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# Opposing Innovations: Race and Reform in the West Philadelphia Community Free School, 1969–1978

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## Abstract

This article uses oral history, archival material, and published primary sources to examine the competing conceptions of “innovation” at work in the creation and operation of the West Philadelphia Community Free School (WPCFS) from 1969 to 1978. One of the longest-running initiatives in the School District of Philadelphia’s experimental Office of Innovative Programs, the WPCFS stood at the crossroads of conflicting imperatives for “innovation.” These included: (1) institutional interests in advancing “humanizing” pedagogy; (2) Black activists’ interests in operating a community-controlled school for students of color in West Philadelphia; and (3) teachers’ interests in balancing their commitments to “humanizing” instruction and a surrounding community with different educational priorities. We highlight two instances where the frictions between these uses of “innovation” became pronounced in the WPCFS—debates over “free time” and the 1973 teachers’ strike. These incidents clarify how the burden of reconciling opposing innovations fell unevenly on the teachers and community members—often in ways that pitted the groups against one another—and exacerbated raced and classed inequalities in the school and district. While the account focuses on the 1960–1970s, we suggest that the WPCFS is relevant for us today, offering insights for the present into the longer discursive history of “innovation” as a lever for school reform, and into its impacts on educational equity.

**Keywords:** innovation; Philadelphia; free schools; community schools; urban education; school reform

Public education in the United States has had a complicated relationship with “innovation.” In 1835, when Rev. Hubbard Winslow addressed an early convening of the American Institute for Instruction, saying “innovation” was “the prevailing spirit of our age,” he intended the term as a pejorative—a preoccupation with newness and change that threatened the necessary, if unfashionable, wisdom of tradition.<sup>1</sup> A

<sup>1</sup>Hubbard Winslow, *On the Dangerous Tendency of Innovations and Extremes in Education* (Boston: Tuttle and Weeks, 1835), 3.

century later, Paul Mort and Frances Cornell held a more favorable view of the word in their research on “diffusions of innovation” in education—how shifts in instructional practice gained traction in schools.<sup>2</sup> And this differed still from the view that came to see “innovation” as a political-economic project to which schools ought to contribute. The Obama administration’s *Investing in Innovation* initiative, for instance, named K-12 education as a foundation for national innovation and opened funding for STEM programming to support the next generation of innovative workers.<sup>3</sup>

This longer view of educational “innovation” crystallizes the concept not as a fixed category, but a pliable discourse, configured to do particular kinds of work for particular stakeholders in particular times and places. Such ambiguities could make it tempting for historians and other education researchers to dismiss “innovation” as snake oil, or to avoid it altogether. But ignoring “innovation” elides the material work the concept does for those insistent on using it (and those who bear its consequences). Even more, it prevents inquiry into the conflicting interests and imperatives that comingle when new “innovations” are grafted onto schools and communities, each with their own unique legacies of invention and reform.

In this article, then, we are interested in the material and discursive history of educational “innovation.” Following historians of science and technology, we consider the concept not, as it is often positioned, as a triumphant break from the past, but as a contingent outgrowth of competing ideas about, and demands for, progress.<sup>4</sup> We do so by focusing on the history of one school that emerged at a time, and in a district, overtly enchanted with the possibilities of “innovative” reform: the West Philadelphia Community Free School, which operated from 1970 to 1978 as part of the School District of Philadelphia’s experimental Office of Innovative Programs. One of the office’s longest-running “innovative” initiatives, the school offers insight into the evolving pressures that conditioned the meanings and uses of “innovation” among governing institutions, school educators, and neighboring communities in 1970s Philadelphia. Even more, a historical analysis of the school reveals how educational reforms carried out in the name of innovation put the burden of reconciling such pressures unevenly on teachers and communities—often in ways that reproduced long-standing systemic inequities and racialized formations of difference. For example, our study shows that these reforms exacerbated the demands on teachers, particularly Black teachers, and nurtured tensions between Black communities and the schools ostensibly created to serve them. Such tendencies, we suggest, not only help surface the entanglements of race and urban development in the alternative educational experiments of the 1970s, but also spotlight the enduring social impacts

<sup>2</sup>Paul Mort and Frances Cornell, *American Schools in Transition: How Our Schools Adapt Their Practices to Changing Needs; A Study of Pennsylvania* (New York: Teachers College Press, 1941).

<sup>3</sup>The White House, *A Strategy for American Innovation: Securing Our Economic Growth and Prosperity* (Washington, DC: National Economic Council, Council of Economic Advisors, and Office of Science and Technology Policy, Feb. 2011).

<sup>4</sup>David Edgerton, “From Innovation to Use: Ten Eclectic Theses on the Historiography of Technology,” *History and Technology* 16, no. 2 (1999), 111–36. See also the transdisciplinary literature on “innovation studies”: Benoît Godin, *Models of Innovation: The History of an Idea* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2017); Bengt-Åke Lundvall, “Innovation Studies: A Personal Interpretation of the State of the Art,” in *Innovation Studies: Evolution and Future Challenges*, ed. Jan Fagerberg, Ben R. Martin, and Esben Anderson (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 21–70.

that can follow from efforts, past and present, to “innovate” or “disrupt” public education.

Our sources include oral history interviews with teachers, district administrators, and community board members involved with the West Philadelphia Community Free School (WPCFS).<sup>5</sup> We supplement these with archival materials related to the Office of Innovative Programs and the planning and organization of the WPCFS. Additionally, we have consulted contemporaneous sources—books, articles, reports, dissertations—that record this period of “innovative” reform in the School District of Philadelphia. In doing so, our account not only adds historical texture to conceptions of “innovation” in mid-century US schools, but also provides insight into the racial and institutional politics that animated alternative public programs during this period. Such experimental school settings have, to date, been documented largely through contemporaneous accounts of individual practitioner-authors and, generically, in intellectual histories of the time.<sup>6</sup> The transience of such programs has made it challenging to capture the more prosaic details of their day-to-day existence and their interoperation with district and city actors in the historiography of US school reform.

### “Innovation” in Mid-century Philadelphia

For much of its history, the term “innovation” has commonly referred to *products* (i.e., new developments in science, technology, organizational strategy, or practice) or *processes* (i.e., the experimental methods through which such developments are created). The mid-twentieth century, however, saw the introduction of an additional usage: as a reference to *systems*. Drawing insights from interdisciplinary research in cybernetics, system science, and organizational theory, this view understood “innovation” as an institutional arrangement for cultivating the material resources and human capital necessary for nation-states to secure competitive advantage over their peers.<sup>7</sup> Economic historian Chris Freeman describes the emergence of

<sup>5</sup>The first dataset was furnished by Dr. John Puckett at the University of Pennsylvania, who conducted the interviews with a team of graduate students in 1989 as part of a larger historical study of school reform efforts in West Philadelphia. The third author of this article, who was a teacher at the WPCFS in its early years and was part of the Puckett study, was interviewed by the first and second authors in 2018 and was integral in locating and conducting follow-up interviews with the remaining living participants from the original project. In addition, the authors also arranged interviews with additional WPCFS teachers and contemporaneous district leaders who could speak to the institutional and city perspectives that were not represented in the first dataset.

