- Special Series -

“In the Trenches”
Interviews with the original founders of career academies

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Series Synopsis
This landmark series was created in honor of the 40th anniversary of career academies. It explores the realities of creating the longest running school improvement initiative in the United States. The following pages have partial interviews with:

Al Glassman
First career academy principal and 2009 Charles W. Bowser Award Recipient

Lee Everett
CEO of the Philadelphia Electric Company

John Thompson
First career academy lead teacher and 2010 Charles W. Bowser Award recipient

Dr. Joseph Phillips
First career academy English teacher
“We wanted to give this academy something that would distinguish it in the minds of the youngsters as something different and very special that they could belong to and be part of.”

- Al Glassman
The First Career Academy

Edison High School
Philadelphia, PA
1969

It was the fall of 1969 when the culmination of a year of intense, community-wide planning came to fruition. A creative spark from the mind of Charles Bowser, the Deputy Mayor of the city of Philadelphia, ignited a fire that has lasted four decades and engulfed every state in America. Career academies are thriving in the 21st century here in the United States and starting to take root across the Atlantic in the United Kingdom.

In an age where educational reforms come and go every two to five years, one that lasts forty is astonishing. Career academies are the longest running educational reform initiative in America. As the National Educator Program (NEP) and the Philadelphia Academies, Inc (PAI) prepare to celebrate the 40th birthday of career academies this spring in Houston, the principal of the first career academy at Edison High School, Mr. Al Glassman addressed employees of PAI and NEP in Philadelphia last month at the main office of the Philadelphia Electrical Company (PECO) - a long-standing supporter of career academies. Here are excerpts of what he had to say:

“As before I started working with Charles Bowser, I was sent back to Edison High School as principal. I knew I was going back in 1968, I knew the neighborhood, and I knew that we had to do something new and different and give these kids a better break. So when Charles Bowser came up with this idea, I said, ‘That’s what I want.’

“And he delivered it! ... We instituted the Electrical Academy. We identified 25 of the most at-risk students in the school we could. These were kids we felt if circumstances didn’t change would surely not be there for the eleventh grade...and we invited them to be part of the Electrical Academy.

“We wanted to give this academy something that would distinguish it in the minds of the youngsters as something different and very special that they could belong to and be part of. Half the day they would be in an electrical shop setting, and the other half of the day they would take their academic courses.

“We scheduled them to keep them together in their English classes and math classes. So in addition to stringent but supportive academic coursework, they were in a work setting that reflected the state-of-the-art best practices of that industry.

“To help us with that, PECO released one of their senior engineers to work with the school full time as this concept was unfolding in the school. His name was Henk Koning and he was a real gift to us. It would have been hard, if not impossible to pull this off without him.

“Each kid was given a complete tool kit for the trade worth about $200 at the time. And they were given classy varsity jackets ...”

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The First Career Academy, continued from p. 7

“...with the academy name and logo emblazoned on the back.

“As we approached June, the main concern of the industry coalition and the school people was how we would insure these twenty-five youngsters would return to the school in September. The prospects were very, very grim at that time. They decided maybe the best way would be to hire them for the summer. So they came to me and said, ‘We’d like to create an electrical trades workplace in your building for the summer. We’ll hire the academy students to work in the program and we will provide contracts for them.’

Now I was kind of new and it never occurred to me whose permission I might have to get. I later became a high level bureaucrat in the system and I’d take umbrage with people who would do things without asking first (laughs), but I gave them a vacant shop on the third floor. Henk Koning came in and completely transformed the building pouring cement, ripping out walls and wiring, putting air conditioners in the windows. In a few days they completely renovated this classroom without anybody from downtown knowing what it looked like (laughs) and they developed a factory in this classroom. I was scared at the time, but I’m glad I did it.”

Hear more from Al Glassman himself as part of The Human Timeline at the NEP’s 7th Annual SLC Success Conference in Houston, April 22-25, 2009.

You can also read more in the book, The Cradle of Career Academies due out in Spring 2009.
Lee Everett
CEO - Philadelphia Electric Company (1969)
Published in Innovation Magazine, 3rd edition

“It was absolutely a wonderful, wonderful experience for me and for the company. But the most wonderful thing was the experience for the kids.”

