

# The “Beating Heart” of a Community: Elements of a Neighborhood School

Margaret Tebbe, College of Arts and Sciences, Class of 2021

## INTRODUCTION

Where children go to school has historically been determined by where they live. This tradition was challenged first by desegregation and later by market-based school choice, better known as charter schools. Neighborhood schools as traditionally defined—where the students all come from one neighborhood—are less and less common, but many parents still feel like they’re getting the “neighborhood school” experience. This project investigates what, if not residence, makes these schools “neighborhood” schools.

## METHODS

1. Passive recruitment through social media posts in community and school Facebook groups
2. 46 in-depth, semi-structured interviews via BlueJeans
  - Must live in Philadelphia
  - Must have had children in grades K-8 during the 2019-2020 school year
3. Member checks
  - Each participant received transcript and analytic memo with quotes via email
4. Transcripts initially coded by hand for broad themes

## EARLY FINDINGS



### Location & Appearance

- Not necessarily assigned school, but in broader neighborhood
- Centrally located within the community
- Looks welcoming, looks like a school

I knew I had run past [that intersection] dozens, hundreds of times. I could not visualize a school there. [...] It had never occurred to me that this like, kind of gnarly looking brick building [...] was my elementary school.

It shrinks their world into a digestible size and scope, right? [...] For a kid that’s seven to have a couple blocks radius that they feel familiar with, [...] it gives them buy in to the physical environment and social environment.

### Community Engagement



- Giving: provide spaces and events for community outside of school families
- Receiving: effectively use resources of local businesses, community members

Like we don’t have a playground, we just have asphalt so like, can the community rally with us to like, figure out what else we could have besides just black asphalt for our kids to play on, and those sorts of things.

I believe that a public school [...] should be a place of community, not just for the kids who are currently there [...] but for the surrounding community as well [...] a central location, to have it be a place where people go for community events.



### Diversity

- Represent the variety of lived experiences in the surrounding neighborhood
- Children are not the only members of their race, class, or religion at the school

I felt like at William Mossell, he would be othered [...] I wanted him to see himself reflected every day, not just in the students, but in the staff.

I want my kids to go to school with people from different socioeconomic and racial backgrounds [...] you are a Philadelphian, you are not going to go to an all-white school.

[Near] where we live [is] section 8 housing and those kids go to the school, [it’s wonderful to have] those conversations with my son daily and not have to wait for big events.

### Parent Relationships



- Teachers and parents in sync with each other
- Outgoing parents who reach beyond race and class to include other parents
- Shared ideology: commitment to public schools

I talk to everybody, so as a, as a person unafraid to talk to anybody, you kind of feel a responsibility to talk to everybody because I know that not everybody has that ease.

It creates a hub where, like, it almost feels like you have like-minded families who are investing in their community by sending their kids to public school. [...] For like, families that choose public, to me it just feels like oh, there are a lot of people here who are committed to their neighborhood who are, who see the value in sending their kids to public.

## CONTEXT

The School District of Philadelphia has a robust school choice system. Almost a third of its students attend charter schools and an additional 27% attend public schools (magnet or neighborhood) that are not their assigned schools.

