Variations on a Theme: The Shift from Distinction to Commonality in Philadelphia's Diverse Provider Model 2002-2008

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Recent years have seen a growing push toward Portfolio Management Models that incorporate a variety of “providers” operating public schools. One rationale for this is that such organizations can offer distinct and innovative educational practices. This article describes the Diverse Provider Model implemented in Philadelphia from 2002–2008, and the shifts in practices by many outside providers away from distinction and toward alignment with the district approach. Drawing on institutional theory, we examine possible explanations for these shifts, including the particular structures and incentives in Philadelphia and discuss what can be learned about the prospects for innovation through outside providers.

KEYWORDS privatization, Philadelphia, institutional theory, educational management organizations
INTRODUCTION

In recent years, an increasing number of large urban districts have begun to move toward a portfolio management model (PMM), shifting away from a centralized bureaucracy that directly manages a relatively uniform set of schools toward a model in which a central office oversees a portfolio of schools (governed as charters or traditional district schools) that offers diverse organizational and curricular themes and is managed by a mix of public and private actors (Bulkley, 2010; Hill, Campbell, & Gross, 2012). Such districts include Chicago, where the “Renaissance 2010” program initiated by Arne Duncan incorporated 100 new schools operating under different management structures (charter, private management, and special “empowerment” schools that had greater autonomy than regular district-run schools) and New York City, where both public and private providers work as support organizations for all public schools (Gyurko & Henig, 2010; Menefee-Libey, 2010). Other cities have made moves in this direction, including Washington, DC, Baltimore, Los Angeles, Cleveland, and Oakland.

One of the core ideas for such reforms is that outside organizations will bring innovation and improvement to struggling schools and systems. According to Paul Hill, one of the leading advocates for portfolio models, and his colleagues, “A portfolio district is built for continuous improvement via expansion and imitation of the highest-performing schools, closure, and replacement of the lowest-performing, and constant search for new ideas” (Hill et al., 2009, p. 1).

In 2002, Philadelphia became one of the nation’s leaders in one aspect of the PMM idea—hiring for-profit and nonprofit organizations to manage district schools. The Philadelphia diverse provider model (DPM), which was implemented under a state takeover, involved outside organizations in the management of district schools; advocates promised that the model would enhance the capacity of these schools to innovate as well as spur school improvement in the district as a whole.1 Advocates of the Philadelphia DPM, especially supporters at the state level, were optimistic that the DPM would lead to a “shake up” of the system by disrupting institutional structures and culture through bringing in organizations with different histories, incentive structures, and programs to manage existing public schools.

In the article, we draw on institutional theory to lend insights into the implementation of the DPM. Institutional theory, based on the premise that broad “cultural scripts guide much organizational behavior,” has the potential to lend insights into the analysis of such reforms (Burch, 2007, p. 84). Although increasingly acknowledging that institutional change does occur, theorists working in this area suggest that creating deep changes of the kind sought by PMM advocates is challenging—and that “institutional isomorphism,” in which new institutional structures come in line with existing
practices and the broader environment is more likely to occur (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983; Meyer & Rowan, 2006).

This article examines the case of Philadelphia, between the inception of the DPM in the fall of 2002 and 2008, prior to the formal changes to the relationship brought about in 2009 by Superintendent Arlene Ackerman (which included moving toward outside providers that were “partners” rather than “managers” of district schools; Socolar, 2009). Substantial changes have continued under Superintendent William Hite, but this article focuses on the earlier years that laid the foundation for the current context (Mezzacappa, 2012). By 2008, the programs offered by the providers became increasingly similar to the district’s own centralized educational program (Bulkley, Christman, & Gold, 2010). In particular, many providers altered their programs to come in line with the district’s “Managed Instruction System” (MIS), which included a core curriculum, pacing schedule, texts, Benchmark assessments on a 6-week cycle as well as SchoolNet, an online data management and resource tool.

Our research examines three related questions:

1. What distinctive practices and programs were initially adopted by providers?
2. How did the practices and programs of the providers evolve between 2002 and 2008?
   a. In what ways did these approaches become more similar to the Philadelphia School District’s centralized educational reforms, implemented in the 2nd year of the takeover?
   b. In what ways did the approaches remain distinctive?
3. What pressures played a role in the changes in providers’ practices and programs?

We describe the changes that took place, and then draw on insights from institutional theory to examine the pressures that led both to increased common ground as well as ongoing differences between providers and the district. Building on this analysis, we conclude by discussing implications for other districts seeking to create institutional change through contracting with outside organizations for school management.

PORTFOLIO MANAGEMENT MODELS

According to advocates of PMMs, the introduction of schools run by outside organizations such as educational management organizations (EMOs) will enhance the capacity of under-performing schools to innovate as well as spur school improvement in the district as a whole (Bulkley, Henig, & Levin, 2010;
Hill et al., 2012; Hill, Campbell, & Harvey, 2000; Hill, Pierce, & Guthrie, 1997). Thus, EMOs are expected to provide diverse curricular, instructional, and governance models in flexible, competitive “school marketplaces,” in which the district manages a varied portfolio of schools with providers that have wide rein to innovate, but are also held accountable for student outcomes by strong contracts (Christman, Gold, & Herold, 2006; Hill et al., 2009; Hill et al., 1997).

Underlying the idea of a PMM is the belief that school failure is the result of entrenched educational bureaucracies that are unable to reform themselves. Problems of low academic performance and fiscal distress are attributed to a lack of sound management practices by district and school leaders as well as union contracts that emphasize narrow work restrictions and a rigid inward-looking professional bureaucracy that eschews innovative practices.

Hill and colleagues (2009) describe key features of a PMM, including that:

- Districts manage portfolios of schools, which may include charters, district-run schools and schools managed by external providers with whom the district contracts;
- Districts select and assign providers;
- Districts write and monitor contracts, which include clear performance indicators and performance measures;
- Providers receive fixed per pupil amounts and have increased budgetary discretion;
- Providers, not districts, employ teachers and principals; and
- Quality options and meaningful choice exist for students and families.

In this article, we focus on one aspect of the PMM idea—the role of “diverse” providers as school managers—and the argument that such outside providers will increase the availability of distinct options within the system of public education.

