

## **Philadelphia Public School Notebook: Re-envisioning the Urban Education Beat with an Eye on Impact**

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### I. INTRODUCTION

In the burgeoning sector of nonprofit media, I am a veteran. Back in 1994, I was one of the founders of the *Philadelphia Public School Notebook*—a news organization focused on providing in-depth coverage, analysis and a forum for dialogue on the Philadelphia public schools.<sup>1</sup> The *Notebook* was described in a recent report by the *Investigative News Network* as a granddaddy of the nonprofit news community: a grandpa at age 18.<sup>2</sup> So we have been grappling with the challenges facing that sector longer than most, and we have also been experimenting with new ways of doing journalism for longer.

### II. EARLY DAYS

When we launched the project in 1994, in one sense the *Notebook* was decidedly “old media.” The premise was to use cheap, tabloid-style newsprint to reach a wide audience. The core product at the start

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<sup>1</sup> Jessica Plautz, “Report: Critical Strategies for Growing a Nonprofit Newsroom,” *Investigative News Network*, March 14, 2012, <http://investigativenewsnetwork.org/article/report-critical-strategies-growing-nonprofit-newsroom> (accessed February 18, 2013).

<sup>2</sup> Elizabeth Osder and Kaizar Campwala, “Audience Development and Distribution Strategies,” *Investigative News Network*, March 2012, [http://investigativenewsnetwork.org/sites/investigativenewsnetwork.org/files/INN-audience-development-whitepaper\\_o.pdf](http://investigativenewsnetwork.org/sites/investigativenewsnetwork.org/files/INN-audience-development-whitepaper_o.pdf), p 35 (accessed February 27, 2013).

was a quarterly print publication. Our launch was not underwritten by any wealthy backers; we raised about \$1,800 to publish a pilot edition relying entirely on donated labor.

Our business plan reflected the nonprofit sector my co-founders and I were familiar with. From the outset, while advertising was part of the picture, our model relied mostly on a mix of grants, in-kind contributions, and a long list of mostly small individual donors that we developed, starting with family and friends. Knowing more than most of our founders about securing grants and donations, I headed the board during the first five years, during which our budget grew slowly but steadily.

I became the editor-director-and-everything-else in 1999—five years into the project, ours was still a paid staff of one. I came to the *Notebook* as an involved public school parent with journalism training and skills, but professionally, for more than a decade, I had been working in the field of nonprofit administration and fundraising.

Prior lessons learned about grassroots fundraising strategies have been key to helping us survive and thrive for eighteen years and have allowed us to grow to a paid staff of seven, with four editorial staff plus me—but like others in this sector we are still learning to operate as business entrepreneurs and still are fragile because of too-great dependence on some large foundation funders. While we now earn more than \$100,000 annually in ad revenues and have a membership program approaching six hundred contributors, a single foundation provided half our budget in 2011–12. This is not a funding model we expect to be sustainable.

The *Notebook* is far from being one of the granddaddies of online news. We did not have a website for the first half of our existence. Thenotebook.org was launched in 2003, and for several years basically consisted of the archives of our print product and a monthly e-mail newsletter. We were and still are very committed to serving a loyal print audience of public school parents and grandparents, many of whom still do not have good online access—in some neighborhoods in Philadelphia, Internet penetration is estimated at less than twenty percent.<sup>3</sup>

It was being selected for a Knight Community Information Challenge grant in 2008 that enabled the *Notebook* to expand its staff sufficiently to support a more ambitious web presence with fresh daily content—both breaking news and commentary—and very active

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<sup>3</sup> Jeff Gelles, “Digital Divide Still Wide in Philadelphia,” *Philly.com*, March 29, 2012, [http://articles.philly.com/2012-03-29/news/31255078\\_1\\_national-broadband-plan-broadband-service-public-computer-centers](http://articles.philly.com/2012-03-29/news/31255078_1_national-broadband-plan-broadband-service-public-computer-centers) (accessed February 18, 2013).

reader commenting. That has been in place for four years, during which time we have begun to successfully compete with the dailies as the go-to place for breaking news on education.

