

Joint Letter from Philadelphia Leaders in Support of the District's Facilities Master Plan

On Wednesday November 2nd, the School District of Philadelphia will release the proposed recommendations for the Facilities Master Plan, a plan which aims to align education programs, resources, and facilities in a way that benefits all students. Philadelphia has seen a dramatic shift in its educational landscape in recent years. A number of factors including general population and demographic shifts, the proliferation of charter schools, and a reduction in education funding have left the district with 70,000 extra seats.

Some public schools sit half-empty and are poorly positioned to provide the best education to the children who are left behind in their classrooms. Students at these schools are often underserved either through a nurse who is part-time or teachers and specialists who are split between two or three schools. The solution for these students and their parents lies in a rebalancing of the district's facilities and resources. The ultimate goal of the FMP is to allow the district to deliver better services to students and to create operational flexibility in its facilities such that it can respond to uncertainty concerning several issues that could impact the district's enrollment.

Change in the delivery of education is primarily coming in the form of charter schools. A decade ago, 34 charter schools operated in the city. There are now about 80 charter schools (serving approximately 45,000 students). Competition like this is healthy and should be welcomed and supported in a free-market, school choice environment. It is this competitive dynamic that makes the district's facilities rightsizing so timely and necessary.

Rather than sit idly by and watch its student population dwindle, the district has taken a smart approach to make its schools more competitive through a facilities rightsizing plan. Most importantly, the district has not taken this step in isolation or in a vacuum. Since November, the district has engaged the public in a series of 29 community feedback sessions with about 1,400 stakeholders from every area of the city.

This process will be difficult for parents and communities most directly affected. Parents, students, and all stakeholders are encouraged to attend upcoming community meetings to make their concerns heard. It is time for the district to become a viable competitor in a challenging market. By undertaking this, the district has decided that it will provide a premium education to its students for the betterment of the overall academic and educational landscape in Philadelphia. This is an opportunity for the city to pull together to improve the educational lives of children now...and in the future.