

2001

## Penn and West Philadelphia

Dale Mezzacappa

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.unomaha.edu/slcepartnerships>

Please take our feedback survey at: [https://unomaha.az1.qualtrics.com/jfe/form/SV\\_8cchtFmpDyGfBLE](https://unomaha.az1.qualtrics.com/jfe/form/SV_8cchtFmpDyGfBLE)

---

### Recommended Citation

Mezzacappa, Dale, "Penn and West Philadelphia" (2001). *Partnerships/Community*. 19.  
<https://digitalcommons.unomaha.edu/slcepartnerships/19>

This is brought to you for free and open access by the Barbara A. Holland Collection for Service Learning and Community Engagement (SLCE) at DigitalCommons@UNO. It has been accepted for inclusion in Partnerships/Community by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@UNO. For more information, please contact [unodigitalcommons@unomaha.edu](mailto:unodigitalcommons@unomaha.edu).

# *The Learning Connection*

NEW PARTNERSHIPS BETWEEN SCHOOLS  
AND COLLEGES

*Gene I. Maeroff*  
*Patrick M. Callan*  
*Michael D. Usdan*

EDITORS



Teachers College, Columbia University  
New York and London

## PENN AND WEST PHILADELPHIA

*Dale Mezzacappa*

May 13, 1985, was one of the most tragic days in the history of Philadelphia. In an effort to dislodge the troublesome back-to-nature group MOVE, the police department bombed its row house, inadvertently setting off a fire that engulfed two city blocks, displaced 53 families, and killed 11 people. It's hard to imagine that anything good could come out of an event like this, but it did. The MOVE fire served as the catalyst that propelled the fledgling West Philadelphia Improvement Corps into what is now one of the most far-reaching collaborations between an urban university and the schools in its surrounding neighborhood.

That spring, American history professor Lee Benson and one of his former students, Ira Harkavy, were running a seminar at the University of Pennsylvania campus for about 20 students called "University and Community Relations: Penn-West Philadelphia, Past, Present, and Future." The history was not pretty, with Penn gobbling up entire city blocks for its own expansion, often destroying stable, mostly African American neighborhoods in the process. In the beginning, Harkavy, then a Penn administrator, and Benson merely wanted to find ways to improve the relationship between Penn and the distressed urban neighborhood that surrounds it. For that summer, they had the modest goal of establishing a youth corps with 50 area teens to work with Penn students on beautification and cleanup projects. They had a small \$20,000 grant from United Parcel Service—and the indifference or outright suspicions of city agencies with the power to kick in additional funds.

But after the MOVE tragedy, "we got big-scale money from the city, and we relocated the entire project to the MOVE neighborhood," Harkavy recalled. Sixty teenagers affected by MOVE worked all summer around a

neighborhood recreation center and school, painting a mural, cleaning up the trash-strewn grass, and planting trees. Sheldon Hackney, then the president of the university, authorized funds for a landscape architect to work on the project. Suddenly, the city and the university were both heavily involved in Harkavy and Benson's dream. And something magical began happening, especially at the Bryant School, located about a mile from the university campus. Neighbors—senior citizens, mostly—donated lawn mowers and garden tools, and worked side by side with the teens and Penn students. Teachers gave up their time to lend a hand. As the new community of workers hauled away the broken glass and other detritus of decline, the beaten-down grass came to life. As the residents, teenagers, and Penn students painstakingly applied paint to the dank brick, the school itself took on a whole new aura. And, for Harkavy, the possibilities suddenly became clear. His and Benson's nascent ideas began to evolve into something much more focused and far more ambitious.

Fired by the theories of John Dewey on problem-based learning and fascinated by their research into the history of the community schools movement, Benson and Harkavy saw no end to the possibilities: They would create community schools in their urban neighborhood and challenge the very assumptions underlying the university's purpose. "We realized the best way Penn could do something constructive in West Philadelphia was through public schools," said Benson, now an emeritus history professor. "When we started, we didn't know anything about John Dewey. The basic argument we made then and continue to make now is that only if the school system improves can West Philadelphia and the neighborhood improve."

As an undergraduate at Penn in the 1960s, Harkavy had led protests against both the university's destructive expansion and its involvement in Vietnam-related military research. He talks fast, and his thoughts often trip over each other, but this makes his ever-growing excitement a palpable force. "That summer," he said, "we saw a result. We had a sense that schools could be neighborhood centers. The idea of learning by community problem solving, the idea of the problems of the community being the curriculum of the school . . . it all came together." Not immediately. But eventually. Today, nearly 15 years later, Harkavy and Benson still teach that seminar. But, in addition, there are fully 96 courses offered at Penn, distributed over nearly all the 12 schools at the university, in which students do some of their work and research in the community.