<sup>6</sup>Exemplars of this teacher-practitioner genre include George Dennison, *The Lives of Children* (New York: Random House, 1969); John Holt, *How Children Fail* (New York: Pittman, 1964); and Herb Kohl, *The Open Classroom* (New York: Random House, 1969). Broader surveys of efforts to implement instructional practices reflected in such works include Allen Graubard, *Free the Children: Radical Reform and the Free School Movement* (New York: Pantheon, 1972); Charles Silberman, *Crisis in the Classroom: The Remaking of American Education* (New York: Vintage, 1971); and, specific to the Philadelphia setting, Henry Resnik, *Turning on the System: War in the Philadelphia Public Schools* (New York: Pantheon, 1970). The historiography of this movement has been limited, but includes Ron Miller, *Free Schools, Free People: Education and Democracy after the 1960s* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2002).

<sup>7</sup>Benoît Godin, *Innovation, Contested: The Idea of Innovation over the Centuries* (New York: Routledge, 2015).

“National Systems of Innovation” as the prioritization of institutional reforms and public-private ventures that would initiate, import, modify, and diffuse knowledge and technologies to accelerate national economic growth. This perspective continues to drive investments in the study and analysis of national innovation trends today, notably by global intermediaries like the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development.<sup>8</sup>

Education has a profoundly important role in the systems-view of innovation. As a mechanism both for producing new techno-scientific knowledge and for staffing the new labor sectors that result from such developments, education becomes a prime target for optimizations that might bolster the larger system of national innovation. In the mid-century US, for instance, these efforts were visible in the increased anxieties about, and policy responses to, the purported shortcomings of students’ performance in science, mathematics, and reading compared with peers in other countries. Historians have shown the systemic character of reforms intended to address “the space race” and “the reading wars”: these were not limited to interventions in the quality of curricular materials, but included a range of organizational, administrative, and pedagogical modifications as well.<sup>9</sup> Their aim, in other words, was not solely to elevate the rigor of science or reading course content, but to align the varied components of school micro-systems with the skills, dispositions, and knowledge needed to enhance the macro-system of US innovation. This is why, as Jamie Cohen-Cole argues, federal and philanthropic spending during this period sometimes flowed to seemingly incompatible educational initiatives, from expert-designed textbooks and audio-visual materials to unstructured “open classrooms.” Distinct as these interventions were, they shared an interest in nurturing authentic behaviors, thought patterns, and working conditions of disciplinary specialists—closing the loop between school and professional socialization in the interest of national innovation.<sup>10</sup>

By the late 1960s, Philadelphia was a hotbed for such experiments. The city’s rapid growth and diversification over the preceding decades had intensified long-standing challenges for its school district: derelict buildings, over-enrolled classrooms, uneven achievement for racially and economically marginalized students, and civic unrest in response to these problems. For administrators, this left the education system ripe for interventions to modernize its facilities and instruction and, in doing so, to assuage its constituents’ mounting concerns over the quality of its schools.<sup>11</sup> The opportunity for such an intervention arrived in 1967, when Philadelphia was among nineteen school districts invited to join an expansive new federal initiative, the Educational System for

<sup>8</sup>Chris Freeman, “The ‘National System of Innovation’ in Historical Perspective,” *Cambridge Journal of Economics* 19, no. 1 (Feb. 1995), 5–24.

<sup>9</sup>Andrew Hartman, *Education and the Cold War: The Battle for the American School* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008); John Rudolph, *Scientists in the Classroom: The Cold War Reconstruction of American Science Education* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002); John Rudolph, *How We Teach Science, What’s Changed, and Why It Matters* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2019); Wayne Urban, *More Than Science and Sputnik: The National Defense Education Act of 1958* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2010).

<sup>10</sup>Jamie Cohen-Cole, *The Open Mind: Cold War Politics and the Sciences of Human Nature* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2014).

<sup>11</sup>Resnik, *Turning on the System*, 42.

the Seventies: A Cooperative Program for Educational Innovation, or ES-70. Funded by the US Office of Education, the program used a “systems approach” to support local and state educational institutions in aligning their high school facilities, curriculum, and instruction with larger goals for national innovation. ES-70 enlisted disciplinary experts to develop curriculum and audio-visual materials, which students were trained to work through at their own “individualized” pace without direct instruction from teachers. The project also encouraged local partnerships with universities and businesses to provide students with authentic academic and workplace experiences.<sup>12</sup> In Philadelphia, participation in ES-70 led to the development of a new science and math magnet school, University City High; but even more, it inspired the creation, in 1967, of a dedicated Office of Innovative Programs to support district-wide experimentation with innovative education. Over the next decade, this office would become a driving force in the district’s reform priorities, inaugurating more than sixty alternative programs—including, among them, the West Philadelphia Community Free School.<sup>13</sup>

While the systems-view of innovation helped legitimize such experiments to state institutions and private funders, these programs also appealed to other district stakeholders for different reasons. Administrators and teachers, for instance, may have been interested in national innovation insofar as it was an external pressure that heightened expectations for them to modernize their practice, but they primarily understood innovation as a way to improve the everyday learning conditions of their students. Many were admirers of contemporaneous education activists like George Dennison, John Holt, and Herb Kohl, and they recognized, in the Office of Innovative Programs, an opportunity to infuse more humanizing pedagogies into a school system historically resistant to such practices.<sup>14</sup> For them, the systems view of innovation was secondary to, or a means to an end for, introducing innovative products (e.g., instructional methods, technologies) and processes (e.g., classroom and organizational structures) into an outmoded and inhumane school system. And indeed, the initiatives that blossomed from the Office of Innovative Programs helped solidify the district’s reputation as a model for progressive education at the time. In 1971, after observing the breadth of experimental offerings available to Philadelphia students—open classrooms, storefront schools, community schools, schools-within-schools, schools-without-walls—free schools activist Allen Graubard suggested the city had no need for the revolutionary transformations he often called for, as the public system already provided them.<sup>15</sup>

Not everyone, however, shared enthusiasm for the district’s innovative experiments. The parents and community members in the predominantly Black neighborhoods of North and West Philadelphia had long been organizing and agitating for targeted improvements in their children’s schools: updated facilities, less crowded

<sup>12</sup>E. F. Shelley and Company, Inc., *An Educational System for the Seventies: Final Report*, Nov. 1969.

<sup>13</sup>Leonard B. Finkelstein and H. Pollock-Schloss, “The Alternative Program Movement in Public Education: The Philadelphia Experience,” in *Educational Innovation: Alternatives in Curriculum and Instruction*, ed. Arthur Roberts (Boston: Allyn and Bacon, 1975), 82–93.

<sup>14</sup>Resnik, *Turning on the System*, 118–19; Arthur Roberts, *Educational Innovation: Alternatives in Curriculum and Instruction* (Boston: Allyn and Bacon, 1975), 4–5.

