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An Outsider's Inside Look at Philadelphia's Public School Classrooms

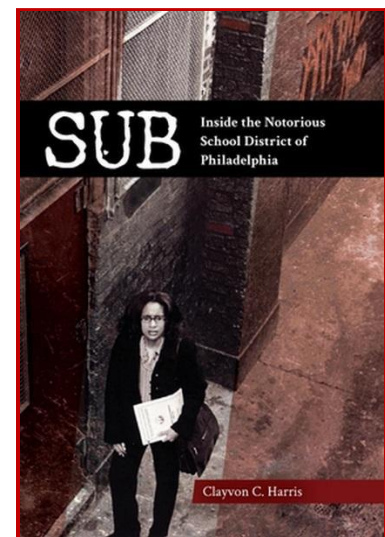
*Substitute teacher's 15-year gap between teaching stints reveals what's working –
and what's not working – in the School District of Philadelphia*

Philadelphia, PA (April 6, 2021) What happens when a Hollywood TV writer returns to her hometown, becomes a substitute teacher and takes meticulous notes recording her day-to-day experiences in schools across the city? The result is ***SUB: Inside the Notorious School District of Philadelphia***. Clayvon C. Harris's firsthand account of the conditions and real-life challenges teachers and students face every day inside the city's public school classrooms also offers solutions for improving educational outcomes.

Completing over 90 assignments (including five long-term gigs) across 67 different schools, Harris came face-to-face with overwhelmed principals, burned-out teachers and chaotic classrooms. "Burdened" is how she describes the district and its administration. "It's underfunded, under-resourced and overpopulated. They're fighting a battle with one arm tied behind their backs and no shoes."

Harris, an African American who earned a BA from Swarthmore College and an MFA from the University of Southern California, had hoped to make a difference as a teacher in the city's public schools. What she found instead was students who had a profound lack of respect for teachers and for education in general, the opposite of her own K-12 education in Diocesan and private Catholic schools. "Students who disrupted the learning process were asked to leave. Period," she states, pointing out that the city's public schools are rarely allowed to expel students. "Students have a right to attend school whether they harass their classmates or not. Whether they respect the teachers or not."

SUB is divided into three sections and schools discussed are identified only by number (Public School #1, #2, etc.) to maintain anonymity. Part 1 chronicles 17 schools (elementary, middle and high schools) from her first tour through the District in 2001-02. Part 2 covers what has happened with those specific schools and includes a running tally of "below basic proficiency" standardized test scores. Part 3, "Back Inside the SDP... 15 Years Later," consists of additional stories from inside the classrooms and an in-depth analysis of the link between education underfinancing and the impact students with emotional and behavioral disabilities are having in classrooms across the US.



According to Harris, unmanaged “disruptive disabilities,” such as oppositional defiant disorder (ODD), ADHD and dyslexia, can negatively impact teachers’ ability to teach and students’ ability to learn. “You have children who cannot thrive in a general education classroom: they bully, hit, harass, stand up on desks and scream during lessons.” Studies cited by Harris in *SUB* suggest that these students should be in small classroom settings with teachers and aides trained to support their specific needs.

Harris attributes the problem to both inequitable funding—at the state level and sometimes within the District itself—and the well meaning but misguided federal law, the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), which dictates that all children with special needs be included “to the maximum extent appropriate” in general education classrooms. “But allowing students to upset the education process day after day is far from appropriate. That daily disruption not only holds back the entire class, it can also be traumatic for students who do not have disabilities and who want to learn.”

Compared to her first subbing experience, Harris says classroom disruptions have gotten worse. Meanwhile, as teachers continue the daily struggle of maintaining classroom order, students continue to fall behind academically. “The loss of education multiplies as the kids advance from grade to grade together. By the time they get to middle school, they’re behind. By the time they get to high school, for many, there’s no catching up.” Then the cycle repeats, creating a “permanent, self-sustaining underclass” in the city, she notes.

Nonetheless, Harris acknowledges the district has made progress in the years between her subbing duties, with more challenging schoolwork, additional resources, access to laptops, experimental curricula, and many “amazing, dedicated teachers” who are increasingly tasked with also being counselors and disciplinarians.

Harris warns inclusion-related difficulties are not confined to Philadelphia or even urban settings, but are affecting classrooms across America. The mandates of IDEA merit a “hard look” at the national level so that the rights of students who do not have disruptive disabilities are at least considered, if not protected. “There *are* good things going on in Philly’s schools,” she concludes. “From what I’ve seen, many teachers, administrators, students and private organizations are working very hard to make improvements where they can. But this effort would have an even greater impact if classroom environments were calm, safe and conducive to learning on a consistent basis.”

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About Clayvon C. Harris

Writer and advocate for fair and equal education, Clayvon C. Harris earned an MFA in Cinema-Television/Screenwriting from the University of Southern California’s School of Cinematic Arts. She also holds a BA in English literature from Swarthmore College where students are taught they have the ability to change the world.

Harris lives and writes in the Philadelphia area where she specializes in messaging strategy, digital content creation and script development. She is also a member of the Writers Guild of America. Her first book is the award-winning collection of essays, *Year of Trial, Year of Grace—A Catholic’s Search for Faith*.

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