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To cite this article: Ryan M. Good & Katharine L. Nelson (2020): With a little help from our friends: private fundraising and public schools in Philadelphia, Journal of Education Policy, DOI: [10.1080/02680939.2020.1730979](https://doi.org/10.1080/02680939.2020.1730979)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/02680939.2020.1730979>



Published online: 21 Feb 2020.



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With a little help from our friends: private fundraising and public schools in Philadelphia

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ABSTRACT

In this paper, we study fundraising efforts for traditional public schools in Philadelphia by neighborhood-based 'friends' groups that have incorporated as independent 501(c)(3)s to support individual schools. We situate the growth of school-based fundraising efforts within the well-known social science literature on the shadow state and the devolution of the welfare state over 30 years ago. As far as we know, this is the first application of these theories to education reform. We ask what characterizes schools and neighborhoods where school constituencies have incorporated as 501(c)(3) organizations, how school-specific 501(c)(3)s raise money, and what priorities guide their investment objectives. We draw on interviews with local organizations, document review of IRS Form 990 filings, and school district and census demographic data. We find that the work of these organizations must be understood in the context of gentrifying neighborhoods and that they reflect the manifestation of inequalities in local capacity described in the shadow state literature.

ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 2 August 2019
Accepted 13 February 2020

KEYWORDS

School funding;
neighborhoods;
gentrification; parent
organizations

Introduction

The School District of Philadelphia (SDP) has for decades struggled for adequate funding, while many suburban school districts work with substantially more generous budgets. In the early 2010s, the SDP instituted a series of extreme 'doomsday' budget cuts as it struggled to manage the effects of dwindling state funding (in part a consequence of the end of the federal stimulus) and an expanding charter school sector (Woodall and Chea-Annan 2013). The resulting personnel and service cuts made national headlines (Strauss 2013).

Public school funding in the United States is a multi-scalar collaboration that extends from state capitals down to local communities. While it is state legislatures that carry ultimate responsibility for children's education, local tax bases supplement state funding, creating a patchwork of funding inequality between wealthier and poorer school districts. This dynamic is mirrored within many school districts, as wealthier communities are able to leverage greater resources to support neighborhood schools and to pick up slack created when districts face funding shortfalls. In the face of stark scarcity at the district and state levels, individual schools often seek out partnerships with outside

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organizations, such as corporations, private foundations, churches, and other community organizations (Nisbet 2018).

In this paper, we explore the emergence of a particular stripe of outside partner: the neighborhood-based 501(c)(3) organization created explicitly as a fundraising conduit for a neighborhood school. In Philadelphia and elsewhere, these organizations often, though not always, call themselves ‘friends’ groups as in: ‘Friends of Bancroft Elementary’. They differ from more traditional forms of parent organizations in that they generally operate with greater autonomy, are fiscally independent, and mobilize a broader constituency of neighbors and future parents (Posey-Maddox 2016). This form of organization is also distinctive for its use as a means through which middle-class families in gentrifying neighborhoods pursue improving a local school for their current and future children (Posey-Maddox, Kimelberg, and Cucchiara 2014; Nelson 2018).

In Philadelphia, friends groups frequently operate separately from existing Home and School Associations (HSAs) because of structural limitations in the ability of some HSAs to fundraise and the historical relationship between the HSA structure and the School District of Philadelphia. Although often driven by fiscal necessity, our research shows that creating a new parent organization can be racially contentious in gentrifying neighborhoods, causing tension with HSAs that are often led by parents representing the neighborhood’s past.

In this research, we focus specifically on friends groups that have taken the step to incorporate as 501(c)(3) organizations. Pursuing 501(c)(3) status is significant, because it establishes the architecture for more substantial fundraising and reflects a higher level of organizational commitment and capacity. We seek to answer two empirical research questions: (1) What characterizes schools and neighborhoods where school constituencies have incorporated as 501(c)(3) organizations? And, (2) how do school-specific 501(c)(3)s raise money and what priorities guide their investment objectives?

We situate the growing role of private and philanthropic dollars in supporting public education (Nelson and Gazley 2014) within a trajectory of state retrenchment in public services more broadly. Nearly three decades ago, scholars described the privatization of the U.S. social service sector as an emerging ‘shadow state’, where state-coordinated public investment is replaced with a more ad hoc and variable landscape of private funders and providers (Wolch 1990). Today, parallel dynamics are evident in the privatization and marketization of public education in the United States. Emphases on privately managed charter schools, enhanced school choice, and market discipline amount to a withdrawal of the state, both in terms of its regulatory and fiscal commitments (Lipman 2011). While a marketized education sector presents opportunities for local autonomy to those with the resources to take advantage of those opportunities, it erodes the public infrastructure tasked with providing education to those communities with fewer resources.

Perhaps this dynamic is nowhere more evident than in gentrifying neighborhoods where middle-class residents bring their professional and economic capital to bear in a project of revitalizing and shoring up disinvested neighborhood infrastructure: houses, parks, commercial corridors – and when children enter the picture – *schools*. Such reinvestment in schools can be fraught. Schools are community institutions: social hubs and repositories of neighborhood history and identity that help root communities in place. When a gentrifying class mobilizes the resources to invest in and improve a local

school, the resultant questions of ownership, turf, and belonging can be complex (see Posey-Maddox, Kimelberg, and Cucchiara 2014). The growth of 501(c)(3) friends organizations is an important part of understanding how these stories of privatization, local mobilization, and political economy intersect in efforts to support neighborhood schools.

Schools and the ‘shadow state’

The term ‘shadow state’ was coined nearly three decades ago to describe a profound restructuring of the American welfare state from one where services were paid for and provided by the public sector, to one dominated by a voluntary sector of nonprofits and intermediaries. While it is a familiar literature in many social science circles, our theoretical contribution is to apply it to public K-12 education in the context of urban education reform.

Public retrenchment, or what has been called the ‘hollowing out of the state’, and its associated dynamics of privatization and devolution (see Rhodes 1994; Kodras 1997; Jessop 2002) have produced a new sector of nonprofits, which Wolch (1990, 201) dubbed the ‘shadow state’, and she defined as ‘a para-state apparatus with collective service responsibilities previously shouldered by the public sector, administered outside traditional democratic politics, but yet controlled in both formal and informal ways by the state’.

The shadow state theorization has been applied to such diverse areas as housing, community and economic development, poverty alleviation, military and defense, and the prison industrial complex (Wolch 1990; Grønbjerg and Smith 1999; Gilmore 2007). The term refers to three interrelated sets of processes (Kodras 1997). First, there is a general reduction in benefits and services. Second, there is a rescaling of state service provision from a national model to the state, municipal, and even local level. This devolution of service provision is generally motivated by the strain of fiscal crisis, which prompts local action. Devolution is also often accompanied by an ideological argument about local flexibility and discretion. Finally, there is a dramatic rise of the voluntary sector through the contracting out of services to not-for-profits either officially or indirectly through the reduction in public services. This final dimension has been associated with massive growth in the nonprofit sector since the early 1980s. We argue that the shadow-state theorization is helpful in understanding changes in the governance and funding of public education generally, and a useful lens through which to make sense of the dynamics in the SDP specifically.

First, most states spend less per pupil on K-12 education than they did before the Great Recession, and funding trends are still negative in many places even though we are now a decade past the Recession (Leachman et al. 2016). In Pennsylvania, the state covers only 35% of education spending compared to 46% on average nationally (Leachman et al. 2016). This means that a greater share must be paid for through local property taxes, which tends to increase inequity in school funding. In 2011, Pennsylvania Governor Corbett cut \$1 billion from the state budget for schools, resulting in an average of \$414 cut per student and disproportionately impacting lower-income students and students of color (Public Interest Law Center 2017).

