

# CITY OF PHILADELPHIA PENNSYLVANIA

## OFFICE OF THE CONTROLLER

*Promoting honest, efficient, and fully accountable government*

### **Review of Vacant School District Facilities**

Neighborhood Nuisances & Hazards

DECEMBER 2011



City Controller  
**ALAN BUTKOVITZ**



# CITY OF PHILADELPHIA

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ALAN BUTKOVITZ  
City Controller

December 6, 2011

Dr. Leroy Nunery, II  
Acting Superintendent  
Philadelphia School District  
440 N. Broad Street  
Philadelphia, PA 19130

Fran Burns, Commissioner  
Department of Licenses & Inspections  
Municipal Services Building, 11<sup>th</sup> Floor  
1401 John F. Kennedy Blvd.  
Philadelphia, PA 19102

Dear Dr. Nunery and Commissioner Burns:

The Office of the City Controller has conducted a special review of the conditions of vacant school buildings owned by the Philadelphia School District. This report was conducted as part of our ongoing review of the School District's capital assets as pursuant to Section 12-100 (c) of the Philadelphia Home Rule Charter.

The objective of this review was to determine whether the District's school facilities, in this case its vacant buildings, are being maintained in a satisfactory manner and to ensure that the facilities are not creating public safety hazards. It's also an opportunity to provide findings that may need immediate attention by the Licenses & Inspections Department.

We believe that our recommendations, if implemented by Management, would improve the financial position of the School District and safeguard our neighborhoods from a potential hazard.

Please call Harvey Rice at (215) 686-6696 if you have any questions.

Very truly yours,

A handwritten signature in dark ink, appearing to read "Alan Butkovitz", with a stylized flourish at the end.

Alan Butkovitz

cc: Members of the School Reform Commission  
Honorable Michael A. Nutter, Mayor  
Members of City Council



## Review of Vacant School District Facilities

### EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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#### Why the Controller's Office Conducted the Review

On August 3, 2011, a four-alarm fire erupted at the old Edison High School in North Philadelphia, putting surrounding neighbors and many firefighters' lives at risk. In the three years prior to the massive fire, City Controller Alan Butkovitz made numerous recommendations to the City and School District for the building to be permanently sealed and demolished.

This report was conducted as part of our ongoing review of the School District's capital assets as pursuant to Section 12-100 (c) of the Philadelphia Home Rule Charter. The objective of this review was to determine whether the District's vacant school facilities are being maintained in a satisfactory manner and to ensure that the facilities are not creating public safety hazards.



*The former Edison High School engulfed in flames on August 3, 2011 -- three years after Controller Butkovitz warned about the potential fire hazard.*

#### What the Controller's Office Found

Through on-site facility observations and by reviewing past inspection documents for eight vacant School District-owned facilities, some of the findings uncovered by the City Controller's staff included the following:

- Three facilities' structures are in very poor condition; exposed rebar, broken and falling cement and large cracks along brick walls. One of these schools needs to be demolished immediately.
- Drug havens and extremely unsanitary conditions at two schools:
  - clear signs of heavy drug activity - used syringes, needle caps, and tiny Ziploc plastic bags were littered in areas around the old schools
  - used condoms and human waste, as well as piles of garbage filling stairwells and storm water areas, mainly consisting of empty alcohol containers
- Three schools have become locations for crime since becoming vacant with charges including robbery, weapons, theft, drug possession and assault.

#### What the Controller's Office Recommends

The City Controller's Office has developed a number of recommendations to address the significant findings that are outlined above. The recommendations can be found at the conclusion of the report.



## BACKGROUND

On August 3, 2011, a four-alarm fire erupted at the old Edison High School in North Philadelphia, putting surrounding neighbors and many firefighters' lives at risk. The hazardous, dilapidated building was vacant for almost a decade and had become home to vandals, drugs, and scrap looters. The School District sold the building to private developers about a month before the fire.