INSTITUTIONAL THEORY FOR ANALYSIS OF THE ROLE OF DIVERSE PROVIDERS

In their seminal piece on institutional isomorphism, DiMaggio and Powell (building on Hawley, 1968), define isomorphism as “a constraining process that forces one unit in a population to resemble other units that face the same set of environmental conditions” (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983, p. 149). In their discussion, DiMaggio and Powell argue that there are two types of isomorphism—competitive and institutional. Isomorphism that results
from competitive pressures, in theory, leads to more effective and efficient organizations. However, they and others suggest that a second type of isomorphism—based on institutional pressures—may often be responsible for the commonalities found across organizations within an organizational field. Here, we discuss the role of institutions and markets in creating isomorphic pressures.

The concept of institutional isomorphism can help in understanding how new organizations entering an existing organizational field respond to the pressures of a new environment. Institutional isomorphism focuses on the argument that, “Organizations compete not just for resources and customers, but for political power and institutional legitimacy, for social as well as economic fitness” (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983, p. 150). Two sets of forces, coercive and noncoercive, can lead to isomorphism that is based on institutional—rather than competitive—pressures.

According to Scott (2008), “the use of coercion requires relatively clear demands, effective surveillance, and significant sanctions” (p. 134). Such pressures rely heavily on power and inducements and come largely from the political and legal environment. Although government policies are the most discussed form of coercive pressures, other forms of legally-binding requirements (such as union contracts) are also coercive mechanisms (Paauwe & Boselie, 2003).

Although DiMaggio and Powell discussed two other types of pressures that can lead to institutional isomorphism (normative and mimetic pressures), here we follow Levy’s (2006) lead and combine these into the broader category of “noncoercive” isomorphic pressures. Among the most important noncoercive pressures that can lead new organizations to become similar to existing ones are strong professional networks and norms. Such pressures tie closely to those discussed by Scott (2008), building on the work of Strang and Meyer (1993), who argues that for new organizations to take on the practices of existing ones, “actors involved need to regard themselves as similar in some important respect” (p. 137). This is of particular importance in environments with considerable uncertainty and ambiguity. In such environments, actors are pressured to find “known quantities” to emulate.

In recent years, institutional isomorphism as a significant set of pressures leading to organizational conformity has been increasingly evident as the broader environment for education has changed since the 1970s and 1980s—especially as the push toward standards-based reform and more testing has led to tighter coupling between broad ideas and policies and fine-grained educational practices (Davies, Quirke, & Aurini, 2006). Rowan (2006a) argues, implicitly, that one of the reasons for institutional isomorphism is that public education in the United States has not solely been in the public sector, but that the web of organizations that interact with schools on a regular basis exert considerable pressure. Specifically, he argues that, “the instructional core of schools—not only in the United States, but
everywhere—is built around the extensive use of texts and tests obtained *outside* of schools” (Rowan, 2006b, p. 68, emphasis in original). He builds on this to suggest that, despite the faddishness of many educational reforms, often such reforms will not affect the core instructional work of schools because this core is stabilized by relationships with long-standing firms such as those in the field of educational publishing (Rowan, 2006b).

In theory, the role of market-based ideas in PMM reforms, including the use of performance-based contracting in a diverse provider model, could lead to isomorphism resulting from competitive pressures. Intertwined with ideas of markets as creating incentives for organizations to conform only if it improves effectiveness and efficiency is the idea of a more “technical” approach to educational change that is driven not by increased profits but by improved test scores.

Huerta and Zuckerman (2009) describe an increasing tension between the demands of the institutional environment for schools and a technical theory of education that emphasizes monitoring student and school performance. As district (not charter) schools, the schools managed under the diverse provider model had to contend directly with district norms of legitimacy based on processes and contracts that, at least in theory, emphasized success in the technical environment.

Using the case of diverse providers in Philadelphia, we looked at the most visible kinds of changes made by new management organizations in order to examine whether initially distinct programs were sustained over time. During 2003–2004, the district moved strongly in the direction of tighter coupling through its Managed Instruction System. We found that, between 2002 and 2008, all providers (with the exception of Edison) moved in the direction of conforming to the broader district instructional core. The case of the increasing commonality among providers working in the diverse provider model offers an opportunity to examine isomorphic pressures that emerge from both institutional and competitive sources.

**THE DIVERSE PROVIDER MODEL IN PHILADELPHIA**

In 2001, the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania took direct control of the School District of Philadelphia (SDP), declaring it academically and financially distressed. The takeover of the district was based on two pieces of legislation, passed in 1998 and in 2000, that allowed the state to takeover financially and underperforming districts. The state takeover gave the Governor and other Republicans in the legislature the opportunity to test out some of the theories underlying alternative market-based approaches to governance and management of schools; there was considerable interest at the time in incorporating school vouchers into reform efforts (Maranto, 2005).
In preparation for the takeover, the state wrote a $2.7 million contract with Edison, Inc., a for-profit educational management organization that ran schools throughout the country, to evaluate the condition of the District and to make recommendations for the design of the takeover. (The state awarded the contract despite the lack of a competitive bidding process and the company’s inexperience in evaluating and managing school districts.) Edison’s report, issued in October 2001, proposed that up to 100 of the lowest-performing schools in the District and several functions of the district’s Central Office be placed under private management. The report also proposed that a five-member appointed commission, rather than the existing School Board, oversee the district.

Despite a groundswell of resistance, the state established the Philadelphia School Reform Commission (SRC) and gave it responsibility for making further decisions about district management and low performing schools. In December 2001, Jim Nevels (a former businessman from the suburbs) was appointed as chair of the SRC. Before the other four members of the SRC were appointed, he announced, with the Governor’s approval, that Edison was in line to manage 60 of the lowest performing schools. This turn to private management of public schools was, to a large extent, a compromise between those interested in vouchers, those seeking to give control of the entire district to Edison, and those who were uninterested in private management or vouchers as a path to district improvement (Maranto, 2005).

Facing public outcry from students, grassroots advocacy groups, unions, and others against Edison’s proposed large role in managing schools, in early 2002 the now complete SRC called for an open process to select a range of for-profit, nonprofit and university partners to run individual schools. That spring, the SRC ultimately chose seven providers to manage 45 of the district’s lowest performing elementary and middle grades schools as part of a "diverse provider model." Early in the summer of 2002, the SRC hired Paul Vallas as CEO of the Philadelphia School District; Vallas moved quickly to centralize and regularize aspects of the existing system. Vallas had previously served as CEO of the Chicago Public Schools from 1995 to 2001; prior to his role in the Chicago Public Schools, he was the budget director to Chicago Mayor Daley.