Second, state funding cuts tend to devolve responsibility to local school districts, which must make up the difference by increasing local funding or cutting programs. In Pennsylvania, a study by the Public Interest Law Center (2017) showed that as a result of

state cuts, 70% of school districts increased class size, 44% cut extracurricular activities, and 35% eliminated tutoring programs. A second trend in this direction is the dramatic expansion of charter schools, which devolves administrative responsibility down to the individual school. In Pennsylvania, charter school enabling legislation was passed in 1997, and by 2017, 84 charter schools operated in Philadelphia, educating roughly 65,000 children, or one third of all students (Pennsylvania Department of Education 2018).

Finally, the voluntary sector is playing an increasingly significant role in funding education. Nationally, 6,500 local school districts now have foundations to supplement their budgets (Conway 2017). In Philadelphia, private fundraising for the SDP is managed by a 501(c)(3) called The Fund for the School District of Philadelphia ('The Fund'). This organization is independent but exists only for the purpose of fiscally supporting the District. The Fund works closely with District leadership to identify needs and priorities and then coordinate grant writing and fundraising toward those ends. In an interesting mid-level effort to mitigate shadow state inequality, in 2017 The Fund rolled out a web platform called Philly FUNDamentals that allows donors to target donations to individual schools. Through a digital map interface, the website allows principals to identify needs, fundraising targets, and progress toward those goals. In a September 2017 interview, leadership at The Fund described this project to us as creating the capacity for all schools in the district to do private fundraising, not only those who have friends groups supporting them. According to their most recent annual report, the Fund has raised more than \$3 million from foundations and philanthropic sources.

The uneven geography of shadow state capacity

The devolution of the welfare state means that local capacity depends on the ability of people in places to mobilize themselves to provide the services they need. Such local capacity varies significantly. Research, not surprisingly, has found that poorer places have thinner and weaker non-profit capacities. In perhaps the seminal work on this question, Allard (2009) found that consistently, and across a set of different measures, 'the vast majority of assistance is delivered in neighborhoods with low to moderate poverty' (85). This finding echoes many others (Grønbjerg and Paarlberg 2001; Joassart-Marcelli and Wolch 2003). Moreover, the inequitable outcomes associated with the voluntary sector were evident 30 years ago. As Wolch and Geiger (1983, 1078) found: 'voluntary resources are manifestly not funneled to those most in "need," nor are organizations agglomerated in the most needy areas of the metropolitan region'. The voluntary sector in education displays these same inequities. Cuts in education funding often lead parents who are able to, to fundraise for programs at their own schools, a system of hyper-localization that reproduces existing inequalities between and within school districts.

Unequal access to resources amidst shadow state service provision makes manifest the state's relinquishment of its responsibility to support the needs of marginalized communities that has characterized the neoliberal era (Mitchell 2001). In describing this dynamic, Lake and Newman (2002) arrive at the term 'differential citizenship'. That is, because of the limits of the non-profit sector in what are often the poorest and most marginal communities, some people cannot fully realize social citizenship, resulting in the further marginalization of vulnerable communities. As Lake and Newman (2002, 118) write, "These

groups are doubly disenfranchised: transferred from the state to the shadow state that is itself unable to respond to citizenship claims due to structural and contextual constraints’.

Research on school fundraising shows that school-based nonprofits are growing throughout the country (Nelson and Gazley 2014), and also that parents in the more affluent schools are exacerbating existing inequalities by supplementing resources (Brown, Sargrad, and Benner 2017). In a recent article, Schaller and Nisbet (2019) consider policy options for school districts to mitigate the ways parent fundraising is able to support enhanced services in wealthier schools (see also Nisbet 2018). Our application of the shadow state theorization contributes to these debates by drawing attention to how the retrenchment of state education funding magnifies the uneven outcomes arising from parents’ differing capacities to fundraise for their local schools. It also provides a frame for understanding how well-intentioned individual actions can exacerbate existing unfairness.

A related literature about school-based fundraising focuses on individual schools or neighborhoods where urban professionals are choosing to stay in the city to raise their children. Some of this research describes gentrifying families’ efforts to get their children into schools outside of their neighborhood catchment or into charter schools (Butler 2003; DeSena 2006, 2009; Hankins 2007). A much larger emerging literature describes parents sending their children to predominantly lower-income neighborhood schools (Childers Roberts 2012; Cucchiara 2008; Edelberg and Kurland 2009; Nelson 2018; Posey-Maddox, Kimelberg, and Cucchiara 2014; Stillman 2012). One central theme of these studies is how middle-class parents’ involvement in urban schools may reinforce patterns of racial and socioeconomic inequality (Cucchiara and Horvat 2009; Kimelberg and Billingham 2013). These new parents often quickly dominate school leadership and refocus energy on fundraising (Cole 2016). Posey-Maddox (2014) provides perhaps the most detailed account of how the enrollment and investment of a small number of middle-class parents in a Title I school led to a demographic shift within the school, as low-income children were replaced by more affluent children drawn by the school’s changing reputation. Cucchiara (2017) proposed the concept of ‘school gentrification’ to characterize these dynamics occurring in schools in many cities across the country.

Applying the theorization of the shadow state allows us to move beyond a school-centric lens and to see middle-class parents and their organizations within a broader social and political context of state devolution and uneven local capacity. The rise of groups fundraising for individual schools exacerbates existing inequalities, with resources and programs concentrated in a single school or a small subset of schools rather than implemented across a district. Borrowing a term from Lake and Newman (2002), we argue that many students in low-income schools are thus ‘doubly disenfranchised’. First, low-income schools are marginalized by the state’s inequitable and regressive funding for local education. And second, these schools are marginalized by the rise of the shadow state, which magnifies uneven resource allocation among schools within the district.

Background: cash-strapped schools and uneven revitalization in Philadelphia

During the 1990s, a deep rift grew between the state legislature in Harrisburg and Philadelphia city and school leadership over the funding of Philadelphia’s troubled public

school system. In 2001, following a contentious fight, the state formally took over the SDP and established a five-member School Reform Commission (SRC) made up of two mayoral appointees and three members appointed by the governor. The SRC adopted a 'diverse provider model', which brought in a variety of private entities to run 45 of the District's most troubled schools, contracting with seven for-profit and non-profit entities (Useem, Christman, and Boyd 2006). The SRC additionally began a dramatic expansion of the city's charter school sector. By the early 2010s, charter school growth, compounded by dramatic cuts in both state and federal support, put a tremendous fiscal squeeze on the SDP. In spring 2012, the SDP estimated a cumulative deficit of \$1.1 billion dollars over five years, driving a round of school closures that shuttered approximately one out of every ten District-run public schools in the city, disproportionately affecting low-income and African American communities (Good 2017).

The SDP's fiscal woes and infrastructural contraction during the early 2010s contrasted strikingly with renewed economic development and population growth in the city, particularly in the downtown area known colloquially as Center City. Mayor Ed Rendell is often credited with orchestrating this turnaround, improving the city's fiscal health through renegotiation of public contracts and privatization of some city services, and engaging in a concerted effort to transform Center City into a space of economic growth, the arts, and tourism (Simon and Alnutt 2007).

