

# Still more to do, even after school budget fight

By Vic Brown

Reading about the annual fight over Philadelphia public school funding prompts me to reflect again on those students I met in New York City on a frightfully rainy night several years ago.

Although today I serve on the adjunct faculty at Ursinus College, back then I also assisted with our admissions department's efforts and frequently represented Ursinus at high school college fairs.

Most of these college fairs were well-oiled machines — row after row of tables set up in a brightly lit high school gym, and college representatives numbering in the hundreds, all with colorful banners and brochures, there to field questions from knowledgeable students and parents.

But this particular college fair, on this rainy night, was very different. In fact, it was the first college fair held at a relatively new school on Manhattan's west side. Their oldest students were just reaching 11th grade, most of them African American and Hispanic, and life after high school was fast approaching.

Slogging through the rain, I encountered a school with metal

detectors and security guards, escalators that did not work, and a general need for maintenance and upgrades.

I don't know how many colleges were invited to attend the fair, but 10 of us were represented. The gentleman who was director of college placement worked very hard to make the evening a success.

No brightly lit gymnasium here. We used a classroom, desks were pushed together so we could spread out our banners, and the event was coordinated with a "parent-teacher night" in order to help encourage greater participation by the parents.

There was pizza for the students and a simple dinner served ahead of time for the college representatives — all in all, a very good first effort given the lack of resources and experience that they were working with.

Despite all of this, I found it to be a sad and frustrating evening. The students who showed up had only a rudimentary understanding of college choices, the important role that high school study habits play in gaining admission to college, and the link between education and future success.

None of the relatively few parents who attended had gone to college, so they were unable to provide much support for their children, and the college counseling staff at the school had to offer as much information as it could, with limited resources. Although the staff was well-meaning, I was surprised and disappointed when one of the counselors thanked me for coming — saying that she had learned a lot about Ursinus, and was surprised to also learn that Pennsylvania was so close to New York City.

I've been thinking about those kids ever since, and wondering what can be done in Philadelphia, New York, and all the other cities where too many students and parents are left floundering without strong guidance.

If money itself were the answer, Philadelphia's "Belmont 112" experiment would have turned out very differently. After local philanthropists George and Dianne Weiss selected 112 sixth-grade students at Belmont Elementary School in 1987 and guaranteed they would cover all their education costs through college, the results were disappointing. They achieved only modestly more success than similar classes, or even the School

District itself. Out of 112 students, there were 20 bachelor's degrees, 10 associate's degrees, 14 vocational certificates, and 65 high school diplomas, with five GEDs.

Our kids today need so much more than school funding. They and their parents need systematic exposure to colleges, employers, and counselors — coordinated and delivered as a unified program, beginning in the early grades and intensifying through middle school and high school.

Weiss himself said something similar last year in an op-ed in *The Inquirer*:

"From our work at Belmont, we learned that the tuition, mentoring, and tutoring we underwrote were just a few of the pieces needed to solve this puzzle. We needed to think bigger and offer comprehensive services on a broader scale to ensure that these young people had the best opportunities to succeed.

"That's why we now provide our support services to children as they enter kindergarten — the earlier we provide these services, the bigger the change will be in the students' lives. And we've moved from working with classrooms to entire school districts."

Going beyond the classroom,

older students need after-school and summer jobs that show them what careers and workplaces are all about. Those students need the involvement of local employers who are committed to building the type of workforce that will sustain their businesses. They also need the assistance of college admissions representatives who can help them understand their choices — and what they need to do now, in school, to plan for the future. Just as important, they need academic and life counselors who will help them focus on how to dress, how to behave, how to organize study habits, and — perhaps most crucial of all — how to fully engage their parents as partners in the effort.

Right now, there is a lot of discussion about providing enough funding just to ensure that the Philadelphia schools open on time this year. That's important. Unfortunately, though, all the effort that goes into that annual struggle overshadows the discussion we should have about long-term student needs, the ones that money alone cannot buy.

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