

William Penn Foundation Testimony on the Dropout Crisis in Philadelphia
January 7, 2007

My name is Candace Bell. I am a Program Officer at the William Penn Foundation and am here to speak in support of the Project U Turn.

As you know, William Penn's commitment to education in Philadelphia is both long-standing and substantial, as is our commitment to ensuring the economic and social well-being of the city. The dropout crisis as described in the Project U Turn report and testified to by those who have already spoken is one that has serious implications beyond school reform or quality of life in our neighborhoods. Philadelphia cannot move into the 21st century with close to 50% of its young adults not having a 12th grade level of proficiency. What employer is going to want to move here with half the workforce unqualified for jobs in this new, high tech economy? This is a ball and chain on progress at all levels that cannot be ignored any longer. It impacts the city's economy, tax burden, safety, quality of life, and civic life.

The Foundation first became involved with this issue through a national funders affinity group called the Youth Transitions Funders Groups in 2002. We participated in the design and funding of the seven city initiative that has produced Project U Turn here in Philadelphia, and similar initiatives in Boston, New York, Portland, San Jose, Washington DC, and Las Vegas. Locally, the Foundation has invested \$2.4 million dollars to date in this issue, as part of the local matching funds required by the nationals.

We feel a critical element to the success of Project U Turn has been the participation of multiple systems in the initiative, because we feel this is a problem that goes beyond what the District can do on its own. We are proud of the fact that the District, DHS, Family Court, and the Youth Council have set aside politics and brought their best minds to bear on this issue. Not surprisingly, Philadelphia stands out among the other cities in its progress to date. In fact, Philadelphia has an opportunity, with Council's support, to be a national leader on this issue. There are several actions Council can take that will support this work:

1. Create an office of education within DHS to help youth in their care earn a high school diploma.
2. Provide resources to place social workers in schools with low graduation rates and/or a large number of students in DHS's care.
3. Expand the number of paid student workplace internships.
4. Support pregnant and parenting teens in finishing their high school education by providing of case management services to pregnant and parenting teens.

The William Penn Foundation, for its part, is committed to supporting Project U Turn going forward. National foundation investment will also continue through the Youth Transitions Funders Group, provided the city systems and the district continue to work together and prioritize this problem for investment.