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Introduction
Growing up as a young girl in the city of Philadelphia, I have always found myself to be engrossed in school and all that I could learn. Since I was 2 years old, my mother always recalls stories of my inquisitiveness and determination to learn. As an only child until the age of 10, I cherished school as much more than a place to learn. It was where I learned to socialize with my peers, learned new ideas and, where I was introduced to many opportunities. My unique upbringing afforded me the opportunity to attend both private and parochial schools throughout my educational career while living in an environment where many of my peers were not given the same chance. The reality of living in two worlds was never lost upon me; instead the exposure to both environments piqued my curiosity into the intricate and complex dynamics of urban education.

While I knew that I did not want to be a teacher, I found myself intrigued by the policies that have been put in place, surrounding urban education. From federal policies such as No Child Left Behind, and state-optimal policies such as Common Core State Standards, I question if these policies, when implemented into urban schools accomplish what they are intended to do, which is decrease the achievement gap. More importantly, as I learned more about these policies, a burning question became, how is it, with the knowledge that we hold about what it means to operate an urban school, we continue to take away their resources. During my fall semester of my senior year at Villanova University in Pennsylvania, I took a course entitled Urban Education. Taught by Dr. Jerusha Conner, the course set out to “discuss the varied social, political, and economic factors underlying the unequal distribution of resources and opportunity within urban schools in America” as well as “exploring the assumptions underlying these pedagogical and policy responses to the challenges of urban education while exploring what it is that urban youth truly want and need in their educational experiences” (J. Conner, personal communication, August 24, 2015).

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In addition to the dialogue and discussion carried out in the classroom based upon the literature read, the course also included a service learning requirement which entailed attending 9th period at Mount Dublin High School\(^1\) in North Philadelphia. My expectation going into the course, was to engage in thoughtful dialogue with my peers about what it means to attend an urban school. Additionally, I expected to gain further understanding of the economic and political implications for education policies and urban schooling. In regards to the course, my expectations were met and exceeded, but, as I think about my expectations of the second classroom experience through service I thought that the class would serve as a “lab”. In hindsight my viewpoint of the service-learning experience proved to be one-dimensional and over-simplified.

Furthermore, during the semester my classmates and I embarked upon a journey to find answers to our own individual questions about urban education. Given the tasks, we were encouraged to “to draw on your original personal statement, any entrance tickets or journal entries you completed throughout the term, and your midterm presentation as you consider your personal journey through the course as you attempted to answer your essential question (J. Conner, personal communication, August 24, 2015).” As assigned, this semester, I specifically set out to uncover the answer to many activist and advocates’ concerns: Despite policy-makers’ knowledge that many urban schools are severely under-resourced, why is it that urban schools continue to lose the little resources that they currently have? This question challenges me to provide a detailed analysis of the current education crisis in the city of Philadelphia. More specifically, I will provide a comprehensive look at a specific Philadelphia high school and my service learning experience throughout the semester. Additionally, I will attempt to provide an answer to my essential question while integrating my experience at Mount Dublin.

**Understanding Urban School Districts**
Underachieving schools, budget cuts, school closure, low teacher retention rates, and high student attendance rates are nothing new to the world of urban education or more specifically, to the School District of Philadelphia (SDP). University of Pennsylvania doctoral student, Robert LeBlanc stated “In 2012, the city faced a $300 million deficit brought on by a political reticence to reassess local property taxes, a state budget crisis in the wake of the 2008 recession, including a nearly $1 billion reduction in funds for PreK-

\(^1\) Pseudo –names have been used to respect the anonymous nature of the school and all person associated.

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Quite frankly, since its crisis in 2012, the failing district has been labeled as ground zero for the national education crisis by *Newsworks* newspaper (Shea, 2012).