In August, the district signed formal contracts with five outside providers that were implemented a month later. Along with a range of responsibilities for managing schools, the EMO contracts held for-profit and nonprofit organizations accountable for the percentage of students who scored "proficient" on the state assessment. At the same time, the two universities (University of Pennsylvania and Temple University) signed Memoranda of Understanding with the district. These Memoranda of Understanding (MOUs) were much less comprehensive than the contracts signed with EMOs. The university partners were only responsible for activities directly related to instruction, such as curriculum and professional development, and the MOU did not
specify exact outcomes for student performance. The universities were not necessarily convinced about the overall model of district change, but were committed to supporting the district and specific schools in general.

There were three private, for-profit EMOs as providers—Edison, Victory and Chancellor Beacon. (At the end of the 1st year, the contract with Chancellor Beacon was cancelled by the district), Two providers were nonprofit EMOs—Foundations and Universal, and two were university partners—Temple University and the University of Pennsylvania. Consistent with the ideas of PMMs, advocates of Philadelphia’s DPM hoped that new managers would bring innovative instructional practices and that their schools would serve as educational “laboratories,” ultimately raising student achievement (Bulkley, Mundell, & Riffer, 2004).

In 2002–2003, the 1st year of the takeover, the School Reform Commission assigned different numbers of schools to each of the external providers. Edison was assigned to manage 20 schools, reflecting its important role in the design of the overall reform, while the remaining providers were each assigned between three and five schools. The providers’ philosophy and approaches included substantial variation in the areas of curricula, required texts, assessments, professional development, scheduling, afterschool and support programs for low achieving students, and coaching.

In addition, a district-designed reform model, the Office of Reconstructed Schools (ORS), was assigned a total of 21 schools. The unwritten expectation was that the providers would compete with each other to raise test scores, and ORS would function as a “comparison group’ against which the success of the external providers could be measured” (Christman et al., 2006, p. 10). In 2002–2003, ORS piloted several elements of what ultimately was to become the district’s centralized model. The district disbanded the ORS model after 3 years, after it had incorporated many of ORS’ features into the centralized district program that were then implemented in 2003–2004, the 2nd year of the takeover.

The Philadelphia diverse provider model differed in important ways from the model discussed by Hill and colleagues. A critical aspect of the theory of change underlying the PMM idea is the creation of a market for education and the overall logic of marketization. Cucchiara and her colleagues discuss the concept of marketization, which encompasses both “privatization and . . . broader political and discursive processes through which public entities become increasingly ‘businesslike’” (Cucchiara, Gold, & Simon, 2011). In the case of Philadelphia, they argue that marketization impacted both the structure of the district and its relationships with stakeholders. Although the overall ideas of marketization had substantial influence in Philadelphia, the most commonly discussed form of an educational market—student choice—was virtually absent. Overall, the DPM did not increase families’ choices about which school their children attended. Instead, the “market” created
under the diverse provider puts the district itself in the central role of consumer, rather than families (Gold, Christman, & Herold, 2007).

Moreover, district and state negotiations did not enable providers to fully manage the schools to which they were assigned. Rather, Philadelphia’s reform model relied on the concept of “thin management,” under which, among other features, teachers remained district employees and members of the Philadelphia Teachers Union, while providers were obligated to adhere to union contracts. The potentially important factor of “buy in” to a provider’s approach by the teaching staff also was limited by the fact that managers were required to work with existing staff, although staff members were offered (and many took) the option of transferring to non-DPM schools. The district also controlled the budget of providers’ schools, management of school facilities, and security. Finally, all providers, including ORS, received additional per pupil funding, ranging from an additional $400–$861 per pupil in the initial year and subsequently between $450–$750.

METHODS AND DATA

This article emerges from an extensive longitudinal study of the state takeover of the SDP, and the reforms that have emerged from that significant governance change. The study, Learning from Philadelphia’s School Reform, was conducted by a team led by the Philadelphia-based organization, Research for Action. Data sources for the broader study included:

- Interviews with district leaders and leaders of each provider at multiple points between 2001 and 2006;
- Interviews in 2002–2003 with principals in 20 schools; and between 2005–2007 extensive and repeated interviews with principals, teacher leaders, and teachers in nine schools operated by providers and the district’s Office of Restructured Schools; and
- Documents including news articles, policy papers, state, district, and provider documents, and contracts.

Our primary use of these data sources was through secondary analysis of articles produced during the study (Bulkley, 2007; Bulkley, Christman et al., 2010; Bulkley et al., 2004; Bulkley, Olah, & Blanc, 2010; Christman et al., 2006; Gold, Simon, Cucchiara, Mitchell, & Riffer, 2007; Research for Action, 2005; Travers, 2003; Useem, 2005). In describing the original programs, we also drew heavily on a description of providers’ programs and approaches from 2002–2003 that included information on the numbers of schools each provider managed, staffing changes, curricula, texts, assessments, and special programs/initiatives (Philadelphia Public School Notebook, 2003).
For the purposes of this article, we supplemented the secondary analysis, which primarily provided data about the original approaches of each provider, as well as some information about change, with additional interviews with representatives of five of the six providers in the summer of 2008. We were unable to conduct an interview with the sixth provider, but were able to gather information about their program from other sources. For the purposes of confidentiality, we do not identify in our analysis the specific role held by the provider staff interviewed. The focus of these interviews was on the programs and approaches used by the provider in 2007–2008 and any reasons they offered for shifts from the original program to the one in operation at that point in time. All interviews were semistructured and included open-ended questions.

In order to analyze the data, we created matrices detailing the original and current programs for each provider. In addition to creating the matrixes, our primary analytic strategy was content analysis through the coding of interviews using Atlas.ti. Specifically, we coded interviews with district officials, provider staff, and principals for information about changes in a provider’s program and approach and possible reasons for those changes. We then examined the coded data, alongside our findings from the matrices, in order to understand better the changes that occurred and analyzed why these changes happened. We gathered information about district-based changes from the sources above, as well as the district website and in-house publications.

