

Olney's Philly Finance Collaborative

Olney Charter High School (Olney) is a grade 9-12 high school serving close to 2,000 students in Philadelphia, PA. Previously directly controlled by the School District of Philadelphia, Olney received its charter in 2011 and is now operated by ASPIRA PA. Olney is located in one of Philadelphia's most impoverished and violent zip codes and is considered one of the most underfunded school districts in the nation. The Olney neighborhood of Philadelphia faces huge socioeconomic challenges which bring about high levels of crime, poor public health, and a range of other issues that burden children and families.



The Program:

Three years ago, Dan LaSalle, an English teacher at Olney Charter High, saw an opportunity offered by *The Philadelphia Academy of School Leaders* for school-based teams to apply for a one-year grant to address a school-specific challenge to student learning, and inspiration struck. LaSalle's idea was to create a financial literacy program that would teach students from high-poverty backgrounds critical financial skills such as how is money earned, how it gains interest, and how it should it be saved for college or retirement.

The program LaSalle envisioned would create a radical approach to teaching financial education by creating jobs for students at their school and paying them for their efforts. Further, he would create a program which would establish checking, savings, and investment accounts for students and previously unbanked families, and help them learn to successfully manage their money. His belief: to teach kids about money they need to have money to manage.

The idea was a hit, and with a two-year grant totaling almost \$25,000 from the Philadelphia Academy of School Leaders, **Olney's Philly Finance Cooperative** (Cooperative) was born. With this grant, LaSalle was able to create a program to help 25 students become passionate about their financial future. According to the plan, for an hour during the school day, these 25 students would receive:

- A real problem to solve
- Coaching around leadership responsibilities
- Instruction in personal finance
- Paychecks into real bank accounts

The first step was to give students actual problems to solve in their school. With increased funding, the Cooperative has managed to expand beyond 25 members and now employs 81 students each school year, who are paid to run afterschool clubs. The students in the Cooperative decide the clubs they want to form based on their emerging career interests. They have founded activities such as a journalism club that produces a printed newspaper, a competitive spoken word poetry team, the first chapter of a STEM program for female students, and a club for those interested in veterinary medicine. Other students addressed problems that led to the creation of a board game club, peer counselling groups, and several other student-led programs.

The next step was to change the pedagogy. In most classes, a student arrives on the first day of school to a predetermined curriculum. With the exception of an intense personal finance unit, the students primarily focus on the administration of their clubs and their paid position. "It's leadership experience aligned to their future career, which they get paid for," LaSalle says. Students

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design the club, make promotional materials, recruit members, work with club sponsors to run meetings, plan trips, keep attendance data, and organize activities. The students work tirelessly to improve their program. They learn how to manage their peers and keep track of data. The skills these students learn are universal.

The third step was to do more than dangle grades over their head. Instead, students established real and potentially lifelong bank accounts and deposited actual paychecks they received for their contributions to the school. Olney used most of the grant for paychecks, close to \$600 per student. In collaboration, the students and school monitored the checking account, a college savings account the student could not touch until the age of 18, and a personal savings account the students could use on any short-term future goal they had. Over time, students made routine transfers into their savings account and were given more freedom in how they used their debit card connected to their checking account. Students led their clubs, managed their bank accounts, and usually opted to receive more lessons about business management and finance.

LaSalle faced several challenges along the way--first and foremost, getting buy-in from students and families. Many of the families were distrustful of banking institutions and were hesitant to participate in the program. To ease the hesitation, LaSalle hosted several dinners with the families where they discussed the financial realities that these low-income families faced. The parents soon began to open up and discuss their struggles and how they didn't want their children to face the same issues. Gaining parental buy-in allowed the Cooperative to set up the necessary accounts.

“Many adolescents aren’t prepared to enter the world with much knowledge of how the economy works, or on how to save for the future,” said one student participant. “This is extremely important to me since I come from a household with only one parent struggling to pay anything that comes our way. This puts guidelines for me for how to save, when to spend, and also a variety of terms that I will encounter in my upcoming years leading to be a financially stable and independent adult. I love this program.”

Outcomes:

The Cooperative is now in its third year and continues to flourish. The students have been able to take a realistic look at what they want to do with their lives and how to achieve the finances for that in terms of education, career, and lifestyle, all the way to retirement. LaSalle has been able to track many positive outcomes from the program such as:

- The total amount given to students in paychecks over the course of one year equaled \$8,960.35; at the end of that year, the combined total amount in the students savings account equaled \$4,226, meaning nearly half of the earnings were being saved.
- 75% of the students are saving between 10 and 20% of their income.
- 68% of the students moved more money than suggested from their checking account into their savings account.
- Attendance in after school clubs nearly doubled, going from six percent of the student body to 11.5 percent.
- When surveyed, 100% of students AGREE or STRONGLY AGREE that they love their school job.
- The average on the final exam, based on national financial literacy standards, was 77%.

The goal of the cooperative has been to create motivated, happy, and eager learners by creating an environment similar to the best of the real world and these outcomes are showing that the program is working!

Thank you to Dan LaSalle and Olney Charter High School for sharing this story. For more information on this program, please contact Dan at DLaSalle@aspirapa.org. If you would like to submit a suggestion for a future Innovation Spotlight, please contact Brandie Karpew at b.karpew@pacharters.org.