The hardships that the SDP was facing at the time trickled down to Mount Dublin, where students, alongside the community, were left to fight to save their school back in 2013. Right off the cusps of the 2012 Doomsday Budget\(^2\), the SDP was left with no choice but to make some tough decisions for the district. Beginning in the 2013-2014 with the cut of arts and extra-curricular activities, those cuts quickly turned into closures for some neighborhood schools. More specifically expert Denvir (2014) states, “In 2013–14, the School District of Philadelphia had 6,321 fewer staff than it did at the end of 2011, according to district figures—a decrease of nearly 27 percent. The reduction included 2,723 fewer teachers, fifty-eight nurses, 406 counselors, 286 secretaries and 411 noon-time aides. The year began with a single counselor assigned to nearly 3,000 students (some counselors were rehired mid-year)” (Denvir, 2014, p.1). Researchers and Policy Analyst, Jack and Sludden from Research for Action (a Philadelphia-based organization), stated in their 2014 memo about school closure that “In 2012, the School District of Philadelphia closed six schools. In 2013, it closed 24. The closure of 30 schools has occurred amid a financial crisis, headlined by the district’s $1.35 billion deficit. School closures are one piece of the district’s plan to cut expenditures and close its budget gap. The closures are also intended to make Philadelphia’s school system more efficient” (Jack & Sludden, 2014).

Three years later, not many things have improved for the SDP, each year they continue to make tough decisions and close calls in regards to the schools within the district; especially with the ever growing presence of charter schools. Current city council representative and parent of a Central High School student, Helen Gym, in a 2014 interview about the current functionality of Philadelphia public schools stated, that “Schools aren't just being starved. The entire district has been turned into a costly experiment, especially with publically funded, privately run charter schools gobbling up a big part of the budget” (Sanchez, 2014). Despite the ever present state of crisis surrounding Philadelphia public schools, one thing remained true: despite the level of

\(^2\) Budget passed by the politically appointed (governor and mayor) School Reform Commission that ignored the voices of students, community activist, and education reform advocates, and voted to implement drastic cuts that forced Philadelphia schools to open that fall without essentially necessary to begin.
performance (both underachieving [Mount Dublin] and achieving [East High School]) all schools and students in the district continue to suffer as a result of ongoing classist attitude perpetuated by urban education and Philadelphia’s public schools.

**Spotlight on Mount Dublin**
The cornerstone of the course that allowed for a holistic understanding of urban education beyond course material was undoubtedly accomplished through my voluntarism at Mount Dublin. Due to the service requirements of the course, neither my classmates nor I were able to learn inactively. Instead, we were forced to fully engage ourselves in the course materials as well as service. Though mandatory for course requirements, by the end of the course, we were each eager to attend class at Mount Dublin every Friday until the end of the semester. During our time at Mount Dublin we worked specifically with Mrs. Purnell’s 9th period class. Although she serves as the school counselor and did not teach a specific subject at the school, Mrs. Purnell’s classes acted as a time for students in the class to be provided with college guidance. A unique class including students from grades 10 – 12, we worked with Mrs. Purnell’s students to help them as they took on the challenge of being a dual enrollment student at Community College of Philadelphia (CCP). Specifically, Mrs. Purnell’s 9th period attended an environmental conversation course at (CCP) in conjunction with their high school classes. The school liaison, Mr. Johnson worked with Villanova’s Office of Service Learning to find undergraduate students who could help guide the students in Mrs. Purnell’s class through their first college course. Although not a graduation requirement, the students were hand-chosen by teachers at Mount Dublin to take the course and were told that it would serve as a part of their science requirements. Given the often-demanding nature of a college course, my classmates and I were tasked with imparting wisdom and advice to our learning partners while also answering any questions that may have had about our college experiences and how we have succeeded thus far.

Mount Dublin High School located in North Philadelphia, transitioned to a co-ed high school in 1977 after years of functioning as a junior high/high school. A school whose student population is 100% economically disadvantaged and 98.2% are African American (SDP, 2015), Mount Dublin is much more than an underachieving school in a neighborhood plagued by poverty and violence. In most recent years, students of Mount Dublin have proven why this school, despite the many negative stereotypes and assumptions placed upon them, is a strong staple in their community. Regardless of their perpetual presence on the ‘Persistently Dangerous School List’ maintained by the state for six consecutive years, district administrators and policymaker’s decision to close Mount Dublin came as a surprise. Although slated to be

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closed just two years after receiving an influx of new students\(^3\) due to school closures in the district, Mount Dublin students and community leaders fought to keep the doors open. Students at Mount Dublin saw the prospect of school closure as much more than a lost of a school building. For students at Mount Dublin, the loss of their school felt like one more thing that the district was taking away from them. As students who come from low-income homes and are mostly made up of minorities, urban school students represent some of the nation’s most vulnerable students. A decision to take away or close Mount Dublin High School would have been a decision to once again, starve a malnourished community.