THE DISTRICT’S MANAGED INSTRUCTION SYSTEM AND SUPPORTS

Given the short timeline between Vallas’ hiring and the beginning of the 2002–2003 school year, changes in regular district schools his 1st year were minimal. District schools continued to use texts and curricula that were in place, and these varied across schools in the district.

The 2nd year of the takeover, 2003–2004, proved to be a critical year for district schools that were not part of the DPM. That year, Vallas instituted a range of district reforms, many of which were piloted as part of the ORS. The most significant reforms involved the MIS, including a core curriculum in literacy and math, with specified texts for all elementary and middle grades schools, and a detailed pacing schedule. In math, the district used Everyday Math in elementary grades and Math in Context in Grades 6–8. In literacy, they required schools to use Trophies in elementary grades and Elements of Literature in Grades 6–8. Benchmark tests, aligned with state standards and the Pennsylvania System of School Assessment (PSSA), were to be administered in 6-week cycles and covered the specific skills and concepts taught during that cycle. The PSSA, in turn, determined whether schools made Adequate Yearly Progress.
In addition, a small fraction of district schools implemented SchoolNet, a computerized data retrieval and resource system that included data on student achievement in various formats and sample lessons plans. The district eventually implemented SchoolNet in all its schools as online capacity to access student data became available. Elements of the MIS were tightly linked and designed to improve student achievement and increase the number of students who were "proficient" on the PSSA.

District-wide professional development was scheduled at the same time in all schools and employed a largely scripted format. The district regularized positions of Literacy and Math Content Leaders in schools, although the amount of release time varied according to school budgeting. Schools were required to provide support for low performing students in an Extended Day Program. Finally, a School Assistance Team (SAT) was assigned by the district to every school in NCLB (No Child Left Behind) Corrective Action from 2003–2004 and on, headed by a case manager from the district. Responsibilities of the SAT included observing instruction, collecting and analyzing data, providing feedback, and writing reports for central office staff.

District Office of Restructured Schools Model
As noted above, many aspects of the district model (implemented in 2003–2004) were based on changes piloted in the 1st year of the ORS model in 2002–2003, including math and literacy texts in elementary and middle grades schools and Academic Coaches and Content Leaders in Math and Literacy. ORS schools also had versions of benchmark assessments and extended day programs similar to that found in the MIS. In 2003–2004, ORS schools were the first group of schools to use SchoolNet. ORS schools were managed centrally by the ORS leadership team. In contrast to many of the provider models, where some differences between schools in the model would become apparent, the ORS model was implemented fairly faithfully in all of the schools. Moreover, in most respects, aspects of the model continued over the 3 years that ORS existed.

DIVERSE PROVIDERS IN PRACTICE
In this section, we present a snapshot of approaches of specific providers at two points in time: 2002–2003, the 1st year of the diverse provider model and 2007–2008, the 6th year. Many of the providers’ distinctive approaches in 2002–2003 were developed specifically for their work in the district schools to which they were assigned. Several of the providers did not have any prior experience managing schools, and thus were not building on an existing model. In this sense, several of the models could be described as
experimental. Because provider contracts and memoranda of understanding were only signed in August of 2002, most providers used existing reading and math texts in schools assigned to them the 1st year of the DPM. (As noted above, the district did not use a common set of texts until the 2003–2004 school year.) Beginning in 2003–2004, and increasingly so in subsequent years, all of the providers with the exception of Edison, adopted the instructional core of the district’s approach, the Managed Instructional System. Because Edison remained the most distinctive during the period of the study, we discuss it last.

Foundations, Inc
2002–2003
Prior to the DPM, Foundations, Inc., a nonprofit management company, had run afterschool programs and one charter school in the Philadelphia metropolitan area but had little expertise in managing district schools. However, in short time they developed a comprehensive school reform strategy that offered a host of distinctive approaches and programs in the five schools they ran. They used a variety of approaches in literacy, including balanced literacy, alongside texts that were already in place in the former district schools they managed. In addition, they introduced SIPPS, a reading curriculum that emphasized phonics, phonemic awareness and decoding, and Reading for Real. In math, Foundations schools used Everyday Math and Math in Context, texts that the district adopted the following year as part of its Managed Instruction System. Foundations also used Success Maker, a computer-based skill development program in reading and math that assessed students in real time.

Additional assessments included end-of-unit tests, the DIBELS literacy assessment, and NCS Learn, a computer-based assessment for low performing students. For a percentage of low performing students, Foundations implemented an “Advocate” program, where mentors worked with students on Success Maker during and after the school day. All Foundations schools had a Caring Schools Community program through a previous grant.

School-based professional development was a significant aspect of the model. It took place every other week for 3 hr through an early dismissal and additional paid teacher time, as well as during a weeklong Summer Institute. Foundations Literacy and Math Consultants rotated among the three Foundations schools and worked directly with teachers and principals.

2007–2008
In 2007–2008, Foundations schools used all elements of the district’s Managed Instructional System, including the core curriculum, texts, and
Benchmark assessments. Principals and school leaders also used SchoolNet to retrieve and analyze data and provided professional development on the same schedule as the district, mostly following the district script.

However, they continued to use the program Success Maker. They had discontinued their in-school, 3-hour professional development every other week, but the organization’s Literacy and Math Consultants provided professional development for two days before the beginning of school and continued to work with principals and teachers in their schools. Usually one of the consultants attended school grade group and leadership team meetings. Foundations also continued to use their Advocate program for low performing students.

Foundations added features over the years, including administering state “Foresight” tests four times a year and establishing a Data Room in each school. They also ran an Extended Day program 4 days a week but used different programs/materials than the district. In addition, they developed a voluntary Saturday School Program for students in Grades 4–6 for several weeks before the PSSA and various programs for parents.

Most of the current practices were in place by the 3rd year. As a representative of Foundations noted, “We didn’t have a curriculum when we started, so we adopted the district core curriculum the second year.” He said that Foundations also recognized that a large percentage of students transfer to other district schools during a year, and the core curriculum and pacing schedule would provide consistency for students. According to him, however, "Foundations didn’t change anything that works for children."

Foundations staff believed that “buy in” by the principals was critical. Thus, as one representative said, “We let them adjust their approaches using their professional judgment.” For example, one principal had: introduced the Children’s Literacy Initiative, with training for K–3 teachers; implemented the Foundations “Kids’ Zone” afterschool program with activities for students in Grade 5–8; and obtained a grant to provide 100 families with their own computers.

