We Don't Need No "Innovation"

by Phil Nichols

How a fight over school reforms in West Philadelphia revealed the pathologies and possibilities of disrupting education.

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In the spring of 1969, a group of parents, residents, and activists staged a series of protests in West Philadelphia. They were attempting to disrupt plans for a cutting-edge new high school that was to be built in their neighborhood. The demonstrations centered on the far-reaching educational innovations that the school, University City High, promised to deliver, and the implications those changes held for students and the surrounding community.

The new school was part of a larger initiative, the Educational System for the Seventies, or ES70. Developed by what was then the US Office of Education, a bureau within the Department of the Interior, with support from the departments of labor and defense, ES70 aimed to establish a national network of twenty "innovation schools" that could be exemplars of technology-enhanced, personalized education at the dawn of the

1970s. Schools in the ES70 network would forego conventional classrooms, replacing formal instruction with a "programmed" curriculum designed by disciplinary experts. Students could work through this curriculum at their own pace with the aid of audio-visual technologies and teaching machines, and they would be assessed on "competencies" in self-directed learning rather than with traditional grades.

To recruit participating districts, like Philadelphia, program leaders presented ES70 as a way for school systems both to raise their profile as national leaders in modernized education, and to foster connections with industry—particularly companies associated with math, science, and technology. But for residents in West Philadelphia, the plans for University City High were a diversion—a way for white district leaders to dress up their persistent disregard for the demands of local Black education activists with an ostensibly benevolent investment in the community and its children.

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Residents objected that the novel educational tools advanced by the ES70 school were unmoored from the educational reforms for which people in West Philadelphia had long been fighting—community control, increased funding, African American history courses. The ES70 program would direct focus and

resources away from these demands. The protests and their aftermath were the culmination of a broader struggle in the city over the nature of "innovative" reform in a school system riven with competing visions for public education.

Today, "innovation" continues to circulate in popular discourse as a self-evident rationale for disrupting schools and school systems. Experimental programs like the XQ Super Schools Project, founded by Laurene Powell Jobs, and AltSchool, launched by ex-Google executive Max Ventilla, position themselves as dramatic shifts in the history of schooling. They promise to supplant the supposedly antiquated rituals of conventional classrooms, which are often portrayed as factory-like preparations for an industrial economy of the past, with technology-driven personalized learning.

The story of University City High makes it clear that such programs are not a break from the past. They are outgrowths of a longer history of postwar reform efforts that have leveraged educational "innovation" to launder private interests as public goods, and to bolster national political-economic competition. To counter such initiatives, it's crucial to center the alternate visions of reform that emerge from the people impacted by such efforts, like those who protested the ES70 initiative in West Philadelphia. Doing so points to an affirmative project for educational innovation—one that takes, as its starting point, a commitment to the material concerns and collective desires of the communities that public schools are meant to serve.

Set Up to Fail

Long before University City High was announced, or the ES70 program was inaugurated, parents and activists in West Philadelphia were advocating for transformation in their local

schools. Residents in the working-poor African American neighborhood were attuned to the incongruities between their own classrooms and those in whiter, wealthier parts of the city. Facilities were crumbling and overcrowded; academic opportunities were sparse; and the curriculum did not reflect the racial and linguistic diversity of students and their families.

Organizing and agitation against these imbalances was common. In 1949, irate mothers stormed the office of the district business manager, demanding increased funding and smaller class sizes. Throughout the next two decades, Black-led organizations like Citizens for Progress staged protests and sit-ins for community control over local education and for nearby universities to invest in surrounding neighborhood schools. In the 1960s, the city's NAACP chapter threatened legal action against the district, citing segregation in West Philadelphia's predominantly Black schools as a violation of *Brown v. Board of Education*. The force of these cumulative pressures led school board president and former city mayor Richardson Dilworth in 1967 to hire a new superintendent, Mark Shedd, to address the community's concerns. In his first month on the job, more than 3,500 students organized a mass walkout, marching to the district office and calling for African American history courses and culturally representative school hiring and dress code policies.

It was into this environment that the ES70 program was introduced. In an embattled school district with a new superintendent, the initiative had the appeal of addressing multiple problems simultaneously. A generous grant attached to the program would fund a new school building in West Philadelphia, which could ease overcrowding in other schools. The "personalized" lesson structure meant that fewer teachers were needed to run the school, freeing up money for the technological investments—teaching

machines, audio-visual equipment, film strips—necessary for the ES70 model to operate. These resources, along with a math and science curriculum created by disciplinary experts from the ES70 project and the University of Pennsylvania, would also extend academic opportunities to the community. On its surface, ES70 appeared to be a win for everyone.