Now, two years after the threat to close Mount Dublin, my classmates and I embarked upon a journey to learn more about the reality of urban education in Philadelphia and the students the schools serve. Our learning at Mount Dublin High School began the moment we stepped into the school. Upon walking into the building, we were met with the school’s security guard and were told to walk through the metal detectors. While this sight would quickly become routine for us, that first time marked our beginning to understand what it means to be an urban students plagued with a laundry list of negative implications. Going into our first day, we knew that we needed to gain the trust of the students if we wanted to have a successful semester as learning partners and subsequently mentors.

During our first day, we quickly realized that our responsibilities would be two-fold: on one side, Mrs. Purnell expected us to help her students understand the seriousness and responsibility needed to take a college course, while sharing with them study techniques, ways to take notes, and have to succeed. But on the other side, the students looked to us for all that Mrs. Purnell expected but also to be a peer who would help guide them daily life tasks such as college choice, how to write a resume, how to write a paper and many other facets of life. Upon our first introduction, we began with an introduction exercise that set out to bridge the gap between us (the Villanova students), and the students of Mount Dublin. It was during the first visit at the school that I learned just how much ambition these students have and how their wants were no different from my own.

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\(^3\) Due to closure at two other high schools (Climber High School & Heritage High School), students were reassigned to Mount Dublin in 2011.
Divided into small groups throughout the class, I had the privilege to work with three female juniors for the entire semester. Since our commitment and time were limited to the class period, we worked together for approximately 1 hour each week. During this time, we worked together to help them understand their course materials, but more often than not, we were periodically interrupted by personal discussions. We would ask each other about our plans for the weekend, we would discuss how our weeks went, or any more “getting to know you” types of conversations. The trust that we developed with one another allowed for our conversations to move beyond the surface fairly quickly. It was not lost on me how fast these young ladies, as well as other students (mostly female) in the class, wanted to talk and share with me. It is my assumption that some of this may have been attributed to the similarities that we each possessed such as race, background, and our living within the same city. Due to this we frequently found ourselves discussing the current state of public education in Philadelphia and what it means to live in our city. These commonalities in our lives opened a door in which they felt comfortable sharing with the their thoughts and viewpoints of the struggles within the schools. This openness among the young ladies allowed for a two-way relationship into our school and personal lives. Whether it was the lack of textbooks in a class, the teacher who seemingly does not teach, or the effects that teacher turnover has had on their personal school experiences, they each voiced their concerns beginning with the following statement: “I just don’t understand why….”

The Urban Education course material in conjunction with my time at Mount Dublin every week, led me to dig deeper into my burning question. By mid-point in the semester, I was determined to find a concrete answer to my question, not only for myself, but also for the three young ladies that I was assisting.

**Burning Question**

As I conducted my own independent research to answer my question, I found that my young partners were onto something: many articles and journals pointed to financial burdens as the root cause for the starvation of resources in urban schools. In an investigation of the funding of disadvantaged schools and how they arrived at this state, expert Bruce Baker stated:

Fiscally disadvantaged districts are those with higher-than-average student needs for their labor-market location and lower-than-average resources when state and local revenues are combined. Illinois and Pennsylvania persist in having what are among the worst savage inequalities. As a result, the cities of Chicago and Philadelphia are, year after year, the two most fiscally disadvantaged large urban districts in the nation. (Baker, 2014, p.8)
Baker (2014) makes the claim that due to the educational disadvantages that the cities of Philadelphia and Chicago currently possess, these educational districts are undesirable to those who they serve and are inhabitable for students. We see this to be the case as many parents make the decision to transition their students from traditional public schooling to private or charter schools, who Ravitch states, are “portrayed as the salvation for poor minority children trapped in subpar urban and suburban schools”. (Ravitch, 2013, p.158)

