2007

Since the publication of *Unfulfilled Promise: The Dimensions and Characteristics of Philadelphia's Dropout Crisis 2000-2005*, and the launch of the **Project U-Turn Collaborative** in October 2006, increasing attention has been paid to understanding and promoting the various strategies that work at re-engaging and educating Philadelphia's out-of-school youth and struggling student populations. Emerging from this work is the awareness that multiple approaches are needed to educate an increasingly diverse population of learners with unique interests, skills and abilities. One of the principal efforts underway to this end is the School District of Philadelphia's Accelerated High Schools strategy. The Accelerated High School is an alternative educational option for students, ages 17-21, who are former dropouts, at significant risk of dropping out, or otherwise in need of smaller, more personalized learning environments.

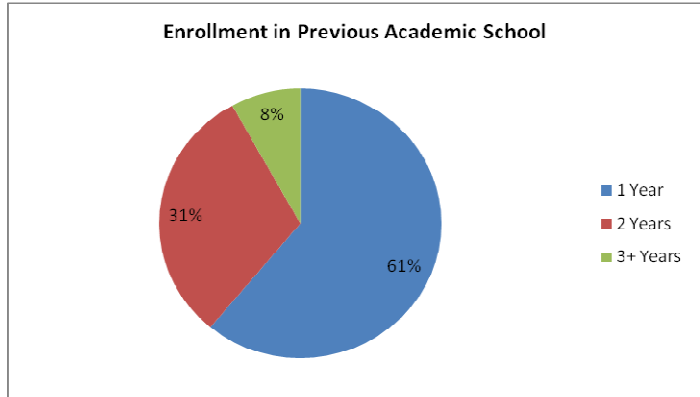
In October 2006, the Philadelphia Youth Network and School District of Philadelphia, under the auspices of the Project U-Turn Collaborative, commissioned an evaluation of the District's Accelerated High School model. CARTA, the Center for Applied Research and Technical Assistance was engaged to conduct this study. The primary objectives of the project were to assess the quality and effectiveness of the accelerated high school model, identify implementation experiences among providers, and identify aggregate needs that would help to inform subsequent investment and program improvement efforts. The information below is an overview of the findings.

The School District of Philadelphia currently contracts with four independent providers to operate full-time, year-round, educational programs for students needing a non-traditional, non-disciplinary, high quality, high support program. These programs or schools fit into two instructional types:

1. *Computer-based, self-directed programs that engage students in independent, individualized learning with support from teachers who track student progress and provide supplemental instruction and guidance.*
2. *Direct instruction programs that emphasize cooperative learning, project-based learning, and computer-based assignments as alternative pedagogies.*

Students

Students who enroll in the Accelerated High Schools are often those at risk of disengaging or dropping out. The average age of students at the time of enrollment is 17. Sixty-one percent of the students enrolling in an Accelerated High School have only been enrolled for just one year in their previous school. Despite a particularly short tenure at their previous high schools, 93% of students attending an accelerated high school were considered overage and under credit. They were at least two or more years behind in grade level and credit accumulation. At the time of their enrollment, more than 90% of the students were significantly off-track to graduation. The table below details the credit profiles of entering Accelerated High School students.



<i>Distribution of Overage and Under Credited Status</i>		
<i>Among Accelerated Students at Time of Enrollment</i>		%
17-21 years old and < 8 credits		93.1
17-21 years old and > 8 credits		4.8
Younger than 17 years old and < 8 credits		2.1
Total N		1,247

Surveys conducted by the Center for Applied Research and Technical Assistance (CARTA) found that the reasons for students leaving their previous high school were varied. The following table reflects the span of identified issues.

Reasons for Leaving Previous High School*	%	“Other reasons” included an unspecified dislike of school and the feeling that school provided insufficient programming relative to student needs involving work and family. The reasons that students
I was pregnant/my partner was pregnant	3.6	
I moved out of the city/state	5.4	
I didn't feel safe	6.4	
I was asked to leave because of academic difficulties	7.4	
I was asked to leave because of attendance problems	12.8	
I was asked to leave because of disciplinary problems	14.1	
I stopped going/dropped out of school	19.2	
I wanted to transfer	30.8	
Other reasons	70.9	
<i>*Students can choose more than one response. Distributions do not total 100%</i>		

provided for enrolling in the accelerated high schools are outlined below.