The founders of what has come to be known as the Center for Community Partnerships have nothing less in mind than redefining the role of the university and remaking K-12 education. They believe it's a matter of mutual survival. As Harkavy and Benson wrote in 1993, "Unless our public school system is radically transformed, the crisis in cities and society will only

get worse and universities will suffer for it." Not to mention that the historic mission of the university is to create a better society, not simply to advance some abstract concept of learning. Or, as Harkavy put it bluntly, "universities cannot afford to remain shores of affluence, self-importance, and horticultural beauty at the edge of island seas of squalor, violence, and despair."

MALEEKA BORDERS, 8, stood inside the front door of the Drew Elementary School, three blocks from the Penn campus, on the first cold day of winter in 1999. School was over, but not for Maleeka. She was selling fruits and vegetables from a stand. Wadin McKie, 12, bought a bag of grapes and handed Maleeka a dollar bill. The third grader, nearly obscured by the piles of grapes, bananas, grapefruit, apples, and asparagus in front of her, carefully counted out Wadin's change: three quarters. Tamara Dubowitz and Dan Gerbner, Penn graduate students in anthropology under Professor Frank Johnston, were supervising this enterprise. A few minutes later, they checked the foot traffic and decided it was trailing off. "Time to pack up," Dubowitz said. The Drew students eagerly plunged into the task, gathering up their unsold wares and dismantling the jigsaw-like table they had designed themselves.

Right about that time, Makeeka's classmate Quideea James, 8, was hunched over a book in the school library downstairs. "I looked for more bugs in the mud," she read, watched over by Penn senior Carrie Pierce and surrounded by a few dozen other students and their tutors. "I found a bad red bug in the mud." The next sentence had a word that totally stumped Quideea—"Todd." She kept saying, "Ty." Pierce kept urging, "Sound it out, sound it out, look at the letters." Quideea eventually did, getting the word right, but it was a struggle. Pierce was a student in Professor William Labov's linguistic class, "Introduction to African American English." After attending a class session, she and the other students went to Drew to tutor and test out new approaches for teaching young children to read. Labov, with several collaborators, wrote the manual Quideea was using, unusual in that it incorporates the cadences and rhyming patterns of hip-hop. It's an effort to help solve the enduring challenge of teaching inner-city Black students to read well.

Johnston's nutrition work and Labov's linguistics research are examples of Harkavy and Benson's ideas come to fruition—more than service learning, more than tutoring, more than field work. West Philadelphia, in effect, has become a laboratory for these professors and their students to do pioneering research in their fields. "What's unique about our program is that the knowledge and information we're gaining is directly related to the problems we're trying to solve," Labov said. "We're not just taking what we know

and using it in the community." So when Quideea stumbles over the word "Todd," Labov is gaining insight into how African American children connect letters to sounds. And he's trying to design a controlled study to see whether students using the reading book he and his colleagues have developed make more reading progress. "We know that the children are not looking at the alphabet in the same way," Labov said. "We know that these African American children have a spoken language that's much more different from the alphabet [than that of most children.]"

The two dozen Penn students in his course, all of whom tutor in the schools, bring him back useful information every day. "In a lot of service programs at universities, the students are just interested in helping," Labov said. "Here, we're making the connection between unsolved problems in linguistics and unsolved problems in teaching reading." The Penn students like it. "We should share what we learn with the rest of the community so they can be in the same spot we are in the future," said Pierce, an economics major from Long Island. Traci Curry, another Labov student who went through the public schools in Washington, D.C., said she was pleasantly surprised. "Unlike a whole lot of universities, Penn is right in the middle of city neighborhoods that are underserved in many ways," she said. "I'm glad to know the university has a commitment to work with and in the community."

Both Gerbner and Dubowitz began as undergraduates at Penn and have built their careers around their neighborhood research in the area of nutrition. "It's a classic story," said Dubowitz, whose field is applied medical anthropology. "In poorer neighborhoods, people make poorer food choices and have poorer access to healthy foods." Her specific interest is the higher prevalence in these neighborhoods of diet-related disease, including stroke, diabetes, and some cancers. At Drew, in addition to operating the stand, students grow their own foods and vegetables in a garden. She thinks her efforts are paying off. "One mother came up to me and said her daughter made her read all the food labels and we couldn't buy anything with high fat content," Dubowitz said, smiling.

