

# Students engaged in Leadership



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## Untapped Potential: What's to blame for the achievement gap?

Shakir Wellons-Senior Writer  
Oliver High School

The online encyclopedia Wikipedia defines the achievement gap as the "observed disparity on a number of educational measures between the performance of groups of students, especially groups defined by gender, race/ethnicity, ability, and socioeconomic status." The achievement gap between urban and suburban school districts, as well as black and white students, has existed for many years. A+ Schools' 2009 Report to the Community identifies the achievement gap between black and white students in PPS high schools in reading as 39.6%. In math, the gap is 38.8%. Across the district, the gap between black and white students is 30.5% in reading and 27.3% in math. Many people wonder why such a gap exists. Some argue that the gap is linked to cultural and structural issues; others blame a lack of motivation in under-performing students.

After interviewing several Pittsburgh Public High School students, I have concluded that the lack of rigor in classroom curriculum is partly to blame for this gap. The majority of students I interviewed testified that their school curriculum does not challenge them enough. Consequently, the students are not being pushed and lose interest. Several students enrolled in the more advanced class tracks, such as the Pittsburgh Scholar Program (PSP), also reported feeling unchallenged. And I can see why after comparing several corresponding assignments from PSP and mainstream courses--the assignments were virtually identical. Students are asked to challenge themselves but are not pushed to their full potential. They are being robbed of their right to learn. While the name Pittsburgh Scholars Program implies that it is considerably more rigorous than the mainstream track, when you compare the two you realize it is merely a title. Furthermore, studies have shown that by de-tracking schools, all students are more likely to have equally qualified teachers, expectations, curriculum, and resources, which can lead to closing the achievement gap.

It is critical that schools along with parents work to produce strong study habits in students if we are to eradicate the achievement gap. These habits will in large part determine how successful students will be in school and beyond.

Schools that don't assign homework to their students help to create and reinforce bad study habits and thus the achievement gap. For example, three of the students that I interviewed claimed that they had not received homework in any of their classes in the past two weeks. One student stated, "I don't think I have ever had homework this year." Assigning homework indicates that schools have high expectations for student learning. If urban school students are going to succeed, then the expectations for their academic achievement must be set higher.

It is my opinion that to close the achievement gap, Pittsburgh Public School students will need to develop strong study habits, schools will need to reinforce these habits by assigning homework, and above all the current curriculum will need to be replaced with a new and more rigorous one designed to push every child. As it stands, there are thousands of Pittsburgh Public School students whose potential has yet to be unlocked to produce the great leaders that lay dormant within each of them.

If you have a student group that you believe would benefit from a presentation on the achievement gap, please e-mail SEL at [engagedstudentleaders@gmail.com](mailto:engagedstudentleaders@gmail.com). Our SEL presentation team would love the opportunity to present before your group! Please post comments on SEL's Facebook page!

## SEL helps to Lead A+ Schools' School Works Community Action Initiative

*Kehinde Oladapo-Managing Editor*

In the fall of 2009, A+ Schools launched another signature initiative designed to address equity in Pittsburgh Public Schools. The initiative called School Works (SW) is modeled after the successful Ready Schools project conducted by DC Voice in Washington DC. The premise behind School Works is that when students have access to quality teachers, resources and supports, school works for any student -- regardless of background or circumstance.

A+ Schools recruited over one hundred volunteers and trained and dispatched eighty of them into Pittsburgh middle schools, high schools, and charter schools. Volunteers interviewed twenty-one PPS principals and two charter school principals. The survey, which consisted of sixty-one yes/no or short answer questions, aimed to assist in the public's understanding of what resources and opportunities exist for students in Pittsburgh Public Schools in areas such as staffing, learning tools, student courses, student transition support, and parent and caregiver involvement.



A+ Schools began releasing its findings in the first of three community meetings held on Saturday, January 23rd, in the East End at Crossroads Church. More than 75 concerned residents, parents, teachers, elected officials and our very own student leaders of SEL gathered to hear the SW survey results around the topic of teaching. Participants learned what supports principals would like to offer to teachers and students and what they think are the barriers to providing quality teaching to every student.