Universal Companies
2002–2003

Universal Companies, a nonprofit management company whose overall focus is on community development and faith-based initiatives in a section of Philadelphia, maintained its community orientation in the three schools it took over. The organization did not have a background in school management and drew heavily on district programs already operating in the schools it managed, especially in the areas of curriculum and materials. Schools managed by Universal used the same texts used in their schools.
before the takeover. They also maintained programs put in place previously through the Johns Hopkins Talent Development program, which the district had discontinued after the state takeover.

Distinct programs in the Universal model included a computer-based testing program called “Lightspan,” and the “Universal Institute for Professional Development,” which offered weekend and after-school sessions for school staff. In its schools, Universal, sought to create deep and substantive partnerships with the community, including faith-based community groups. They worked closely with parents, including implementing a Homelinks homework program that parents were expected to monitor and a summer reading program.

2007–2008

Once the district introduced the MIS, Universal quickly implemented key features, influenced by a Universal central administrator who had come from the district’s Curriculum Office and supported the idea of a core curriculum. Universal schools used the same literacy and math texts as those adopted by the school district. Universal stopped using the “Lightspan” computer-based testing, and instead opted to use the district’s Benchmark and literacy assessments, as staff felt they would better align with their use of the core curriculum. They were enthusiastic users of Benchmark data, despite seeing limitations for assessing growth in student learning. Universal offered the same as the Extended Day program as that used in regular district schools.

Although the content of professional development varied based on staff assessments about individual school needs, it occurred on the same schedule as in the district, discontinuing the weekend and after school professional development previously provided. However, Universal had "contracted days" where they delivered their own professional development and required principals to complete “action frameworks” that included progress on the district program. Universal schools used SchoolNet, but reformatted data in a way that the staff believed was more “user friendly.”

Although Universal’s program aligned with the district’s in many core areas, the company also worked to extend and deepen the district’s curriculum—sometimes in a more prescriptive way. For example, Universal developed its own program of standardized homework connected to the district core curriculum. This standardized homework became a foundation for conversations between Universal and school staff around student work. As a Universal representative said, “You have to monitor and you have to review the student work. That to me has been the most powerful—what the students are responding to and what they aren’t responding to.”
The University of Pennsylvania largely agreed to become a provider at the urging of the SRC. The Penn Graduate School of Education took almost complete responsibility for working with three schools located near the university with which it had previously had worked. The transition to the DPM was not as abrupt for these schools as was the case with schools assigned to other providers. Penn continued relationships with partner schools in terms of student teachers, student tutors and workshops given by their Education faculty, as well as support for individual school level initiatives in curriculum and pedagogy.

In the 1st year, Penn essentially used the pre-existing curriculum and texts in math, literacy, and writing and the instructional approaches in these three schools. In many respects, Penn’s approach was inquiry-based and often required students to show what they knew through performance-based, authentic assessments. The most distinctive aspect of Penn’s approach was the requirement that all teachers attend 120 hr of professional development a year, with a choice to attend a combination of district professional developmental sessions and six Penn-led study groups in math, literacy, and writing.

2007–2008

By 2007–2008, Penn had adopted all of the key features of the district’s Managed Instructional System, including the district’s core curriculum and the accompanying texts in math and literacy; the Benchmark assessments, and SchoolNet. They had Content Leaders in Math and Literacy, though responsibilities and release time varied by school. However, they also used Graduate School of Education coordinators and graduate students to provide direct support to teachers and classrooms. Penn followed the district’s schedule (although added a summer retreat) for professional development but did not use the district script. Instead they based professional development sessions on needs identified in individual schools’ School Improvement Plans. They had discontinued the requirement for 120 hr of professional development outside of school hours out of concern that this expectation was excessive.

There were several other distinctive features of Penn’s approach, including twice-yearly math tests that focused on content and skills not covered by the Benchmarks, formative assessments for classroom use, and analysis of student work. Penn staff worked with teachers to develop multi-grade writing prompts and poetry units, and bought multicultural trade books to supplement the core curriculum. Penn did not offer the district’s Extended Day Program, but developed SOAR, a metacognitive program for students below the 40th percentile on the PSSA. Penn schools were also able to access
resources, workshops and outreach activities, and afterschool programs through Nutter Center, which provides outreach to the West Philadelphia community as part of its mission to serve the community where the university is located.

Penn had reservations about some of the district approaches and attempted to retain some of the educational approaches that were consistent with the philosophy and practices taught at its Graduate School of Education.

Temple University

2002–2003

Under Temple’s "memorandum of understanding" with the district, the Office of the President assumed oversight of the partnership and hired a Temple Coordinator. During 2002–2003, Temple continued pre-existing relationships by partnering with five schools near the university, providing student teachers, interns, tutors, and special programs. Two Temple faculty offered semester-long courses in literacy and math for teachers who wanted to attend and observed classes of teachers who participated in the literacy course during the spring semester. Temple also offered workshops for parents on a number of topics during the year.

Temple acknowledged, however, that in many respects 2002–2003 was a "planning year," and that their presence in schools was limited. During the year, Temple staff worked with principals and faculty to determine the instructional focus for subsequent years. Each of the Temple schools chose a literacy focus.

2007–2008

In 2007–2008, responsibility for the Temple partnership was transferred from the Office of the President to the Dean of the School of Education. Temple used the MIS, including the district core curriculum, Benchmarks and required texts in both literacy and math, but adapted these for own their purposes. Temple had adopted the core curriculum in math and accompanying texts at the same time the district did. However, from 2003–2005 they maintained a unique literacy curriculum that emphasized "shared reading" and, most significantly, taught using texts at students’ instructional level rather than their grade level, as was the case in the district. They also used supplementary texts at students’ instructional levels. While Temple used both the math and literacy core curriculum in 2007–2008, some schools did not follow the pacing schedule or teach concepts or skills in the same order. Thus they did not rely on the district’s Benchmarks as assessments of what students learned during 6-week cycles. They relied heavily on analysis of student work using personnel from external organizations and teachers in
Temple schools. Temple principals used SchoolNet, but not necessarily in the manner prescribed by the district. Temple schools also offered an after-school literacy program that was open to all students, but low-performing students were encouraged to attend.

