

Statement of State Representative W. Curtis Thomas
School Reform Commission
March 11, 2009

I strongly urge the School Reform Commission to reject and/or table the School District's recommendation to close William Penn High School at the end of the 2009-2010 school year until the following affirmative steps are taken:

1. The School District must thoroughly consider all options before closing William Penn High School and displacing students. There are several viable alternatives to closing William Penn High School.
 - a. Create a small learning community with a workforce development component, K-12 school and child care center;
 - b. Develop a charter school focusing on academic excellence;
 - c. Establish a magnet school.

Any of these educational formats can be created and sustained by strengthened focus on academic performance, as well as public/private partnerships.

2. The School District must develop a comprehensive building utilization plan prior to recommending closure of William Penn High School or of any school in the district. The City of Philadelphia cannot afford another blighted building along Broad Street. The District must present the public with a plan detailing the uses of the William Penn High School building to ensure that any

- future use of the building will help the community thrive rather than create a neighborhood eyesore.
3. If the School District moves forward with any action regarding William Penn High School, the District should officially notify the parents/guardians of current students about its recommendations.
 4. Parents should have time and a venue to provide feedback and response to the School District's recommendations about William Penn High School. The District must designate a contact person for parents and families of William Penn students with questions and concerns about the District's recommendations. To date, it is unclear whether the District has provided parents and guardians of William Penn students an official notice of its recommendations.
 5. Insure the academic needs of William Penn students are adequately addressed before these young people are moved to another school. William Penn High School has academic challenges. The School District has recommended students from William Penn High School be transferred to Benjamin Franklin and Simon Gratz High Schools. The District cannot send William Penn students to schools that also face significant challenges, have not met academic goals and have not instituted an extensive plan to improve academic outcomes. Moving William Penn students to already low performing schools will exacerbate the academic concerns at these schools.
 6. Provide assurances that William Penn High School students and families will not be displaced again. The District should not send students to schools with

significant structural deficits or facing major capital improvement issues.

Families cannot afford to be faced with displacement another time.

William Penn High School is the only public high school in North Central with a campus environment which includes an Olympic size swimming pool; fully equipped exercise and dance rooms; state of the art communications equipment; athletic field for football, baseball and track; physical accommodations for students with special needs; and underground parking. No other public high school in North Central has these amenities all on one campus. There is no other location in North Central or maybe Philadelphia that can and will provide young people with a holistic educational experience.

The conditions at William Penn High School represent an opportunity to invest in young people not abandon them. The time is now to make this investment. Reevaluate the purpose for William Penn High School. The school was created to provide quality education to residents in North Central Philadelphia. History has demonstrated attendance, and academic performance will excel where the learning environment is driven by a progressive management team, state of the art resources and equipment, teachers that believe in students' unlimited potential, and a climate that is safe and secure.

I strongly urge the School Reform Commission to reject and/or table the School District's recommendation until the above referenced affirmative actions are taken. The challenge before you is not about the building as much as it is about the future of 400 plus uncut diamonds, their families and a community which is growing socially and economically. The Governor's proposed budget and the President's economic stimulus dollars for education almost demand that we invest in the young people of William Penn High School before we invest anywhere else.