4. Working with Adult Non-Completers to Address the School Dropout Problem

Decoteau J. Irby

The Philadelphia-Delaware-New Jersey metropolitan area is home to approximately six million people. Situated along the Delaware River are the region’s central city, Philadelphia, the southwestern portion of New Jersey (Camden), and the northern part of Delaware (Wilmington). The urban metropolitan area is often referred to as the Delaware Valley. Because of its proximity to the Atlantic Ocean and the access the Delaware River provides, this has historically been an area of trade and development. At the inception of the United States, it was one of the nation’s busiest ports. It was also a gathering place for the founding fathers and served as a temporary capital during the early formation of the republic. From the port grew the railroads, which led to Philadelphia becoming a railroad hub and industrial center. The region was and continues to be among the United States’ most important centers for economic development, intellectual and social innovation, and politics. Located just north of the Mason Dixon line (that separated “Slave” states from “Free” states), the region served as a center of the US slavery abolition movement. Historically, these aspects made the Delaware Valley and its principal city of Philadelphia a major destination for African Americans seeking refuge from slavery and southern racism over a period spanning the pre–Civil War through the 1950s Great Migration.
From 1930 to 1960 the Black population of Philadelphia grew by 300,000 people, increasing from 11.4 to 26.4 percent. After World War II at the onset of “White Flight” to the suburbs, Philadelphia’s Black population began expanding out from the area historically known as “Black Bottom,” which was defined by 32nd and 40th Streets and from University to Lancaster Streets in the city’s West Philadelphia borough. According to the US Census Bureau, the City of Philadelphia had an estimated population of 2,992,206 people in 2013. It is home to one of the United States’ most concentrated Black populations, specifically in North Philadelphia. It is the fifth most populous city in the United States and has many symptoms of a deindustrialized North American City: a weak labor market plagued with the inability to provide good jobs to long-term city residents, a segregated housing market defined along lines of class and race and ethnicity, and an education system that ranks among the worst in the country.

Life in the inner city of Philadelphia presents many challenges to its residents, especially the poor and dispossessed who are disproportionately people of color. Marginal schools and a struggling economy are two barriers to achieving success that Philadelphia’s poor must overcome. Philadelphia is in the top ten largest school districts in the country. Most students in Philadelphia attend schools that are segregated along lines of class and race, a direct reflection of the city’s and region’s patterns of residential segregation. In traditional public schools in Philadelphia, Black students are the majority at 51 percent, followed by Whites and Hispanics who make up 14 percent and 19 percent of the population, respectively. Asians make up 8 percent, and 6 percent is multiracial. Charter schools in Philadelphia enroll a majority of Black and Latino students at 79 percent. In the past ten years, the school district has reformed its governance into a corporate model that does not rely on a traditionally elected board. The new governing body, the School Reform Commission, has engaged in a pattern of closing schools, reducing the teaching force, and expanding the district’s networks of charter and privately managed schools. Low test scores, high dropout rates, violence, and segregated and unequal schooling remain common.

The poor performance of students in Philadelphia’s schools has a detrimental effect on the city and the region because the students become underused local human capital. The state spends $11,000 a year to educate a student in Philadelphia but pays $34,000 a year to incarcerate a person. Courts in Pennsylvania sentence “more youth under 18 to life without parole than any other state in the country.” The phenomenon of school