Gerbner's interests are slightly different. After graduating from Penn, he taught in the public schools for a while. His interest is using this program to rebuild the curriculum. The students operating the fruit stand, for instance, learn a lot about math by making change and taking inventory. They learn about science through working in the garden. Dubowitz can't imagine doing the sort of isolated, ivory-tower research that can be typical at universities. The mutual benefits are apparent. "For me, I'd have a hard time doing it any other way," she said. Jacki Popielarski, a teacher at Drew who serves as a coordinator for the Penn programs there, presided over these after-school activities. "Penn helps us have a variety of programs we may not have had, at least not on this scale," she said. "The university is a major positive force

for the kids." Drew showed more improvement between 1996 and 1999 in reading and math in fifth and eighth grades than any other school in the state in the Pennsylvania System of State Assessment tests, although there was no research to link the improvement specifically to Penn's involvement. Harkavy said he suspected that it was due to a number of factors, including a strong principal. "But the fact is," he said, "we're doing reading and nutrition at that school in a big way."

### Spreading the Impact

Marie Bogle was one of the teachers who got involved in the summer project in 1985 at the Bryant Elementary School. At that point in her career, she was ready to give it all up. "I was one of those burned-out teachers," she said. "I was not happy about returning to work as a teacher. It offered me little fulfillment at that time." In the spring of 1985, she went in to talk to the principal, June Harrison Brown, about the next year's appointment, and by luck or fate, Harkavy phoned while she was in the principal's office. He was seeking a teacher to coordinate a more comprehensive, year-long program at Bryant that would deepen the work begun in the summer and turn Bryant into a true community school. Brown pointed to Bogle. "She'll do it," Brown told Harkavy. "Do what?" asked Bogle. When another teacher agreed to help out, Bogle found herself immersed in a project that would take up the better part of the next 15 years and rejuvenate her career.

Her reluctance was born not just of her frustration with a school system that bumped her from place to place and didn't offer support, but also from attitudes about the university. "Penn had a bad reputation," Bogle said. Even after the successful summer at Bryant, "I could see some resentment of these White kids coming into the community. Yet we had done something positive." By that time, Bogle was teaching special education students. Initially, she and the other teacher took their students out to maintain the mural and the landscaping, still casting about for how to expand the program. "I started teaching my children what a community was, what a neighbor was, and, after a while, they started knocking on doors and introducing themselves," she said.

The change in her students who engaged in this simple activity was, as she put it, miraculous. "They went home and told their parents what they were doing," Bogle said, "and that turned everything around for me, the tremendous parental support. I saw we *had* to do something different for the kids." Her students were both learning and engaged, and parents were proud of what their children were accomplishing. Before long, her students, some of whom were severely handicapped, were producing oral histories. Everything, suddenly, became a learning tool, even the calendar, and all this

was shared with the neighbors and parents. Students made placemats for the families, painted numbers on their mailboxes. Gradually, the curriculum was built around the real world—and the students did better on tests than they had before. “We were just doing something that, I guess, made sense,” Bogle said. “We weren’t wasting time; kids were learning and we were still within policy. We felt we were doing something right, and it went from there.” From that point, “learning by doing” became her credo.

Other principals became interested, especially Robert Chapman at Turner Middle School. As happens in school systems, principals come and go; when Brown left Bryant, support for Bogle’s work dropped off. So in 1987 she went to Turner, “and it was a whole new ballgame.” She created an after-school program for particularly troublesome kids, who cleaned up graffiti on the school grounds and then protected their work, rallying the neighbors in the process.

But the goal of the Penn sponsors was to create a true community school, one around which the neighborhood revolves. That’s what they did at Turner, which gained a national reputation for its virtually round-the-clock operations and special programs. Not only could all members of the community take courses in subjects as varied as computers, airplane modeling, and vegetarian cooking on Saturdays, but eighth-graders who worked one morning a week at Penn’s hospital taught evening classes in the neighborhood on hypertension and did some supervised initial screening. Residents also got a chance to teach courses in their areas of expertise. This was all in addition to cleanup and beautification projects, which continued. But not all the effects were on weekends and after school. “We really started to restructure schools through the philosophy that all kids could learn,” said Bogle. “And we saw that we had to change the way in which we were teaching them to make education relevant.”

There was still a lot of skepticism among other teachers that all the work would be worth it, accustomed as they were to institutions such as Penn giving one-shot grants and then moving on. And it wasn’t always clear how Penn would help. But several teachers were willing to take the chance—spending a lot of time planning, getting involved in new kinds of schedules, scrapping old lessons. The key was getting students out into the communities to do research and work, even those who teachers may have thought weren’t capable. And then the teachers had to figure out how to make sure students were learning the right math or science skills through the project. They did investigations of the nutritional habits of families through Johnston and his Penn students and had a fruit and vegetable store there, too. “When I left Turner this year, we had every teacher involved in this program,” said Bogle. “But it was a hard struggle.”