As of 2019, Philadelphia's population has grown for 12 consecutive years, sustained by influxes of immigrants and young adults. However, the benefits of this growth have been uneven and reveal a starkly racialized geography of opportunity. While median home sale prices in some of the city's hottest neighborhoods in and around Center City increased more than 75% between 2010 and 2018, poverty rates top 45% in some of the city's poorest and predominately African American neighborhoods (The Pew Charitable Trusts 2019). Population growth among young professionals has supported development and gentrification in a number of neighborhoods in and around Center City. The city has had less success, however, keeping such professionals from moving to the suburbs when they begin having children, as Philadelphia's schools become a liability for young families once children approach school age (The Pew Charitable Trusts 2014).

For cash-strapped school districts, it can be difficult to reconcile the twin objectives of improving struggling schools in poor neighborhoods and adequately raising the bar at schools in gentrifying neighborhoods so as to convince middle-class parents to enroll their children (Cucchiara 2013). An alternative – and the dynamic at the core of this paper – is for middle-class parents to organize themselves to leverage the resources necessary to improve schools in their own neighborhoods. In Philadelphia, a growing number of such organizations has emerged since the SDP fiscal crises of the early 2010s, energy reflected in and supported by a coalition of more than 40 friends groups called Friends of Neighborhood Education (FONE). FONE, established in 2015, supports newly organized groups, and provides a clearinghouse for best practices to bolster Philadelphia public schools.

Methods

There are 147 elementary and K-8 District-managed public schools in Philadelphia. Through internet research and review of IRS filings, we identified 16 organizations that had incorporated as 501(c)(3)s and focused on supporting an SDP-run school. In one

case, there are two 501(c)(3) organizations supporting the same school, meaning that 15 schools are represented in our set of 16 organizations. We reached out to each of these organizations, requesting an interview with a representative. Eleven of the sixteen organizations agreed to be interviewed for this project. The goals of the interviews were to learn: (1) how the organizations started, (2) how they raise funds, and (3) what objectives guide their use of those funds. When permission was given, interviews were recorded and transcribed (in seven of the eleven cases, this was so). Notes from non-recorded interviews were typed immediately following the interview. Analysis of the interview data was structured around six coding themes: (1) organizational history, (2) governance structure, (3) fiscal role, (4) budget and fundraising strategies, (5) projects and activities, and (6) SDP-wide challenges and politics.

In addition, we collected publicly available data from the SDP and the Census to better understand the evolving student populations and neighborhood demographics. We used Geographic Information Systems (GIS) to map the schools and school catchments with supportive 501(c)(3) organizations in order to identify spatial patterns, and to compare neighborhood and student demographics over time.

Empirical findings

Why do these groups exist? What are their motivating objectives?

While, the 501(c)(3) organizations in this study are diverse in size, structure and age, three primary motivating objectives were shared by most of them: (1) fundraising, (2) advocacy at the neighborhood and – for some – the District level, and (3) serving as a fiscal conduit for privately raised funds.

In the context of SDP budget deficits and service cuts, these organizations have sought to fill the gaps in supplemental enrichment services and facility needs. A number of the people we interviewed described their organization's fundraising objectives as meeting needs that should be provided by the school district and that are provided in many school districts. As one interviewee explained:

We pay for a lot that, in my opinion, every school should have, but doesn't. And many schools do, you know. The suburbs, what have you. But, you know, in a very distressed district like Philadelphia, they just don't have. We pay for an art teacher. Many schools don't have art. We, you know, if things break, as opposed to sometimes relying on the school district, you know, depending what that is, we may just pay for it.

A second motivating objective, core for many of the organizations in this study, is building a base of support for the school among middle-class residents who might not otherwise consider sending their children to the neighborhood public school. This effort encompasses shoring up services and facilities to standards acceptable to middle-class sensibilities *and also* a project of outreach, legitimation, and rebranding. Describing their organization's efforts to improve the school's playground, an interviewee noted:

You get something like that done, and it's almost like a giant billboard. You know, I mean, the way that public schools are going to see a resurgence is for more people to send their kids to 'em. And that's really the problem because nobody wants to be the guinea pig. And nobody wants to, you know, offer their child up as the, you know, potential sacrifice on a political level to keep, you know, public education on track. So, somehow we need to attract all the people that

are moving into Philadelphia and ultimately having kids to stay here and send their kids to a neighborhood school. And I feel like a schoolyard with great play equipment and lots of greenery and looks really nice and inviting, um, is like a beacon that says, 'We're doing stuff here. And this would be a good place to send your kid.'

Many of the individuals we spoke with described the health of neighborhood schools in Philadelphia as being undermined by the city's expanding charter school sector. For a minority of the organizations, advocacy on behalf of their schools has extended beyond the local community to the District level, and advocating on behalf of traditional neighborhood public schools has been an important piece of their work. As one interviewee noted, being an independent organization gave them more political leeway to pursue this objective:

We see ourselves as outside of the umbrella of the District, and so it's as much, you know – whereas Home and School is not really supposed to, you know, be critical of the District, necessarily, we can do whatever we want, because we're an independent organization. [...] So, [advocating for traditional neighborhood public schools is] as much a part of our mission as – if not more so – than the fundraising for the school.

Almost all of the individuals interviewed in this study understood the work of their organization to be part of a broader movement of middle-class parents organizing to support neighborhood schools in Philadelphia and saw similar organizations across the city as reflecting a common agenda, challenges, and strategies. Many of the organizations are to varying degrees involved with FONE, described above, which has sought to bring these organizations together for combined political voice, mutual support, and sharing best practices.

Lastly, the organizations in this study highlighted their roles as independent fiscal actors who are able to hold and dispense monies raised on behalf of the school without constraint by school district processes or paperwork. This includes holding and managing the funds raised by the organization, but also in many cases serving as a manager for monies raised or collected by individual teachers for specific classroom projects. One of our interviewees described this as simpler than utilizing District fiscal channels:

The [organization] is also a simpler way to run money through. So, if first grade is going on a field trip, the school collects money from the parents of families for that field trip. You know, eight dollars a kid for whatever. We, [the organization], take the money, deposit it, and then I write the check – I happen to be the treasurer – I write the check to the bus company, to the art museum, whatever the field trip is. It just simplifies lots of things so that you're not going through the school district.

Most of the schools supported by 501(c)(3) organizations in this study had existing parent organizations already at work in the school. In many cases, the existing organization was a Home and School Association (HSA), often comprised of lower-income, African American parents who were not newly arrived in the neighborhood. The race and class differences between the HSA and the friends organization in many of these schools initially reflected the distrust characteristic of a gentrifying neighborhood, including questions of turf, objectives, and displacement. The organizations in this study where this dynamic was at play reported working intentionally to develop stronger relationships with the HSA and to clarify distinctions in mission and jurisdiction, with varying success. In most cases, interviewees explained that HSAs focused on events

within the school and mobilizing parent volunteers to support teachers and in-school activities, while friends groups focused on fundraising and building support for the school within the community. This dynamic was not present at all the schools we interviewed, but it was widespread enough to invite further research on the interplay between these organizations and how this dynamic relates to processes of neighborhood and school change.

Why did these groups incorporate as 501(c)(3)s?

For the groups in this study, the need to raise, hold, and manage money drove the decisions to incorporate as 501(c)(3) organizations. Most of the organizations began as groups of middle-class parents with children starting at the local elementary school or community members concerned about the conditions at the school because they were considering future options for their young children. As the groups became more organized, the logistical challenges of raising and managing larger sums of money led many of them to establish partnerships with existing neighborhood civic organizations that could serve as fiscal sponsors. By definition, the organizations in this study all reached a point where they decided to incorporate as independent 501(c)(3)s. However, there are many similar organizations in Philadelphia that continue to work with established fiscal sponsors.

