

## For-Profit Writes Mandatory Courses for Phila. High Schools

BY LYNN OLSON

*Philadelphia*

If all goes according to schedule, 10th graders here should be learning how to determine the area of a regular polygon in geometry class today; in world literature, they'll be critiquing one another's essays on a literary theme; and in biology, they'll learn about Gregor Mendel's contribution to genetics. Eleventh graders in Algebra 2 should be tackling how to estimate the probability of an event, while in chemistry, they'll use bouncy balls to study when real gases deviate from the ideal-gas law. And in American literature, they'll be exploring the power of love as a theme in *The Price of a Child*, a novel about the Underground Railroad by Lorene Cary.

Those courses are part of a new, standardized college-preparatory curriculum crafted by Kaplan K12 Learning Services Group, a division of Kaplan Inc., best known for its test-preparation materials. The curriculum, which made its debut in the Philadelphia district this school year, is a critical element in the district leadership's plan to improve secondary education.

At a time when many policymakers and educators are debating how to redesign high schools, Philadelphia's experiences could offer a window into one of the central issues: just how far to go in mandating course content at the secondary level.

What's taking place in the 214,000-student school system is also an experiment in opening the doors for profit-making companies to write such curricula.

"In a way," said researcher Jolley Bruce Christman, "Philadelphia is serving as a test bed for an organization like Kaplan to develop a new product that it hopes to be able to sell elsewhere. So I think both Kaplan and the district are beholden to show that they are scrutinizing carefully the quality of this curriculum."

### Raising Expectations

Although managed instructional systems—that include tightly aligned curriculum materials, professional develop-

ment, and frequent diagnostic tests—have helped boost elementary achievement in many big-city districts, there's far less experience with such efforts at the high school level.

Certainly that was the case with the secondary system when Paul G. Vallas took over as the chief executive officer of the public schools here in 2002. At the time, only eight in 10 Philadelphia teenagers attended school on any given day. Just over half of 9th graders were promoted to grade 10, with that proportion dropping to 45 percent in the city's neighborhood high schools. Only about one-fourth of incoming freshmen made it to graduation and into their first year of college. And

just 18 percent of district students scored at the "proficient" level or higher on the state math tests in 2001; only 24 percent did so in English.

"I think that we have known in Philadelphia for a long time that curriculum has been a gap in our high schools," said Ms. Christman, a researcher

at Research for Action, a local nonprofit group that has conducted studies of school reform in the district.

The year Mr. Vallas arrived, 1,069 courses were listed in high school course catalogues—including 25 versions of 9th-grade English alone. Few of the courses Mr. Vallas found when he arrived were aligned with Pennsylvania's academic-content standards or taught to grade-level expectations.

"The high school system was a system of extraordinarily low expectations," he said. "Ninth grade algebra was really not 9th grade algebra. Tenth grade geometry was really not 10th grade geometry."

As a first step, Mr. Vallas and his team pruned away. About 400 courses were dropped. Now, no high school course can be offered without approval from the new office of secondary education. Then in the 2003-04 school year, the district introduced transitional English and mathematics courses for incoming 9th graders, doubling the amount of time in those subjects, to close skill gaps and prepare the students for work at the high school level.



Next, the district took the unprecedented step of hiring an outsider, a for-profit one at that, to write the core curriculum.

Bringing in the New York City-based Kaplan to provide the curriculum was troubling to many people, according to Pal Socolar, the editor of the *Philadelphia Public School Notebook*, a community newspaper that focuses on education issues.

“One [concern] is that they hadn’t done anything like it before,” said Mr. Socolar. “The second one is that we want our high school curriculum to be, obviously, more than just a test-preparation program. Another is that the contract really involves diverting a lot of money that is needed to sustain and strengthen the district’s own capacity to do curriculum and assessment work.”

The issue that was vocalized most publicly, he said, was the fear that an outside group would not reflect the rich history and multicultural context of Philadelphia.

The company was given a \$4.5 million, one-year contract to develop the college-prep curriculum in 10 core courses required to earn a Pennsylvania diploma: 9th grade physical sciences and world history; 10th grade biology, U.S. history, geometry, and world literature; and 11th grade chemistry, social science, Algebra 2, and American literature. That money also covers related assessments, materials for 9th grade transition classes, and student preparation for state tests. A second \$4.5 million contract this year includes revisions to the curriculum as well as scoring the related tests.

Kaplan already had a track record in the district as the provider of the 9th grade transitional English and math courses. Results from the spring 2004 TerraNova, a commercial test taken by Philadelphia students, found significant increases in the percent of 9th graders scoring at or above the national average in reading, language arts, and math, and a significant decrease in the percent of 9th graders in the bottom quartile, following introduction of the program. Ninth grade improvement outpaced that of any other grade level.