To supplement SW data on teaching, A+ Schools also released its data from a 16-month study called Tools, Rules and Schools, which looks at the distribution and migration patterns of teachers and what staffing rules and working conditions influence these patterns. The result of the Tools, Rules and Schools study was an endorsement of specific measures of the district's Empowering Effective Teachers Plan, which all participants were asked to endorse at the conclusion of the community meeting. And you are, too! Please go to [www.aplsschools.org](http://www.aplsschools.org) for more information and to sign the Community Agenda for Effective Teaching.

Student leaders of Students Engaged in Leadership (SEL) greatly impacted the SW community meeting. Student leaders have been engaged in leadership training in the form of public speaking, facilitation and communication for the past six months and were called upon to use their new-found skills in the second SW community meeting on Thursday, March 11th, at Langley which focused on school courses and tools. The communication team worked feverishly with our CORO and MGR partners and trainers, Michael Sider-Rose and Amy Garbark, to put together a media strategy to turn out students for this meeting.

Students decided to use a multi-pronged approach, unleashing text messages, as well as print and audio campaigns. Leading up the community meeting, students sent texts to all their friends, created spots on their Facebook pages, and wrote and delivered announcements at each of their respective schools. Those on the facilitation team prepared to lead SW discussion tables, sitting in on trainings with adult volunteers on how to be an effective facilitator. Members of the presentation team provided spoke about how the data presented that night impacts their lives.

**A+ Schools**  
Pittsburgh Community Alliance for Public Education

**MGR**  
Foundation  
[www.mgrf.org](http://www.mgrf.org)  
a non-profit providing direct  
service to the community

**CORO**



Community participants were so impressed with our students that 47% of them reported on our feedback survey that their contributions were the most valuable part of the SW community meeting. Needless to say, SEL students rocked the house!

SEL student leaders are preparing to continue to lead A+ Schools' School Works action initiative at our last community meeting, scheduled for Thursday, April, 29th. The meeting will be held on the North Side at Calvary United Methodist Church (954 Beech Ave, Pittsburgh PA 15233). Please join us as our student leaders raise their voices, sharpen their skills and join other members of the community to improve PPS schools. To learn more or to register please visit [www.aplusschools.org](http://www.aplusschools.org).

## Two School Board Members Offer Answers and Inspiration

Jaela Wesley-Senior Writer  
Pittsburgh Obama 6-12

Since the last newsletter was published, Students Engaged in Leadership has continued to get to know the system and to build relationships with decision makers in order to effectively advocate for change in PPS schools. We have conducted several more interviews with key decision makers. Of these interviews, an inspirational and informative one was with school board members Bill Isler and Sharene Shealey. Mr. Isler is the Board's Second Vice President of District 4 and has a long history as a professional educator and advocate for children. Before beginning his career as a school board member, Mr. Isler served as the Commissioner of Basic Education and Senior Program Advisor for Early Childhood Education with the Pennsylvania Department of Education Science and Technology Academy. Mr. Isler represents Shadyside, Squirrel Hill and parts of Oakland and Point Breeze. Ms. Shealey, one of the newest members to join the board, represents District 1. Ms. Shealey is a graduate of Pittsburgh Public Schools and also has a distinguished career in education. She is a successful environmental engineer and former CCAC Chemistry Instructor, as well as a recent graduate of Pittsburgh Leadership Development Initiative. Ms. Shealey represents Homewood, Lincoln, Lemington, East Hills and parts of Larimer, Point Breeze and East Liberty.

