

# The Philadel

*How leadership's efforts  
to implement sweeping  
educational reforms have  
turned around reading  
achievement in this major  
urban school district*



# Philadelphia Story

By Leslie J. Thompson



From the outside, Eliza B. Kirkbride Elementary looks like a typical inner-city school. Situated a few blocks from the river on the south side of Philadelphia, the gray stone building blends inconspicuously with surrounding row-houses and corner shops. Historically, the neighborhood has been predominantly Italian, but in recent years, a new wave of immigrants has settled in the area. Most of the students at Kirkbride are minorities, including African American, Mexican, Cambodian, Chinese and Vietnamese. Many are first-generation U.S. citizens.

But what sets Kirkbride apart from other inner city schools is not its multicultural student body; it is what's happening in the classrooms. Kirkbride is one of 264 campuses in the School District of Philadelphia implementing a new curriculum, new professional development program and new testing measures to assess student performance. The changes come as part of a sweeping overhaul of the city's school system, launched in 2002 by the recently-appointed Philadelphia School Reform Commission and district Chief Executive Officer Paul G. Vallas.

"At the most basic level, ensuring equal opportunities for our students and closing the achievement gap must begin with fundamental academic reforms," says Vallas, who earned a reputation as a maverick during his tenure as CEO of Chicago Public Schools prior to taking over the ailing Philadelphia school system two years ago.

Of course, it's no easy feat to turn around achievement scores for the 200,000 students now in his charge, and Paul Vallas' tough-love tactics have won him as many critics as allies. But his track record in the nation's third largest school system is a testament to his tenacity. His overarching reading

initiatives resulted in significant gains in student reading performance in Chicago. Vallas believes his plan can have a similar impact in Philadelphia.

"Since last year, the district has embarked on an unprecedented curriculum, instruction and professional development plan calling for the creation of a pre-kindergarten through 12th grade core curriculum in literacy, math, science, social studies and the arts," Vallas states, proudly. The curriculum is aligned to Pennsylvania state standards and is intended to move all students to proficiency on high-stakes assessments.

Other changes already underway include reducing class sizes in grades K-3, expanding after-school and summer school programs, providing year-round professional development in areas ranging from classroom management to the use of data, and hiring 65 new teacher coaches. In addition, Vallas wants to spend up to \$2.5 billion to renovate and upgrade many old school buildings and build nine new high schools.

## Emphasis on Literacy

The recent reforms affect classrooms from kindergarten through high school, but a primary focus is on reading instruction for early learners. A key component of the new plan calls for an increase in the time spent on reading each day to 120 minutes for kindergarten through 8th grade, up from 90 minutes previously.

"Reading success leads directly to success in other subjects, such as social studies, math and science," says Vallas. "We must ensure that kindergarten and first-grade students are proficient in all required skills and strategies at their grade level if they are to experience success throughout their school careers. Simply put, countless new doors are opened when children become good readers early in life."

Prior to Vallas' arrival, the district used a balanced literacy model without a specific sequence for reading instruction. Teachers could choose what skills they felt were important to teach and what materials to use in the classroom. Administrators admit the approach had significant shortcomings.

"It was a framework, but there was no program in place, and we weren't getting the kind of results we wanted," says Donna Piekarski, Administrator for the Office of Early Childhood Education, which oversees Reading First and other early childhood programs for the district.

When the *No Child Left Behind* legislation was passed, Central Office and regional staff pooled resources to determine where the existing literacy curriculum was falling short and what changes needed to be made to meet new federal mandates. The problems they uncovered plague many inner city school districts: high student mobility rates and high teacher turnover.

"As students moved from one school to the next, they could encounter a totally different [reading] program, depending on what the school or region did," explains Piekarski. "And to do balanced

literacy, you have to know how to teach reading. We had high teacher turnover in some of our lowest-performing schools, so every year, you were starting over again with a whole new group of teachers. You couldn't build teacher capacity in terms of knowledge that way."

With a new CEO in place, the district revamped its reading curriculum to deliver the five essential components required by Reading First and to make it easy for teachers to implement in the classroom.