<sup>15</sup>Miller, *Free Schools, Free People*, 150.

classrooms, equitable resourcing, culturally representative curricula, and greater community control in governance decisions.<sup>16</sup> For them, the district's investments in innovation—products, processes, and systems—were valuable only to the extent that they could address these pressing, material concerns.<sup>17</sup> During construction of University City High, the school that developed from the ES-70 initiative, these communities packed into the district's open town hall meetings about the project to express their frustration at the influx of funding for new audio-visual technologies and experimental programming, but not for more basic infrastructure for student flourishing.<sup>18</sup> A teacher in attendance at one such meeting summarized this sentiment, saying, "Hunger is not new. Torn pants are not new. They are not 'innovative.' Therefore, there are not funds for that kind of problem."<sup>19</sup> In this way, the work of "innovation" in mid-century Philadelphia was multivalent—simultaneously cultivating, and distracting from, the competing desires of the school district's institutional, instructional, and community stakeholders.

### West Philadelphia Community Free School

It was out of this environment that the West Philadelphia Community Free School took shape. Though the school would eventually become one of the longest-running initiatives in the district's Office of Innovative Programs, it originated less as an "innovative" experiment than a response to community protests about overcrowding in West Philadelphia High School (West). In 1969, West enrolled 3,800 students—1,400 over its capacity—98 percent of whom were African American.<sup>20</sup>

That spring, Novella Williams, a Black community activist and leader of Citizens for Progress, organized a sit-in at the nearby University of Pennsylvania (Penn) to protest these learning conditions. Citing Penn's history of exploitative development

<sup>16</sup>Matthew Countryman, *Up South: Civil Rights and Black Power in Philadelphia* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2007); Rhiannon M. Maton and T. Philip Nichols, "Mobilizing Public Alternative Schools for Post-neoliberal Futures: Legacies of Critical Hope in Philadelphia and Toronto," *Policy Futures in Education* 18, no. 1 (2020), 159–78.

<sup>17</sup>The tensions between federal, state, district, and community visions for reform have been explored in a variety of rich historical accounts, including: Kabria Baumgartner, *In Pursuit of Knowledge: Black Women and Educational Activism in Antebellum America* (New York: NYU Press, 2021); Jack Dougherty, *More Than One Struggle: The Evolution of Black School Reform in Milwaukee* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2005); David G. Garcia, *Strategies of Segregation: Race, Residence, and the Struggle for Educational Equality* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2018); William J. Reese, *Power and the Promise of School Reform: Grassroots Movements during the Progressive Era* (New York: Teachers College Press, 2022); Tracy L. Steffes, *School, Society, and State: A New Education to Govern Modern America, 1890–1940* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012).

<sup>18</sup>See T. Philip Nichols, "We Don't Need No Innovation," *Logic Magazine* 14 (Sept 2021), <https://logicmag.io/kids/we-dont-need-no-innovation/>. For a detailed account of community activism related to University City High School, see Edward Epstein, "Race, Real Estate, and Education: The University of Pennsylvania's Interventions in West Philadelphia, 1960–1980" (PhD diss., University of Pennsylvania, 2020).

<sup>19</sup>"Teacher Raps Shedd, Calls Schools 'Mess,'" *Evening Bulletin*, April 10, 1969.

<sup>20</sup>Kim-Jamey Nguyen and John L. Puckett, "The West Philadelphia Community Free School," West Philadelphia Collaborative History, n.d., <https://collaborativehistory.gse.upenn.edu/stories/west-philadelphia-community-free-school>.



**Figure 1.** “Street view of West Philadelphia High School,” May 17, 1969. Temple University Libraries Special Collections Research Center, *Philadelphia Evening Bulletin* Collection.

in West Philadelphia, demonstrators demanded that the university provide building space for a new high school that could relieve the enrollment pressures from West and offer a strong, community-controlled educational program enriched by university resources. In response, Penn administrators appointed education professor Aase Eriksen to lead an ad hoc group of school district officials and community members—Novella Williams among them—in developing a school model that could serve each party’s interests. The school would be part of the district’s growing Office of Innovative Programs and would act as an “annex” of West—with the district funding facilities, instructors, and teaching materials and Penn providing faculty support and cash infusions for planning and programming.<sup>21</sup> Thus, the West Philadelphia Community Free School (WPCFS) was born.

Eriksen modeled the WPCFS both on emerging methods for “humanizing” pedagogy, popularized by progressive figures like Neil Postman and Herb Kohl, and ideas she brought from her home country, Denmark. As Eriksen described it, the model would be a “non-graded, experimental school based on notions of freedom, responsibility in learning, individualized instruction, and community participation in the education process.”<sup>22</sup> Course offerings would include subject area classes as well as “outside” courses, where students would gain exposure to careers through engagement with local businesses and community institutions. They would also be given “free time”—unstructured blocks in the day that they were free to use however they pleased. Physically, the school was to use a “scattered site” structure: where

<sup>21</sup>Lawrence A. Goldfarb, Peter H. Brown, and Thomas P. Gallagher, *Seven Schools: A Story of Community Action for Better Education* (Philadelphia: Young Great Society Building Foundation, 1972), 46–51.

<sup>22</sup>Aase Eriksen and Judith Messina, “Consequences of Implementing Alternative Schools: Toward a Theoretical Framework for Investigating Problems” (paper, Annual Meeting of the Society for Applied Anthropology, Montreal, 1972), 3. Available at: <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED062708.pdf>.



**Figure 2.** “Novella Williams, president of Citizens for Progress,” Dec. 18, 1974. Photographer: Fred A. Meyer. Temple University Libraries Special Collections Research Center, *Philadelphia Evening Bulletin* Collection.

the one thousand students projected to attend would be divided into “houses” of one to two hundred students, each located in different rowhomes throughout the neighborhood. The school would be governed by a thirteen-person board, composed of the community members who were part of Eriksen’s original ad hoc planning committee, as well as a community liaison from Penn and the principal of West, Walter Scott. Eriksen would serve as the school’s interim director.<sup>23</sup>

Over its eight-year existence, the school would never reach the size or number of sites that Eriksen originally envisioned. The district acquired an early 1900s duplex near Penn’s campus to serve as the first WPCFS “house”; however, delays in renovations to bring the facility to code forced the school to open, in 1970, in a temporary

<sup>23</sup>Goldfarb et al., *Seven Schools*, 46.



**Figure 3.** At the opening of the West Philadelphia Community Free School, “John Mount, of the training section of the U.S. Post Office; Linda Powell, West Philadelphia HS junior moving to the Free School; Dr. Aase Eriksen, Penn lecturer and consultant to the Free School; Donald Colman, WPHS junior also at Free School and Richard Seymour, head teacher of the Free School’s first unit,” Jan. 26, 1970. Photographer: Raymond F. Stubblebine. Temple University Libraries Special Collections Research Center, *Philadelphia Evening Bulletin* Collection.

location—a vacant storefront, slated for urban renewal demolition. The school would expand to three houses and five hundred students the following year, but would downsize back to two houses the year after, and finally to one until its closing in 1978.<sup>24</sup> The student population itself also deviated from the model’s plan. Although Eriksen and the school’s community board intended admission to occur through random assignment to ensure fairness for local residents, the WPCFS staff quickly recognized that Principal Scott was taking an active role in shaping enrollment, using the “annex” program to offload students he saw as creating disciplinary problems at West. This reflects a fairly common practice during this period in the district, where school leaders used the flurry of new innovative initiatives to quietly reassign “problem students” under the guise of matching them to instructional programs better suited to their needs.<sup>25</sup>

Significantly, it was not only the school’s size and student population that differed from the original model; the core practices of the program also evolved over the school’s operation. Late in the fall of the school’s first year, concerns among

<sup>24</sup> Arthur A. Hyde, “Program and Curriculum Development in an Alternative Secondary School: A Descriptive Analysis” (PhD diss., University of Pennsylvania, 1974), 9–10.