Mr. Isler and Ms. Shealey met with me and several other SEL students at one of our regular Monday leadership and advocacy development sessions. Students were broken up into groups; one group interviewed Mr. Isler and the other group interviewed Ms. Shealey. I was with the group that interviewed Mr. Isler. We formally introduced ourselves and the SEL program and promptly got down to business. The students and I were eager to get answers to several questions we had developed, which had to do with school funding, curriculum and whether or not students really had power to change PPS. He answered all of our questions very thoughtfully, but what struck me the most was when he told us that students can influence school policy. He went on to give an example; he told us, "It was students just like you who got the airing of the swearing in ceremony of President Barack Obama into PPS schools." Hearing this, I have to admit I got very excited about the potential impact SEL students can have on PPS.

My excitement grew further when the students and I gathered to hold joint interviews with Mr. Isler and Ms. Shealey. In the joint session, both Mr. Isler and Ms. Shealey restated the power student voices have on shaping school policy. Mr. Isler encouraged SEL students never to think for a minute that the board doesn't listen to students. "Because we do," he said, "and a lot of changes have been brought about because of students like you." Ms. Shealey also encouraged us to keep working to hold our teachers and the school district accountable for our education, stating that we, in fact, have just as much of a responsibility to ensure that we are getting a quality education as our parents and community members.

If you're a student reading this, I hope this encourages you to get involved in helping to improve PPS schools. Remember what Ms. Shealey said -- we are responsible for ensuring that we receive a quality education. Please log on to SEL's Facebook page and share your stories of what you would like to see changed at your school or how you are working to change something about your school that you don't like. We want to hear from you, so don't be shy!



**"It was students just like you who got the airing of the swearing in of President Barack Obama into PPS classrooms." --School Board Vice President Bill Isler**

## School Safety: A right, not a privilege

Eric Buzard-Senior Writer-Op-ed  
Allerdice High School

*Sharing my personal story in the hope of improving school safety*

The school district reports numerous school fights each year. Unfortunately, I was included in last year's count, but not of my own doing. On March 4th, 2009, I was jumped by three kids that I had never met before, down the block from school at the Port Authority bus stop. I didn't know who they were because they wore ski masks.

Some of you might say that, because it wasn't on school grounds, this incident is a public safety issue rather than a school safety issue. But you would be wrong. According to school district policy, schools are responsible for their students from the time students leave school up until the time they walk into their homes.

I am writing this article because I think the way my school handled my situation perpetuates a climate where students feel unsafe. For example, although I did not know who the attackers were, many of my friends did; one friend even wrote their names on a piece of paper that I subsequently turned in to school officials. Those students were called down to the office, but nothing happened. School administrators said they couldn't do anything because there wasn't enough proof, even though there were over thirty people who said they heard the students talking and joking about it while in class. It seems like students can commit acts of violence and nothing happens to them, even when dozens of people can identify the persons who committed the act. How can students feel safe if incidents like mine go unpunished?

Incidents like mine are not unique to my school. They also take place in the schools of other SEL student leaders. In fact, in a recent SEL session, student leaders talked about the subject of school safety at length, and school safety proved to be one of the greatest issues of concern for the group. Student leaders mentioned how fights would break out and five minutes would pass before any adult would break them up. We also talked about how the suspension policy was ineffective in preventing these fights and how it seemed unfair to suspend one student but not the other. In light of this, I think it's safe to say that disciplinary actions--not to mention efforts to prevent violence--are sometimes lax in our city's schools. This leads me ask: what will it take to improve safety within our schools?

I think schools need to rethink their disciplinary policies and follow through on them. For example, Allerdice has taken a big step forward in prevention, not only in curtailing school violence such as fights, but also in the areas of drug and alcohol abuse. I had the opportunity to sit down with the assistant principal of Allerdice, Mr. Bailey, to discuss these new measures aimed at addressing school violence. In simple terms, this new measure allows students who have issues, whether they be with drugs or another substance or conflict with another student, to go up to any faculty member and share their issues confidentially. Instead of automatically being suspended or sent to a correctional institution, these students are referred to the plentiful counselors and social workers in the community. More problems have been avoided this year than any other year because of this new measure.

I am grateful for these measures and would ask other schools to rethink their policies -- to work to ensure that school safety is a right and not a privilege.