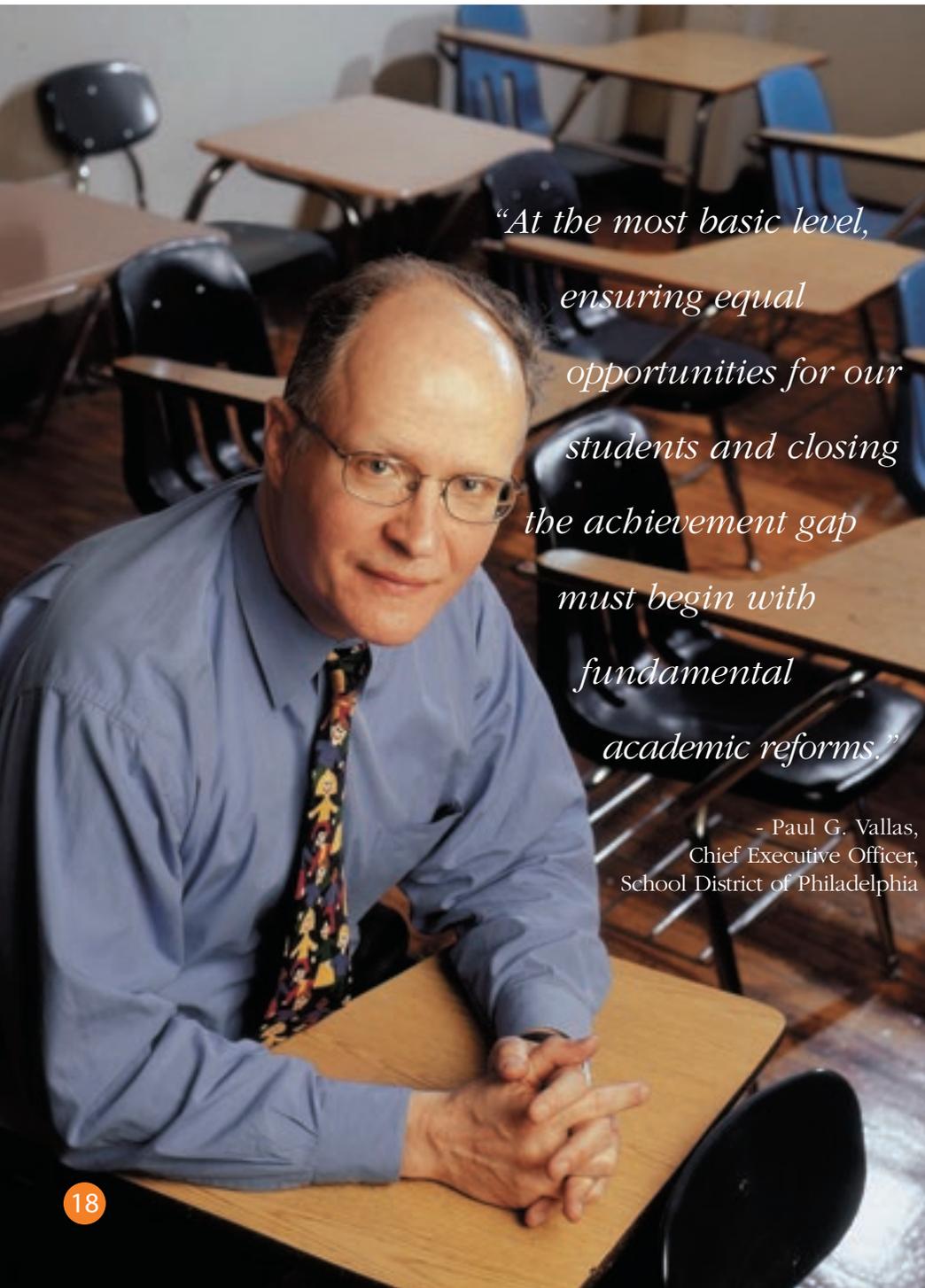
"Luckily for us, [our focus] melded with his vision of things, which was to have a consistent program systemwide. We were ready with the bulk of what he wanted to do, because we had done some legwork," says Piekarski.