However, almost three years prior to the fire, the Office of the City Controller conducted an on-site inspection of the property and found that the abandoned school's open windows and access points provided easy access for this illegal activity and that it was welcoming young children who lived around the school to play within the unsound structure. All of which created a serious public safety issue for surrounding residents.

It was at this time that City Controller Alan Butkovitz demanded that the City and the Philadelphia School District take actions to permanently seal the facility with the recommendation that it be completely demolished. During an interview with NBC 10 in December 2008, Controller Butkovitz was quoted as follows:



*The broken window shown above was found by the Controller's staff during the initial inspection more than three years ago. This was one location where trespassers could access the school.*



*After the Controller's initial inspection of Edison High School, the School District sealed the windows to prevent entry. While this was a temporary fix, it never moved forward with demolishing the building*

*"Eight year old kids routinely get in through openings in the building and they play games up on the roof. You have a gigantic parcel of property that could turn into a fire. It should be demolished by now."*

*– City Controller Alan Butkovitz*

While the Controller's initial call to action resulted in the School District temporarily securing any openings to prevent access, plans to demolish the building were never executed. Surrounding residents became victims to the dangers that the school imposed to their families and children over the last decade. Unfortunately, these same residents were then put at even more risk when flames and ash from the four-alarm fire started landing on roofs and their families had to be evacuated.

This spurred the Controller's Office to review other vacant facilities within the City of Philadelphia that are owned by the School District and that could be potential hazards waiting to happen.

