Who runs the School District of Philadelphia?

What is the School Reform Commission (SRC)?
The School District of Philadelphia (SDP) is governed by the School Reform Commission (SRC) which was established in December 2001, when oversight of the School District shifted to the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania. It replaced the school board. This was in response to the school district’s financial difficulties; at the same time as the takeover, the General Assembly approved a new school funding package. The SRC is made up of five members, three appointed by the Governor and two by the Mayor. The Governor’s appointees serve terms that last 5 years and the Mayor’s appointees serve terms that last 4 years. Once appointed a member can be removed only for “clear and convincing” proof of wrongdoing or failure to perform. There is no limit to the number of terms a member can serve. SRC members aren’t paid for their work, but may be reimbursed for expenses while performing official duties from funds provided by the Pennsylvania Department of Education. The current commissioners are: Pedro Ramos (chair), Lorene Cary, Joseph Dworetzky, Feather Houstoun and Wendell Pritchett.

What are the duties and responsibilities of the SRC?
The SRC sets the policy direction of the SDP and is responsible for all financial matters relating to the district. The SRC carries out its responsibilities through its selection of a Superintendent, the annual review and retention of the Superintendent, and through approving the plans and budgets submitted by the Superintendent. The SRC has ultimate oversight of the district’s educational programs and for setting strategic goals and objectives for improving academic performance. All proposals for programs and spending must be approved by the SRC. The School Reform Commission also has authority to establish new charter schools or approve the conversion of an existing school to a charter school. It can also close charter schools and considers charter renewals and requests for increases in enrollment or changes in grade structure. The SRC is governed by state law, including laws requiring public decision making.
What are the duties and responsibilities of the Superintendent?

The Superintendent makes the majority of decisions for the direction, administration and implementation of programs for the District. The SRC hires the Superintendent and makes decisions about contract renewal of the Superintendent. The Superintendent acts under the supervision of the School Reform Commission through adoption of an annual plan and budget and then works with executive staff to carry out the day-to-day administration and supervision of the district. The Superintendent hires and supervises the leadership team, including academic and operations staff. They are responsible for preparing and implementing the curriculum, programs, strategies and initiatives approved by the SRC including the annual budget and the school district’s strategic plan. There is also a Deputy Superintendent who reports directly to and works closely with the Superintendent to carry out district programs and operations. Dr. William Hite was appointed as the new Superintendent of the SDP in July 2012.

In addition to the Superintendent and Deputy Superintendent, the District currently has three Assistant Superintendents who are responsible for the following portfolios: Curriculum, Instruction and Assessment, Accountability, Equity and Compliance and Talent and Leadership Development. There are seven Assistant Superintendents apportioned across all grade levels and school type: Elementary schools, Middle Schools, High Schools, and Alternative Schools. These were formerly divided by geographic regions. Assistant Superintendents develop, coach, and mentor principals around the core leadership competencies; recommend and evaluate principals; are responsible for oversight of the implementation of educational programs; support schools in creating and managing budgets; develop and apply professional growth plans; and give final approval for long-term student suspensions. A Manager of Operations supervises Facility Managers for the management of school building operations.

The School District of Philadelphia has 146,090 students attending 249 schools.

What is the authority of the Mayor of Philadelphia and City Council over the Philadelphia School District?

The Mayor has the authority to appoint two of the five members of the School Reform Commission. City Council does not have direct authority over the SDP or SRC, but does have the power to host public hearings concerning SDP matters through its Education Committee. City Council is the body that approves local taxes going to the District as well as the transfer of funds from the City budget. In 2012 this local contribution amounted to 34.29% of the District’s budget. Under state law the City cannot reduce taxes going to the District. In June 2011, the SDP and the Mayor’s Office signed an education accountability agreement that requires the SDP to provide more information including contracts, staffing and budgets to the City with a goal of having City officials have much more information about the operations of the SDP.
What are the duties and responsibilities of school principals?

Principals are responsible for the day-to-day management, academic achievement and financial affairs of a school. There are 249 schools in Philadelphia (as of July 2012) including 57 high schools, 23 middle schools and 169 elementary schools. Principals are responsible for the academic performance in their schools. They evaluate teacher performance and are instructional leaders to teachers and staff. Principals are also responsible for ensuring the safety of students and faculty at their schools and oversee student discipline including short term student suspensions. Philadelphia principals belong to the Commonwealth Association for School Administrators (CASA), which is the principals’ union.

Who is in charge of charter schools in Philadelphia?

Charter schools receive public funds to educate their students from their authorizing (local) school districts. The law provides charter schools with flexibility in terms of governance, curriculum, and staffing not available to traditional public schools. By law, charter schools manage their own affairs and are not subject to the governance of the school district except for the negotiation and renewal of their charters. Charter schools are registered non-profit organizations, and are therefore subject to rules, regulations and laws pertaining to non-profits. As of 2012, 45,999 students attended 80 charter schools in Philadelphia.

What is the authority of the Governor and the General Assembly over the School District?

The governor appoints three of the five members of the SRC. The state senate must confirm the nominees. The legislature has authority to pass state education laws which apply to all school districts in the state; legislation is then signed into law, or vetoed, by the Governor. The Governor and General Assembly also annually appropriate funding to the District, which in 2012 amounted to approximately 47.85% of the District’s budget.
What do the Pennsylvania Department of Education and the Pennsylvania Board of Education do?

The Department of Education is an executive agency controlled by the governor and is charged with providing support and assistance to the school districts of the state. The Department of Education also oversees the proper expenditure of state education funds and federal funds that are passed through the state.

The Pennsylvania Board of Education is part of the Department of Education and has 21 members that are appointed by the governor and the majority and minority chairs of the House and Senate Education Committees. The Board is responsible for adopting the regulations to implement Pennsylvania’s education laws including the academic standards for basic and higher education in Pennsylvania.

What is the Philadelphia Federation of Teachers and what is its relationship to the School District of Philadelphia?

The Philadelphia Federation of Teachers (PFT) is the SDP’s largest union, representing 17,000 teachers, librarians, nurses, counselors and support staff. The PFT and the SDP negotiate the collective bargaining agreement that establishes the salaries and benefits for district employees represented by the union. The agreement also includes the working conditions such as length of the working day, class size, rules about hiring and lay-offs, and teacher evaluations.

Education Voters of PA is a non-profit, non-partisan, education advocacy organization focused on building public demand for strong education policy and increasing public involvement in the policy making process.

This project received generous support from the William Penn Foundation.