Reasons for Enrolling in an Accelerated School*	%
I could get credits faster than in a traditional high school	56.2
My parent/guardian wanted me to attend	40.7
I believe teachers and staff would support me	39.2
The school is smaller than other high schools	36.2
I liked the attitude of teachers and staff	35.3
I felt like I belonged here	27.4
I felt like I would be safe here	23.7
Most of the students are my age	22.2
Recommended by a student	22.2

The school is in my neighborhood	19.5
Most of my friends go to school here	7.0

**Students can choose more than one response. Distributions do not total 100%*

Between 2004 and 2007, enrollment at

the Accelerated High Schools dramatically increased. As new schools opened, enrollment grew from 584 students to 1,729 students. Of those that enrolled, over half (56%) enrolled for one academic year, 35.5% for two, and 7.8% for three academic years. Here, it is important to note that a majority of students were more than one year away from graduation based on their credit profiles at the point of entry. Data reveal that in 2005, 65% percent of the students attending an accelerated high school either dropped out or were transferred. Among those on roll in 2006, 28% neither graduated nor were enrolled during the following academic year, i.e. AY 2007. Subsequently, student retention emerges as an issue for further investigation.

Reasons for Leaving Previous High School*

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I moved out of the city/state	
I didn't feel safe	
I was asked to leave because of academic difficulties	
I was asked to leave because of attendance problems	
I was asked to leave because of disciplinary problems	
I stopped going/dropped out of school	
I wanted to transfer	
Other reasons	

**Students can choose more than one response. Distributions do not total 100%*

Prior to enrollment, the majority of students presented some form of academic challenge:

- According to their 8th grade

PSSA scores, the majority of students enrolling in the accelerated high school scored below basic on this standardized assessment with only 3.3% in 2004, 7.7% in 2005, and 9.2% in 2006 scoring at the proficient level.

- On average, students had only passed 35.9% of their classes and attained an average grade of 60.72 for all classes taken.

Many Accelerated High School students experienced behavior and attendance issues prior to enrolling in the accelerated school. The average number of days suspended was 10. Average attendance neared

70%, meaning that students generally missed about 2 days of school per week. Because of these reasons, many students identified as being “asked to leave” their previous high school.

To effectively engage their target population of student, the Accelerated Schools have employed a number of approaches and strategies including:

- Small class sizes which increase the likelihood of a personal and family atmosphere;
- Innovative courses (creative writing and Open Mic), communications and Internet Radio;
- A strong and positive school community where teachers and staff make an effort to greet students to make them feel welcomed and important, and see them off at the end of the day;
- Attention to safety with protocols for safety and protection of students and staff;
- Giving priority to rules, regulations and accountability -- *n.b.* while schools applied these rules with varying degrees of consistency, all spoke about the importance of providing structure and accountability to staff and students;
- Extra curricular activities, like school dances and opportunity to play sports; student government and a school store;
- Wrap-around services, including case managers, to identify and address emotional and personal needs of students. (One school provided health and psychosocial support services onsite, including the provision of onsite day-care;) and
- Community partnerships to provide networks and professional and personal opportunities, from taking an art class in an artist’s studio, to the opportunity for community projects including the creation of a mural to beautify the main entrance of one of the schools.

The Impact of the Accelerated School

Despite the various challenges surrounding these schools, collectively they have demonstrated notable progress in primary performance areas. There have been gains in nearly every attendance and academic outcome measure.

Student Achievement

Accelerated Student Achievement			
Population	Prior to Accelerated Enrollment	After Accelerated Enrollment	Comparison Group (during accelerated period)

Proportion of classes passed	35.90%	60.70%	44.50%
Grade Average	60.72	71.87	63.45
Average attendance	70%	88%	65.03%
Average # of days suspended	9.63	0.0017	2.58