- Lee Everett
The Growth of Career Academies
Philadelphia, PA 1970s and 1980s

It was the fall of 1969 when the culmination of a year of intense, community-wide planning came to fruition. A creative spark from the mind of Charles Bowser, the Deputy Mayor of the city of Philadelphia, ignited a fire that has lasted four decades and engulfed every state in America. Career academies are thriving in the 21st century here in the United States and starting to take root across the Atlantic in the United Kingdom.

In our ongoing series, NEP talks with the founders of this initiative that became a fundamental shift in the way secondary education is delivered in America. In the last edition of Innovation Magazine, Al Glassman discussed the early days of the first academy at Edison High School in Philadelphia, focusing on 1969-70.

One of the major supporters of the career academy initiative was a gentleman named Lee Everett. Mr. Everett was CEO of the Philadelphia Electric Company. To build on what Al Glassman said in our last issue, here are excerpts of what Lee Everett had to say about how career academies built momentum and spread throughout Philadelphia in the 1970s and 1980s:

"The biggest boost we had was long about the beginning of the third or fourth academy. We got a new superintendent of schools, Connie Clayton. Dr. Constance Clayton. She was a wonderful, wonderful lady. An African-American lady. And the first thing she did was call me up and say, “I want to meet with your board.” I said, “That’s great, Connie.” So, she met with us the day she was elected superintendent, she said, “I want you to know you are my flagship. You are my number one program and what ever we can do for you in the school district we will do it.” We didn’t need any money. We had money coming in from our supporters in the business community; people who were active with our academy. I got the business Academy started by talking with Fred Heldring - another Dutch ex-national, who was executive vice president of the Philadelphia National Bank, of which I was the director. And he decided this would be a good thing for them to do, so the bank became a sponsor of the Business Academy. I think that was a West Philadelphia High School, one of those high schools in West Philadelphia.

So, we got that when rolling fairly easily because they had enough to put it together and we had a lot of businesses that did banking and knew each other as bankers and we involved as much of the Chamber of Commerce as we could. We had all kinds of

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Career Academies Spread in the City
As the academies began replicating, their focus areas included Health, Business and Automotive career fields. Temple University became involved with some of these, along with a “board” of corporations that banded together to support the youth of Philadelphia.

Connie Clayton
Soon, a new superintendent was elected by the name of Connie Clayton. Ms. Clayton saw the value of career academies and made them a centerpiece of her policy on secondary education.

The Philadelphia Electric Company PECO was one of several early supporters of Charles Bowser’s “little project.” A big sponsor of the Electrical Academy at Thomas Edison High School, Lee Everett and Hank Koening became fixtures in the growth and development of other academies in Philadelphia.

Mileposts in Career Academy History
Follow the development of career academies in each issue of Innovation Magazine, as we celebrate 40 YEARS OF CAREER ACADEMIES!

The Philadelphia Electric Company
businesses involved. We wanted to get a Healthcare Academy and we found that to do this we would have to put kids in hospitals. So they became orderlies and things that they could do until they got an education. Well, some of the hospitals were unionized and some weren’t. We had a problem.

I talked to the head of the osteopathic hospital connected with the medical school. He agreed to head up the Healthcare Academy but we had to work through this business of getting both the non-unionized hospitals and the unionized hospitals working together without the unionized hospitals using it as a bridge to unionize the non-unionized hospitals. So, the fellow who headed up the unions (and I think still does), was a man named Henry Nicholas. As far as I know he’s still there running the Union. At least that’s what I was told. But anyway, Henk and I had a least a half a dozen breakfasts with Henry and his staff, because he wanted to know all about it before he got the union involved in it. And we described it, and they sent people up and looked at the Electrical Academy and the Automotive Academy and the Business Academy.