# Did You Know?

- To qualify for the Pittsburgh Promise Scholarship in 2009, students needed a grade point average (GPA) of 2.25 or higher in addition to other requirements. In six out of ten high schools, over 60% of the graduating class was eligible for the Promise by GPA. However, for black students, that percentage held true for only two out of ten high schools. (Statistic taken from A+ Schools 2009 Annual Report to the Community, page 8.)
- The District's most vulnerable schools have the highest teacher turnover rate. A+ Schools', Tools, Rules and Schools report defines most vulnerable as those schools with the highest percentage of low-income students, higher number of disciplinary incidents and lower student achievement.
- When asked if every student in the building had access to advanced level courses, 18 of PPS principals interviewed said yes, 2 said no and 1 didn't provide an answer. (School Works data findings on school courses and tools)
- You're invited to attend A+ Schools' School Works community meeting! Come out on April 29th at 5:30 p.m. to hear our findings on school supports and services. SEL student leaders will be in various leadership roles throughout the meeting and would love it if you came out and joined them and other concerned community residents working to improve PPS! To learn

more or to register please log onto [www.aplusschools.org](http://www.aplusschools.org) today!

*Students Engaged in Leadership will be concluding its program year in May with an end-of-year program celebration where students will recap the year and share their vision for continued student engagement. We hope to see parents, students, board members and hopefully you there! If you want more information or would like to be added to the list of invited guests, please e-mail us at: [engagedstudentleaders@gmail.com](mailto:engagedstudentleaders@gmail.com).*



**The Spotlight** recognizes the talents, accomplishments and service of one of our own. Each student is nominated and voted on by fellow SEL student leaders based on character and commitment shown to the group and its goals to improve PPS.

This editions' spotlight student is City Charter High School 10grader **Jevon Hankins**:

### Activities:

- Member of the SEL 's facilitation and communications team
- Youth member of T.A.S.K (Teens Against Senseless Violence)

### Talents:

- Networking
- Public Speaking
- Construction

### Academic Achievements:

- Received most improved student in English and Spanish
- Received an A in web-design software class, Dreamweaver and Photoshop

### Community Service:

I have completed 50 hours of volunteer service since my ninth grade year. Most of my volunteer efforts have been through T.A.S.K, which is a local group working to end senseless acts of violence in the East End section of the city. Some of my volunteer activities with T.A.S.K included a community clean-up and helping to identify and recruit other young people to join the cause.

### Why would you encourage other students to join the effort to improve Pittsburgh Public Schools?

I would encourage other students to join the effort to improve PPS because their future depends upon it; who better to advocate for change than students whose futures are positively or negatively affected by school policy.

-Jevon Hankins



### SEL Class Of 2009-2010

Eric Buzard-Allderdice High School, Janell Colbert-Westinghouse High School, Kira Fields-Brasher High School, Darnell Great-Carrick High School, Jevon Hankins-City Charter High School, Hailey Javier-CAPA High School, Hannah Javier-CAPA High School, Donte Jones-Oliver High School, Marisa Jones-Langley High School, Hasaun Leonard-Carrick High School, Jocelyn McLaughlin-City Charter High School, Julian Payne-City Charter High School, Joel Phifer-Career Connections Charter High School, Guadalupe Soloaga-Allderdice High School, Tequill Taylor-Peabody High School, Tia Torres-Peabody High School, Nisa Washington-CAPA High School, Shakir Wellons-Oliver High School, Jaela Westey-Pittsburgh Obama 6-12, Twain Winston-Northside Urban Pathways Charter School, Lamont Wright-Schenely High School, Isaiah Williamson-Perry High School

### SEL Staff

Khalif Ali-CORO, Trainer, Amy Garbark-MGR, Trainer, Dale Harris-MGR, Trainer, Mayada Mansour-A+ Schools, Program Director, Michael Sider-Rose-CORO, Trainer, Kehinde Oladapo-A+Schools/Public Allies, Program Coordinator

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