<sup>25</sup> Hyde, “Program and Curriculum Development in an Alternative Secondary School,” 186–87.

community board members about the school's leadership prompted Eriksen to step aside as director, pivoting to a consultant role until her resignation in 1971. Without Eriksen at the helm, the faculty had to determine for themselves which components of the school's model to retain, and what new elements might be folded into the program design. Complicating matters was the fact that the teachers' revised model would need to be implemented with fewer resources. Eriksen's departure meant that Penn was no longer institutionally linked to the WPCFS and, as such, was no longer obligated to send volunteers, teaching interns, and resources to the school. Karl Holland, a teacher who worked at the school for the duration of its existence, described the cumulative effects this had on the school:

When Aase . . . went, all the resources was, like, pulled out. All of a sudden, we didn't have a facility, we didn't have those [outside] classes, we didn't have the equipment they made available to us. And then, we were, in fact, a dumping ground [for students] without the resources that they had [at West], let alone the ones that Penn was lending us.<sup>26</sup>

The absence of teaching interns also affected staffing. Teacher Jolley Christman explained that, following the departure of Eriksen and Penn, class sizes increased significantly. This prevented teachers from implementing those parts of the school model they believed to be most effective and forced them to revert to more conventional instructional methods. In her words, "We just didn't have as many bodies as we had had . . . [and] the school had become more traditional. Like, there was no co-teaching going on by the third year . . . and there was no interdisciplinary work going on."<sup>27</sup> Such instabilities—in the school's structure, student population, resourcing, and instruction—highlight how the "innovations" of the WPCFS were never a fixed feature in its model, but were an outgrowth of conflicting institutional commitments and material pressures that underpinned its everyday operation.

### Opposing "Innovations"

The competing motivations that animated the WPCFS's development reflected the fraught space that many schools in the Office of Innovative Programs occupied. On one hand, "innovation schools" allowed the district to garner attention and resources from federal and philanthropic funders for implementing experimental programs aimed at bolstering national innovation.<sup>28</sup> On the other hand, they also provided a flexible discourse that local stakeholders could use to advance their own

<sup>26</sup>Karl Holland, interview with John Puckett's research team, 1989. All interviews from this dataset were audio recorded and transcribed in 1989 and have been used to inform Puckett's ongoing West Philadelphia Collaborative History Project (n.d., <https://collaborativehistory.gse.upenn.edu/>). The full transcripts were furnished to the authors by Puckett in 2019.

<sup>27</sup>Jolley Christman, interview with the authors, Feb. 22, 2019.

<sup>28</sup>In addition to large federally funded programs, like the ES-70 initiative, philanthropic organizations also supported research and development associated with innovative school models. The Carnegie Corporation, for instance, funded Charles Silberman's *Crisis in the Classroom* study, which became a best-selling book and helped popularize reform movements for "open classrooms" and "informal education" in US schools during the 1970s. See also Cohen-Cole, *The Open Mind*, and Ellen Condliffe Lagemann, *The*

educational priorities. Just as school administrators could wield this discourse to reassign “problem students” to other buildings, teachers and community members, too, could leverage it to advocate for governance models, school structures, and resources that might not otherwise have found support. As with other programs, then, the WPCFS was shaped by the competing conceptions of “innovation” that were layered together in its design, and the agonism of their relations as the school evolved over time. In what follows, we highlight three groups whose varied interests in, and uses of, “innovation” were influential in shaping the WPCFS’s trajectory: institutional stakeholders (Penn, West, the School District of Philadelphia), community stakeholders (the community board), and instructional stakeholders (teachers and school administrators). We then turn to two incidents from the school’s history where these conflicting imperatives ground against one another, creating frictions that make visible the ways “innovation,” as a material and discursive practice, reinforced racialized formations of difference and educational inequities in West Philadelphia.

### *Institutional Stakeholders*

To examine the stakes of “innovation” in the WPCFS for Penn, West, and the Philadelphia school district, it is helpful to step back a few years. As noted, the sit-in at Penn that was organized by Novella Williams and that led to the development of the WPCFS was not the first of its kind. While overcrowded schools were a problem throughout the city of Philadelphia, they were disproportionately concentrated in the predominantly Black neighborhoods of North and West Philadelphia. Over the preceding two decades, waves of activist agitation rippled through these communities in response to this injustice. In 1949, newspapers reported that a group of “irate mothers” stormed the office of Add Anderson, the district business officer, to protest the cramped conditions in classrooms.<sup>29</sup> And in 1966, a direct-action campaign led by the NAACP and Citizens for Progress called on the Johnson administration to suspend funds to the district until it allowed students of color “to get an equitable share of the city’s resources in terms of schools, materials, and teachers.”<sup>30</sup> Mounting pressures like these were instrumental in prompting the district, in 1967, to hire a new superintendent, Mark Shedd, who was tasked with addressing the growing unrest related to racial inequities in the size and quality of neighborhood schools.<sup>31</sup>

A white progressive educator, Shedd believed that the engine of equitable school reform was “humanizing” education. He admired, and frequently quoted, the work of contemporaneous romantics like John Holt and Ivan Illich to argue that injustices in schools were rooted in the education system’s fundamental orientation toward “dehumanization.” In November of 1967, just months after Shedd’s arrival in Philadelphia, a mass student walkout put his philosophy to the test. Approximately

*Politics of Knowledge: The Carnegie Corporation, Philanthropy, and Public Policy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989).

<sup>29</sup>“Irate Mothers Prod Anderson for School,” *Philadelphia Inquirer*, Sept. 4, 1949, 12.

<sup>30</sup>Jim Magee, “West Phila Citizens Group Asks Gov’t to Stop School Funds,” *Philadelphia Tribune*, Feb. 15, 1966, 20.

<sup>31</sup>Henry Resnik, “The Shedd Revolution: A Philadelphia Story,” *Urban Review* 3, no. 3 (1969), 21.

3,500 students marched on the administration building, demanding improvements to school facilities and class sizes, courses in African American history, and the freedom to wear culturally representative clothing in schools. Philadelphia police, led by Commissioner Frank Rizzo, broke up the protest with brutal force, injuring twenty-two students and arresting forty-two.<sup>32</sup> Shedd responded by publicly criticizing Rizzo, blaming police for the escalation. He also began working with delegates to approve dress code changes and develop an elective course in Black history, and he arranged sensitivity training retreats focused on “white racism” for district staff.<sup>33</sup> These efforts were, in many ways, responsive to instances of “dehumanizing” practices in schools; yet, significantly, they did not address the less tractable concerns of the student protestors related to uneven school resourcing. In a cash-strapped district, finding physical space to alleviate overcrowding would require creative problem-solving. “Innovation” offered a path for marrying material solutions for over-enrollment with pedagogical solutions for “dehumanization” in schools.