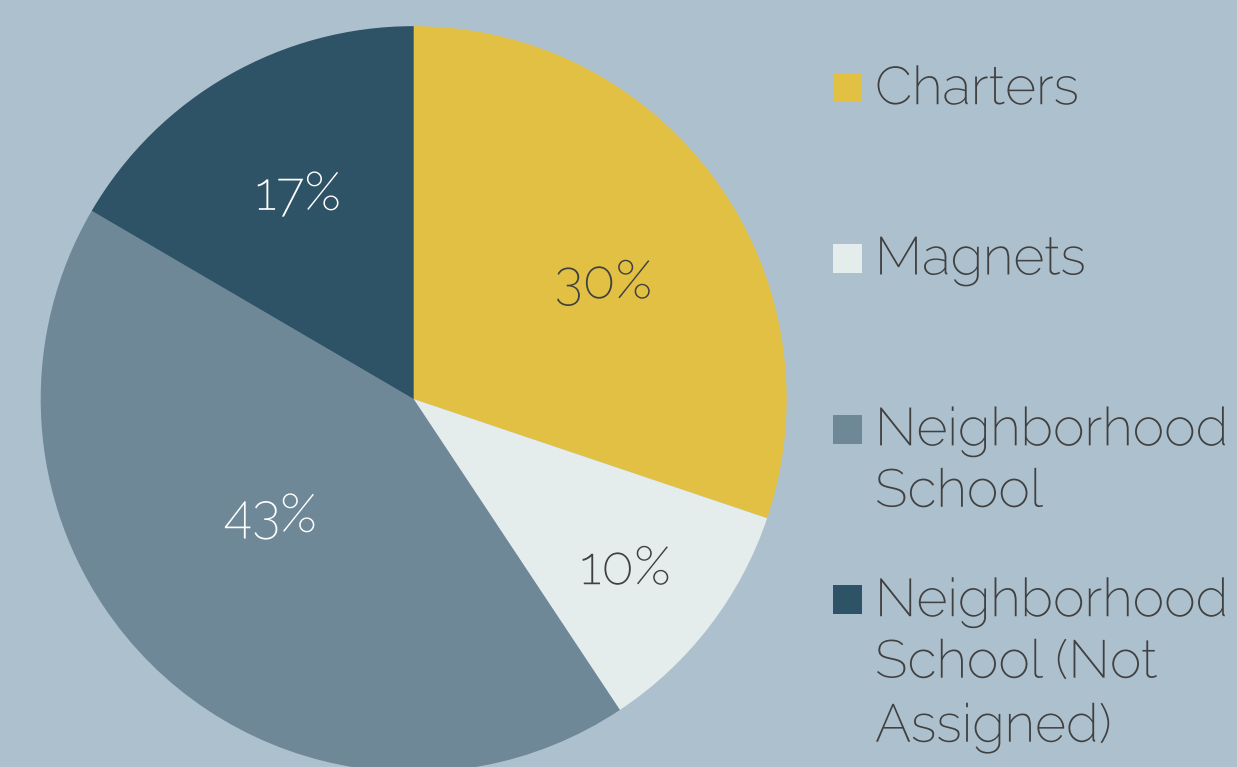


Figure 1. School District of Philadelphia Attendance Breakdown

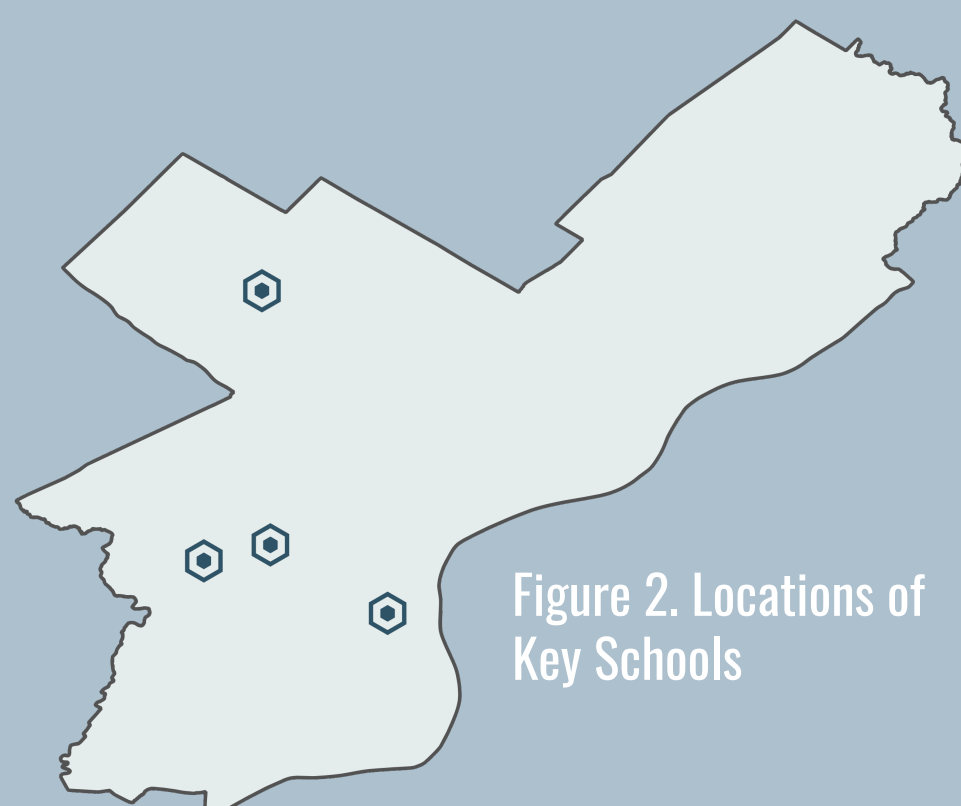


Figure 2. Locations of Key Schools

Most of the participants in this study have children at four schools in Philadelphia: one in Northwest, one in South, and two in West. These four schools scored between 50% and 75% (Reinforce) on the School Progress Report and all are about 50% out of catchment. Three of the schools are majority African American (~70%) and African Americans hold a plurality at the fourth school (40%)

## IMPLICATIONS

1. Schools should consider their appearance as a key part of what attracts parents—one way to do this is building a playground or a garden.
2. Schools should have reciprocal relationships with their neighborhood community: they both provide and use community resources.
3. Schools should make discussions of diversity, neighborhoods, and current events that go beyond the surface level a key part of their curricula.
4. Schools should build infrastructure that promotes relationships between parents across demographic lines (e.g. class contact lists).