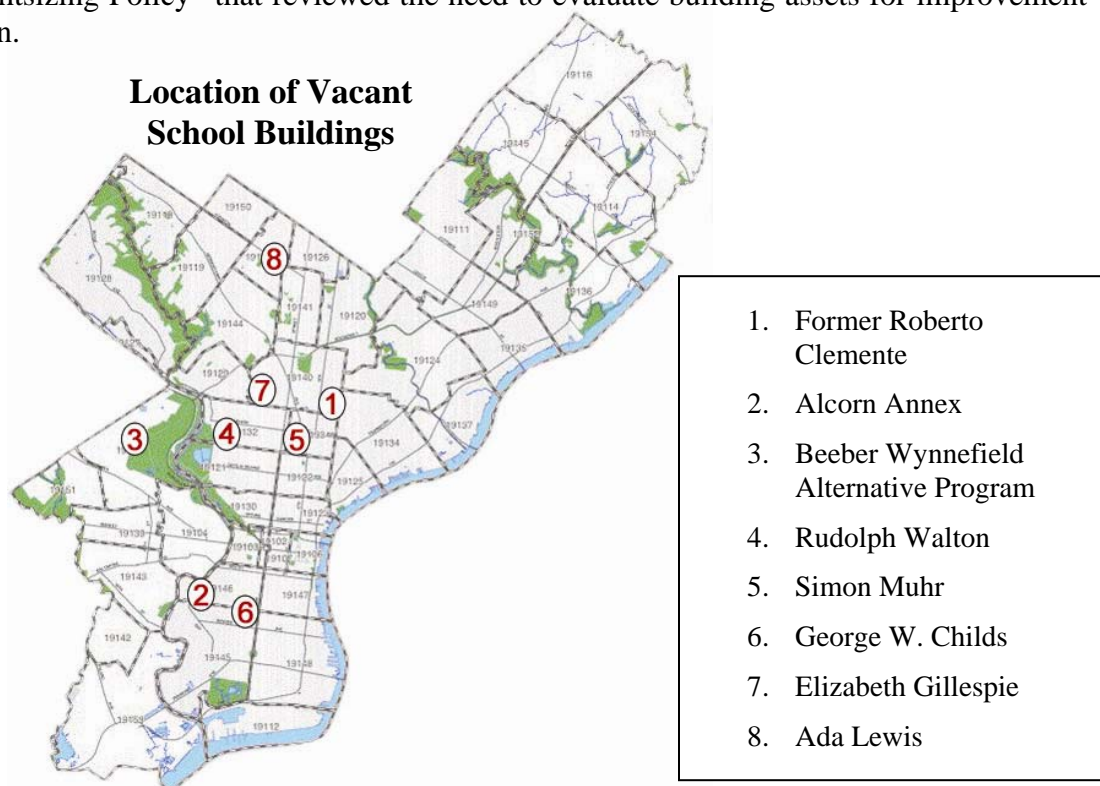
## OBJECTIVES SCOPE AND METHODOLOGY

The City Controller's Office contacted the Philadelphia School District and obtained a list containing eight vacant schools currently owned by the School District. The Controller's Office then created a team consisting of two investigators, a technical specialist and a licensed civil engineer to inspect the eight vacant facilities. The eight vacant schools, their addresses and dates when the facilities became vacant include the following:

Name of School	Address	Closing Date
Former Roberto Clemente	3921 N. 5 <sup>th</sup> Street – 19140	1998
Alcorn Annex	33 <sup>rd</sup> and Reed Street – 19146	2009
Beeber Wynnefield Alternative Program	53 <sup>rd</sup> Street and Euclid Street - 19131	2001
Rudolph Walton	2601 N. 28 <sup>th</sup> Street – 19132	2003
Simon Muhr	12 <sup>th</sup> & Allegheny Ave – 19133	2008
George W. Childs	1541 S. 17 <sup>th</sup> Street – 19146	2010
Elizabeth Gillespie	1801 West Pike Street – 19140	2009
Ada Lewis	6199 Ardleigh St.- 19138	2008

The on-site inspections consisted of visually inspecting exterior building structures and surrounding areas, such as playgrounds and parking lots, in all areas that could be accessed by the Controller's staff. All visual observations were photographed and video taped to provide digital documentation of any and all findings.

In addition to performing on-site investigations, the Controller's staff conducted interviews of neighborhood residents and researched city documents, reports, and additional records pertaining to the schools, which included the School Reform Commission's Policy #713, "Proposed Revised Rightsizing Policy" that reviewed the need to evaluate building assets for improvement or demolition.



## SUMMARY OF FINDINGS BY CONDITIONS CATEGORY:

The general conditions observed by the Controller's Staff indicated that these vacant properties are unsafe, a haven for illegal activity and a public nuisance. Conducting on-site inspections of the eight vacant schools and researching documents and records resulted in the Controller's Office to summarize the following findings:

**Exterior Building Structure** – Two of the buildings were structurally unsound, one of which needs to be demolished immediately to avoid any further risk to the public. There were large pieces of cement found on the sidewalk around one school, due to sections of the building falling from at least four stories above.

Doors and windows were broken and/or missing. There was exposed rebar and large cracks in the walls that were visible.

### **Surrounding Property Conditions:**

#### Signs of Illegal Activity and Unsanitary Conditions

Areas around the schools, both hidden and easily visible, contained signs of drug activity, as there were used syringes, needle caps and tiny Ziplock plastic bags. These areas also contained used condoms, human waste, piles of garbage and were littered with empty alcohol containers.

#### Additional Amenities

There were missing and clogged drains leading to pools of water, perimeter fencing was destroyed allowing for easy access, and parking areas contained broken and patched cement, which can create dangerous conditions for children who still use the old playgrounds.

**Interior Observations** – While the Controller's staff only conducted inspections and observations from outside the walls of the vacant schools, two of the facilities were observed to have the lights on in various hallways and rooms and there were operating window-unit air conditioners.

**Research & Records** – Three schools have become locations for crime since becoming vacant with charges including robbery, weapons, theft, drug possession and assault.



