

# NEWS & VIEWS

## Back To The Blackboard

*Look into the microscope. See those little things swimming around in there? They're Pennsylvania public school students.*

By Darlene White Natale

From parents to teachers to taxpayers to kids, no one has much faith in the public school system anymore. So as Gov. Tom Ridge looks forward to two years of Republican dominance of the State House and Senate, he and his colleagues are poised to turn the Commonwealth into an educational laboratory.

High on the agenda are charter schools, vouchers and more privatization. Meanwhile in Wilkinsburg, Pennsylvania's first privately managed public school, Turner Elementary, continues to draw praise from some quarters, and vociferous criticism from others.

### Bad Grades And Good Balance Sheets

The Wilkinsburg School District was desperate for a solution. For years the district had been plagued by low test scores, plunging student morale and parental discontent. In 1992, the district produced a valedictorian with an uninspiring 2.667 grade point average out of a possible 4.0. So last year, the district took the bold step of privatizing one of its three elementaries, the now-famous Turner school.

The school is now in its third semester under the management of Alternative Public Schools, Inc. (APS). Financially, all parties seem satisfied for the moment. Pennsylvania Secretary of Education Eugene W. Hickok, who cleared the way for the Turner privatization, says that Wilkinsburg was spending about \$8,000 per student each year and that the district's property taxes were among the highest in Allegheny County. The average that Pennsylvania schools spend per student is \$6,957. The Wilkinsburg School District's contract with APS, on the other hand, pays \$5,400 per student per year. John Eason, president and co-founder of APS, a Tennessee-based company says that they're "managing pretty well" on that amount.

Eason says his goal for the school is meaningful long-term progress, and he can point to concrete measures his company has taken. APS has lengthened the school year to 210 days, and the school is open from 7 a.m. to 6 p.m. on school days. Instruction runs from 8 a.m. to 3:30 p.m., with optional organized activities such as tutoring and games after school. Each student meets regularly with a Turner-employed, trained adult mentor.

But before APS can make a profit, specific goals must be met. Students' test scores must improve by the third year of the five-year contract, or the contract can be terminated. On average, students enrolled at the APS Turner school for two consecutive years must show test score increases of at least 5 percent over the scores the semester before APS took over; children enrolled three consecutive years must show improvements of at least 7.5 percent; and scores of students enrolled for four consecutive years must go up by at least 10 percent. Non-academic goals include school safety and parent and student satisfaction.

In the first set of assessment tests, taken last spring, Turner students scored 18 percent lower than their counterparts at Wilkinsburg's publicly run Kelly and Johnston Elementary schools in math, 15 percent lower in reading, and 17 percent lower in writing. Eason argues that the first two years are "transition" years and promises improvement in the future.

Meanwhile, conservative interests have jumped to the school's defense. The Greentree-based conservative think tank Allegheny Institute, in a study authored by Grove City College professor John Sparks, predicts long-term success for the school. "Two key features positively distinguish the Turner initiative from other highly publicized public-private partnerships," the report says. "APS possesses the power to adopt its own curriculum and hire teachers. These two elements alone greatly enhance the likelihood of success."

These might be some of the very elements of the experiment which anger teachers unions like the Pennsylvania State Education Association (PSEA). "The only example of privatization in Pennsylvania is Wilkinsburg, and it's a failure," says Butch Santicola, spokesman for the PSEA. He says that Turner's test scores were worse than Kelly and Johnston's scores, even though the testing procedure was weighted in Turner's favor. At Kelly and Johnston elementaries, 98 percent of the students' assessment test scores counted, says Santicola. At Turner, only 58 percent were tabulated because the contract with APS stipulates that transient students don't have to be counted.

That caveat was negotiated into the agreement between the school district and APS because, historically, Turner educates many transient children who move in and out for a variety of reasons. Though the kids who stay at the Wilkinsburg schools perform adequately on tests, the transients typically don't. So APS's financial rewards won't reflect the performance of the transients.

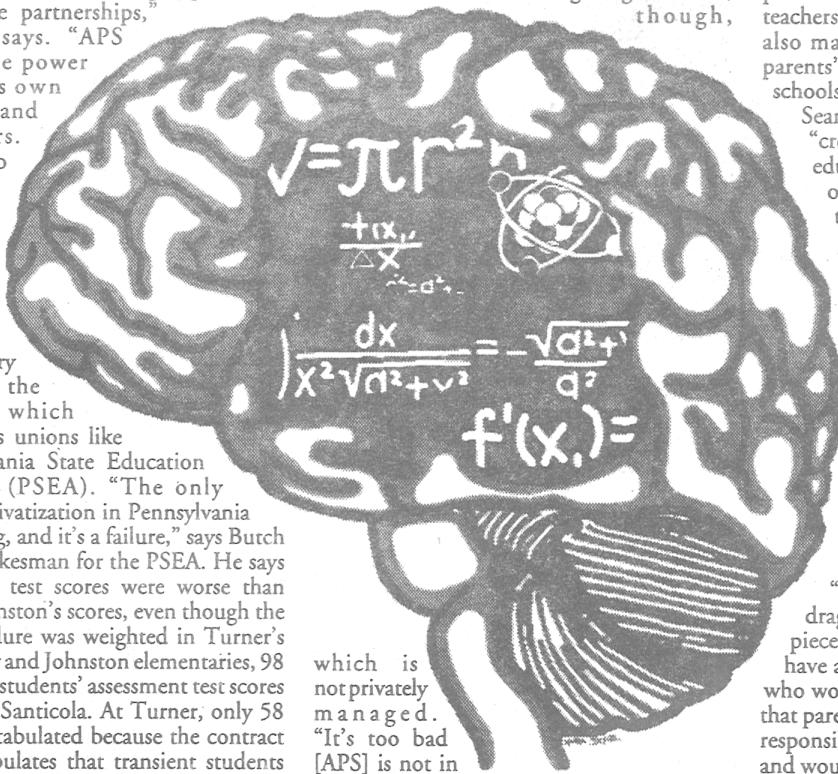
"They say let's give them another year," says Santicola of Turner's defenders. "Had the two public schools, Kelly and Johnston in Wilkinsburg, performed as poorly as Turner did, there would be screams from the top of the Education Department calling for heads."