He said, “Look, there’s one thing I do not want. I don’t want to have these kids in high school get trained for the medical profession so that they have a dead-end job.” I said, “Henry! That’s the last thing we want.” And I showed him how this worked in the Electrical Academy with kids going around to electrical courses outside of high school and finally he said, “Okay, on that basis we’ll do it.” So, he took it over. That was at Martin Luther King High School. That was probably the academy that outshined all the rest. They took in the first class with 100% attendance.

No dropouts. When that class graduated, every one of them went on to a higher education of some sort to get more training. Henry was beaming. It was just exactly what he had hoped. It was exactly what that program should’ve done.

I had a director named Bill Fishman who was chairman of the board of ARA services, a big catering company and school bus operator. I wanted Bill’s ARA services to sponsor the first Hospitality Academy. You know, hotels, restaurants, that kind of thing. It took us almost 3 years to talk them into doing it, but they finally were involved in it and we even got the unions whose members ran the hotel dining rooms, the hotel employees union, to co-sponsor the hospitality academy and talk to the kids enrolled, you can see the kids bloom when they did that. It was wonderful. That was kind of the feedback that everybody needed to know that the program was succeeding on its own. Now I read the numbers and I can hardly believe them. Thousands enrolled in the academies, dozens of academies, one at least may be more in every high school in Philadelphia, it’s unbelievable.

It’s spilled over into the suburban school system and, oblivious to me, was the national growth around the country. I heard that people had come in to look at our academies and I would meet with them when they would come in. We have luncheons, the kids ran the luncheons. Boy, wasn’t that great. We’d go there and they would be the master of ceremonies and I could tell that these kids were not only learning skills and how to work and hold a job, but they were developing leadership skills. That was the greatest thing of all.

And when we began to get academy graduates to come back and visit their academies as alumni and talk to the kids enrolled, you can see the kids bloom when they did that. It was wonderful. That was kind of the feedback that everybody needed to know that the program was succeeding on its own. Now I read the numbers and I can hardly believe them. Thousands enrolled in the academies, dozens of academies, one at least may be more in every high school in Philadelphia, it’s unbelievable.

It’s spilled over into the suburban school system and, oblivious to me, was the national growth around the country. I heard that people had come in to look at our academies and I would meet with them when they would come in. We have lunch together or something when they came in, but I wouldn’t get the continuity of what was happening on their end. I get snippets, but really nothing that would tell me that the academies were alive and well somewhere else as I knew they were in Philadelphia. So that’s the early days.”
John Thompson
First Academy Lead Teacher (1969)
Charles W. Bowser Award Recipient (2010)
Edison High School, Philadelphia

Published in Innovation Magazine, 4th edition

“The family as a whole stayed together and supported each other.”

- John Thompson
In the Trenches of Career Academies

Philadelphia, PA
1969 - 1972

It was the fall of 1969 when the culmination of a year of intense, community-wide planning came to fruition. A creative spark from the mind of Charles Bowser (Deputy Mayor of the city of Philadelphia) ignited a fire that has lasted four decades.

In our ongoing series, NEP talks with the founders of this initiative that became a fundamental shift in the way secondary education is delivered in America. In the last edition of Innovation Magazine, Lee Everett discussed the growth of the first academy as it spread into a systemic change model in Philadelphia Schools during the 1970s - 80s.

Now we go into the first academy classrooms where it would finally be determined if career academies were as good an idea in practice as they were on paper. John Thompson was one of the classroom teachers who would make it or break it. Forty years later, here is what he told NEP about their resounding success, in his own words:

Charlie Bowser, Lee Everett, “Duke” Yaple from Bell Telephone were the movers and shakers in the industry world that wanted to bring change within the schools. At the time there were a lot of disruptions within the city and it was felt that there were too many young people unemployed. My point at that time was, and still is, that school is not a short-term deal. It has to be addressed as a workday, and that day is full so a young person is involved in their trade or career plan after school as well as during the school day. We had to figure out how to get our content practical enough to get a kid to want to be engaged, because the attendance was so low at the time. In fact, I was pulled in in the interest of low attendance. So first I said, we need to know what kind of product we are dealing with - the “product” being the student. How do we take this raw product and massage it to get where we want to go and aim it toward our objectives? The first move that we made was to measure their math and reading abilities.