*This syringe was found along with numerous needle caps in an open area next to what was once an entrance to the Simon Muhr school.*



*Missing windows and broken concrete, which has fallen to the ground, has weakened the overall structure of the former Roberto Clemente Middle School. It should be demolished immediately.*



## SUMMARY OF FINDINGS BY VACANT SCHOOL

### Former Roberto Clemente

3921 N. 5<sup>th</sup> Street – 19140

Vacant Since 1998



#### Exterior Building Structure:

Most of the windows were broken and/or missing from the second floor up to the top floor. Bricks had fallen from the building and rebar was exposed in many locations. This building is structurally not safe and should be razed.

There was a large crack along the bricks at the corner of Rising Sun Avenue and Luzerne Street.

A steady stream of water was dripping from the top of the building down to the sidewalk, which could indicate that the building's roof is in poor condition.

#### Surrounding Property Conditions:

A section of the seven-foot chain link fence that surrounded the perimeter was removed allowing easy access. The fence also prevents pedestrians from walking along the building because it doesn't allow enough space on the sidewalk for passage.

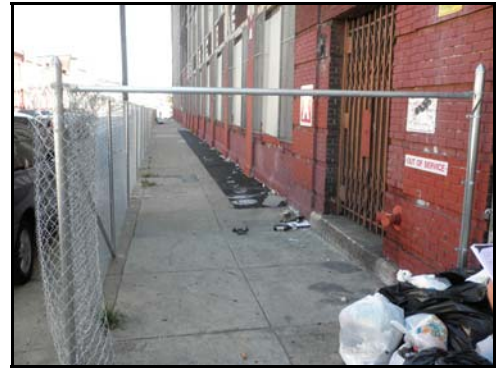
There was another broken fence located directly next to the school building and it appeared to be an access point to enter the school.

#### Interior Observations:

Interior objects, such as lighting and other metals, appeared to be stripped from the building.

#### Research, Records, & Other:

Police records indicate at this address in 2006 there was a domestic abuse, simple assault and a city ordinance offense. In 2007, there was a reported theft of over \$200 from the building.



*This open fence allows anyone to enter the area next to the building where pieces of cement have fallen from the eroding school. The fence also prohibits suitable access to walk down the sidewalk*



*A large block of cement that has fallen from the school onto the sidewalk below sits next to empty beer bottles*

**Alcorn Annex**  
*33<sup>rd</sup> and Reed Street – 19146*

Vacant Since 2009



**Exterior Building Structure:**

There is exposed rebar along the entire school, which indicates that the building is not structurally sound. On the northeast corner there is broken rebar sticking out of the wall.

There are bricks missing from the top of the north face of the school.

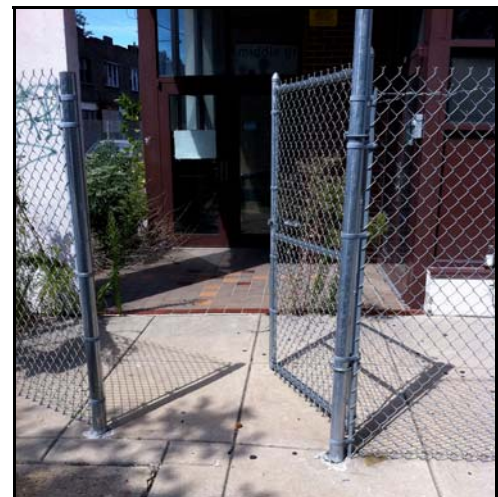
**Surrounding Property Conditions:**

The fence surrounding the perimeter of the property is not secure and can be easily accessed. The fence also takes away the required walking path from the sidewalk to comply with ADA standards.

There are pieces of cement that have fallen from the building located between the fence and the building. There also was trash dumped in this area.



*Exposed rebar and broken cement can be found around the entire building*



*An open fence allows easy access to the area directly around the school building. The fence also prohibits a suitable amount of space to get around the sidewalk*



## Beeber Wynnefield Alternative Program

53<sup>rd</sup> Street and Euclid Street – 19131

Vacant Since 2001



### Exterior Building Structure:

There is a brick missing from the northern wall, which can cause surrounding bricks to become weak if it is not repaired.