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Local businesses also saw an opportunity in the ES70 program. The West Philadelphia Corporation (WPC), a coalition of industry and university leaders, had long been committed to redeveloping the neighborhood into a hub for scientific innovation modeled on the Stanford Research Park. The new ES70 school appeared to be the missing link in this plan. If the building site could overlay the residential blocks that separated the two major universities in the area—the University of Pennsylvania and Drexel Institute of Technology—then the school would effectively bridge the campuses. This would demarcate "University City" as an up-and-coming neighborhood distinct from the rest of West Philadelphia. Even more, ES70's emphasis on science, math, and personalized learning would lure professors and

industry leaders to the area so their children could attend the school. Fortuitously for the WPC, its Executive Director Leo Molinaro was named to the ES70 planning committee. Not only did the school's site selection follow the WPC's blueprint, but its name—University City High—reflected the organization's larger efforts to rebrand the neighborhood.

Over time, these competing visions of education reform—of residents, administrators, and business leaders—clashed, flaring up most visibly at a series of public forums between 1968 and 1970. Titled "Educational Innovations in University City," these gatherings featured Shedd and Molinaro sharing details about the ES70 program and responding to public concerns. Parents and activists packed into these forums to protest the "innovations" the district and WPC were prioritizing, and the effects these would have on the neighborhood. Longtime residents, who had seen their neighbors displaced during previous WPC "redevelopment" efforts, called out the racist and classist implications of the University City High project. Others expressed outrage at the material concerns overlooked in the ES70 reforms. As one teacher said, "Hunger isn't new. Torn pants aren't new. They aren't innovative. Therefore, there are no funds for that kind of problem." Even those who saw some potential in the ES70 model voiced concerns that their children, thrust into a new, self-directed learning environment with limited preparation and teacher support, were being set up to fail.

This was borne out when the school opened in 1971. While some students managed to adapt to the ES70 model, the personalized curriculum failed to engage students as it promised. In the absence of formal instruction or classrooms, students opted to use their unstructured time in other ways. They abandoned their assignments and, instead, gathered in common areas where

there was little supervision. After several fights broke out, local newspapers reported that University City High was in chaos. Within two months, administrators abandoned the ES70 model altogether, returning to a more traditional classroom and curricular structure.

Innovation and Its Aftermaths

On the surface, the ES70 program in Philadelphia was a failure. One could view it as a breakdown in implementation—that its core innovations, while sound, were undercut by reformers' inability to build consensus with parents and residents. Others might blame the structure of schooling itself: that the rigid conditions of classrooms are resistant to change and, by extension, produce students who are equally inflexible in the face of transformative learning opportunities.

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But in another sense, it wasn't a failure at all. The ostensible goal of ES70 and similar postwar reform efforts may have been to modernize schools, but the larger aim was always to enroll K-12 education into a nascent project of national innovation. The federal spending behind such programs was committed to "personalized" learning only to the extent that it turned

public schools into proving grounds where the next generation of workers in innovative sectors could be trained. In this, ES70 was a success.

Even before University City High opened, ES70's director had already submitted a final report for the overarching project to the US Office of Education, celebrating ES70's achievements in closing the loop between public education and scientific research and development. While individual initiatives may have faltered, as University City High did, the program was nevertheless effective at systematizing "innovation" as a model for, and aspiration of, educational policymaking. The report recommended continued investment in basic and applied research on educational innovation—an agenda that persists to the present.

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In Philadelphia, Superintendent Shedd followed up the district's involvement with ES70 by inaugurating an Office of Innovative Programs, which pursued more than seventy experimental initiatives in its first five years. Most of these, like ES70, were short-lived, but they contributed to a significant discursive shift. "Innovation" became the dominant strategy for school reform; and being "innovative" became more important than any particular outcome of such experiments. This, too, has proven resilient: Philadelphia continues to operate an Innovation Network

of nine public schools, many dedicated to technology-enhanced personalized learning.

In 2021, the building for the newest of these schools was completed on the grounds where University City High once stood—a palimpsest, etched into a West Philadelphia remade by the aftermath of educational innovation. The neighborhood is no longer residential. It is now home to the University City Science Center, the largest urban research park in the US. University City High's development in 1970 allowed the WPC to secure adjacent land for the project. While the WPC is now defunct, the reverberations of its urban renewal agenda live on in the gentrified academic-industrial economy of modern University City.

In all, more than 2,600 residents, most working-poor and African American, were displaced by the construction of University City High and the adjoining research park. Their stories are inextricably linked to the city's lineage of educational "innovation." But so too are the transformations that might have been—the counter visions of innovation that exist alongside, and in opposition to, those that enlist public goods, like schools, in the service of private and national political-economic interests.

How might West Philadelphia and its schools be different, today, if innovations fifty years ago had centered the material concerns of its residents: community control, equitable resourcing, small class sizes, racially and linguistically diverse teachers, and culturally sustaining instruction? What even more radical possibilities were preempted by the mode of "innovation" that gripped the district instead?

The legacies of struggle in West Philadelphia point to an alternate frame for educational innovation: where the

as-yet-unrealized project of free, just, and democratically controlled education for all stands as the measure against which any proposed reforms are judged. If "innovation" is to be anything more than a buzzword—or a Trojan horse for austerity measures, urban development, and workforce production—it must be rooted in such a commitment to the self-determination and flourishing of the publics that schools are meant to serve. ∼∼∼

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