At the same time we made that leap, we did not cut back on print—we instead expanded our print publication to six times a year. Among nonprofit news organizations, we have been particularly successful at reaching and engaging an economically diverse readership, and our print edition, which always includes two pages translated into Spanish, continues to be vital to that. Many of our print readers still have not made the transition online. So we are part of a camp in the nonprofit news sector that is very committed to print. Involved parents tell us the *Notebook* is their bible for making sense out of the school system.

That broad audience, including many parents, is key to our ability to do accountability journalism. Our stories have more influence because members of the school district's governing board regularly hear testimony from the public that cites the *Notebook* as a source. Local officials read our coverage and know that it is taken seriously.

### III. MISSION AND ACTIVIST ORIENTATION

Where the *Notebook* has the most interesting experience to offer around journalistic innovation is in its thinking about its mission, its relationship to its audience, and its impact. It is in the story of how we have cultivated and expanded a reader community. While we spent a lot of years successfully building a brand on our own, increasingly for us the growth of that reader community has tied into questions about partnerships. For the *Notebook*, there are important professional partnerships with other news organizations, including the *Philadelphia Daily News*, our local public radio station (WHYY), and the national journal *Education Week*. But there also have been partnerships with education and community organizations.

The *Notebook's* mission is to serve as a source of information and support so that everyone involved in or concerned about education in the city—which, one way or another, is virtually everybody—can work more effectively for quality and equity in Philadelphia's public schools. We seek to have an impact by supporting greater and more effective public engagement in schools.

As a mission-driven publication, there are a couple of things about our approach that may diverge from traditional ideas about journalistic objectivity. Our thinking on journalism and advocacy and how we balance and integrate the two is something we pay close attention to and is constantly evolving.

The *Notebook's* history of partnerships really started with community and activist groups. In fact, the *Notebook* grew out of Philadelphia's education activist community—our initial leadership came largely from groups that were involved in the early 1990s in organizing parents, teachers, and students and bringing attention to inequities faced by students of color and students with disabilities. In launching the *Notebook*, we took advantage of those ties. We chose to involve members of those organizations—on our initial board list, most were identified as affiliated with activist or advocacy groups. In creating the organization, while we have never allowed the *Notebook* to be a vehicle for organizational press releases, we did not sever those ties or push to keep those organizations at arm's length. We have explicitly made education activism a focus of our content.

In maintaining those ties, we tapped into a natural base of support among groups that are involved in education advocacy. We do not automatically embrace or adopt the specific agendas of those groups, but we do openly espouse the point of view that grassroots activism on education issues is a vital lever for education reform. We do consistently look to highlight the work of organizations that are educating and involving parents, students, and community members in efforts to create a more effective and equitable school system.

The *Notebook's* activist bent also extends to the ever-present issue of the need for transparency in the public education system. We see it as part of our mission to consistently and relentlessly press officials on recognizing the right of the public to be fully informed and given channels for input into policy decisions.

For example, if you went to our website in recent months, you would have seen a focus on how Philadelphia is dealing with a wave of school closings. Generally, the wisdom dispensed by expert consultants on how to downsize large urban school systems is to tell the public about any closing plans as late in the game as possible so they have less time to organize opposition. It became clear early in the "facilities master plan" process in 2011 that the school district was sitting on their plans. The *Notebook* was aggressive in pushing for disclosure. After all, why not maximize the opportunity to tap feedback and the wisdom of the community on how to proceed? After a few months of raising this perspective, one day a brown envelope arrived in our office with a copy of the district's "confidential" fifty-page draft plan of which schools were targeted for closing. We published it a full three months before a closing list was officially

released.<sup>4</sup> Even though officials pooh-poohed what we published as just an early draft that had already changed substantially, every school on the final proposed closing list had been included in and alerted by our earlier report. Two of the schools on that final list ultimately were not closed because they were widely recognized to be high-performing, and our early release of the report helped make it possible for those schools to build a consensus that it would be a mistake to close them.

That experience around the school closings process illustrates that as a mission-driven publication, there are some questions the *Notebook* is decidedly not neutral or objective about—it is an advocate for the education system to have open and democratic processes. To be faithful to our mission of informing and supporting efforts by the public, we as journalists take the approach that we have to be assertive about transparency and openness to community input. As a rule, big-city school systems, like other bureaucracies, are not good at this unless they are pushed. And so transparency and opportunities for public input are issues we at the *Notebook* are going to harp on.