Now keep in mind at that time, and it has been for some time, that vocational education (which it was called then) was the dumping grounds. Any kid who was a disciplinary problem or special needs student, they shifted them over to the vocational programs. The average testing data showed our students were falling around the fourth grade reading level. 10th-graders were reading at the fourth grade reading level.

With that, the team of teachers that I had would determine that we couldn’t go below the fourth grade reading level, because the industries were saying they had

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to be able to read a newspaper. Typical industry reading material at the time was at that level, the sixth and seventh grade level. That meant we couldn’t exclude so many students, but we could work toward ability level. We put the cut off at the fourth or fifth grade reading level. The same way with the math.

By the same token I was saying to the English department head and the Math department head, “You know, you’re working close with us in some respects and distant from us in other respects. Why don’t you join us? Why don’t we team up?” We developed something called “integrated instruction.” (Now we’re going back 40 years ago.) And finally the English department head who was Dr. David Phelps, and is still alive, (I can give you his number) came to my aid. We talked and we talked and he signed on. Along with him came William Tomasco for English, and Tom Winters. They were too young English teachers, William and Tom. The math teacher was Mr. Porter. He is still alive. In fact he’s just retiring.

So with that, we managed to pull together in about the third year, integration. It started working because we as teachers, we met, talked, communicated, and the materials were integrated. That is, before talking about ohms law, we’re talking about algebra. Well, if you’re teaching algebra one, why not take some of these samples and use them in your classroom because these students are going to be in your class. Why are these students going to be in your class? Because we’ve got the agreement of the administration of the school to bundle this group of students and have them go through a group of teachers which became part of the Academy family.

With that, we started developing lexicons of terms that the English teacher would have. We then got in a history teacher who started developing a lot of materials that were related. We didn’t talk about the war of 1812 unless we talked about industry, how was industry involved. You had the war of 1812 but what was going on in industry? Along the same lines, social sciences came into play where the teacher taught why it is that when you go to certain sections of Philadelphia that you run into a big wall and you get chased? Back in that time Philadelphia was very shaky. So all those things that came into play in a student’s life were brought into the classroom.

As we got started, we saw that our attendance started going up and we maintain 95% attendance for a year. Why? Well, we’re all talking and the student new that if I do something here and here about it here, here, and here. So it was part of the family. If you had a punishment coming to you, then you knew there was a central process and it’s going to go on, but you’re part of the family. We didn’t send you out elsewhere for discipline, the discipline took place within the family. And that worked because the students start looking at each other and supporting each other so it brought together teamwork.

Keep in mind in the first portion of it, it was all boys and as we move forward things got better and tighter. Then there was the injection of females and at the time everybody got upset about girls, there’s got to be problems, disputes, so forth and so on. But we got a group of young ladies and they were surprising and nontraditional. They wanted to get into this work and learn what it was all about. They proved that they even created or brought along some adhesive that pulled it together even tighter among the students. We had a tighter family.

Well someone might ask how did you relate to the rest of the school? Did you segregate the kids from the rest of the school? The answer is “no.” We also maintained connections to the other things in the school: student government, whatever was going on. We did not isolate ourselves. We participated in that. But the family as a whole stayed together and supported each other.
Dr. Joseph Phillips
First Academy English Teacher (1969)
Edison High School, Philadelphia

Published in Innovation Magazine, 5th edition

“You can’t do everything, but you can do something.”

- Dr. Joseph Phillips
In the Trenches of Career Academies

Philadelphia, PA
1969 - 1972

It was the fall of 1969 when the culmination of a year of intense, community-wide planning came to fruition. A creative spark from the mind of Charles W. Bowser ignited a fire that has lasted four decades.

In this series, “In the Trenches,” NEP talks with the founders of this initiative that became a fundamental shift in the way secondary education is delivered in America. We have been fortunate to speak first with Al Glassman and Lee Everett. In the last edition of Innovation Magazine, John Thompson discussed what it was like to be the first career academy Lead Teacher: creating academy curricula from nothing, and the perils of being a vocational teacher marshaling support from academic teachers.