Some professional development offered by three external educational organizations occurred on the same schedule as the district. However, a major part of professional development involved staff from these organizations who worked with teachers in their classrooms and modeled “constructivist” instructional approaches. During the summer, Temple offered an intensive 4-week session of professional development in which teachers not only received professional development in formal sessions but also taught classes in which they experimented with approaches they learned.

Victory Schools

2002–2003

Victory, a for-profit management company, was already operating a small number of charter schools in other cities before coming to Philadelphia. During the 1st year of the DPM, in the three schools it managed, Victory implemented Direct Instruction in reading and used the accompanying assessments. In writing, they had a separate program, Step Up to Writing. They also introduced Core Knowledge. In math, they used the texts that existed in the schools they took over. In terms of professional development, Victory required 40 hr of paid professional development for teachers in their core programs during the summer and school year. In addition they offered optional workshops on Saturdays and after school for which teachers received a stipend. They used school-based Coaches and specialized subject matter Coaches in all their schools. A distinctive feature of Victory’s approach was the separation of male and female students in middle grades "academies," with deans for each academy.

2007–2008

Victory Schools made some significant changes between 2002 and 2008. Most notably, they decided to stop using Direct Instruction and adopted the district’s core curriculum, including the literacy and math texts. They scheduled in-house professional development at the same time as the district and had access to SchoolNet, though it is unclear how it was used. Because several attempts to contact a representative from Victory were unsuccessful, we were not able to document additional features of their model in 2007–2008. Likewise, we could not document whether Victory continued some of the distinctive features of the model discussed above. From news reports in the local media, however, we know that Victory maintained, and expanded, its focus on single-gender schooling.
Edison Schools

2002–2003

In 2002, Philadelphia contracted with Edison to manage 20 schools—far more schools than any other provider organization. Edison Schools was an established for-profit EMO nationally and had the most clearly developed and distinct educational program among the providers, with many components that were in place already in Edison schools outside of Philadelphia. Their model included the use of *Success for All* (K–5), which incorporated prescribed teaching strategies and *Choices in Literature* (6–8) for instruction in literacy. They used *Everyday Math* (K–5) and *Connected Math* (6–8) for instruction in math.

Edison used a previously developed system of benchmark assessments, tied to an elaborate computer-based system, which one staff member described as the "heart of what we do at Edison." Edison benchmarks were conceptually different from those used in the MIS, in that they tested and retested students on the same content at several points during the year in order to determine student progress. (The district Benchmarks were aligned with the core curriculum taught in each cycle and questions differed from cycle to cycle.) The district’s development of its Benchmark assessment system, however, seems to have been spurred in part by the use of benchmark tests in the Edison model.

Edison offered its own character education program and after-school programs. They provided extensive paid professional development for teachers and school leaders during the summer and the school year that focused on aspects of their model and strategies for teaching the required texts. Three centrally-based Achievement Directors oversaw and supported the implementation of their program. Content coaches, called Curriculum Coordinators, worked directly with teachers in math, literacy, and science in each school.

2007–2008

More so than any of the other providers, in 2007–2008, Edison had maintained a program that was distinct from the district’s approach. They continued to use different curricula in literacy and in middle grades math, although they used the same textbooks the district did in K–5 mathematics. They continued to use their own benchmark and student data retrieval systems. They also continued to use Curriculum Coordinators and Achievement Directors who specifically supported instruction based on their approaches and texts in math, literacy, and science. The changes in the Edison model over time were minimal, with the most significant piece being the development of a new extended day program, called “Learning Force.” The program
was piloted in Philadelphia, and was then was implemented in Edison schools in other locations.

As the district and Edison slowly worked out their roles, Edison drew more directly on the district for operational needs and supports. One Edison staff member said that, “We have made shifts in our resources more toward instruction and achievement and away from operational services.” Thus, issues such as school safety became more the responsibility of the district. (This pattern of a shift in operational issues to the district was common across all the providers.) Edison staff participated in district professional development that focused on noninstructional issues, but continued its own professional development in the area of instruction and implementation of its model. Edison principals used SchoolNet for limited purposes, such as retrieving operational data (i.e., attendance and suspensions) rather than for reporting and analyzing student performance data.

In 2008–2009, the University of Pennsylvania and Temple University decided not to continue their partnerships with the district. The other providers continued as part of the diverse provider model, but in several cases they were asked to manage fewer schools than they initially were assigned by the School Reform Commission. The district took over a number of provider schools that had consistently failed to make AYP and had been in Corrective Action for 6 years. These schools returned to the district as part of a newly created CEO district.

PATTERNS IN SIMILARITIES AND DIFFERENCES BETWEEN PROVIDERS AND THE DISTRICT

The above descriptions demonstrate key ways in which most of the providers relinquished a considerable amount of their individuality in the period covered by our research. (Because the case of Edison is distinct, in that they retained more elements of its initial approach than did other providers, in the analysis that follows, we discuss it separately.) As shown in Tables 1 and 2, the major shifts happened around the Managed Instruction System. By 2007–2008, all of the providers, except Edison, were using the district’s core curriculum in reading and math and companion texts, Benchmark tests aligned with the core curriculum, and SchoolNet. In addition, all providers offered professional development on the district’s professional development half- and full-day schedule and in many cases covered the same topics and used the district script.

At the same time, providers also retained distinctive features of their initial programs and initiated some new approaches. Most frequently, providers offered supplemental curricula and assessments designed to work with/expand upon the district’s program. Table 2 reflects these variations, including the availability of different types of supports for teachers such as
TABLE 1 District and Provider Programs (2002–2003)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>District Program</th>
<th>Edison Foundations Victory</th>
<th>Victory</th>
<th>Universal Penn</th>
<th>Temple</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Number of Schools</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Curriculum and texts</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Curriculum</td>
<td>Used curriculum in place in schools</td>
<td></td>
<td>&amp;       &amp;       &amp;       &amp;</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Math texts</td>
<td>Math texts (varied)</td>
<td></td>
<td>*       *       *       *       *</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Literacy approach</td>
<td>Balanced literacy and varied texts</td>
<td></td>
<td>*       &amp;       *       &amp;       &amp;</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Assessments</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Standardized</td>
<td>TerraNova and PSSA</td>
<td></td>
<td>X       X       X       X       X</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Additional assessments</td>
<td>Varied</td>
<td></td>
<td>*       &amp;       &amp;       &amp;       &amp;</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Professional development</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Schedule</td>
<td>Varied</td>
<td></td>
<td>*       *       ?       *       *</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Content</td>
<td>Varied</td>
<td></td>
<td>*       *       *       *       *</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teacher supports</td>
<td>Varied</td>
<td></td>
<td>*       *       *       *       *</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(including coaches)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>After school programs</td>
<td>Varied</td>
<td></td>
<td>*       *       *       *       *</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. X = Use of district approach; & = Mix of district, existing school and provider approaches; * = Use of provider approaches; ? = Unknown.