On the southern wall there is a crack that goes along several bricks, which can result in surrounding bricks to eventually fall to the ground.

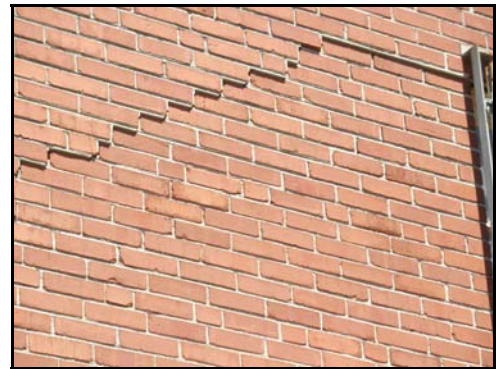
On the lower roof on the northern side there is standing water at a low point that does not have a drain (about 15' diameter) and will cause deterioration to the parking area if left unattended.



*Trash found in an open stairwell that contained covers where the copper wiring has been stripped*

### Surrounding Property Conditions:

A stairwell attached to the school was full of trash, which included the remains of empty wire covers that once contained copper wiring. If not properly monitored or secured, vacant schools become grounds for people to strip copper wiring as well as other metals and materials to sell to scrap yards.



*A large crack along the southern wall that spanned over several bricks*

### Research, Records, & Other:

Police records indicate at this address the following incidents were reported: vandalism/criminal mischief \$5,000 and over and possession of weapons charge in 2006; terrorist threats in 2007; and possession of synthetic manufactured narcotics in 2008.



**Exterior Building Structure:**

There were no issues with the structure of the building but the outside walls are covered in graffiti, which creates an eyesore for the entire neighborhood.

**Surrounding Property Conditions:**

In an area that can be easily accessed, there were signs of heavy drug activity, which included tiny plastic bags throughout the area. There were also numerous used condoms and condom wrappers scattered around the area as well human waste and empty alcohol containers.

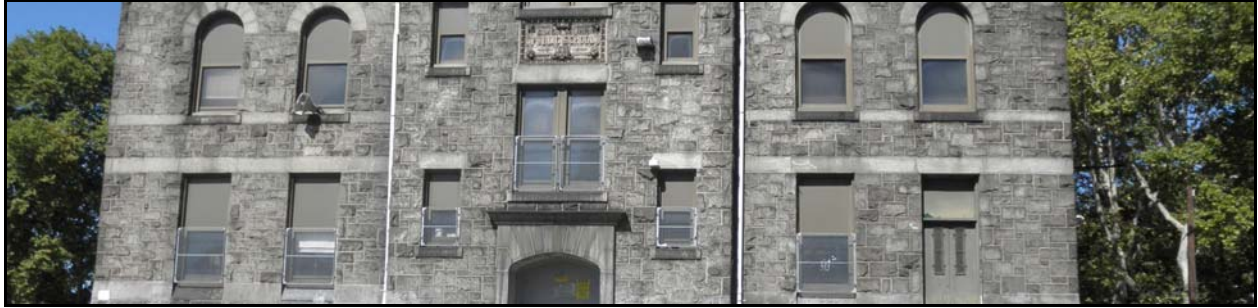
Interviews with surrounding neighbors said that illegal activity, such as drug usage, can be seen on this property on any given night, and that the area is not patrolled by police.



*Numerous used condoms were found in an area directly next to the school building*



*A view of graffiti that covers the exterior walls of the school*

**Exterior Building Structure:**

The exterior structure of the school appears to be in good condition and the windows and doors are secured. Although, there was a metal door on the side of the building that looked like someone had tried to access because a section of it was pulled back from the door frame.

**Surrounding Property Conditions:**

In an area that can be easily accessed and visible to nearby residents, there were syringes, tiny plastic bags, numerous needle caps and used condoms.

Less than 10 feet away from the location where illegal activity appears to be occurring, there were vehicles parked in the open lot. The sidewalk surrounding the school was in poor condition and could result in a tripping hazard.