In this final installment of this series, we speak with one of the earliest supporters of the career academy concept from the academic side of the hallway. Dr. Joseph Phillips was the English Department Head at Edison High School. Forty years later, here is what he told NEP about their resounding success, in his own words:

I was the department head for English when this thing got started. The first year, it stumbled along, trying to put into place something that would be beneficial in the education of these poor kids for whom the conventional, or the established educational patterns were not successful. It was very modest. Henk Koenig had an idea that if you motivate the kids with tools in their hands, have them do things with their hands, that would be good and they would have a sense that they would want to be educated. So that was his vision.

Henk didn’t have the practicality of it, but we got together in a meeting to tackle the problem that was facing everybody: the kids were having an attendance problem. We couldn’t keep them in school. But, in the first year or so as we progressed, it was clear that the kids were not coming to school except on a selective basis. They were coming to the shop. They were coming to this stuff having to do with electronics. But they weren’t going to English or math and so on. Their attendance was generally not that different from the other kids. What this indicated was, they would come to school if the electronics teachers required it.

So, we thought this thing through. We couldn’t just say, “Forget about their schooling. Just let them go to the electrical shop.” The idea came to us, when we make a program in school, conventional high school programming has to connect as often and frequently as is operationally responsible with this career goal that the academy was setting up for the kids. Over the next couple of years, we worked on developing a curriculum that integrated schooling in a way that it could be the work of the Academy. It was an interesting problem of trying to define what it was we wanted to do. It was a blank slate as far as we were concerned.

So we came up with this: If you go into a shop, if you go into work, if you go into an electronics store . . .

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... and talk with the boss, you have to communicate well. We taught in our academy how to communicate in this thing called English. And you have to be able to do a certain amount of math. If you don't have it, there's a real block against your education. If you want to be an electrician, you have to know Ohms' law. It's as simple as that. You have to know what that means.

What I would do is work with the math teacher and ask what he would do. My understanding is, a student can't understand the text unless you can understand 70% of the words you're going to encounter. You can get away with maybe a few words to get the gist of something, but to understand it you've got to have 70 to 80% of the vocabulary understood. The students won't be able to understand it if the teachers don't understand it. It was a hard lesson for us to learn. You are cooperating in what ought to be somebody else's job, but we are all in this together in a real practical sense. The kid had to come out of ninth grade, had to come with enough math knowledge -- whatever that was -- to encounter algebra. And it's not that easy.

We were a school within a school. We had a program of study that included a regular English and math class, and later science. If a student was able to go beyond that, he could find a place in the larger school setting. We took advantage of the larger institution, things that we could get from the larger institution we utilized. We kept some kind of a close alliance there. We did not think to cocoon the kids, or isolate them.

In our case at Edison, the principal, Al Glassman, was very good and believed in what we were doing. He was very good at interacting with the people who could make things happen. He was an "enabler", which is a very good role for a principal. He was a very good enabler, and when you have somebody like that, you're in good shape. He saw it as something he should support, and not just something he should let happen.

Disciplining was positive. We didn't count up the misdeeds. It was, "You can do better." That would be how we would handle it all the time. It demonstrated to the kids we cared about them.

The guy who would become the coordinator of the Academy, John Thompson, would have a lot to do with that: finding the right fix for a particular kid. He would deal with discipline a good bit, and he also dealt with outside issues. You need somebody -- or as many people as you can get -- who would be thinkers. In our case, I believe my function was to be kind of the "idea man." John would be the "implementer." He was very good at that.

I've seen many changes, and most of them are not for the better. You can't come back and do the same thing you did the year before. Some people think that's okay. I don't.

You know I was an English teacher. I taught literature. If you want to teach Macbeth, you have to read Macbeth. No matter what novel it was, whether it was Great Expectations or what have you, I would always reread everything because I couldn't remember it all. But it was a blessing to have a bad memory, because I would always have to reread everything.

In working with the teachers, and keeping them involved, I would remind them, "You can't do everything, but you can do something." The problem of burnout is based on failed expectations. The