

## A+ Schools

### Statement on Pittsburgh Public Schools Budget Challenges.

Today, A+ Schools is releasing findings from community meetings on the PPS budget held throughout the summer — and asking for the districts cooperation in ensuring that the community's questions are answered and all students are well served as the district moves forward with financial remedies.

In May, PPS Superintendent Dr. Linda Lane shared the most recent financial projections incorporating the announced reductions in state and federal educational support. These projections indicated PPS would have to reduce expenditures by \$92 million over 2011 and 2012 in order to have a balanced budget. To mitigate this, significant cost reductions and avoidances with an estimated savings of approximately \$35 million have already been identified and initiated by the district. The most notable items among these reductions included the elimination of many jobs in the central office, the proposed closing and repurposing of several schools, and cuts to other operational expenditures. As much as it hurts to close schools and eliminate jobs, the district still has much more work ahead to reach financial stability.

Since May, A+ Schools has engaged Pittsburgh families, educators and community members in discussions about budget priorities in the Pittsburgh Public Schools. With community organizers on the ground, we worked with PPS and community partner organizations in June, July and August to host nine meetings at multiple locations throughout the city to dig deeper into these budget challenges. In all, nearly 400 people participated by listening to Dr. Lane's presentations, deliberating in small discussion groups, and voicing their opinion on priorities through polling, either online or in person.

In those meetings, the district identified the under-enrolled classes in our high schools as a major cost driver. According to PPS, the elimination of these smaller classes and the consolidation of certain courses and programs could save over \$30 million annually. Overall, community polling indicated an understanding of the budget challenges PPS faces. In general, people also understood that under-enrolled classes are contributing to high costs, but they expressed great uncertainty and resistance to reducing courses or programs without more detailed information about specific costs, course offerings, enrollment and effectiveness. Decisions to ensure equitable access to challenging courses are at the heart of how the racial achievement gap is closed and where we, as A+ Schools, plan to remain focused.

Based on this feedback from the community, A+ Schools will do the following as the budget process moves forward:

1. **Provide the public and district with an independent view of the financial situation and the spending reduction process.**

We have commissioned Bill Johns to conduct an independent financial analysis that examines the district's overall budget goals, spending projections, cost reduction options and strategies for making budget-related decisions. Mr. John's analysis will also compare Pittsburgh Public Schools to similar districts. Dr. Lane and her team have graciously collaborated with A+ Schools and have been committed to working with us to engage the public in this ongoing budget conversation. The financial analysis is expected to be available in October.

[Mr. Johns is a former senior vice president-finance of PNC Financial Services who brings private sector expertise as well as an intimate knowledge of PPS finances. He retired in 2005 after 31 years with PNC and served as interim CFO of Pittsburgh Public Schools in 2006/07.]

2. **Advocate that decisions related to course offerings are made with a commitment to equity.**

We want to ensure that, despite significant cutbacks, ALL students will have access to the courses that best prepare them for college or career training after high school. **This was the number one concern of the poll participants.** That is why we ask PPS to make it a priority to involve the community in the decision making process by providing information about specific courses/programs identified for elimination or consolidation, including their effectiveness, enrollment statistics and associated costs. In order to be informed participants in that process, we also urge PPS to provide answers to the questions posed by the community throughout the summer.

3. **Advocate for the creation of teams at schools experiencing changes to help students during the transition.**

Given the great losses incurred with school closings, we recognize that no superintendent or school board makes these decisions lightly. When schools close, students are uprooted and forced to move to new environments with new teachers and new friends. Struggling neighborhoods are left with large vacant structures. When courses or programs are eliminated in schools, students and families are forced make new choices and adapt.

To ease their transition, A+ Schools asks for the district's support and cooperation in building teams at each school experiencing changes immediately after the school board vote. These teams should continue working through the first year in a new school. Teams should include students, families, teachers, administrators and community organizations from both the old and new school to work through and address such challenges as transportation, school and family expectations, safety, and extracurricular activities. In schools experiencing a reduction in programs or courses, these teams can help work through recruitment, scheduling and communication challenges that arise.

A+ Schools is committed to engaging families, students, and the community in helping to shape the direction of the district as budget decisions are made. We plan to see this process through to completion to ensure that student needs are met. We appreciate the cooperation of the Superintendent Dr. Lane and her staff and look forward to continuing this productive dialogue. A complete report from the summer budget meetings can be found by visiting ([LINK TO REPORT ON WEBSITE](#))