As part of the new initiatives, last year the district implemented a comprehensive reading and language arts curriculum model, which put in place two core reading programs: Harcourt Trophies and Voyager Universal Literacy. In schools using Harcourt Trophies, the core basal was supplemented by Voyager's Passport Reading Intervention System in first and second grade to provide additional, targeted instruction to struggling readers. In addition, the district implemented intervention plans with Voyager Extended Day (grades 3-8) and Summer School (grades 1-8) programs systemwide.

"With this curriculum and its alignment to rigorous standards for performance, students will learn the skills and habits of reading," says Vallas. "The older they get, the less time they will spend learning to read, and the more time they will spend actually reading to learn."

### Reforms in Action

Norma Parfitt, a kindergarten reading teacher at Kirkbride Elementary, has 26 children in her class. Last year, she began teaching Voyager's Universal Literacy System, which incorporates both whole-group and small-group instruction. The large number of students might be daunting to other teachers, but with more than three decades of classroom experience, Parfitt handles the assemblage with grace. A recent visitor to the school was astonished at how smoothly



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children transitioned from a whole-group exercise to four separate reading stations under their teacher's watchful eye.

Parfitt's know-how and love of teaching are a boon to the young learners. She continually expands her repertoire of techniques and activities in the classroom to keep her lessons fresh and her students engaged.

"I've been teaching for 33 years, and I'm able to embellish what's in Voyager and enrich it, where a new teacher can just rely on the script," she says of the school's new core reading program. Parfitt frequently adds word games and other materials downloaded off the PBS

The children learned how to read."

Parfitt agrees, noting, "I do see a huge impact with Voyager, because it is so phonemically based and very structured."

The structured lesson plans in the Teacher's Guides make Voyager programs easy to implement, and helped foster a smooth transition to the new curriculum for Philadelphia teachers. Although initial reactions to the academic reforms were mixed, teachers have begun to see positive results in student achievement, as evidenced by improvement in the reading scores on the Terra Nova over the previous year.

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television network Website to her daily instruction, as well as literature-based reading, journal writing, and computer-based practice. "A lot of new teachers, when they first come in, don't have the knowledge to be creative. But if you want to, and you have the experience, you can certainly expand on [the lessons]."

Linda Maccariella, an ESOL teacher and Campus Coach, has seen a half dozen reading programs come and go at Kirkbride and admits that teachers were skeptical of the new curriculum. "When we first got Voyager, we all grumbled a bit," she says. "But you know what?

### **Accountability at all Levels**

Frequent assessments are a major underpinning of the district's academic reforms, and educators now rely heavily on DIBELS™ scores to determine how well the new initiative is working. Previously, the district didn't have a common reading assessment measure. Consequently, at-risk readers rarely received the additional instruction they needed, and teachers could not be certain of a student's specific skill level if the child transferred into their classroom from another school.

"The district has put a major emphasis on looking at data," says Donna

Piekarski in the Office of Early Childhood Education. "We're giving benchmark assessments every six weeks to see if the curriculum is being implemented and what the kids are mastering." The Voyager programs are fundamentally data-driven, she adds, and help ensure that teachers can make informed decisions about differentiating instruction.

Notes Linda McGregor, District Program Manager for K-3 Literacy Grants, "I think the whole framework of scientifically based reading research has put a new focus on what we do. It's so much easier when you know exactly where a child's needs are. We knew before, but this is so much more specific."

Having access to assessment results fosters greater accountability, from the teachers and principals to the regional directors and top-level administrators, notes Concetta Suravicz, Academic Coach for the Central East Region. Every resolution presented to the School Reform Commission now must include a measurable objective in the evaluation section, and every program—even professional development—is tied to a student outcome.

"What we expect to occur in a classroom is what we expect at a regional level, and at the Central Office level," Suravicz says. "We expect each teacher to look at data on each of their students and come up with a plan for differentiated instruction. On a regional level, we look at school data. I've been in the system for 30 years, and I've seen that occur more now than ever before. It's not enough to talk about accountability. Now we have a system in place."

### **Added Support for Teachers**

Augmenting the new reading curriculum and proficiency standards, the district's reform plan provides ongoing training and support for educators, to ensure they have the knowledge and skills to help students succeed.

"Teachers matter," says School District CEO Paul Vallas, succinctly. "Research clearly indicates that students learn at proficient and advanced levels when they are taught by effective teachers. All teachers can become



effective when they improve their teaching style by learning more about their content as well as learning more about the art of teaching.”