### ‘Director’s Notes’

Working with the district’s office of secondary education, as well as teachers and community members, Kaplan hired a team of writers to draft the yearlong curriculum, including former high school teachers from other urban districts. It has produced spiral-bound “curriculum resource” documents for each course that include a year-at-a-glance overview of how many class periods should be devoted to each topic; a more detailed “scope and sequence” that details which state and TerraNova standards are addressed by each topic over the course of a day or week; and two-page daily lesson plans that include essential questions, suggested warm-up activities, instructional objectives, ideas about assessment, and homework assignments.

Separate volumes provide standards-aligned resource materials that teachers can often photocopy and use directly, as well as links to other resources. The documents—which eventually will be available online—also include suggestions for multicultural education and ways to differentiate instruction for advanced learners, students learning English, and those with disabilities.

For the first time, the school system also purchased textbooks districtwide to accompany the new curriculum.

Teachers can no longer linger on content that they’re comfortable with and avoid material they don’t like, Mr. Vallas said. Nor can they design courses that address their own talents and interests rather than the needs of their students.

“Secondary teachers have often been treated like college and community college faculty,” said Seppy Basili, Kaplan’s vice president for learning and assessment. “Somehow, because they have subject-matter expertise, we haven’t paid attention to the way they teach. They need tools, too.”

Students take short “benchmark” assessments every six weeks to track their progress, with immediate feedback to teachers and schools via a Web-based system of data analysis and reporting. Reports show the number of students at each performance level for every topic tested, and how students did on individual items. Kaplan also provides on-site support to high schools, with three full-time employees located in district headquarters.

“Choosing an outside person or group to do this is not the way a lot of educators think you should be doing curriculum,” acknowledged Mr. Basili, who worries that teachers will perceive the materials as “doing the Kaplan.”

But, he asserted, “we’re not providing a script. We’re actually providing director’s notes. What we’re really trying to do is raise the bar, in getting teachers to teach to the standards.”

While veteran teachers can lean on the curriculum documents as guides, he said, novice educators will find everything they need. And school administrators should be able to walk into any classroom and know what teachers are teaching within a five-day window.

Philadelphia has a perpetual license to use the materials, although Kaplan can market them elsewhere. The company is currently working with the Camden, N.J., schools on New Jersey-specific curricula, though the scope of the work is different.

### A Fast Pace

So far, reviews from Philadelphia teachers are mixed.

In a Nov. 23, 2004, opinion piece in *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, Christopher Paslay, an English teacher at Swenson Arts and Technology High School, wrote: “Despite a few kinks and glitches, I think it’s a giant step forward. For the first time in my career, there is a tangible guideline that keeps all of Philadelphia’s English teachers on the same page. Specifically, reading lists are now uniform across the city, as are research and writing strategies.”

Lisa Kelly, an English teacher at University City High School, described the quality as “OK, on the whole,” although she said there are still not enough books for students.

And a chemistry teacher, who described the quality as decent, but who asked not to be named, said, “I don’t totally agree with the jumping around that takes place as we cover the material, but the content is pretty much what it should be.”

The biggest complaint so far is the pacing.

At Edward Bok Vocational Technical High School, teachers

praise the support they've gotten from Kaplan, but say it's been a struggle to keep up with the schedule, despite a few days built in periodically for review or enrichment.

John Pacoraio, a 30-year veteran English teacher, is suddenly having to familiarize himself with three new sets of curriculum materials for grades 9, 10, and 11. "With the 10th and 11th grades," he said, "I'm going through with blinders on. I don't feel, in many cases, that I'm adequately preparing lessons for my class. I don't have the time."

Bill Phelps, a 36-year veteran mathematics teacher at the Bartram Academy of Business and Finance, said: "You have a pacing schedule. You've got to follow it. You can't get bogged down. If a child complains they're not getting it, you've just got to say they've got to come to tutoring. That's it. They've got to learn to hustle. And you've got to match a schedule. You've got to put the responsibility on the student."

Teachers still say there aren't enough materials or supplies—like science labs. And the curriculum has been a particular challenge for older students, who never experienced the city's new standardized curriculum in grades K-8 and may never have had a certified math instructor before high school.

"I strongly disagree with this new curriculum," wrote Elizabeth Curry, an 11th grader at Northeast High School in an article for her school newspaper. "It traps both the students and the teachers into a locked routine with no way out. The curriculum is accompanied by a strict timeline, which leaves no room

for the students who require extra assistance. Teachers are bound to follow this timeline whether students comprehend the material or not."

Rather than slow down the curriculum, which could "dummy down" the content, Mr. Vallas said, the district is considering increasing the amount of instructional time in certain core subjects, perhaps by offering double-period classes.

### A Subject Apart

By far the most problematic area appears to be social studies.