coaches. In many cases, they developed their own topics for professional development sessions, and in some cases they provided additional professional development during the school year and the summer. Several designed their own afterschool programs. As well, some of the original “hallmarks” of programs were retained such as single-sex schooling for Victory Schools and the use of Penn Graduate School of Education faculty and graduate students to implement their model.

ANALYSIS AND IMPLICATIONS OF INSTITUTIONAL THEORY

Student Achievement in the Diverse Provider Model and Competitive Isomorphism

Because the goals of the district and provider schools were focused on improving test scores on the PSSA, below we report key findings regarding achievement gains in provider schools that were identified in a study conducted by RAND and Research for Action in 2007 (Gill, Zimmer, Christman, & Blanc, 2007). The study included data from the first 4 years of the diverse provider model.

Gill and his colleagues examined the achievement of students in schools under different “treatments” (provider and school district schools, including those in the ORS model) and compared the trends in school achievement
they identified. The research analyzed growth in academic performance on the PSSA for children attending provider schools as a group compared to growth in achievement of students in regular district schools; compared the gains made by students in specific provider models to one another; and compared growth in achievement for students in individual provider schools. It is important to note that this research investigated growth in student achievement for individual students, rather than the percentage of proficient students on the PSSA in tested grades in each school, the approach used to determine AYP. The study’s analytic approach allowed each student to serve as his or her own control, thereby factoring out characteristics of students (such as race, ethnicity, and other unchanging family and student characteristics) that may affect student achievement results.

In the 4 years of the study, student achievement across the district, including in the provider schools, rose significantly. However, after 4 years of intervention, even though schools in the diverse provider model received

TABLE 2 District and Provider Programs (2008)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Curriculum and texts</th>
<th>District</th>
<th>Edison</th>
<th>Foundations</th>
<th>Victory</th>
<th>Universal</th>
<th>Penn Temple</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Core curriculum</td>
<td>Core curriculum with pacing schedule</td>
<td>*</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Math texts</td>
<td>K–5 <em>Everyday Math, 6–8 Math in Context</em></td>
<td>&amp;</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Literacy texts</td>
<td>K–5 <em>Trophies, 6–8 Elements of Literature</em></td>
<td>*</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Assessments</td>
<td>PSSA, Terra Nova (only in grades 1,2)</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Additional assessments (benchmarks and others)</td>
<td>District Benchmarks, additional district assessments</td>
<td>*</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>&amp;</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>&amp;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Professional development</td>
<td>Schedule</td>
<td>Full and 1/2 days throughout year</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Content</td>
<td>District scripts for most sessions</td>
<td>&amp;</td>
<td>&amp;</td>
<td>?</td>
<td>&amp;</td>
<td>*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teacher supports (including coaches)</td>
<td>Math and Literacy Content Leaders</td>
<td>*</td>
<td>&amp;</td>
<td>*</td>
<td>&amp;</td>
<td>*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>After school programs</td>
<td>Extended day</td>
<td>*</td>
<td>&amp;</td>
<td>?</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Data system</td>
<td>SchoolNet</td>
<td>&amp;</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. Shaded cells are those in which the provider was more similar to the district in 2007–2008 than in 2002–2003. X = Use of district approach; & = Mix of district, existing school and provider approaches; * = Use of provider approaches; ? = Unknown.
substantial amounts of additional per pupil funding, average student gains in math and literacy in privately managed schools were not statistically different than those of students in regular district schools. Moreover, when student achievement gains in the three provider types (for-profit and non-profit EMOs and universities) were compared with each other, there were no statistically significant effects, positive or negative, for any of the three types of provider models. Finally, achievement gains for students attending individual provider schools showed few statistically differences from one another. The only model that showed growth in student achievement was ORS, the district’s reform model. In math, student growth was significantly greater than that of students in either provider or regular district schools.

The results of this research challenge advocates’ expectations that implementation of Philadelphia’s diverse provider model, premised on quasi-market-based competition, would dramatically improve student achievement. It also suggests that the reasons for the increasing program similarities described above was not the result of competitive isomorphism tied to clear pressures from a technical environment in which organizations become more similar because those similarities are leading to increased efficiency or effectiveness (Huerta & Zuckerman, 2009). Why, then, might these similarities have emerged?

Influences of Institutional Isomorphism

Despite initial hopes for the diverse provider model to promote different approaches to reform of the schools they were assigned, with the notable exception of the schools managed by Edison, the model did not yield the dramatic variations in approaches to school improvement. In order to better understand the pressures that led five of the providers to adopt most features of the district’s Managed Instructional System, we draw on ideas of institutionalization and isomorphism (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983; Scott, 2008). Specifically, we analyze the coercive/regulatory and noncoercive isomorphic pressures operating in the Philadelphia context that we believe help explain the shifts toward school district approaches.

Coercive/Regulatory Isomorphic Pressures

As discussed earlier, coercive/regulatory isomorphic pressures largely come through the political or legal environment, including factors such as government actions and contractual requirements. In Philadelphia, there was extreme pressure by district administrators on regular district schools and schools managed by providers to raise the number of proficient students and meet Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP), not only because the district did not meet NCLB requirements but also because the district was under state
takeover. By far the most important goal of the district’s reform plan was to improve student achievement on the PSSA. Schools that did not achieve AYP were designated in Corrective Action and potentially faced increasingly severe sanctions as required by NCLB. In this regard, the success of the EMOs (and their continued operation in the district) was intended to be based on a more technical approach that did not depend on increased efficiency and profits but on improved student achievement on the PSSA.