According to James “Torch” Lytle, a central office administrator who worked with Shedd at this time, the Office of Innovative Programs was “the heart of the Shedd approach” to reform. One reason for this was the federal and philanthropic funding attached to innovative initiatives at the time. Lytle recalled, “There was a ton of money around for school reforms and experimentation.”<sup>34</sup> While the impetus for starting the Office of Innovative Programs was to build on the momentum, publicity, and investments stemming from the district’s involvement with ES-70, Shedd saw potential for housing, under the umbrella of the office, dozens of decentralized “subsystems.” These programs could siphon students away from crowded facilities—easing the district’s burdens regarding over-enrollment—while simultaneously providing a wide range of options for “humanizing” instruction that could operate at low cost to the district. They also had potential to lure more outside investments from organizations and institutions interested in educational innovation. Taking inspiration from the array of alternative and experimental programs surfacing in other districts at the time, the Shedd administration made expanding the Office of Innovative Programs a priority.<sup>35</sup>

It was against this backdrop that the WPCFS was formed. After waves of protest from Black community organizations related to overcrowded schools in West Philadelphia and Penn’s lack of investment in its surrounding neighborhoods, both the district and university found an opportunity—following the 1969 sit-in—to address their distinct needs by opening an “innovation” school. While individuals like Shedd and Eriksen might have been energized by the “humanizing” potential of a community school in West Philadelphia, the program would also remedy other long-standing institutional tensions. For the district, it would assuage community concerns about school quality and racial inequity without the material costs involved in building new facilities. And for Penn, it could appease protestors and

<sup>32</sup>Timothy J. Lombardo, *Blue-Collar Conservatism: Frank Rizzo’s Philadelphia and Populist Politics* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2018), 103–5.

<sup>33</sup>Resnik, “The Shedd Revolution,” 21–25.

<sup>34</sup>James “Torch” Lytle, interview with the authors, Feb. 23, 2019.

<sup>35</sup>Resnik, “The Shedd Revolution,” 24–25.

improve community relations at the minimal expense of faculty time, student interns, and small investments in teaching resources. These dynamics were evident to observers at the time. Arthur Hyde, a WPCFS teacher and doctoral student at Penn's Graduate School of Education, put it bluntly: "A superficial analysis of the motivation of the university and school district administrators would undoubtedly judge their primary purpose . . . to be the alleviation of community protestations."<sup>36</sup>

In this way, the potential for "innovation" to simultaneously serve humanizing, cost-saving, and peace-keeping ends reinforced the WPCFS's appeal as a solution for institutional stakeholders from the district and university. Moreover, the convergence of these interests in the fraught landscape of West Philadelphia gave the WPCFS special status, even among other initiatives in the Office of Innovative Programs. In 1971, when the district faced substantial budget cuts and teachers were being reallocated throughout the district, Mark Shedd personally intervened to assign four additional teachers to the WPCFS so that it could meet its innovative potential.<sup>37</sup> This special interest in the school helps to explain its longevity in the district: where most experimental programs lasted, at most, one or two years, the WPCFS would last for eight—a testament to the overlapping institutional interests it served as an innovation.

### *Community Stakeholders*

In contrast with district and university stakeholders, the WPCFS's community board was less invested in "innovation" as a force for cost-saving, or even for humanizing pedagogy—at least, in the sense advocated by progressive reformers at the time. Instead, "innovation" was a discourse that could be leveraged to redistribute district and university resources to students of color in West Philadelphia. By the time of the 1969 sit-in that led to the creation of the WPCFS, Novella Williams—along with other neighborhood activists in her organization, Citizens for Progress—had been agitating for equitable learning conditions in predominantly Black schools for years. Williams believed, in her words, that "you can't improve the schools unless you change the power structure."<sup>38</sup> Consequently, a central theme in Citizens for Progress's protests was the demand for Black communities to have greater say in the governance of the schools their children attended. In this way, the district's decision to respond to the 1969 sit-in by opening a community-controlled school in West Philadelphia was a tremendous victory for Williams and Citizens for Progress. Its identity as an "innovative" school was ancillary to its political meaning for West Philadelphia's Black community.

After the years of struggle that led to the opening of the WPCFS, community board members felt significant pressure for the program not only to be successful, but to do so without becoming dependent on its partnering institutions. In Hyde's description, "The board clearly wanted a community-controlled school, based on Black initiative, as independent of the school district as financially and politically

<sup>36</sup>Hyde, "Program and Curriculum Development in an Alternative Secondary School," 107–8.

<sup>37</sup>Hyde, "Program and Curriculum Development," 111.

<sup>38</sup>Hyde, "Program and Curriculum Development," 106.

as possible.”<sup>39</sup> The board, and Williams in particular, thus maintained a healthy suspicion of the district and university’s involvement. “The Free School came out of the tears and sweat and toil of [Williams’s] brow,” Karl Holland recalled. “She wanted a say in how it was going to be administered to make sure that we [the Black Community] were not taken advantage of or lost out on anything.”<sup>40</sup> The school’s weight, not just as a community-controlled institution, but a symbol of Black self-determination, extended into the culture of the school—even among its white faculty. Dick Seymour, a white teacher, explained that a current running through the program was the idea that education had a role to play in redressing historical injustices and empowering communities: “There was just so much optimism and so much angst and pain in the African American community. . . and yet, there was a real sense that education could make a difference.”<sup>41</sup>

The board’s interest in independent community control sat in uneasy alignment with other institutional demands for the school. Williams recognized that, as much latitude as the board had, district officials—or, “the rednecks,” as she sometimes called them—would never allow a school governed by the Black community to have the autonomy that other programs in the Office of Innovative Programs enjoyed. For this reason, even though it was not its primary interest, the board entertained the “innovative” suggestions of Eriksen, the district, and the teachers to the extent that these alliances might allow them to keep control over the school’s day-to-day governance. Most were deeply skeptical of the Eriksen model, understanding it as a project of “white liberal assistance” that was antithetical to their own interest in “[Black communities] getting their own thing together.”<sup>42</sup> However, some members came to see some potential in the partnership. Eriksen’s “humanizing” pedagogy, for instance, seemed to give students space to learn independently, which could dovetail with the board’s larger aims. Sarah Mack, a Black member of the community board, was among those initially won over by these innovations:

We saw students being able to move ahead at their own pace, and not being regimented and sitting down in a classroom setting. But where bright students could move ahead and not be held back waiting for others to catch up with them. And we saw the vision of students being involved in the community, going to outside courses, that whole concept. That’s what we saw.<sup>43</sup>

Board members also believed that playing nicely with the university could open opportunities for students to attend college—and perhaps that the school might even one day serve as a “pipeline to Penn.”<sup>44</sup> However, over time, they became concerned that the school’s humanizing innovations might actually undercut its potential to prepare students for higher education—or even to ensure a quality high school education. In practice, the flexibility on which Eriksen’s model was based offered little

<sup>39</sup>Hyde, “Program and Curriculum Development,” 203.

<sup>40</sup>Karl Holland, interview with John Puckett’s research team, 1989.

<sup>41</sup>Dick Seymour, interview with the authors, Feb. 22, 2019.