Further investigation specifically into the finding a comprehensive answer my questions directed me to the 2007 Costing Out Study, conducted by the state of Pennsylvania. The study required that it focus on the adequacy and equity of Pennsylvania Schools. Additionally, the mandate stated that “Under the provisions of Act 114 of 2006, the Board issued a Request for Proposals (RFP) in October 2006 requesting the services of qualified contractors to conduct a comprehensive Statewide costing out study to arrive at a determination of the basic cost per pupil to provide an education that will permit a student to meet the State’s academic standards and assessments. (APA, 2008, p. 2)”. As a result of the study, APA found that “the Commonwealth would have needed to provide $21.63 billion, or $11,926 per student (excluding transportation, food services, community services, adult education, and capital expenditures)” (APA, 2008). Although conducted with a purpose of looking at the 2005-2006 school year, this study further emphasizes the idea that legislators and people in power know and understand what is needed in order for a school like Mount Dublin to exceed expectations.

Although fiscal considerations are of the most prevalent reason why urban schools tend to be under-resourced, I also discovered the importance of politics and legislation in the crisis of urban education. According to Loflin (2013), based on the art of the critical pedagogy, “Perpetual urban school failure is tolerated because deep down our nation subscribes to the belief that someone must fail in school. Here, failure results from the inferiority of the student, the family, or her/his culture and community. Indeed, this deficit-model of students is built into most schools through the existence of a largely unchallenged system of grading and testing which by its very design requires failure for some” (Loflin, 2013). Loflin suggests that those who believe in the neoliberal viewpoint of public education see public education as nothing more than a business in which some people will prevail while others fail. I saw this play out at Mount Dublin – where the students attending the school were subsequently positioned to fail due to the winner/loser mentality of our society. Yet, my learning partners at Mount Dublin possessed a drive and determination to succeed not only for themselves, but for their families and communities.
Conclusion
As I strived to find a concrete answer to share with my learning partners, I found the answer to be disheartening and completely unacceptable. How was I supposed to tell these three young ladies that the reason why their school was underfunded, lacked essential resources, did have enough teachers, was just the way it was supposed to be? These students not only understand the challenges of attending a school like their own, but they also realized that attendance in a school such as Mount Dublin already placed them at a disadvantage.

In reflecting on the semester and my education course, my time at Mount Dublin allowed me to dig deeper and challenge my own pre-existing knowledge of the problems in the school district of Philadelphia. At the beginning of the semester, I naively thought that the school district was simply allowing the starvation of public school in Philadelphia. What I failed to examine was the prospect that the district was created in such a way that those who were in power would remain in power by taking on a classist approach to public education. While many would think that having the knowledge of such disparities is simply enough, I learned through my time at Mount Dublin that awareness requires action. My time at Mount Dublin has helped to reaffirm my commitment to being an active participate in educational reform. Although there are many challenges at a school like Mount Dublin, my experience contributed to my leadership development in many ways. Through allowing the students to unapologetically express themselves, and encouraging to continue to strive academically and personally, I believe I have inadvertently given them the courage to rise above expectations. It would be irresponsible of me to be aware of the ongoing challenges of an urban school and to leave the students and teachers to figure it out on their own. Therefore, I have committed myself to keeping in contact with the students we helped serve, through my nonprofit organization (EMBRACE Mentoring Foundation) that I started in February of 2014. Through this organization, I aimed to provide our country’s most vulnerable students with college application assistance, ranging from financial aid support to helping them to choose the appropriate school. I am moved by what I have learned throughout the semester and through my time at Mount Dublin.

Most importantly I believe that due to the deliberate structures in place to determine and continue the subsequent failure of my learning partners at Dublin, it is my responsibility to find a way to intercede and help the students rise above the bar that has been placed for them. My service learning experience provided me with an opportunity to overcome many hesitations that I had about my ability to make an impact on students in a
classroom setting. I am inspired by what I have learned so far, and my experience and findings have further solidifies my decision to continue to work with the students of Mount Dublin.

Works Cited


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