There are piles of trash in open stairwells and in other corners of the school.

**Research, Records, & Other:**

Police records indicate at this address the following incidents were reported: theft, under \$50.00 in 2009 and a robbery, without the use of a weapon, on the street surrounding the school in 2010.

According to the postman that the Controller's staff interviewed, the school has been abandoned about a year and there was a break in three weeks ago. The postman also stated that school officials take stuff out of the school about six times a year.



*This syringe was found along with numerous needle caps in an open area*



*Vehicles parked in the open lot directly next to the school building*





**Exterior Building Structure:**

There is cracked brick around the windows on the west side.

**Surrounding Property Conditions:**

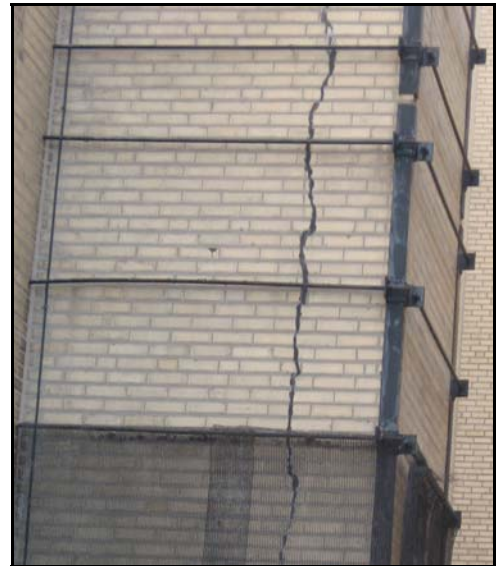
There were three tripping hazards - roughly 4-inch diameter holes in the pavement and in a manhole lid.

The North West sidewalk was in bad shape and would cause a tripping hazard.

There was a fence around the basketball court, but part of the fence had been removed.

**Interior Observations:**

Lights can be seen in various rooms and hallways. One of the window air conditioning units was operating.



*A large crack in the building's structure that extends almost from the ground to the roof*



*The open drain with the broken cover pictured above is a tripping hazard*



**Exterior Building Structure:**

All first floor doors and windows are sealed.

Many of the higher windows are open about four inches.

When looking into the building from the east side, exposed rebar can be seen inside the third floor window.

Areas below the windows were not maintained

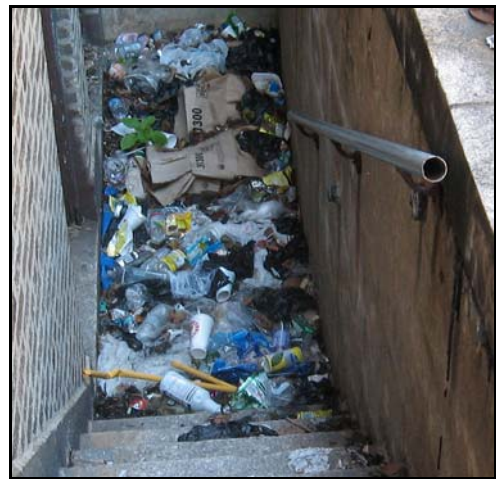


*A pool of standing water was found along the side of the school*

**Surrounding Property Conditions:**

There is a tripping hazard on the sidewalk at a manhole near Pike Street on 17<sup>th</sup> Street.

There is a 20-foot by 20-foot puddle of standing water that has no drain in the walkway between the buildings.



*Trash located in an open stairwell along the building*

**Interior Observations:**

Lights can be seen in various rooms and hallways.

## Ada Lewis

6199 Ardleigh Street - 19138

Vacant Since 2008



### Exterior Building Structure:

There was cracked concrete in several exterior locations of the school building. There was also a fair amount of exposed rebar which can result in the structure to become weak over time if it's not repaired. Many of the windows were broken but they were boarded shut.