<sup>42</sup>Quoted in Hyde, “Program and Curriculum Development,” 203.

<sup>43</sup>Sarah Mack, interview with John Puckett’s research team, 1989.

<sup>44</sup>Hyde, “Program and Curriculum Development,” 204.

structure or direction for students—which could be disorienting for some. Sarah Mack found this disturbing as it seemed to overlook the asymmetrical expectations that fall on Black students. “Black people just have to have structure . . . because we’re just not free to . . . do whatever we want to do, to dress as we please, to get an education or not get one.” The school’s approach to freedom, in other words, was so focused on non-coercion that it sometimes appeared to absolve educators of a responsibility to teach, direct, or discipline students. For Mack, this dynamic was deeply racialized: “Blonde, blue-eyed teachers can’t discipline Black students. . . . They want to be buddies. Our kids don’t need more friends. . . . They need adults who care about them enough to teach them something.”<sup>45</sup>

In this way, the board’s investment in the school’s “innovations” was always modulated by their impact on the larger goal of maintaining the school as a Black institution, founded through Black initiative, and governed by the Black community.<sup>46</sup> To the extent that the district or Eriksen’s innovations could align with this aim, the board was willing to entertain them; however, when these innovations diverged from—or worse, compromised—its vision, the board was quick to object. In 1971, for instance, Eriksen’s continued insistence that students be given unstructured free time—in opposition to the board’s demand for more structured programming—prompted a series of disputes that ultimately led to the board removing her as the school’s director.<sup>47</sup> This combative stance stemmed from the fact that the board did not see the reputations of Eriksen, the university, or the teacher staff as equally tied to the success of the WPCFS as that of the Black community in West Philadelphia. After Eriksen’s dismissal, when several teachers requested representation on the board—and threatened to go public with some of the school’s operational problems, if denied—Williams responded, saying, “[I would] react like a woman whose child was attacked if anyone tried to destroy the school.”<sup>48</sup> This reaction demonstrates how, for Williams and the board, the WPCFS was more than an “innovative” experiment—and the stakes of its success were far greater than a particular pedagogical outcome.

### *Instructional Stakeholders*

The WPCFS teachers who joined the school in its first years had interests and values that, at times, intersected with those of both institutional and community stakeholders. Those who gravitated to faculty positions at the school tended to believe, like Eriksen, that “innovative” pedagogy was responsive to the needs of students. They were thus committed to building close and trusting student-teacher relationships, cultivating interdisciplinary collaboration, and nurturing students’ sense of freedom. Dick Seymour reflected, “Trying to work with what the kids wanted to learn was one of our . . . basic organizing principles.”<sup>49</sup> The school model reflected this

<sup>45</sup>Sarah Mack, interview with John Puckett’s research team, 1989.

<sup>46</sup>Hyde, “Program and Curriculum Development,” 203; Sarah Mack, interview with John Puckett’s research team, 1989; Karl Holland, interview with John Puckett’s research team, 1989.

<sup>47</sup>Hyde, “Program and Curriculum Development,” 142.

<sup>48</sup>Hyde, “Program and Curriculum Development,” 205.

<sup>49</sup>Dick Seymour, interview with authors, Feb. 22, 2019.

arrangement. In its early years, classes were driven by the interests of students, and most teachers were intentional about not coercing their participation—or even their attendance. Seymour recalled,

People would kind of come in unstructured. . . . And you never knew when Eugene [a student at WPCFS] might show up. . . . We spent no time keeping track of where kids were. They were doing a bit in class, but if they weren't, we didn't go running around after them.<sup>50</sup>

At this early juncture, the WPCFS teachers preferred allowing students to make decisions based on their own free will. While this sometimes led to students milling about the school, or not showing up for classes, teachers recalled that there were few real behavioral or disciplinary issues.<sup>51</sup>

Importantly, the innovations of the Eriksen model did not only pertain to teachers' interactions with students, but also to how they engaged with one another. Teachers understood the development of mutually supportive relationships as central to the school's design, and consequently, they worked to cultivate them on and off the clock. During evenings, weekends, and even school breaks, it was not uncommon for groups of educators to gather to design field trips or develop curriculum. Eriksen saw such collaborations as essential in a "humanizing" education. As educators developed strong personal and professional connections with one another, Eriksen claimed, "they realized that the task of helping students adjust to the school environment, while meeting the educational needs of students of widely differing academic backgrounds, was too great for teachers to accomplish as individuals."<sup>52</sup> Several teachers affirmed this experience. Sally Gee, a Black teacher with close connections to the community board, saw the relationships that resulted from the school's model as an avenue for nurturing quality, personalized education for West Philadelphia students. "I got to know the students, teenagers, a lot better because I was closer to them, more intimate with them. Whereas, in the traditional setting, I'm standing in front of the classroom."<sup>53</sup> In this way, just as community board members like Sarah Mack were drawn in by the potentials of Eriksen's model, some teachers also recognized, in the school's "innovations," opportunities for humanizing pedagogy and community investment to be mutually reinforcing.

More often, however, these desires bumped up against one another—often along lines of race. In its first years, many of the WPCFS teachers were Penn students who were recruited to faculty positions after interning at the school.<sup>54</sup> The majority were

<sup>50</sup>Dick Seymour, interview with authors, Feb. 22, 2019.

<sup>51</sup>Elaine Simon (third author), interview with first and second authors, Feb. 18, 2019.

<sup>52</sup>Aase Eriksen and Frederick M. Fiske, "Teacher Adaptation to an Informal School," *NASSP Bulletin* 57, no. 369 (Jan. 1973), 8.

<sup>53</sup>Sally Gee, interview with John Puckett's research team, April 19, 1989.

<sup>54</sup>In its first full school year starting in September 1970, the teaching body consisted of the school director originating from Penn (i.e., Aase Erikson), twenty certified teachers, twelve graduate interns from Penn, and six paraprofessional teachers originating from the local community. All six paraprofessional teachers were Black, but only four teachers and no interns were Black. See Hyde, "Program and Curriculum Development," 11.

white students who had little experience in predominantly Black schools, much less in teaching classes of predominantly Black students. Jolley Christman, a white Penn intern who was hired as a WPCFS teacher, reflected, “I think we were really naive about race. I think we were really naive about the community board. I think we were young and naive and idealistic.”<sup>55</sup> As Christman suggests, young white teachers often arrived at the school driven by strong ideals—many of which aligned with facets of the school’s innovative model. However, they also lacked an understanding not only of the way these ideals sat uneasily with other stakeholders’ conceptions of what the school was, or could be, but also of how these divergences were refracted through the racial politics of the district, the community, and the city.

Significantly, following Eriksen’s dismissal by the board, and the severing of ties between the school and Penn, the teaching conditions at the WPCFS changed dramatically. First, with Eriksen gone, teachers were left to interpret and implement the school’s innovative curriculum without her direction; and with Penn no longer affiliated, the resources for collaborative teaching and curriculum development based on student interests—which were central to the Eriksen model—were soon depleted. Where once sharp tensions existed between Eriksen’s call for free time and the board’s counterdemand for structured programs, now teachers had little choice but to adopt more traditional, structured teaching methods. Second, Eriksen’s departure also slowed the flow of white teacher interns from Penn, leading the district and the board to focus on recruiting teachers from other West Philadelphia neighborhood schools. Over time, this led to greater numbers of Black teachers joining the faculty. These educators brought much-needed experience teaching in local public programs, but they also tended to be more ambivalent about the innovative experiments that guided the school’s early years.<sup>56</sup> Incrementally, these practices became less and less central to the teachers’ vision of the school.