Organizations weighed the functional benefits of decisions to incorporate against the paperwork burdens of annual IRS filings. As one interviewee explained, 501(c)(3) status made their financial support of the school easier to manage, streamlining the channel from donor to school need:

And so for us, incorporating as a 501(c)(3) really kind of allows us to, you know, be a much simpler conduit for some of these gifts to make it to the school. So, if the school needs something, and someone wants to donate some money, you know, we can make purchases, and then just have it delivered there. And there's, you know, I won't say there's no strings, but it's just much simpler.

In one particular case, the original motivation for 501(c)(3) status came from the school's principal. In this case, a private housing developer targeting professional class residents wished to see the schoolyard down the street from his development upgraded, reportedly so as to make less glaring a troubling inequality. The developer contacted the principal about financing this redevelopment and the principal then came to the recently organized group of parents, asking that they incorporate as a 501(c)(3) in order to be able to manage the funds coming from the developer. As our interviewee explained:

Basically, [the principal] was like, 'We need a 501(c)(3) because these checks can't – You know, I don't want to have to give a chunk to the District.' And so she said, 'So, we need to form [a friends organization].' [...] We weren't sure if we wanted to be a 501(c)(3). We did the research. [...] It was probably about eight – about four couples, core parents. You know, all – mostly all professionals. And weren't really sure if we wanted to deal with being our own 501(c)(3) because we knew that that was burdensome in terms of the filing and all that. We looked into using existing 501(c)(3)s through community – through the [neighborhood] civic association, and we did use them for the first year or two. But that was complicated for them and a lot of extra work for them. And we had a lawyer, who was one of the members, who was the treasurer, and she said she would take care of the filing and the taxes and that would be her big volunteer ask. And so we went forward and did it. And once we did that, we started kind of having an annual fundraiser.

In addition to the fiscal architecture afforded by 501(c)(3) status, incorporating as a nonprofit organization also made clear to potential donors a group's financial and organizational independence from the school district. As a leader from a different organization described:

We realized that we needed to, you know, create the ability to fundraise, you know, long-term. [...] And we needed a way to reach out to the community. And becoming an independent, kind of, community-parent organization, rather than an HSA, would allow us to reach out to the community, have the community feel that their money that they were bringing in was being, you know, kind of separate from the School District, and gave us that kind of independence, and, you know, community-friendly abilities in our fundraising.

Where are they located?

The fifteen schools associated with the sixteen organizations in this study represent approximately one tenth of the 147 elementary and K-8 schools in the School District of Philadelphia. The geographic pattern where these organizations are emerging is striking. Catchments with supportive 501(c)(3)s are limited to a few sections of the City. First, they cover the Central district, including Center City, and the rapidly appreciating neighborhoods north and south of Center City. Second, sections of West Philadelphia, specifically around the universities, have these supportive organizations. Finally, these organizations exist in several catchments in Northwest Philadelphia, a section of the City known to have pockets of wealth. In short, and not surprisingly, school-based fundraising organizations have emerged in the most affluent, the most rapidly appreciating, and the whitest sections of the City.

Figure 1 shows a map of Philadelphia with the schools with 501(c)(3) organizations and their school catchment areas in black. A straightforward mapping analysis shows that these areas are the most affluent sections of the City (see Figure 2). The highest income areas, with incomes above \$80,000, are shown in the darkest gray shades. These cover Central and Upper Northwest Philadelphia and overlap closely with the catchment areas outlined in black. The area around the universities in West Philadelphia, which also has several 501(c)(3) organizations has lower median income than the other two areas, due to the number of university students residing in these areas. Overall, the numbers are striking: the average median household income across Census tracts with 501c3 organizations is \$71,609 compared to \$40,649 in the City as a whole.

School fundraising organizations are also emerging in neighborhoods with rising incomes. Figure 3 shows the percent change in median household income from 2012–2017¹, with declines shown in white and increases shown in grey. In just a few short years, many of the neighborhoods with school-based fundraising organizations saw incomes increase more than 25% compared to less than 10% in the City overall. Rapid income growth is especially pronounced around the Central City and in parts of the Northwest. As shown in the vast number of white sections on the map, much of the city is now experiencing a reduction in median income.

Finally, as is well known, many rapidly appreciating neighborhoods have some of the largest, and the fastest growing, populations of white non-Hispanic residents (Figure 4). On this map, the areas with the largest shares of white non-Hispanic

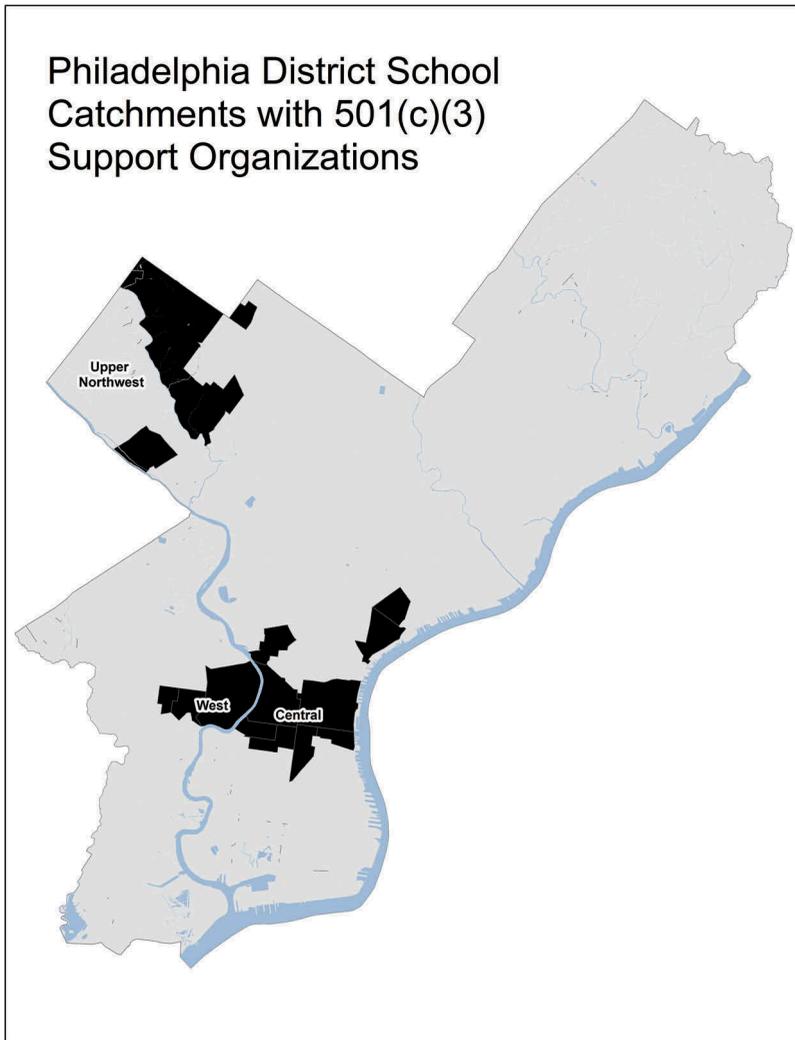


Figure 1. Philadelphia District School Catchments with 501(c)(3) Support Organizations

residents are shown in the darkest shades and they overlap clearly with the 501(c)(3) catchments.