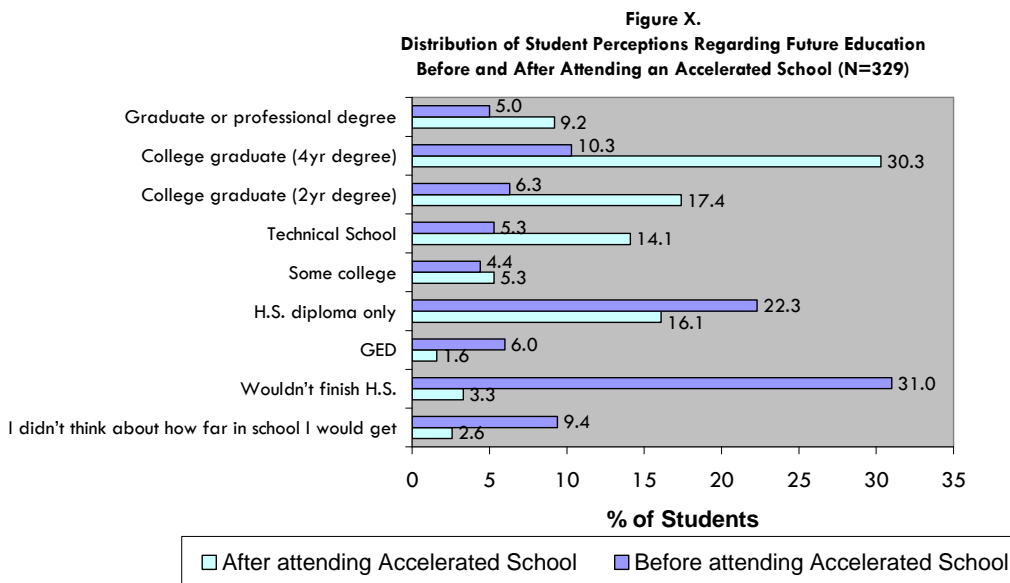
Since enrollment, accelerated school students progressed in the following areas:

- Attendance improved by 28%.
- Suspensions significantly declined and were virtually nonexistent.
- Students passed a significantly greater proportion of classes taken.
- Accelerated students posted an 11 point increase in average grade.

Personal Growth

Many students reported having low expectations for their academic futures prior to enrolling in the Accelerated High School. Figure X below illustrates the growth in aspirations experienced by these students.

"It made me believe in myself/career. It made me get ready for the real world. It made me realize how serious my education is."



In focus groups, students reflected on the ways in which attending the accelerated school impacted their lives. Student responses were similar across all accelerated schools. All had mentioned the following benefits:

- Improved academic performance
- Better school attendance
- Greater appreciation for school and learning.

"[My School] has showed me that I can actually achieve my goals. Here, I am able to obtain high grades and a positive attitude. Getting along with my teachers and peers allows me to stay out of trouble and focus on my work."

Several students also noted more personal changes, including:

- Becoming a better person
- Learning to be more responsible
- Gaining greater self-confidence and improved self-esteem.

Generally, students noted that after attending the accelerated schools, they had more hope and confidence in a successful and bright future for themselves and their families including improved prospects for college and meaningful employment.

Challenges

While the Accelerated schools strategy demonstrated promise, there are particular implementation challenges, needs, and issues that deserve consideration. They include:

- Support for literacy skill development among especially low-level readers
- Transition programs that support students' entry into post-secondary options
- Student retention strategies
- The identification and securing of physical space for the school program
- Data management including access to and the consistent use of the School District of Philadelphia's School Computer Network
- The need for thoughtful referrals during the student assignment and matching process
- Collaboration and coordination the various accelerated programs

Next Steps

An understanding of the accelerated school strategy indicates overage and under-credited students can make positive gains toward credit recovery and secure a high school diploma. Being successful with these students, however, takes time and requires a series of coordinated approaches from committed

individuals, including educators, community service providers, families and youth, community leaders and policy makers. Findings suggest three policy and programmatic issues that should be addressed to build on and enhance the accelerated schools strategy.

1. **There is a need in recruitment, professional development and support** for administrators and staff willing to choose employment with an accelerated school versus another educational environment.
2. **Students need a myriad of supports to engage consistently in the opportunities provided by accelerated schools for mental health services, transportation, and flexibility in scheduling.** Schools must make such supports available on site or collaborate with community-based organizations to offer the additional support services that students need to be successful.
3. **Schools need to refer students to the approach that is conducive to the student's individual learning style and life circumstances.** Educators and policy makers must be willing to identify for what proportion of students this approach is truly viable, and what needs to be done to best position youth to achieve their diploma. The models may need modification to promote the desired achievement.