

# Children Come First.

## An Education Action Plan for Philadelphia

### Executive Summary: Bill Griffin

Education has been my life's work. For more than 35 years, I served Philadelphia's children and families as a special education teacher, administrator, and principal. I have worked with students, parents, teachers, support staff, unions, administrators, and communities, and I have seen both what works in education and what happens when the system fails the children it is supposed to serve.

My education philosophy begins with one simple principle:

#### **Children come first.**

Our schools exist because of children. We fund them because of children. Every major decision involving curriculum, staffing, spending, facilities, safety, or educational policy should therefore begin with one question: **How will this benefit the children we are entrusted to educate?**

Putting children first does not mean ignoring teachers, parents, administrators, or other adults. Supporting the people who educate and care for our children ultimately benefits students. But the needs of the system can never become more important than the children the system exists to serve.

### **1. Demand Academic Excellence and Accountability**

I believe in strong public schools. But supporting public education does not mean accepting failure.

When large numbers of children are unable to read or perform mathematics at grade level, small improvements should not become an excuse for complacency. Progress should be recognized, but persistently low achievement must be treated as a call to action.

We need to identify what is working in successful schools and school districts and bring those practices into struggling schools. We need measurable improvement plans, transparent reporting, responsible use of taxpayer dollars, and accountability for results.

When something is not working, we should change it. We cannot continue doing the same things while expecting different outcomes.

As State Representative, I will use legislation, funding, oversight, and the influence of the office to push for measurable improvement and greater accountability in Philadelphia education.

## **2. Make Every School Safe and Healthy**

Children cannot learn effectively when they do not feel safe, and teachers cannot teach effectively in an unsafe environment.

School safety begins with the buildings themselves. Students and staff deserve schools that are free from dangerous asbestos exposure, have adequate ventilation, reasonable temperatures, functioning mechanical systems, and facilities that are properly maintained.

Philadelphia must establish clear priorities for repairing dangerous and hazardous conditions and be transparent about what needs to be fixed, how much it will cost, and when the work will be completed.

Safety also means maintaining order inside our schools.

Teachers and principals need clear, consistent standards for addressing violence, bullying, drugs, theft, and serious disruptions. Consequences should be fair, consistently applied, and appropriate to the circumstances while respecting due process and protections for students with disabilities.

No student's right to an education should include the right to prevent other children from learning and receiving their education.

## **3. Give Parents a Real Voice- Parents are our Partners**

Parents are not an obstacle to education. They are essential partners in it.

Parents deserve timely, understandable information about their children's education and a meaningful opportunity to participate in important decisions affecting them.

Schools should actively seek parental involvement, listen when parents raise concerns, and, in a reasonable manner, inform parents and seek appropriate permission when significant decisions affecting their children are being considered.

This is especially important in special education. Parents of children with IEPs should understand their rights, the services available to their children, and how to navigate the system. They should never feel that they need to be educational experts or attorneys simply to advocate effectively for their children.

Parents know their children. Their voices matter.

## **4. Provide Educational Choice and Opportunity**

No two children are exactly alike, and one educational model cannot meet every child's needs.

I support strong neighborhood public schools, but I also support meaningful educational choices for families, including charter schools, Catholic and other nonpublic schools, approved private schools, virtual education, and scholarship opportunities such as Pennsylvania's Educational Improvement Tax Credit program (EITC).

Choice can also encourage schools to improve. When families have alternatives, educational institutions must continually demonstrate that they are meeting the needs of the children they serve.

When a school is persistently failing a child, our first responsibility should be to improve that school. But the child should not be required to sacrifice years of education waiting for adults to fix it.

The system should serve the child. The child should not be required to serve the system.

## **5. Modernize Education for the 21st Century**

The world our children are entering is changing rapidly. Education must change with it.

Traditional instruction still has an important place in education, but it cannot be our only approach. Schools should increasingly teach students how to think critically, communicate, collaborate, solve problems, use technology responsibly, and apply what they learn to real situations.

Project-based learning can bring mathematics, science, reading, writing, technology, social studies, and other subjects together around meaningful problems and projects.

Our goal should not simply be producing better test-takers.

**Our schools should be developing problem-solvers who are prepared for college, careers, trades, entrepreneurship, and life in the 21st century.**

Teachers must also receive the training, resources, and support necessary to make that transition. Their instructional time should be protected, and unnecessary processes that take them away from teaching should continually be reviewed and streamlined.

## **6. Reform Governance and Put Communities Back at the Table**

Philadelphia's educational problems cannot be addressed without accountability at the top.

I support a comprehensive examination of School District finances, programs, administration, facilities, and academic performance. Taxpayers, parents, and educators deserve to know where education dollars are going and whether those expenditures are producing results for children.

I also believe Philadelphia should reconsider how its Board of Education represents its communities.

I support developing a system that provides meaningful geographic representation from across Philadelphia, including representation corresponding to the different regions of the School District. Community members and parents should have a meaningful role in identifying the people who represent them, even where final appointment authority remains with the mayor under existing law.

Board members should not simply represent a school system. They should represent the families and communities that system serves.

If sustained reform does not produce meaningful improvement, Pennsylvania must also be willing to examine additional governance reforms rather than accepting continued failure as inevitable.

## **The Commitment**

**My education strategy is straightforward:**

**Put children first. Demand results. Make schools safe. Give parents a voice. Support teachers. Provide educational choices. Prepare children for the future. Demand accountability.**

For more than 35 years, I have worked inside Philadelphia's schools. I have taught children with disabilities. I have worked with parents navigating the special education system. I have led schools as a principal. I helped develop and implement technology systems designed to improve special education administration and services. Through that work, I collaborated with teachers and parents to help produce individualized education plans for every student with a disability in the School District of Philadelphia and IU 26 since 2005. I have worked with teachers, support staff, unions, administrators, police, community organizations, and families.

That experience taught me that successful schools are not created by one person, one program, or one political party.

They are created when children, parents, teachers, administrators, communities, and government work together toward a common purpose.

There will always be disagreements about education. But there should be one principle upon which all of us can agree:

**Our schools exist for our children.**

Every dollar we spend, every policy we adopt, every program we create, and every decision we make should ultimately be measured against that responsibility.

**Children come first.**

**Together we can make things better.**