The spatial relationship between school-based fundraising organizations, and rapidly appreciating white non-Hispanic neighborhoods is clear. It provides strong support for the relationship between the emergence of school-based fundraising organizations and processes of gentrification.

If we consider the student populations themselves, the 501(c)(3) organizations are disproportionately represented among schools with wealthier student demographics. Out of fifteen elementary schools with the lowest rates of economically disadvantaged students throughout the District, seven have 501(c)(3) organizations dedicated to supporting the school.

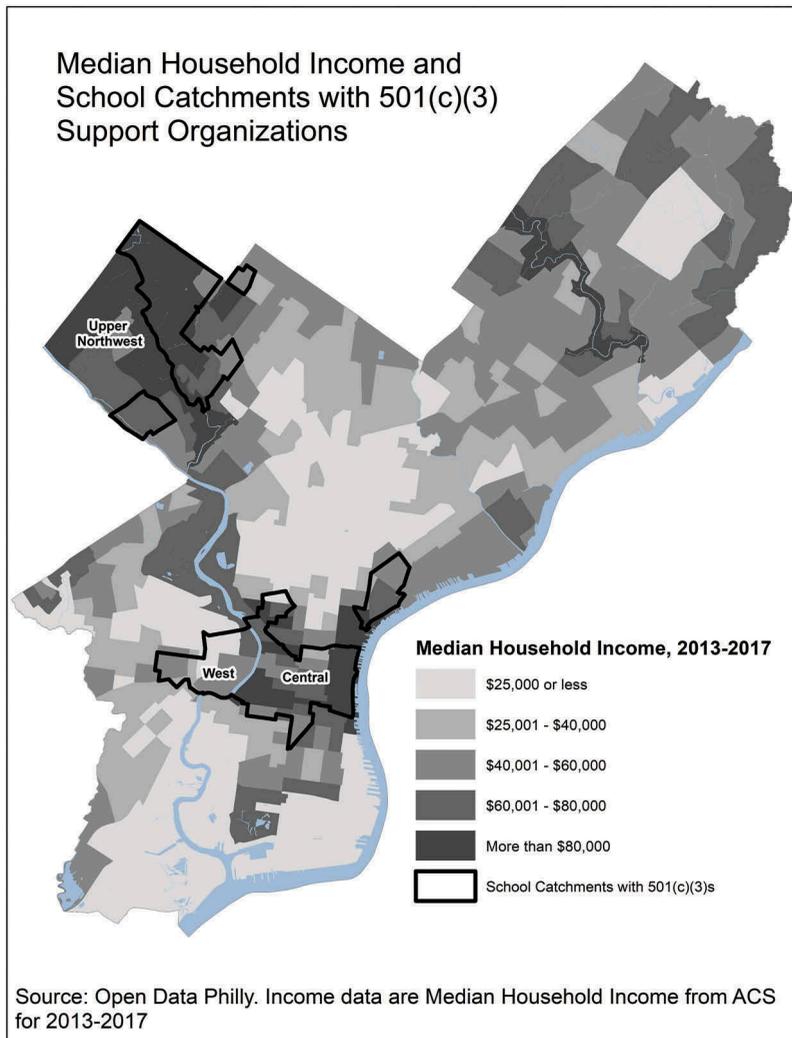


Figure 2. Median Household Income and School Catchments with 501(c)(3) Support Organizations

The schools supported by 501(c)(3) organizations are also, on average, whiter than the rest of the District. Overall, the 15 schools with 501(c)(3)s (represented individually by the light grey bars in [Figure 5](#)) have substantially higher enrollments of white students (31%, shown in medium grey) compared to schools without such organizations (11%, represented in dark grey).

Student bodies at the fifteen schools supported by dedicated 501(c)(3) organizations are also, on average, becoming whiter ([Figure 6](#)). Overall, white representation across the fifteen schools with 501(c)(3)s rose by 4 percentage points. By contrast, white enrollment at District schools without 501(c)(3) organizations dropped 3 percentage points between 2009 and 2016. Strikingly, only seven schools across the entire District saw their white enrollment rise by more than 5 percentage points between 2009 and 2016, and all seven of those schools are supported by dedicated 501(c)(3) organizations.

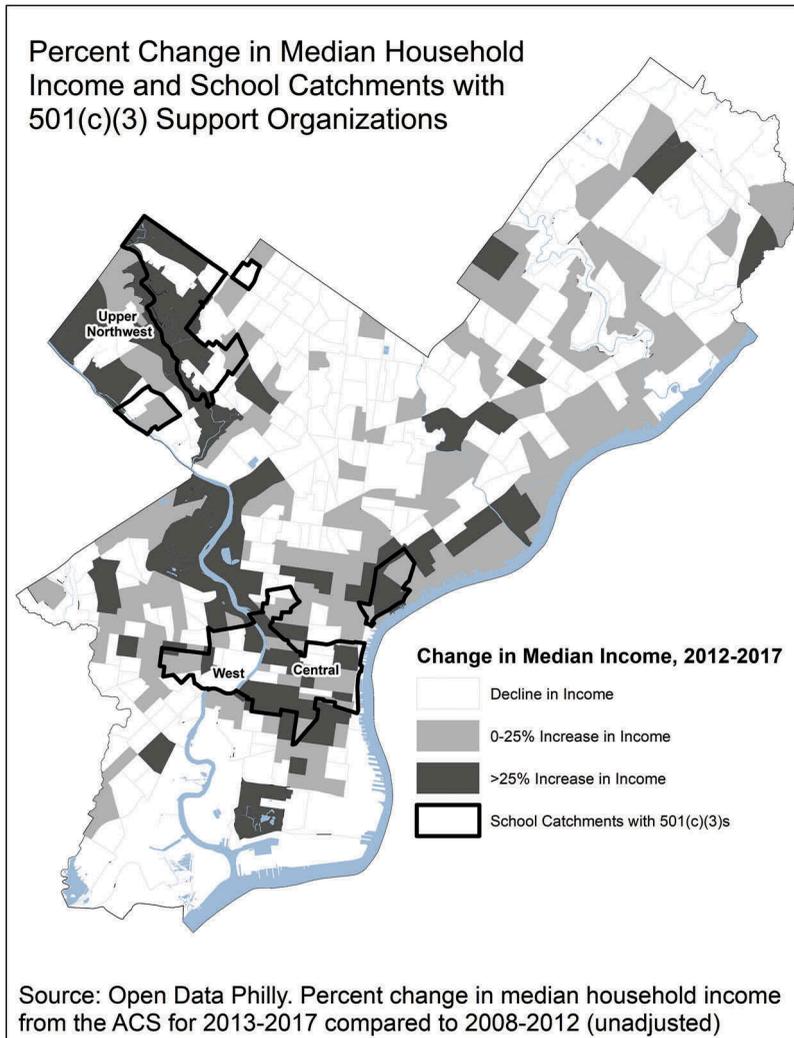


Figure 3. % Change in Median Household Income and School Catchments with 501(c)(3) Support Organizations

What does their governance structure look like?