Gradually, the attitude of the neighborhood toward Penn changed; initially, Penn students found it unsettling to take the trolley to the neighbor-

hood at night. Perhaps the most dramatic evidence of the turnaround in attitude was when the neighborhood dedicated a garden to the memory of a Penn student who was killed in an accident. In projects such as the one on nutrition, the community was an active partner, not simply a research subject.

"The Penn people they kept their word, that they were not just there to take something away and give their own students an 'experience'; they were there to give and to learn from this community, too," said Bogle. The two-way street operated in other ways, too. At least one young man from Turner was inspired to attend Penn as a result of his contact with students and the extra academic and social supports he received. David Rice is now a pre-med sophomore. "They made me see what I could aspire to," he said.

### **From Penn's Perspective**

On the Penn side, not everyone was convinced that community-based activity was worthwhile. "Some professors doubted whether it's a way to advance their own work and the learning of their students," said Harkavy. "But once many of the faculty try it, they like it, but some say this is not what higher education does. But it is what higher education did in the past." In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, he said, the mission of the American university was not simply to advance learning but also to create a better society. Today, however, status within the university is often tied to arcane research. But gradually, more and more professors are finding it rewarding and beneficial to rethink their approach to their disciplines.

Peter Conn, an English professor, meets each spring with teachers from University City High School. Located just three blocks from Penn's campus, "Uni," as it is called, typifies all the struggles of urban high schools: a student body that is overwhelmingly poor, almost entirely minority—Black and Asian—and plagued with low test scores, high dropout rates, and problems with weapons and crime. Conn asks the teachers what books and curriculum plans they have for the next fall. Then he designs his American literature course around those texts, and his students serve as teaching assistants in the University City classrooms. "They do curriculum planning, find background material, work with small groups of kids," said James M. "Torch" Lytle, the former principal at University City and now the superintendent of schools in Trenton, New Jersey. "The undergraduates love it. It's intellectually stimulating for them and for him, plus it creates smaller class size and high-intensity instruction at the high school."

Before Lytle, who also teaches an urban education course at Penn's graduate school of education, arrived at "Uni," the relationship between the high school and the university was one of distrust. He worried especially about

the "fishbowl" aspect: the notion that Penn researchers were using the high school for their own academic ends without really helping the students or teachers. "There have been instances where students or faculty members or parents have felt folks from Penn were not sufficiently respectful," Lytle said. In the past, the university had given grants that benefited researchers who spent a lot of time in the high school but had negligible benefits for the students there. "If the benefits for us weren't clear," he said, "we wouldn't get involved."

In one particularly successful program, Lytle said, special education students spend 1 day a week working in areas such as food service and maintenance at Penn, the largest private employer in Philadelphia. The community residents who work in these departments mentor them, and they often get hired when they graduate. A professor in the education school has documented the success of this approach to school-to-work for students who, traditionally, have been unemployable. "These are kids who have a negative sense of self and didn't even see themselves as working at McDonald's," said Lytle. On balance, he said, "the array of things that have emerged and continue to emerge is really remarkable."

Part of that is due to the hard work of Cory Bowman, a former student of Harkavy's. Since 1991, he has been the apostle of community-based learning at the university, helping professors craft new courses—even redirect their academic focus—and negotiating the participation of schools and community. When he started, there were 12 courses with a community focus; now, there are fully eight times that many. While many of the courses have focused on more the traditional subjects of arts and humanities and social work, the next big step, he said, is to get more that concentrate on math, science, and computers.

Dennis DeTurck, chairman of the math department, got a National Science Foundation grant through Bowman and Harkavy's center, in which graduate student fellows help teachers in West Philadelphia High School, about eight blocks west, with science and math curriculum ideas. One project is using Wisconsin "fast plants," which grow rapidly, for hands-on units on genetics. "The high school students can see the genetics happen," DeTurck said. "All the stuff I learned from reading a book, they can see it." On the other end, he said, "We're trying to impart the idea that caring about and being involved with K-12 education is part and parcel of what scientists do." In just half a year with this grant, "we've had some students decide that maybe what they really want to do is teach, and that would be great, if we could get more teachers who were trained in a serious way in science and math."