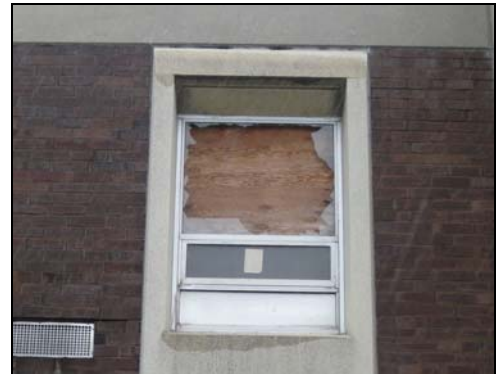
### Surrounding Property Conditions:

There was a ladder that could have been used to access a nearby open window as well as access to the lower roof. It appeared that someone had set a fire because ash remains were observed on the path behind the school.

Investigators also observed a man sitting on a couch in a covered location along the building and he was reading a book. There were signs that he, or someone else, might inhabit this location.

### Interior Observations:

Many of the lights were on inside the building.



*A broken window that had to be boarded to prevent access to the building.*



*An area behind the school where there are signs that a fire was started.*



## MOVING FORWARD

Most of the School District's vacant buildings contain conditions that, if left untouched and not maintained, will become increasingly worse over time. The former Thomas Edison building sat vacant for a decade and decayed due to disrepair and neglect, until it ultimately erupted into a four-alarm fire.

Of the two closed schools that the Controller's staff considered to have acceptable exterior structures, these buildings have become home to illicit activities and have created public safety hazards for surrounding neighbors. The longer that these buildings remain host to these activities the greater the risk that a serious incident will occur.

Three years prior to the fire at the former Thomas Edison school building, the Controller recommended that the School District coordinate efforts with the City and demolish the school. For this report, as a means to ensure public safety, the Controller recommends that all school buildings determined to be imminently dangerous should be demolished immediately. Demolition for buildings that would have a greater chance of being sold to a developer should also be considered.

The Controller's Office obtained demolition cost estimates from the City's Department of Licenses and Inspections which includes the following:

<b>School</b>	<b>Sq. Ft.</b>	<b>Demo Cost</b>
Beeber Wynnefield	22,857	\$200,000
Rudolph Walton	66,183	\$600,000
Simon Muhr	33,673	\$275,000
Elizabeth Gillespie	110,204	\$925,000
Fmr. Roberto Clemente	287,350	\$800,000
Alcorn Annex	12,000	\$225,000
George W. Childs	78,163	\$225,000
Ada Lewis	270,000	\$1,890,000
<b>Total</b>		<b>\$5,140,000</b>

While the estimated \$5.1 million in demolition costs would cover the School District's current vacant buildings, the School District has recommended closing another nine facilities with closings to start at the end of the 2011-12 school year, as stated in the District's Master Facilities Plan that was released November 2, 2011. This measure, if adopted by the School Reform Commission, would create additional vacant buildings under the ownership of the School District and more responsibility for oversight by the City.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

The Controller's Office has developed a number of recommendations for both the Philadelphia School District and the Department of Licenses & Inspections.

### Philadelphia School District needs to conduct the following:

- Formulate a corrective action plan within 90 days to address the major structural issues that were found during the Controller Office's inspections. This should include implementing plans to demolish all buildings that are structurally unsound.
- Establish a short-term corrective action plan within 30 days for all hazardous findings, such as obstacles that may cause a tripping hazard in sidewalks around the school.
- Repair all broken fencing that allows access beyond the perimeter of the schools as well as any access points that lead directly into the schools.
- Secure the schools to prevent unlawful entry and activity.
- Deploy School District personnel such as school police officers or security guards to prohibit unlawful entry and vandalism.

### Licenses & Inspections needs to conduct the following:

- Inspect the interior and exterior of all structurally unsound buildings to determine potential public hazards that need to be addressed immediately.
- Coordinate efforts with the School District to ensure that all access points are sealed.
- If building is determined to be imminently dangerous then ensure that it is demolished according to city code.