Organizations in this study share substantive similarity in their basic governance structures, involving a relatively small board (in most cases 9–12 people) supported by a core volunteer base of committed parents. Organizational goal setting and decision making generally happens within the structure of the board, and most of the individuals we interviewed talked about the challenge of parent engagement and finding ways to share the work of the organization beyond the board. The more established organizations with the largest budgets tend to have more people involved in committee work pursuing different avenues of the organization’s mission. For most of the organizations in this study, agenda setting reflects a collaboration with school leadership. That is, board leaders work closely with school principals, responding to needs identified by principals

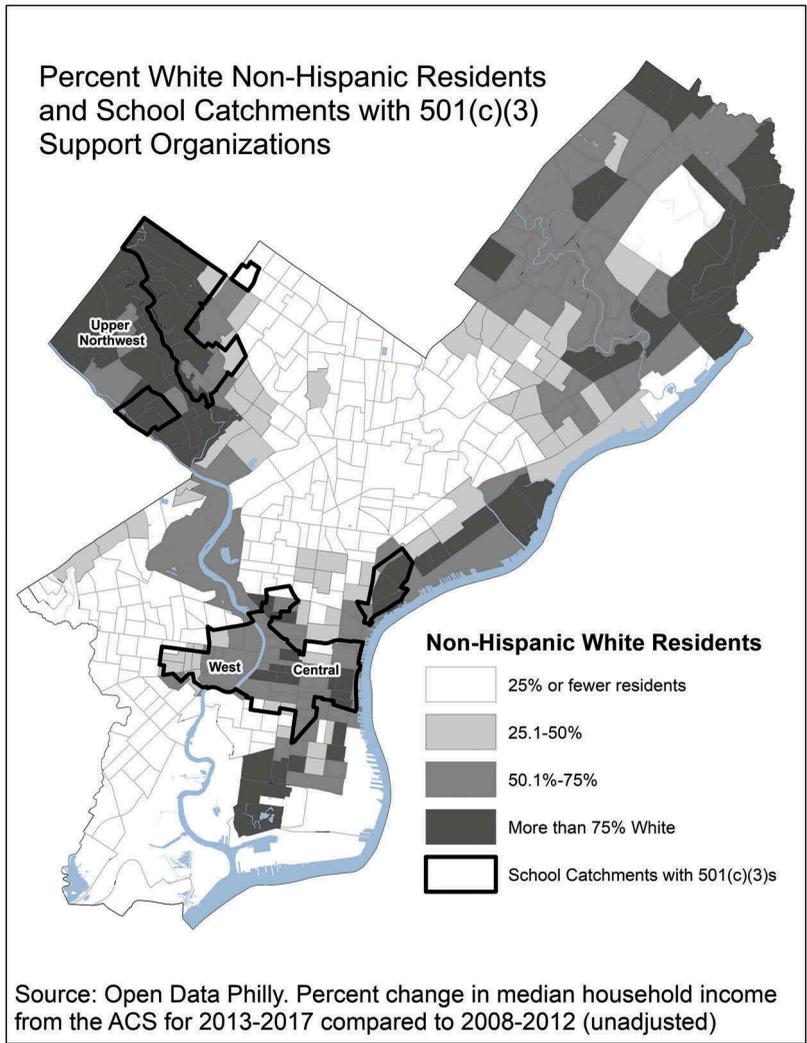


Figure 4. % White (non-Hispanic) Residents and School Catchments with 501(c)(3) Support Organizations

and also proposing projects and initiatives for school improvement. Some of the organizations hold regular public meetings, as frequently as monthly but much less often for most of the organizations. One interviewee, involved with one of the newer organizations, explained that they used social media channels as a primary method of communicating with the organization’s constituency.

Fundraising strategies

A handful of these groups raise hundreds of thousands of dollars for local elementary schools, but most of them are more limited in their fundraising scope with annual budgets smaller than \$50,000. The most recent revenue and assets of these organizations,

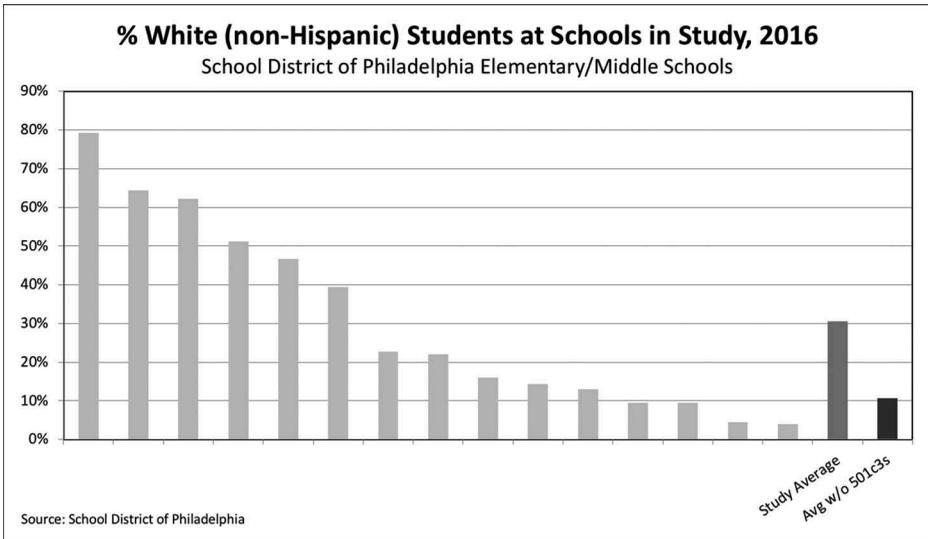


Figure 5. % White (non-Hispanic) Students at Schools in Study, 2016

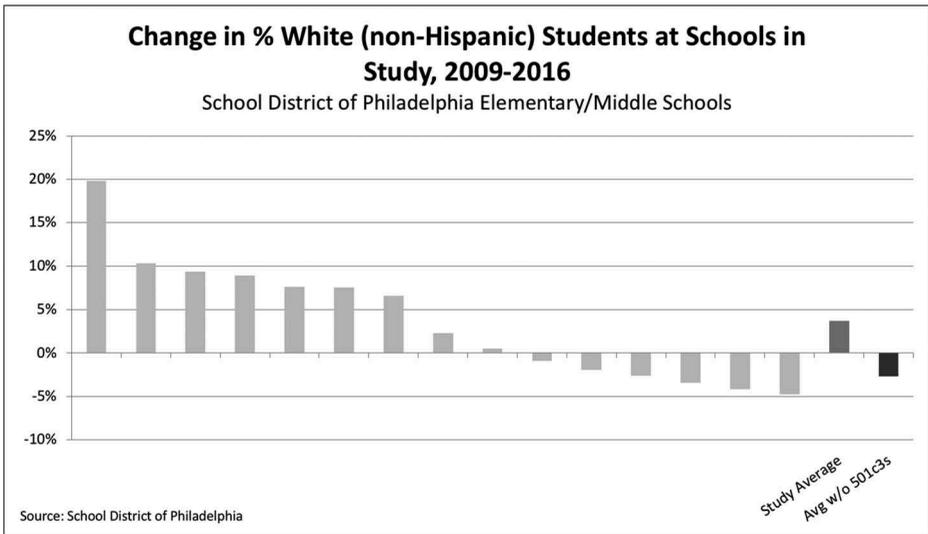


Figure 6. Change in % White (non-Hispanic) Students at Schools in Study, 2009-2016

as reported to the IRS, are listed in [Table 1](#). Most of the groups reported that they did targeted fundraising for specific projects through project campaigns or raises. They often used a GoFundMe or other online ask from the community for specific programs, projects, or needed supplies. Groups often reported that it was more effective to ask for money for a specific item or program, but also sometimes reported that they were simply responding to very concrete and specific needs of the school. A super-majority of schools also had one or two larger fundraising events per year. The most common event types were auctions (7 schools) and 5-K runs with sponsorships (5 schools).