We have seen that an explicit stance in support of informing and empowering communities serves us well in building a strong rapport with a broad audience. It is a principled stance that virtually everyone can relate to, whatever educational camp they are in—at least among those outside the bureaucracy. It is widely understood that the *Notebook* supports the right of communities to have a voice in decisions. It does not mean we are going to argue that every decision must be made by “the people” or even that there is never a place for a private meeting. But most big school systems do not err in that direction. There are a lot of parents, teachers, and students with a lot of expertise who feel they are shut out of decisions in schools and the school system. In our view, someone needs to be asking regularly whether the closed-door meetings should be open to sunshine, or whether there are documents and private conversations that should be shared.

This commitment to openness and public discussion is a point of view or a bias that we wear comfortably and try to be open about. There certainly are legacy news organizations that are relentless on the community’s right to access information. But our mission and

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<sup>4</sup> Benjamin Herold and Dale Mezzacappa, “Confidential Document Lists Dozens of Possible Closings, Consolidations,” *The Notebook*, June 25, 2011, <http://thenotebook.org/blog/113836/confidential-document-lists-dozens-possible-closings-consolidations> (accessed February 18, 2013).

orientation help keep that set of issues front and center for us, and that has served us well.

Given our connection to activist groups and our assertive stance about community involvement, it has been vital to our credibility that the *Notebook* also demonstrate what we refer to as strong journalism DNA. I cannot say that is something we consistently achieved in our early days, but it was one of the central challenges I took on when I became editor. The foundation for that effort is maintenance of high standards for fairness and accuracy, and also transparency about those standards.

In our early days, one of the reasons that kind of standard was a challenge to consistently uphold was that for many years, a high percentage of *Notebook* content was not written by professional journalists. We did our best to work with those writers, to clarify which pieces were “news articles,” and to make those fair, factual, and free of editorializing. We were also systematic about labeling opinion articles as such.

But having adequate funding to hire a staff of professional journalists as writers and editors was a huge advance over the days when I had to spend a lot of my time editing non-professionals. A significant breakthrough for us was being able to hire Dale Mezzacappa, the *Philadelphia Inquirer's* former senior education reporter, who came with decades of experience in traditional newsrooms. More recently, as an outgrowth of our affiliation with the *Investigative News Network*, we have put renewed effort into detailing our editorial standards and policies, as we did through a statement of ethics and editorial policies.

#### IV. MAXIMIZING IMPACT

At the *Notebook*, we have also spent lots of time grappling with the question of what kind of partnerships are appropriate to enter into as we think about maximizing our impact. Here again, we have not always adhered to the traditional notion that the subjects of stories always have to be kept at arm's length.

To me, a helpful frame for folks in the field of journalism who are rethinking their approach is an article in the winter 2011 *Stanford Social Innovation Review* called “Collective Impact,” by John Kania and Mark Kramer.<sup>5</sup> The piece, which has created some buzz,

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<sup>5</sup> John Kania and Mark Kramer, “Collective Impact,” *Stanford Social Innovation Review*, Winter 2011, [http://www.ssireview.org/articles/entry/collective\\_impact](http://www.ssireview.org/articles/entry/collective_impact) (accessed February 18, 2013).

highlights the importance of broad and deep collaborations in the nonprofit sector in achieving meaningful social impact.

The authors are part of a research group called FSG Social Impact Advisors that we have worked with through our involvement with the Knight Foundation. In this article, they put forward the basic insight that “[l]arge-scale social change requires cross-sector coordination, yet the social sector remains focused on the isolated intervention of individual organizations.”<sup>6</sup> Their perspective is that the thinking in the nonprofit sector among funders and grantees is still too much focused on judging which organizations have the biggest individual impact, even though an individual approach is not likely to have much success dealing with intractable social issues—like failing urban school systems.

They go on to argue for attention to *collective impact*, through very specific kinds of collaboration across organizations and sectors—ones with a centralized infrastructure and staff, a common agenda, and mutually reinforcing activities among groups. They make a strong case that this kind of broad and deep collaboration is what is necessary to make lasting impact on social problems. And the concept of collective impact seems to be gaining some traction.