Philadelphia administrators chose to implement the VoyagerU Reading Academy to meet their training requirements because the course content focuses on the essential literacy skills specified in Reading First, coupled with best-practices techniques and strategies for classroom instruction.

“The feedback that we’ve been getting for VoyagerU is that it has been an eye-opener for teachers about scientifically based reading research,” says Linda McGregor. “So many have heard the saying, but were not aware of what it really meant. They just raved about the content and how much they learned.”

Participants were equally pleased with the coach-led group discussions, which provided a forum for teachers to share insights about the online content and classroom application with their peers. Says McGregor, “As they moved forward to do the activities, they felt they were supported in their school with others. It wasn’t like doing a course on their own and floundering, because they had the support of the literacy coach right there in the building.”

Leslie Morris, a Reading First Coach at the William Cramp School, found that teachers were often eager to put the lessons into action. “The wonderful thing about the Reading Academy is that if you were online or looked in the book, you had something you could do with your intensive or strategic learners the very next day,” she says. “There were so many different suggestions of different kinds of activities. We actually spent three hours in the lab [one Saturday] just to print out different activities they could do on Monday morning.”

This kind of passion and dedication on the part of teachers and coaches is at the heart of any successful school district and brings academic reforms to life.

Says Morris, “I have the good fortune of working with teachers who are really very committed and diligent about the work they do with kids.”

### A Positive Trend

Less than two years since implementing the visionary reforms, district administrators feel overwhelmingly positive about the direction they’re heading.

“I think we’ve really moved beyond the constraints of most urban districts,” says McGregor. “We have great core program materials. We have a wonderful new curriculum that everybody is using. I’m looking forward to seeing how everything settles as teachers become more comfortable with the new curriculum and reading programs.”

McGregor plans to pay close attention to student reading scores in the coming school year to determine how well the new programs are working. She notes, “I think it’s going to be very hard not to see scores go up with everything we have in place in Philadelphia.”

Says CEO Paul Vallas, “We will have achieved success when we are sure each and every student can enjoy the life-long gift of literacy.”

### *Kayla’s Story, continued from page 10*

At home, Kayla has become a real bookworm, reading Voyager materials as well as books that she and her mother choose. Her favorite is the “Junie B. Jones” series by Barbara Park, illustrated by Denise Brunkus.

“I read every day, at my school and at my house,” Kayla says. “When I’m on page one I end up reading and reading, and then the book is ended. I like it. It makes me feel happy when I read my books.”

Her mother couldn’t be happier, too. “I have to go to Barnes and Noble every two weeks to get her new books,” says Negron. “I buy her three at a time, and she reads them in just a few days. Her reading has improved a lot, I am very proud of her because I always wondered if she would have problems learning because she was always goofing off. But now she loves to read.”

### WHAT’S GOOD FOR THE STUDENTS IS GOOD FOR THE TEACHERS

While the Voyager program has been a boon for Kayla and so many of Lake Weston’s other young pupils, it’s also had some surprising side benefits for the faculty. A diverse group representing a wide range of ages, Lake Weston’s teachers suddenly found they had a lot in common: Because the four earliest grades use the same strategies for teaching reading, they can now share their ideas, experiences and approaches with one another.

“This program has made our team so incredibly cohesive,” says Berry. “It has really brought us together.”

As the Campus Coach, Howe is delighted to see this newfound team attitude among the faculty members.

“Watching the transformation with the kids is phenomenal, but what’s happened with the teachers is even more incredible,” she says. “They have bonded together, really supported and taken care of each other, and helped each other learn this program and implement it in the classroom.”

The teachers in all four grade levels now share a common language, teach the same skills, and reinforce what the students have learned as they move from one grade level to the next. And because the students are growing increasingly experienced with the Voyager program over time, the teachers now spend less time getting them started with every new school year.

This kind of consistency is everything Lake Weston’s administrators had hoped for in a reading program.

“We have been able to develop one coordinated reading program that spans the various grade levels,” says Dobbs. “At the same time, we’re developing within the children a sense of independence and the ability to work cooperatively in groups.”

For Kayla, like so many other students at Lake Weston Elementary who have come such a long way in a short time, these skills mean a much brighter future.