### Parental Guidance

Some parents are doing just that. One, who asks not to be named, relates tales of insensitivity and inattentiveness by Turner teachers. Following the privatization, she says, she went to the school to report her son was being bullied. The staff became defensive, and accused her son of causing the problems.

Worse, she says, one teacher struck her son in the head with a pencil. Her son's offense: she claims he told another student, "shut up or we'll get in trouble" when the other student asked him for an answer during a test.

Other parents, though, offer glowing reviews. "I'm pretty much impressed," says Jennifer Williams, parent of a Turner student. "I'm pleased. My daughter loves it. We were thinking of moving, but she wants to stick around until she finishes the school." She says the whole atmosphere in the school has changed. "At one time when you walked the [Turner] halls, you didn't want to be there." Williams is leery about eventually sending her child to Wilkinsburg High School, though,



which is not privately managed. "It's too bad [APS] is not in every school," she says.

Santicola is adamant that privatization is "a major league rip-off. ... It hasn't delivered on anything it said it would. You have kids leaving the program. You have parents who supported it the first year saying it's a disaster and yet, [where are] the governor or the secretary of education or anybody who stood up and said 'Privatization in Wilkinsburg — Yes?' We don't have any of those people admitting that the public schools are outperforming the private schools."

### The Charter Choice

"If we had a charter school law in Pennsylvania, the parents in Wilkinsburg wouldn't have needed to push for a private company," says Tim Reeves, a spokesperson for Gov. Ridge. "They could have taken back control of the Turner school through charter schools and you wouldn't have had that very divisive debate there."

Charter schools are institutions run by the parents within certain guidelines, using state funds but largely free of direct state

control. Such schools would only be set up when parents specifically petition for the option. Charter schools are now operating in Arizona, California and Minnesota, and are under consideration in several states, including Pennsylvania.

Legislation which passed the State House last year but which did not pass the State Senate allows charter schools to be formed by school board approval or by referendum. For-profit businesses are excluded from receiving state funding for charter schools. The original bill required that at least 75 percent of the teachers in a charter school be state certified. Reformers contend that requiring state certification of all or most teachers would exclude highly respected community members with advanced degrees from educating, because they hadn't taken specific teaching courses.

A recent amendment to the charter schools legislation, proposed by State Sen. Dan Delp (R-York) would reduce from 75 percent to 60 percent the portion of a charter school's teachers who must be state certified. It would also make it harder for districts to resist parents' requests for a change to charter schools. Education Department Spokesman Sean Duffy thinks that charters would "create a new dynamic" in Pennsylvania education. He predicts that since parents of students would control the schools, they would be likely to "hire 100 percent state certified teachers."

Duffy's optimism is "baloney," says PSEA's Santicola. "That's a cover-up story. That's a smokescreen. That's not going to happen. ... In the state of Pennsylvania you will need a license to cut hair, but you will not need a license to teach."

Duffy isn't surprised at the union's criticisms. "We're going to start hearing it, now that the union's down a couple of runs in the ninth inning on this," he says. "They're going to start saying, 'You'll drag anybody, set them up, and put a piece of chalk in their hand and let them have at it.' That is demeaning to the folks who would design a school." Duffy believes that parents and teachers would take primary responsibility for running the charter schools, and would have every incentive to staff them well. School districts would also work with the charters to ensure they are well run. The whole community would get involved in every aspect of education.

That isn't all Ridge has planned, as he takes a Bunsen burner to education as we know it. The governor also intends to reintroduce school vouchers when the General Assembly reconvenes. Vouchers are an option that allows parents to take a state-provided monetary allotment and use it to purchase the education of their choice, whether it's at a private, parochial, public or charter school. Meanwhile, parents unwilling to wait for reform have turned to home schooling. Even as the pressures of job and family bear on everyone, 787 students in Allegheny County are being schooled at home by their parents. It's clear that whatever the fate of Turner and charter schools, the bus ride to educational excellence is about to enter some hairpin turns. ■

Darlene White Natale is a freelance writer from Middlesex. Art by Nora Jayne.