News organizations that are seeking philanthropic support are inevitably going to have to be concerned about demonstrating impact. If this interest in collective impact is a direction in which philanthropy is moving, then it stands to reason that the nonprofit journalism sector is increasingly going to be confronted with the question of how to relate to emerging “collective impact initiatives” that may be focused on the very same public policy issues we cover.

Is there a role for journalists on the inside of these initiatives? Or is our role only to be the objective observer and reporter?

In keeping with our activist orientation, the *Notebook* has been testing the waters and participating in some collaborations that fit with the collective impact approach. Our longest and most substantial involvement has involved us in a local initiative for about eight years—a citywide anti-dropout campaign called Project U-Turn.<sup>7</sup>

The initiative was originally framed as a citywide, cross-sector public awareness and action campaign aimed at increasing the graduation rate in Philadelphia. The *Notebook* was actually invited in on the ground floor with some community-based organizations,

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> See Philadelphia Youth Network: Project U-Turn, <http://www.pyninc.org/projectuturn/index.php> (last accessed March 29, 2013).

fundes, education reform organizations, university researchers, and city government officials. The question of how a news organization like the *Notebook* could contribute to this project through our reporting was part of the conversation. As a result of that conversation, we were funded to do independent reporting on the dropout situation. We have included others from the initiative on our editorial advisory board, and we have produced an annual edition on the topic seven times now.

My being part of the inner circle—the steering committee—of this effort at the start likely played a role in establishing sufficient support for the *Notebook*'s long-term involvement. It gave me an opportunity to pitch ideas for how our news organization could contribute—and to demonstrate first-hand the kinds of insights that a news organization could bring to the effort. It also provided the *Notebook* a depth of understanding of this multifaceted effort that enabled us to think strategically about our coverage.

But being part of the steering committee that coordinated the initiative grew more complicated by the second year as the project gained momentum, and the school superintendent and the mayor stepped up their interest and involvement in the project. There were probably conversations officials did not want to have with me in the room. We removed ourselves from the steering committee at that point but continued as a partner on the project.

The funding, support, and access we have had by being a partner in the campaign has allowed us to do some great reporting. I would maintain our coverage has been fair and balanced and has also contributed to building increased awareness about the grim outcomes for Philadelphia students. Much more of the city is now aware that there is only about a sixty percent graduation rate and some of the stories behind that, which are not just about student or parental failure. We have tracked the overall impact of the effort and its major initiatives and taken a different angle on our coverage each year. For instance, in a February 2012 installment, we looked at how the dropout problem intersects with economic disinvestment in a depressed, former industrial neighborhood in Philadelphia.<sup>8</sup>

As a partner in the effort, we have been privy to some of the inside dealings of this collaborative and have been willing to accept that there are some meetings we cannot report on. There might be some stories about the inner workings of the collaborative that are off-limits

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<sup>8</sup> Benjamin Herold, "No Diploma, No Job: Few U.S. Job-Seekers Face A Tougher Road than Young Dropouts from Kensington," *Philadelphia Public School Notebook*, February 2012, 1.

for us. That is a compromise we make by being part of this initiative—but it has not affected our ability to tell the bigger story of how the dropout problem and responses to it are developing across the city. We have reported honestly on the progress and in some cases the lack thereof. Over eight years, we have produced a body of work about why students leave school of which we are proud and that has helped the public understand the systemic failure underlying the low graduation rates. Our experience has encouraged us about entering in to other such partnerships—while doing our best to be transparent about the relationships we are entering into.

#### V. SOME TAKEAWAYS

Overall, what the *Notebook* has increasingly been able to offer is a depth of coverage and analysis about the school system that our endangered legacy media can no longer provide. Beyond that, our willingness to break with some of the conventions of traditional journalism has brought a kind of immediacy and passion to our reporting that has attracted an engaged readership.

The *Notebook*, over nineteen years, has made real strides toward creating a local space for people to grapple with the difficult problems of how to improve a troubled school system. Remarkably, on some issues there is even consensus about what the answers are. But in all cases, having that space for constructive conversation and sustaining a dialogue encourages professional educators, parents, advocates and others to persist in their efforts to address what often feel like overwhelming social problems. And while our focus is on the single issue of schools, we at the *Notebook* contribute to a larger, emerging public interest journalism community in Philadelphia that hopefully is helping our city and its citizens better address its problems.