By 1974, the WPCFS remained a part of the district’s Office of Innovative Programs—now rebranded the Alternative Programs Office—but the design and operation of the school looked very different. Against the wishes of the teachers and community board, the district had changed the school’s enrollment procedures. Rather than strictly serving the West Philadelphia community, the school became a landing spot for students with perceived academic and behavioral mismatches with neighborhood schools throughout the district. Likewise, while the school continued to meet in a “house” setting, rather than a conventional school, up until its closing in 1978, instruction increasingly took on the conventions of other classrooms in the district: discrete subject areas, bounded blocks of instructional time, regular assessments via tests. Jolley Christman reflected, “It was a much more traditional school and with a more traditional roster. And not nearly the collaboration among the faculty.”<sup>57</sup> In this way,

<sup>55</sup>Jolley Christman, interview with authors, Feb. 22, 2019.

<sup>56</sup>The ambivalence of some Black teachers in Philadelphia to the “innovative” and “humanizing” methods advocated by their white liberal colleagues is reflected in Lisa Delpit’s *Other People’s Children: Cultural Conflict in the Classroom* (New York: The New Press, 1995), 21–47. Drawing on six years of experience in Philadelphia public schools in the 1970s, Delpit argues that Black students tend to benefit from traditional teaching methods that equip students to navigate existing cultures of power—rather than progressive methods that frequently ignore such racialized power differentials.

<sup>57</sup>Jolley Christman, interview with authors, Feb. 22, 2019.

perspectives among school stakeholders about what made the WPCFS innovative were varied, evolving in relation to the wider changes in the program's organization and the makeup of its faculty.

### Innovation in Conflict

Throughout its operation, the WPCFS was animated by its stakeholders' competing interests in, and desires for, "innovative" reform. At times, these institutional, community, and instructional commitments found tenuous alignment. In such moments, the school appeared as a success story, celebrated as an exemplar of the powerful opportunities that the Office of Innovative Programs made available to neighborhoods, educators, and students.<sup>58</sup> More often, however, these interests produced conflicting imperatives that bumped against one another in the everyday activities of the school. Across interviews and contemporaneous accounts of the WPCFS, two sources of conflict surface repeatedly as meaningful emblems in the school's evolution: the use of free time by WPCFS students and the teachers' strikes of 1972 and 1973. Examining these components as outgrowths of the school's underlying tensions, we suggest, helps clarify the material and discursive work of "innovation" in reinforcing racialized formations of difference in each.

### Free Time

As noted, Aase Eriksen believed that providing unstructured time during the day was essential to humanizing education, allowing students "to develop a sense of freedom" and to learn "how to make choices and take risks."<sup>59</sup> From the beginning, however, "free time" became a point of contention between Eriksen and the community board. When the school first opened in 1970, operating out of a temporary storefront location on Penn's main commercial strip, students often spent their free time socializing at the front of the building, in plain view of passersby on the street. Board member Sarah Mack recalled that the scene was worrying: "When you walked in the Free School there, and people made remarks, it was like chaos. And [outsiders] didn't see what kind of place it was. . . . Kids were playing cards and smoking, you know."<sup>60</sup> The teachers also acknowledged that students' behavior during free time could be viewed, from the outside, as disorderly; however, most believed this chaos to be generative. It was a way to break students' established perceptions of what learning had to look like, and eventually, it would lead them to adopt more constructive uses of their time in school.

Initially, the community board and teachers tried to find a workable solution that could preserve free time in a form that pleased everyone. But Eriksen and the teachers' sense that unstructured time was central to what made the school innovative continued to sit uneasily with the community board's desire for a structured program enriched by university resources. Novella Williams and other Black activists in West Philadelphia had fought so hard, and for so long, to have a community-

<sup>58</sup>See Finkelstein and Pollock-Schloss, "The Alternative Program Movement in Public Education."

<sup>59</sup>Quoted in Hyde, "Program and Curriculum Development," 102.

<sup>60</sup>Sarah Mack, interview with John Puckett's research team, 1989.

controlled school, and now that they had it, they worried that the program's "innovative" structure would hurt its public image. Sarah Mack described the frustration of constantly having to explain the term "free" in the school's name to curious or concerned parents: "They said, 'What is the "free" school?' And 'does it mean anything goes?' . . . There were always questions being asked."<sup>61</sup> By the winter of 1970, the board had lost its patience trying to temper the school's permissive structure and the narratives circulating about its programming. They called for Eriksen to be replaced and for the practice of rostering free time to be eliminated. Even with this edict, however, the teachers who believed in Eriksen's model for humanizing education continued to find workarounds for inserting free time into the school. During the 1971–1972 school year, the teachers began introducing interdisciplinary courses and workshop periods, which effectively camouflaged free time in what appeared to be more structured course offerings.<sup>62</sup>

The controversy over free time reflects the competing imperatives that guided institutional, community, and instructional stakeholders' understandings and uses of innovation. For Eriksen and the teachers, unstructured time was foundational to nurturing students' sense of autonomy—and, by extension, to offering them a humanizing education. From this view, compromising on free time could amount to a kind of pedagogical malpractice, imposing narrow and constricting routines onto students that risked undermining their curiosity and motivation as learners. And yet, even as individual board members were occasionally sympathetic with this view, for the board on the whole, the school's innovative approach to pedagogy was of secondary importance to its significance as a community-controlled school, founded on and governed by Black initiative. "Innovation" from this perspective was important only insofar as it provided a means to redistribute resources and power from the district and university to Black communities in West Philadelphia. The incommensurability of these positions highlights how the wider discourse of innovation—circulating from federal and philanthropic programs into district- and school-level practices—created tenuous alliances between white liberal educators and Black community organizers in West Philadelphia that both advanced and destabilized the desires of each.

### *The Teacher Strikes*

Where the tension over free time was an enduring challenge in the school, the second conflict was a more bounded event. The school's third operating year saw significant labor strife develop across Pennsylvania and, specifically, within the School District of Philadelphia. In September 1972, teachers from across the district went on strike, leading to the temporary two-week closure of two hundred local public schools. Several months later, teachers went on a second eleven-week strike, beginning January 8, 1973, demanding a pay raise, strengthened benefits, and increased funding for public education in the city more broadly.<sup>63</sup>

<sup>61</sup>Sarah Mack, interview with John Puckett's research team.

<sup>62</sup>Hyde, "Program and Curriculum Development," 292–93.

<sup>63</sup>"Philadelphia Strike by Teachers Irks Parents and Pupils," *New York Times*, Sept. 22, 1972, <https://www.nytimes.com/1972/09/22/archives/philadelphia-strike-by-teachers-irks-parents-and-pupils.html>.