Table 1. Revenue, Assets, and School Demographics of 501(c)(3) Support Organizations

	Total revenue	Total assets	Tax year ending	2016 School Demographics	
				% White (non-Hispanic)	CEP Economically Disadvantaged Rate*
1	\$266,455	\$364,822	Aug-2017	51%	32%
2	\$237,657	\$116,890	Dec-2016	64%	26%
3	\$160,359	\$131,416	Dec-2017	39%	44%
4	\$160,106	\$51,965	Jun-2018	22%	78%
5	\$133,650	\$106,751	Jun-2016	14%	100%
6	\$40,483	\$54,515	Jul-2017	9%	62%
7	\$36,427	\$110,000	Jun-2017	4%	100%
8	Less than \$50,000	Unreported	Dec-2018	79%	100%
9	Less than \$50,000	Unreported	Jun-2017	16%	100%
10	Less than \$50,000	Unreported	Jun-2017	47%	79%
11	Less than \$50,000	Unreported	Dec-2018	51%	32%
12	Less than \$50,000	Unreported	Jun-2018	62%	100%
13	Less than \$50,000	Unreported	Jun-2018	13%	79%
14	Less than \$50,000	Unreported	Dec-2018	23%	100%
15	Less than \$50,000	Unreported	Jun-2018	5%	100%
16	Less than \$50,000	Unreported	Dec-2018	10%	99%

* SDP reports student economic need as a Community Eligibility Provision (CEP) rate, calculated by multiplying the percentage of students who are eligible for free meals by a USDA-defined factor of 1.6, and capped at 100%. For reference, the reported data is capped at 100% for 127 of the 147 elementary and K-8 schools in the District.

The groups with the largest budgets tend to raise significant funds with annual campaigns asking for donations from parents. Two schools described sending a letter home to parents at the beginning of the semester with a recommended donation amount. One school reported that they were replacing project-specific fundraising with the annual ask in order to avoid parents feeling like they were constantly being asked for money.

However, the schools doing annual asks were not the norm, and because of the ad hoc nature of their fundraising, there was often a lot of fluctuation in the annual budgets of these groups. This pattern was particularly pronounced in those schools that tackle larger capital improvement projects such as new schoolyards or auditoriums or for those groups that funded (or temporarily funded) part-time or full-time staff members. Groups often raised money from foundations to fund larger-scale projects and almost always combined funding streams from multiple sources. Such fundraising capacity may not be reflected in IRS filings and, therefore, our methodology likely dramatically understates the total fundraising some of these groups are achieving. For example, one of the organizations we interviewed described raising one million dollars toward a capital improvement initiative, significantly through grant writing. Others raised funds through City programs, in particular the Water Department for schoolyard renovations and Playworks or Education Works programs for support staff at recess, lunch, or other non-programmed parts of the day.

What do they fund?

These groups support a great variety of activities and programming, but do not see their role as providing funding for academic instruction in the classroom. Rather, these groups focus on support activities such as providing supplies or enhancing the school day (or after school programs) with arts, music, recreation, or STEM activities. It was common for groups to emphasize that the principal determines the budget and overall plan for

the year, while the role of friends groups is to provide small-scale support for enrichment activities, and sometimes to streamline financial processes such as coordinating money collection for field trips or school supplies. Generally, these supporting activities take three forms:

- (1) *'Extras' or 'Specials' or 'Enrichment activities'*: Each of the organizations we interviewed described support of supplementary programming beyond academics during the school day. Most often this was by supporting arts and music programs for students. Other times this was foreign language or STEM programs. The most common approach was to coordinate with area institutions or groups specializing in custom instruction.
- (2) *After-School Programming*: Many of these groups were organizing or supplementing after-school activities by coordinating with area institutions or groups. Sometimes they relied on parent volunteers to coordinate activities such as sports, arts, or chess.
- (3) *Supplies and Materials*: Virtually every group assisted schools in acquiring supplies for classes or for supplementary enrichment activities. These include coordinating group purchase of basic supplies children need for classes or purchasing extras for teachers' classrooms such as Chrome books, libraries, and other classroom materials. In addition, groups commonly held targeted raises to acquire science, art, gym, band, or music supplies.

In addition, almost all the organizations took on some form of capital improvement program such as the cleaning or greening of a schoolyard, the maintenance or replacement of facilities (such as air conditioning units), cleanup days where volunteers came in to clean or paint, or assistance with minor repairs such as leaks. Many groups were also engaged in much larger-scale capital improvement projects including major schoolyard renovations (8 schools); library re-openings (4 schools); auditorium renovation (2 schools); and heating and cooling systems (2 schools).

Many groups reported that a common priority was to help provide assistance in the supervision of children during recess, lunch, and other non-classroom time. They often cited the lack of support staff as a major need within the school. Some groups addressed the issue by coordinating parent or neighbor volunteers to assist at the school during lunch, recess, and before or after school. Many groups also explained that they paid for part-time or full-time employees to assist with this through programs such as Playworks or Education Works. Some groups had grants for this but often these grants ran out and groups had to figure out how to pay for the position on an ongoing basis. Although some groups were supporting administrative employees, none of the groups we interviewed were funding teacher salaries.

Finally, some groups explained that their 501(c)(3) status enabled them to serve as a funding conduit for the school. For example, if parents sent in money for field trips it was their job to collect all the money and provide the necessary cash resources to the teacher or field trip coordinator. A few schools described playing this same role to coordinate the purchase of school supplies at reduced large-group rates.

Discussion

This study is a preliminary and descriptive effort to understand the emergence of non-profit organizations incorporated to support individual neighborhood schools in a context of inadequate and diminishing state funding. Specifically, we have sought information on the origins, objectives, structure, and activities of 16 such organizations in Philadelphia that have taken the step of incorporating as independent 501(c)(3)s. We framed the emergence of these organizations as paralleling the rise of the voluntary sector in response to state devolution in other areas of social service, as described in the shadow state literature for more than three decades.

While parents have always organized to support local schools, we see the dynamic at play here to be uniquely a reflection of two contextual factors: (1) cuts to neighborhood public school funding associated with state retrenchment and expanding charter school sectors and (2) growth of middle-class populations in gentrifying neighborhoods who are making the decision to opt in to underfunded neighborhood schools.

We do not mean to suggest that all school-based fundraising occurs in this context. Certainly, wealthier suburban school districts are also seeing a growth in school-based fundraising (Nelson and Gazley 2014). However, the two social phenomena that underlie our case – state retrenchment from education spending, and uneven patterns of urban gentrification – are being felt in many cities throughout the country. Therefore, we contend that our analysis and shadow state theorization are relevant far beyond Philadelphia. Our interviews revealed that these organizations pursue objectives explicitly tied to these two dynamics. They have incorporated in order to raise supplemental private funding in a context of resource scarcity, and they are pursuing a political project of building support for the school among middle-class parents in their neighborhood (and to a lesser extent, support for neighborhood schools in contrast to charter schools at the district level).

In incorporating as 501(c)(3) organizations, these groups created the fiscal architecture to independently raise, manage, and disburse funds on behalf of their school. The ability to incorporate and – more fundamentally – to raise substantial funds is a reflection of the professional and economic capital that the middle-class parents spearheading these efforts have been able to access from within their ranks. In order to realize their objective of staying in Philadelphia, parents took steps to ensure that schooling options met their criteria for safety, supplemental services (e.g., art and recess), and adequate facilities (e.g., playgrounds, air conditioning, and sound systems). Instructional funding continues to come from the District, but these parent groups have taken on crucial pieces of school operation and upkeep, particularly with respect to enrichment programs and facility maintenance and improvement. The SDP fiscal crisis increased the need for gap funding and motivated the organization and incorporation of 501(c)(3)s.