The partnerships touch nearly all aspects of the university. Ann Spirn in the Urban Studies Department works with teachers and students at Sulzberger Middle School to build community gardens, do land-use planning, and in-

investigate the environment of Mill Creek. William Yalowitz, in Theater Arts Department, works with the Black Bottom Performance Project. People from the displaced sections of the Penn neighborhood, called the Black Bottom, work with students from the college and University City High to create theatrical productions about the very history that has caused so much tension. "It's definitely a reciprocal relationship," said Yalowitz. "My students benefit at least as much if not more than the students and teachers and community people we work with. It brings enormous vitality to learning that is sometimes happening in a vacuum." Plus, he said, it's the right thing to do. "This is primarily about the sharing of resources. The university represents a huge aggregation of resources that should be distributed with economic justice in mind."

Community groups by and large find the relationship with Penn productive. Frances Walker, a lifelong activist in the neighborhood and president of two community groups, said that the university has learned the value of partnership. She cited Ann Spirn's project at Sulzberger Middle School on Mill Creek, a neighborhood waterway that has caused sinking, shifting homes and other environmental problems. The Sulzberger students are learning science by studying the creek, and, in turn, they educate their parents and neighbors. Spirn also teaches classes for adults on Saturdays to help them identify whether plumbing and water problems in their homes may be related to the creek.

"She's been working with us for 12 years," Walker said of Spirn. "Gaining these kinds of resources is invaluable to the community." Most important, she said, "We create the programs together. They don't come in here and say, 'We're going to put this program in your community.' We work together on the priorities of the community rather than people just doing things they think we need." Besides that, Penn has helped nonprofit organizations such as Spirn's Parents and Children Against Drugs, with training, accounting, and grant applications. When the air-conditioning broke down in the old building in which the organization is based, the Engineering Department at the university even helped get the system repaired. Walker, now 65, began protesting against Penn's actions when she was just 14 years old. She and her girlfriends objected at that time to prohibitions that kept them from walking on campus. "You can never completely make up for the past," she said, "but I've seen a remarkable change in their efforts to work with the community."

Penn's involvement in trying to improve public education in Philadelphia is not limited to Harkavy's partnership. Thirteen years ago, Penn alumnus and philanthropist George Weiss established the Say Yes to Education Foundation and promised 112 sixth-grade graduates of the Belmont Elementary School a free college education. Through Norman Newberg, a profes-

sor at the College of Education, the university became heavily involved in providing programs for these students and resources to the public schools they attended, including University City High. The program succeeded in significantly increasing the number of students who graduated from high school over the norm for the neighborhood, but hopes of catalyzing major educational reforms that would benefit all students were largely dashed. About 10% of the students have gotten 4-year college degrees, again above the norm, one of them from Penn.

The next leap for the Penn-community collaboration is the creation of an entirely new elementary school in the area, from scratch. Part of the motivation is to have a local school where Penn faculty members want to send their children. But the pitfalls will be great, as debates have already erupted over the geographic boundaries of the new school's feeder area—and whether the configuration of its population will drain resources and the most motivated students from the other neighborhood schools.

"There is a lot of conflict embedded in how this new school will be set up," said Shelly Yanoff, director of Philadelphia Citizens for Children and Youth, an advocacy group. "How to make all that work is a challenge." Harkavy said that the partnership will be very involved in making sure it works and doesn't subvert all the assumptions underlying the Penn-neighborhood collaboration in the first place. A Penn-initiated school that ends up excluding significant parts of the neighborhood just won't do, he said.

Penn has been at the center of both a statewide and national network to replicate the work of the partnership. So far, nine universities across the country have adopted the model, including Clark-Atlanta and the University of Alabama at Birmingham. Locally, the Philadelphia Higher Education Network for Neighborhood Development involves 36 institutions and was awarded a grant in 1997 to develop service-learning courses and support community-initiated projects.

"Any university considering such a move must carefully consider its intent," Harkavy said. And several conditions must be in place. University faculty members must see value to their getting involved but not view it as a one-way street which they will gain research knowledge but then abandon the relationship. Universities must be willing to continue the programs after seed money, often provided by grants, has run out. And they must be prepared to reevaluate their very mission in light of the new involvement.

School systems must be flexible enough so that teachers and principals can adapt curricula and schedules to accommodate the new programs. They must be willing to get over what may have been a bad relationship or difficult history with the university in the past. And they have to invest resources in community building and communicating with neighborhood organizations.

In Philadelphia, Harkavy has seen institutional change both in schools and the university, but, he said, it isn't enough. "Penn has done a great deal and could do a great deal more," he said. The mutual benefits are obvious to him and are becoming more obvious to others. "Something related to making things better for most people is the best way to learn," said Harkavy. "It's Dewey's principle of instrumental intelligence. Human beings learn best by confronting real problems in a practical way."