Mr. Basili said Kaplan reached out to a number of groups in crafting the curriculum, hosting forums attended by more than 40 individuals who had an opportunity to comment. Social studies was "far and away" the most discussed topic, he said. Eventually, Kaplan chose to include a list of core topics and "choice" topics that would give teachers more flexibility. Social studies is also the one area that does not include daily lesson plans.

"We're told, especially in history, less is more. Go for depth, not breadth. This is lists and lists of facts and terms to memorize," complained one high school social studies teacher who asked not to be identified. "I think there's an attempt to try to cover [everything] and appease everybody, and you can't do that."

## District Making 'Transition' to Bigger Supply of Schools of Choice

BY LYNN OLSON  
*Philadelphia*

Philadelphia's new, standardized curriculum is just one component of a larger agenda for secondary education.

By 2008, the school system plans to make a transition from about 55 high schools, when Chief Executive Officer Paul G. Vallas took the helm in 2002, to between 70 and 80 smaller ones of choice. As part of the multimillion-dollar project, the district will create some new schools from scratch, as well as convert existing middle schools to high schools, turn annexes into separate schools, and replicate charter schools.

The first phase began with 17 "transition" high schools last September. By early this spring, the School Reform Commission, the body appointed to run the district when the state took the system over in December 2001, is expected to vote on which private education consult-

ants receive contracts to help manage the changeover in as many as a dozen more transition high schools. The district already has contracted with a range of for-profit and nonprofit providers to help manage 45 of its lowest-performing schools; only one of those is a high school.

### A Template

Among the potential "transition managers" talking to the district are Kaplan K12 Learning Services; the Princeton Review; Victory Schools, a New York City-based company; and Temple and Drexel universities, both in Philadelphia.

"We have a need, we're going out there, and we're using our powers as a consumer to secure the best management resources possible, so that we can go in and we can accelerate the transformation effect," Mr. Vallas said. "I don't have 10 years to transform this school system. I

want to transform the high schools now."

Each of the transition schools must follow a template that includes: using the district's standardized curriculum or an alternative college-prep model; offering honors and Advanced Placement courses; providing a "signature" program, such as a focus on math, science, and technology; having an agreement with at least one institution of higher education so that students have access to college courses and the potential to earn college credit; and employing a fully certified teaching staff within four years, along with a strong school leader.

The district has also provided free PSAT and SAT training to all its 10th and 11th graders, as well as the opportunity to take those college tests at no charge. It has restored Advanced Placement courses in all the high schools, and formed a homework club at each high school.

While the curriculum lists primary documents, teachers argue that the time allotted to specific topics doesn't permit their use. An 11th grade U.S. history teacher noted: "Students are expected to cover the Declaration of Independence and Enlightenment ideas in one-half period (24 to 26 minutes), and the Constitution in two periods. Afterwards, students are to have a class discussion of freedom of speech, press, religion, and assembly in 12 to 14 minutes."

Teachers also contend that the benchmark assessments, which typically include about 15 to 20 multiple-choice items each, are too focused on specific facts, particularly in social studies. This past month, the district moved to scan the tests centrally, after it encountered problems getting teachers to do the electronic scanning at each high school in order to score them.

Rosalind Chivis, the executive director of the office of secondary education, said the district was "still working out the kinks" on the benchmark assessments.

### 'The Glue'

Despite the problems, the benchmark tests are "the glue," Mr. Basili maintained. "Without them, it's hard to imagine that folks would meet the timetables. I think, used properly, teachers will start to value the information."

Samuel J. Gotlieb, the principal of the Bartram Academy of Business and Finance, finds the tests and the Web-based data-analysis and -reporting system to be an "incredible" tool for educators. "If you're not a particularly creative person, or you haven't been trained in diagnostic, prescriptive teaching, this does it all for you."

In general, the ambitious implementation schedule has presented a challenge. Although Kaplan had completed the scope-

and-sequence and year-at-a-glance work by last May, the detailed curricular materials were not available until the end of summer. Teachers could take four weeks of in-service training on the curriculum in July, but the preparation was primarily targeted to "teacher leaders" who were supposed to provide additional professional development in their schools. Because teacher leaders are not routinely compensated for that part of their day, however, and some carry a full teaching load, professional development has been uneven.

Kaplan is working with the district to make changes in the curriculum, such as its pacing, and in the assessments, Mr. Basili said.

"This is a year of adjustments," Mr. Vallas emphasized. But the schools chief also made clear there's no going back. "People complain about the curriculum," he said, "but then they tell me that it's so much better than anything they've ever had before. So that's the kind of criticism you want."

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#### EDITORIAL & BUSINESS OFFICES:

Suite 100, 6935 Arlington Road  
Bethesda, MD 20814  
(301) 280-3100  
FAX Editorial (301) 280-3200  
FAX Business (301) 280-3250

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**K12 Learning Services**

888 Seventh Avenue, New York, NY 10106  
Tel: 1-888-KAPLAN8 Fax: 1-888-527-5263 www.KaplanK12.com