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Parents work to rejuvenate a public school

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It was a two-page wish list, full of goals both lofty and practical: "reopen the school library," "establish a language program," remove "bars/grates/fencing if possible."

A handful of playground moms brainstormed the plan and presented it to a Philadelphia School District official last fall as a blueprint for a vibrant neighborhood school.

The school, Andrew Jackson Elementary at 12th and Federal, has failed to meet state standards for several years running. Seventy-six percent of its students are poor. Student outcomes have caused the district to classify Jackson an "empowerment" school, among the lowest performers in the city.

Still, the moms want to send their children, now toddlers, there. With the encouragement of the district, the dozen core members of the Passyunk Square Civic Association's education committee - architects, stay-at-home moms, a lawyer, even two women who don't yet have children - plan to check off every item on that list, from installing a science lab to incorporating yoga programs into classroom routines.

All they've got to do, they figure, is reshape curriculum and teaching, lower class size, and sell Jackson to a neighborhood highly skeptical of city public schools.

The needs of the nondescript brick school building are big, but they will raise money, they swear. They will volunteer and scrub and recruit and work with officials and do whatever it takes to make Jackson a top public school.

"We can make the most impact at a school that's struggling," said Terry Jack, one of the moms. "We can do this."

That's a revolutionary idea in their up-and-coming South Philadelphia community of cozy brick rowhouses where neighbors sit out on their steps on warm nights. Many young professional families there go the private- or charter-school route or move to the suburbs as their children approach kindergarten age.

"You can't gamble with your kids' education," acknowledged Jackie Gusic, a cochair of the

committee.

But by the time her 3-year-old son enters Jackson, Gusic figures, it won't be a gamble. The members point to local and national successful neighborhood school renaissances as evidence.

Take the Nettelhorst School in Chicago, which eight years ago looked an awful lot like Jackson but has been hailed by U.S. Education Secretary Arne Duncan - the former CEO of Chicago Public Schools - as a star school.

Take Philadelphia schools like Henry and Houston in West Mount Airy, Meredith in Queen Village, and McCall Elementary in Society Hill, highly regarded schools aided by groups of parents committed to making public schools a viable option for neighborhoods.

In 2004, Sonja Bingham ruled out sending her kids to private school because it was too expensive. She decided to take her chances on McCall at Seventh and Pine, which she deemed safe but lacking in extras.

Little by little, she and a core group of parents won change in the form of a new playground, a state-of-the-art library, whiteboards, and a commitment to Chinese-language classes. McCall is now among the top public schools in the city.

"Now, you're seeing more of the families walking their kids to school," Bingham said. "There really is a neighborhood feel. For me, the benefit of seeing it go from one or two families to an army of families - I can't even tell you how great that feels."

When the Passyunk Square education committee formed in the fall, the moms entertained the idea of starting a charter school, then quickly dismissed it.

"It's unnecessary," committee member Katie Lavelle said on a recent weeknight, as outside, dozens of neighborhood children screamed with glee on the new, packed Columbus Square playground at 12th and Wharton. "Up the street there are four walls and teachers and a budget. We've taken not sending our kids to Andrew Jackson off the table."

They weren't sure what to expect when they met with Ralph Burnley, the regional superintendent who oversees Jackson. But when the moms presented him with their list, Burnley seemed delighted.

He still carries his well-worn copy with him.

The list encompasses things that all children should have, Burnley said, and he was glad to find partners to help the district get there for Jackson's kids - 35 percent of whom are African American, 30 percent of whom are Latino, 18 percent of whom are Asian, and 12 percent of whom are white.

"This group gets that the better the school is, the better the community is, and not a lot of folks get that," said Burnley, who now meets monthly with the moms. "We think this is very viable. As a regional superintendent, for me, this is a godsend."

The moms have already gotten results. With Burnley's blessing, the moms and Jackson eighth

graders planted a garden last weekend. They painted a map of the United States on the playground blacktop. They're overseeing the opening of the long-shuttered library, and Burnley said their opinions will carry weight as a committee picks Jackson's next principal.

The moms want to tackle the science lab next. They will hold a teachers' appreciation luncheon. They plan to put a mosaic on the front of the school. They want a language program for the school's Latino parents, and an antiracism program in social studies classes.

And they've gotten the attention of Superintendent Arlene Ackerman, who met them briefly last week. She said their efforts dovetailed perfectly with her philosophy that "parents are our partners."

"I like the fact that parents are getting involved early," Ackerman said in an interview. "They can make changes long before they enroll their children."

Like the other moms, Jennifer Zanck, committee cochair, is a product of public schools and a committed urban dweller. Her first-grade daughter is the oldest of the moms' children, and it was Zanck's kindergarten quest last school year that provided the spark for the committee.

"I love my neighborhood, and I had this vision of being able to walk to school with my children," said Zanck. "But nobody wanted to be the sole pioneer in a public school."

Ultimately, Zanck's daughter won a place in a charter school, and the girl, who has medical issues, will stay there. But her baby son will attend Jackson, Zanck said.

She sees progress, too. Zanck has been going to Jackson open houses for the past three years, and the first time she showed up, she sat in the office for 30 minutes. She was the only parent present, and no one knew what to do with her.

This year, Jackson had an organized tour, and the school's interim principal has been receptive to the moms' overtures, said Zanck.

Still, the moms know they've got a long way to go to overcome the poor reputation of the city's school district. If one of them talks to a neighbor about sending their children to Jackson, they often hear shock.

"People will say, 'Oh, no, honey, you want to go to a charter school or a Catholic school,'" said Zanck.

Last week, the moms looked to author Jacqueline Edelberg, in town for a book reading, for advice. Edelberg was one of the moms who helped transform Nettelhorst, the Chicago school. *How to Walk to School* describes the work.

The Passyunk Square moms, who discovered Edelberg's book after they launched their own quest, were all ears.

"You guys have real advantages we didn't have," Edelberg told them. "You have Facebook and social-networking tools that weren't available to us."

Change can come fast to Jackson, but they have to be prepared to work hard, Edelberg said,

adding that the energy around the Jackson moms' work feels just like that of her and her friends' seven years ago.

"Most people think that education is so messed up that there's nothing you can do about it," Edelberg said. "But you can do this. Schools aren't anything more than a collection of people who are trying to do right by children."

For More Information

The Passyunk Square Civic Association's education committee welcomes input - and help - from any South Philadelphia parent, not just those living in the immediate neighborhood (Washington Avenue to Tasker Street and Sixth Street to Broad Street). For more information, visit the organization's Web site at www.passyunk.org or send an e-mail to [education@](mailto:education@passyunk.org)

passyunk.org

The committee is currently conducting a survey on elementary education in the neighborhood. To take the survey, go to [http://passyunksquare.](http://passyunksquare.questionpro.com)

[questionpro.com](http://passyunksquare.questionpro.com) Completed surveys must be received by April 30.

To read more about the Chicago moms' quest, go to <http://www.howtowalktoschool.com>.

Contact staff writer Kristen Graham at 215-854-5146 or kgraham@phillynews.com.

Find this article at:

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