

TESTIMONY OF MICHAEL CHURCHILL

On Behalf of ASPIRA of Pennsylvania and
The Public Interest Law Center of Philadelphia

I am appearing on behalf of the Public Interest Law Center of Philadelphia and ASPIRA, which has been a party in the School Desegregation litigation since 1993.

In 1994 Judge Doris Smith Ribner found that the School District was failing to use all feasible methods available to provide equal educational opportunities to all of its students, that not all students received a quality education, and that in particular this was true for the African American and Latino students attending racially isolated schools. That was 23 years after this case began. Among her detailed findings was Number 28: "The least experienced teachers are employed in racially isolated minority schools which face the highest rate of teacher turnover...."

Fifteen years later the achievement gap between the races that she documented continues nearly unabated. Although the percentage of students in the district now scoring proficient or above on state tests has doubled in the last six years, there are still more than 80,000 students scoring below proficient, and they are unfortunately disproportionately in the schools with the heaviest concentrations of minority students. The differences in facilities and programs available in many of those schools is palpable, as the testimony you heard recently from the William Penn High School community revealed. And Finding Number 28 continues true today.

ASPIRA, working in the Hispanic community, is acutely aware of these disparities.

Superintendent Ackerman, to her credit, recognized these inequalities immediately upon her arrival, and her 5 year strategic plan, *Imagining 2014*, adopted by you three months ago provides the basis for this historic settlement presented today for your approval. Almost all of the provisions in this agreement can be found in *Imagining 2014*, including the provision which will finally correct the huge resource inequity of the least experienced teachers in the highest minority schools, by using actual salaries to

calculate if additional resources are required to equalize resources in those schools.

This Agreement is a gamble for the community, for we lose Court supervision over the actions of the District. In its place, however, we think we have more than just promises -- we have a system of transparency and public exposure where specific plans must be developed, where changes have to be in writing and can be commented upon, and where an independent body will report on whether the achievement gap is being closed, and whether resources are distributed more equitably. If the public does not believe the changes are appropriate, you will hear from them.

On its side, the District is gaining flexibility in how it will go about reducing racial achievement gaps and how it faces financial constraints. But make no mistake, this Agreement puts the onus on the SRC and the District to get the job done. It will not be someone else's fault if the racial achievement gaps existing today continue to persist in the city's schools. We are here today because your predecessors did not get the job done, were not insistent enough that the tragedy of unequal opportunities in our neighborhood schools be ended. Frankly, all of the important steps in this Agreement could have been and should have been taken long ago.

Thus we are delighted that we are entering a new era where the District is willing to make the necessary commitments. But the challenge will be to carry them out. I hope the sense of cooperation which was displayed in reaching this Consent Agreement by parties which historically have pursued their own paths, will inform it's implementation, so that the District, its teachers, administrators, parents, and students, find a way to work together to convert this framework into the actuality of a more supportive environment for teaching and learning. That will take the hard work of listening and working together, and of taking risks to realize the shared goals of student achievement. If that happens we can expect to see substantial progress in reducing the racial achievement gap when this Agreement expires in five years. I urge you to approve this proposed end to the Desegregation litigation, accept the challenge to end this dark stain on the District's record, and every year judge your own success by whether the District is actually reducing the unequal results which it for so long has tolerated.