In addition to sanctions, there were additional district-based coercive pressures on schools that failed to make AYP. Vallas’ heavy hand around issues such as curriculum and the overall MIS played an important role in these pressures (Bulkley, Christman, et al., 2010). In schools managed by providers, those in the ORS model and regular district schools, the district implemented School Assistance Teams. These teams, headed by an individual appointed by the district, monitored school performance, conducted evaluative walkthroughs and reported findings to the district Office of Accountability. The presence of School Assistance Teams in provider schools that were in Corrective Action increased pressures felt by management organizations.

Providers initially anticipated competing with each other in raising school achievement, based on their unique approaches. However, it became increasingly clear that, in fact, they were competing against academic achievement of students in regular district schools. At least part of the providers’ motivation to adopt the district’s MIS, with the exception of Edison, was because they recognized that if school achievement in their schools lagged in comparison to that in regular district schools, poor performance on the PSSA could be attributed to not adopting the tightly coupled and prescriptive approach of the MIS. In this regard, none of providers wanted to fall behind the district or other providers on PSSA results (Christman et al., 2006).

Noncoercive Isomorphic Pressures

Noncoercive isomorphic pressures, such as pressures from networks and professional norms, were also clearly in play in Philadelphia. For one, a number of the providers initially hired administrators with strong ties to the SDP. Such hires not only enabled them to build relationships with the district, but also resulted in ideas from the district influencing provider practices.

Perhaps more importantly, teachers often retained their core identity as district employees rather than provider teachers. Teachers in provider schools remained SDP employees and union members. Moreover, most teachers in provider schools, with the exception of new teachers hired after the inception of the diverse provider model, had been socialized to the same professional norms as teachers in regular district schools. Because teachers in provider schools would return to district schools if their provider’s contract...

was not renewed, which was a possibility since the outset of the diverse provider model, their professional loyalty often was to the district, rather than to the provider. This loyalty proved prescient. In 2008–2009, the SRC did, in fact, take some schools away from all of the providers and returned them to district management. Teachers in these schools once again became "full members" of the Philadelphia teaching force.

Another noncoercive isomorphic pressure was the establishment of an EMO district for provider schools in 2003–2004. A district administrator chaired the group and facilitated discussion of common issues faced by EMOs in Philadelphia. It was a place where EMO staff could discuss their problems candidly and without a sense of competition. The EMO district enabled providers to collaborate in ways that were not evident in the initial year, because they now appreciated that their fortunes were linked. In 2004, a conference sponsored by the PSD and the federal government, entitled “Innovations in Education: Building a Public-Private Partnership Model for K–12 Reform," included discussion of their collaboration. The nature of “thin management," in which providers in Philadelphia’s model were not afforded the degree of control over the management of their schools advocated by Hill and colleagues (2009), also meant that there was significant interaction between district administrators and provider schools in areas such as Title I and facilities.

Finally, for a number of the diverse providers in Philadelphia, entering into the management of schools was a new and uncertain effort. Furthermore, ambiguity about the roles of the district vis à vis the provider only served to further this uncertainty (Bulkley et al., 2004). Because many providers were uncertain about how to improve PSSA results, over time they came to adopt core elements of the district’s MIS that the district touted for improving student achievement. In fact, the areas in which the providers’ programs varied from the district’s and with each other’s often built upon the basic components of the MIS, deepening or broadening its focus, by providing teacher supports and after-school programs tied to improving student achievement on the PSSA.

Why Didn’t Edison Change Significantly?

Given all the pressures for providers to align more closely with the district, how is it that the Edison program remained relatively unchanged during this time period? In terms of coercive pressures, Edison’s model and the company’s experience nationally was already tied to attempts to raise test scores on state assessments. Edison was in a position where it needed to push back against isomorphic pressures because staff had to consider not only the schools in Philadelphia, but also the company’s “brand” as a school manager nationwide. To make significant changes in Philadelphia, as the
other providers did, could easily be interpreted by investors and others as a challenge to the value of the model itself.

Moreover, noncoercive pressures on Edison were less potent. For example, the three Achievement Directors for Edison schools in Philadelphia worked outside of individual schools in the district and had no prior connection with the district. They were hired to work specifically with Edison in Philadelphia. The training of these individuals in the Edison educational model was intensive. Thus, individuals in the best position to make decisions about the program did not view themselves as district affiliated, but instead reported to Edison representatives at the national level. Likewise, Edison hired most new principals from outside Philadelphia and provided them extensive professional development in the Edison model. In addition, Edison’s school design appeared to provide more guidance, especially at the elementary level, for provider level staff and teachers.

**IMPORTANCE OF STUDY/IMPLICATIONS**

In part from pressures related to NCLB, and pressures to increase choice within public school systems, an increasing number of school districts have been developing some form of a PMM that includes schools run by outside providers (Bulkley, Henig et al., 2010). However, the Philadelphia story demonstrates how the theoretical promise of “innovative” educational programs may not play out in practice due to the kinds of isomorphic pressures described here. Although the changes at the district level in Philadelphia, especially the introduction of the MIS and the powerful influences of a Vallas-led central office, made the pressures on providers particularly strong, providers in other contexts may encounter similar kinds of isomorphic pressures. Policy makers should consider the Philadelphia experience carefully, including the reasons why it varied from the “ideal” model laid out by Hill and his colleagues, if considering bringing in outside providers as a strategy for enhancing innovation, variation, and achievement (Hill et al., 2012). In particular, they should consider the strong pressures on providers over time that may lead them to become increasingly indistinguishable from the district.

Some would argue that the Philadelphia MIS is an educationally sound approach, and that providers are adding something to it through additional teacher supports and programmatic approaches. However, what was in place by 2008 was a far cry from the vision of those who argued that the DPM would bring substantial innovations and gains in student achievement. EMO leaders (whether nonprofit or for-profit) and principals of schools in a PMM also need to anticipate and find ways to respond to pressures such as those described here in an increasingly “public/private hybrid” educational enterprise, if they are to strive toward the initial promise of a diverse provider
model (Henig, Holyoke, Lacireno-Paquet, & Moser, 2003; Rufos-Lignos & Richards, 2003).

NOTES

1. In this article, we use the term “diverse provider model,” or DPM, as this was the language most used in Philadelphia.
2. This section draws heavily on Travers (2003).
3. For more information about the Philadelphia Benchmark tests, see Bulkley (2010).

REFERENCES