Leading up to the strike, the WPCFS's community board was adamant that the school should remain open—even as other programs shut down. They encouraged teachers to remain in classrooms, serving their students, rather than joining their fellow union members in striking. This request required the unionized teachers to cross their own picket line—creating conflict over what the appropriate response ought to be. While some wanted to show solidarity with the union, and to fight for better wages and working conditions, others, particularly the Black teachers at the school, were concerned that the strike would withhold instruction from Black students in West Philadelphia and, even more, would undercut the authority of the community board.<sup>64</sup> Ultimately, two faculty members, both white, went on strike. Jolley Christman, one of the striking teachers, recalled the friction between the two groups:

The teachers who didn't go on strike felt let down because they were carrying the school without us. And we felt like we really needed to speak up. . . . The Community Board really didn't get over that some of us went out on strike. . . . It was a point of pride that they were keeping that school open. . . . None of the African American teachers at the free school went on strike.<sup>65</sup>

While conflict between the community board and the striking teachers was not explicitly about “innovation,” for its stakeholders it crystallized the divergent meanings that the WPCFS held as part of the Office of Innovative Programs. For the community board, the school was about more than innovative pedagogy. Its existence was a testament to years of struggle by Black community activists to advocate for resources and control in West Philadelphia schools. To the extent that the strike might interrupt the consistency or quality of the educational services the school would offer, the community board was opposed to it. Significantly, this understanding of the school's mission was forceful enough that its Black faculty members and many of its white teachers were willing to cross their own picket line to protect it. It was also forceful enough to draw lines between those who remained in the classroom and those who chose to picket. As much as teachers like Christman were energized by the innovative instruction that the school offered, it was also a workplace—and

<sup>64</sup>The labor strife between Philadelphia teachers and management took place after several years of intense nationwide labor action in US teachers unions, which may have had an impact on internal conflicts between the WPCFS Community Board (mainly composed of Black members) and the striking white teachers. According to Jon Shelton, the 1968 strike by New York City's (NYC) United Federation of Teachers had led to a range of long-lasting racial divisions that extended well beyond the bounds of the Ocean Hill/Brownsville region of NYC, where the strike took place. See Shelton, *Teacher Strike! Public Education and the Making of a New American Political Order* (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2017), 26–55. Jerald Podair argues that the conflict realigned the political parameters of NYC along racial and economic lines, and points out that many African Americans viewed the strike to be “a racial affront—an attempt to withhold educational services to black schoolchildren.” See Jerald E. Podair, *The Strike That Changed New York: Blacks, Whites, and the Ocean-Hill/Brownsville Crisis* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2004), 91. It is likely that the WPCFS Community Board was familiar with this circumstance, and in this sense issues of race were infused into their demand that teachers remain in schools serving the local West Philadelphia neighborhood students who were nearly 100 percent Black, rather than march alongside their union sisters and brothers on the picket line.

<sup>65</sup>Jolley Christman, interview with authors, Feb. 22, 2019.

they did not see their loyalties to the school or community board as more important than their loyalties to their fellow workers. A similar dynamic played out regarding the use of free time and the teacher strikes: as the conflicting imperatives that were layered together in the school's design bumped against one another, the resulting frictions had uneven impacts across its institutional, community, and instructional stakeholders. And importantly, the burden of reconciling these contradictions often fell to those whose racialized identities had the most at stake should the school fail. Indeed, the weight of these stakes was high enough to pit workers against one another, along lines of race, rather than against the structural forces that shaped these conditions.

## Conclusion

The West Philadelphia Community Free School emerged during a time, and in a district, enamored with the possibilities of “innovative” reform. In looking across the perspectives of its institutional, community, and instructional stakeholders, we can see the material and discursive work of innovation in conditioning not only the design and operation of the school, but also the conflicts that surfaced in its everyday activities. As much as “innovation” was, at the time, a systemic concern—tied to national imperatives for education reform—its local instantiations were deferred downward, negotiated by district administrators and university faculty, classroom teachers and students, and members of the wider city community. Importantly, these deferrals did not fall evenly on the WPCFS's stakeholders. Board members, for instance, were regularly caught between the institutional drive for innovative pedagogy and the board's larger vision for community control of education for Black students in West Philadelphia. The school's Black teachers, likewise, were made to choose between loyalty to the community board and to their fellow union members. For all the discomforts they encountered in developing the WPCFS, district leaders and Eriksen were insulated from such decisions, and from the stakes of making them incorrectly.

In line with historians' analysis that has explored the contradictory impulses that underwrite public school reform, the story of the WPCFS also illustrates how the discourse of “innovation” helps to paper over these incongruities and their asymmetrical consequences.<sup>66</sup> It offered an anodyne and elastic language that was fluid enough to forge tenuous alliances between otherwise opposing stakeholders. For the School District of Philadelphia and Penn, the discourse of innovation not only opened streams of federal and philanthropic funding, but also provided a means of addressing student and community protests with minimal overhead expenses. Likewise, the district's enchantment with innovation gave teachers and community members leverage to make demands—for humanizing pedagogy and for community control of education in West Philadelphia, respectively. As the example of the teachers' strike demonstrates, these unstable associations created conditions where the community

<sup>66</sup>For example, see David F. Labaree, *The Making of an American High School: The Credentials Market and the Central High School of Philadelphia, 1838–1939* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1988); David Tyack and Larry Cuban, *Tinkering toward Utopia: A Century of Public School Reform* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997).

board felt compelled to make demands of teachers that would split their loyalties with other colleagues in the district, and where teachers were forced to navigate these demands by weighing their professional solidarities against their commitments to racial justice and the West Philadelphia community.

Attending to these tensions adds texture to existing historical accounts and contemporaneous literatures that document the “Free School” movement of the 1960s and 1970s. In contrast with depictions that paint the Free School teachers as naive romantics—out of touch with the needs and desires of the communities they served—the teachers in our study were well aware of the contradictory pressures their work required them to reconcile.<sup>67</sup> Likewise, the WPCFS story also highlights how many of the top-down innovative efforts that emerged during this period did not occur in a vacuum, but were prefigured by years of on-the-ground efforts of activists and organizers in communities of color. Fraught as its history was, the WPCFS is an example of how West Philadelphia residents were able to leverage the district’s investment in “innovation” to secure resources for their children. And it ultimately emerged as one of the longest-running initiatives that the Office of Innovative Programs supported.

Although our account has focused on a notion of innovation formed and put to work more than fifty years ago, in concluding, we suggest that there may well be instructive resonances in the history of the WPCFS for our present. While the discourse has evolved in the last half-century, it is possible that the contemporary enchantment with “innovation” that proliferates in today’s school reform efforts has inherited some of the same contradictory imperatives that our historical analysis illuminates: those toward the cultivation of humanization or human capital, and those toward professional commitments or community investments. In light of this possibility, we suggest that the WPCFS story crystallizes the need for inquiry guided by questions that are tuned to such tensions: Which stakeholders are made to shoulder and reconcile the conflicting meanings of innovation? Whose ideas about, and purposes for, “innovation” win out over others? And crucially, what inequities might be sustained or exacerbated by the drive to “disrupt”?

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<sup>67</sup>For instance, see Jonathan Kozol, *Free Schools* (New York: Houghton-Mifflin, 1972).