The organizations in this study understand their work to be political. Some of the interviewees explicitly described their choice to enroll at the local school and to work on its behalf as arising out of a belief in the importance of strong systems of public education. They described the work of the organization as supporting public schools and, in some cases, as supporting neighborhood schools in the face of charter school expansion. However, the political work of these organizations is also a project of building support for *their* neighborhood schools among other middle-class parents who might consider sending their child to the school.

Arguably, there is a tension between these two political projects: leveraging private resources into an individual school in a cash-strapped school district may undermine the larger equity objectives at the heart of public education. And a number of our interviewees acknowledged this irony. As one interviewee noted:

People are very passionate and interested and it's great that we have these friends groups, but the fear that I have, and unfortunately, I sometimes see it, is it – by the nature of having these, kind of, little nonprofits that are angling to get more resources for their school, it ultimately defeats the purpose of a public school system which is supposed to provide equal resources to everybody. And so what you see are catchments that have, you know, that have seen some gentrification, or have affluence, they're able to get a bigger slice of that cake. So, it's almost like we're talking against ourselves here. You know, I would rather be in a situation where groups, like friends of groups, were not necessary.

Another interviewee shared similar feelings:

Although we do all this, I kind of have some fundamental problems with the fact that we actually have to do this. [laughs] And how unfair it is that, you know, there are communities that can do this well, and communities that can't. And, often it's the communities that can't get the friends group together that are in the most need. And so, everything becomes very inequitable. You know, and it's sort of like a band-aid approach to a big financial problem that, you know, does not resolve the inequality of funding and perhaps makes things worse.

Both of these individuals identify a dilemma at the heart of the retrenchment and devolution characteristic of the shadow state: pushing the responsibility of financing and service provision down to local communities exacerbates existing inequalities. Wealthier communities – those communities with the social, political, professional, and economic capacity to fill the gap left by state retrenchment – are able to organize independent fiscal entities (i.e., 501(c)(3) organizations) and to leverage the needed financial resources.

Our research also suggests that the work of friends organizations in Philadelphia should be considered in relationship to the processes of gentrification and neighborhood change with which they are often intertwined. We wish to avoid the suggestion of a causal process, however, taken together, our interviews reveal a pattern in the development of friends organizations that parallels the changing income profiles and racial demographics of the neighborhoods in which they are situated. That is, the initial organizing efforts tend to occur when a group of middle-class parents choose to enroll (or hope in the future to enroll) their children in a neighborhood public school that had up to that point been home to a predominantly lower income and usually African American student body. As these parents work to raise money and awareness, the very existence of an organization of middle-class and often white parents supporting a school acts as a legitimization of the school to other white, middle-class parents.

In this way, the work of friends organizations has sometimes encouraged more middle-class families to move into the neighborhood and to enroll even before there has been any improvement in a school's performance metrics. This dynamic is likely a reciprocal one, as demand-side gentrification pressures lead middle-class parents to support the school, and the support of middle-class parents at a neighborhood school creates an attraction to the neighborhood that accelerates gentrification pressure. Within our study, those organizations that are most established, with the greatest organizational

and fiscal capacity, are supporting schools in neighborhoods that have become very expensive and where gentrification has progressed the furthest.

The scale of fundraising accomplished by the largest friends organizations puts them to some extent in a separate league from others in the City. However, for most of the organizations covered in this study, their efforts are focused on responding to basic deficiencies rather than on providing boutique amenities. Budget cuts in Philadelphia left schools operating without core services, including sufficient access to nurses, libraries, support staff, and arts and music programs. In our interviews, leaders at these organizations were not seeking exclusivism or exceptionalism. However, as we have already noted, their efforts to address school-level deficiencies nevertheless exacerbate system-wide inequalities.

A critical policy question amid the realities of state retrenchment centers on how school districts facing fiscal austerity – and the local governments that support them – balance the need to improve conditions at schools serving their lowest income students with the imperative of convincing middle-class families to stay in the city and enroll in public schools. In Philadelphia, evidence suggests that the SDP has welcomed the investment of middle-class families in individual schools through independent friends organizations. While some interviewees complained about the hoops involved in coordinating with the District to move their capital improvement projects forward, we are not aware of instances of private investment being blocked.

The rationale for allowing private efforts to fill gaps at individual schools within a cash-strapped district appears self-evident. The dynamic, however, raises a critical question: what obligation does a school district have to redistribute private investment in individual schools to support the larger public school system? The SDP has made a show of balancing this playing field through The Fund's Philly FUNDamentals platform, described above. However, this is not in any sense a redistributive policy. The Fund gives all schools access to the fiscal architecture to undertake their own private fundraising. A more radical, though politically contentious, approach would require intra-district resource sharing, for example by pooling a portion of every dollar raised or a percentage of dollars raised above a given threshold. As Schaller and Nisbet (2019) argue in their case studies of two districts that implemented redistributive policies along these lines, the fundamental challenge lies in convincing parents and organizations supporting wealthier schools of the value for them of a stronger system of public schools across their city.

There is nothing inherently problematic about parents working together to support the schools their children attend. The issue, in this case, is the context in which this is happening. The larger devolutionary processes that are prompting the creation of 501(c)(3) friends organizations in Philadelphia are simultaneously undermining systemic equity and fairness. Specifically, the state's regressive tax structure, recent regressive cuts to state funding, and an expanding charter school sector have rendered public funding streams inadequate for Philadelphia neighborhood schools. These funding trends widen the resource gap, depriving children of the resources they need relative to more affluent suburban districts. The unevenness of private sector mobilization in response to this retrenchment adds another layer of inequity, further disadvantaging lower-income Philadelphia communities. These two simultaneous processes work in tandem to 'doubly disenfranchise', following Lake and Newman's (2002) description of shadow state inequality.

We argue, additionally, that the patterns of uneven revitalization and gentrification throughout Philadelphia shape a third dimension of disenfranchisement at play here. As higher-income residents move in and force up real estate prices in some neighborhoods, lower-income students in those neighborhoods face pressures that threaten to displace them from their schools and their homes. When more affluent children fill up the available slots at the most sought after schools in the city, children from lower-income and predominately African American neighborhoods are no longer able to access these schools through the SDP's voluntary transfer program. This intersection of real estate dynamics and school finance trends constitutes a third level of disenfranchisement impacting low income children in Philadelphia.

In short, applying the well-established shadow state literature to the growing non-profitization of public school finance in Philadelphia allows us to make sense of an ongoing tension in the literature on middle-class parents and urban schools: how, despite the best intentions, middle-class parents who become active in underfunded urban schools may further exacerbate existing and racialized patterns of inequality. That is, fundraising for individual schools within the broader financial and policy landscape intensifies existing spatial and social inequalities. The processes of state public education retrenchment and devolution of financial responsibility to school districts, coupled with the uneven capacity of local volunteerism to fill those gaps, reifies inequality in educational resources. Ultimately, the physical displacement of lower income children from these better-resourced schools through the processes of gentrification further undermines the capacity of lower income neighborhoods and families.

Note

1. These are American Community Survey estimates. 2012 data is based on surveys from 2008–2012; 2017 data is based on surveys from 2013–2017.

Acknowledgments

We are grateful to James DeFilippis for his collaboration in the early stages of this research, including partnering in conceptualization of the project, early fieldwork, and commenting on drafts of this manuscript.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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