



SCHOOL WORKS
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Contact: Carey Harris, A+ Schools
(412) 697-1298
charris@aplusschools.org

A+ Schools Expands School Works Initiative to Connect with City Teachers
150 Volunteers Needed to Conduct Confidential Teacher Interviews

PITTSBURGH, PA – Aug. 23, 2011 – A+ Schools, Pittsburgh’s community alliance for public education, today announced it is expanding its School Works initiative to include confidential interviews with middle and high school teachers throughout the district. At least 150 volunteers will be involved in conducting the interviews.

Carey Harris, A+ School’s executive director, said volunteers will meet with more than 100 teachers — approximately 10 percent of the teachers from the district’s 21 high school and middle schools, and three charter schools. “Our goal is to interview a representative number of teachers from all public schools,” Harris said. “We want them to tell our School Works volunteers what they need to ensure student success, particularly given the emerging challenges in our public schools.”

Launched in 2009, School Works is a community action research program that mobilizes trained volunteers to interview school staff to collect data on the inner workings of city schools. During the first year, volunteers talked to the district’s middle and high school principals. Last year, the program was expanded to include interviews with principals and guidance counselors. School Works is modeled after the successful Ready Schools Project conducted by D.C. Voice in Washington, D.C.

“Teaching is at the heart of what makes schools work. By talking with teachers, our volunteers and our community will gain a better understanding of the work they do and the challenges they face,” Harris said. “We know with great teaching — school works. And, we want to make sure that school works for all Pittsburgh students.”

This year’s challenge is to get the word out to teachers about the importance of signing up for the 30-minute interviews, Harris said. Two to three volunteers will meet privately with each teacher, following a set of questions to ask about implementation of the Empowering Effective Teachers (EET) plan, the use of the RISE teacher evaluation rubric, availability of rigorous courses, behavior management and learning environment, and how to engage at-risk students.

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Interviews will be conducted in the district's middle and high schools (including four 6-12 schools) from Oct. 3 through Nov. 4. Teachers at Pittsburgh's three charter high schools (City Charter, Career Connections and Northside Urban Pathways) are also being invited to participate.

Recruitment of volunteers is already underway with training sessions to be held in September. "No experience is necessary, just a desire to make a difference," Harris said.

A+ Schools will release findings from the interviews at community meetings next spring. Over the past two years, A+ Schools has hosted six community meetings — with nearly 400 people participating in analyzing the information, prioritizing needs and forming recommendations. Individual names and schools are always kept confidential.

Data collected during the second year of School Works interviews showed that schools were making progress toward implementing recommendations. The School Works recommendations have included:

- Increasing expectations for all students so they can independently study, take notes and organize their time and work by the time they graduate;
- Establishing clear and fair criteria for student enrollment in advanced level courses for students who have not been identified as gifted;
- Establishing school-wide behavior management system in every school;
- Using suspensions as a last resort; and
- Creating support teams in every school to identify at-risk students and coordinate interventions, such as small group involvement, to keep students engaged.

Pittsburgh City School Superintendent Linda Lane, who commended the initiative, said, "School Works continues to provides us with important insight into the workings of our schools along with valuable community input on expectations and priorities."

Nina Esposito-Visgitis, incoming president of the Pittsburgh Federation of Teachers, said, "We're pleased that teachers are now being interviewed through School Works. They can provide important first-hand knowledge and a candid assessment that will contribute greatly to this initiative."

Teachers who would like to be interviewed, and anyone interested in becoming a School Works volunteer, should contact A+ Schools at 412-697-1298 or via e-mail at info@aplusschools.org.



ABOUT SCHOOL WORKS

School Works is a community action research program involving volunteers who are trained to interview school staff using a survey developed by A+ Schools and its partners. These independent and neutral citizens use confidential interviews to benchmark the workings of city schools and collect data on staffing, training, coursework, support services, resources and learning opportunities for students.

The School Works 2011 is the latest phase of the program. When it was first launched in 2009, the initiative focused on interviews with the district's middle and high school principals. In 2010, it was expanded to include interviews with principals and guidance counselors.

This fall, trained volunteers will meet privately with middle and high school teachers throughout the district to gain a deeper understanding of the extent to which teachers feel empowered to:

- Provide "great" instruction to all students;
- Prepare all students for college and careers; and
- Establish classroom environments conducive to student success.

School Works is modeled after the successful Ready Schools Project conducted by D.C. Voice in Washington, D.C.

OUR GOALS

Goal of A+ Schools: To be a community force advancing the highest educational achievement for every public school student and mobilizing the community to improve public education.

Goal of School Works: To ensure objective oversight and steady support for school improvement initiatives while serving as a non-partisan advocate, resource and catalyst for change. Ultimately, the goal of School Works is to make sure that every Pittsburgh Public School student attends a school that "works."

OUR PLAN:

- Focus community attention on the specific resources and opportunities students need to be ready for post-secondary education and job training.
- Inventory the opportunities for high school and middle school students in Pittsburgh Public Schools through community action research.
- Create a specific, consistent and solution-oriented role for the community in school reform.
- Explore issues of equity and opportunity through public dialogue in a way that does not place blame or point fingers and use data to support recommendations and plans for action.
- Serve as a catalyst for change in promoting equal opportunities for all students in Pittsburgh Public Schools.



School Works Q&A

Q: What is School Works?

A: School Works is a community action research program sponsored by A+ Schools that uses teams of volunteers to interview Pittsburgh's city school staff and collect data on staffing, training, coursework, support services, resources and learning opportunities for students. School Works is modeled after the successful Ready Schools Project conducted by D.C. Voice in Washington, D.C.

Q: Why is School Works necessary?

A: Equity and the achievement gap are central concerns for all who care about Pittsburgh Public Schools' students. School Works allows members of the community to conduct confidential interviews with school staff throughout the school district and learn first-hand about the resources and opportunities that exist — or don't exist — for students.

Q: How does School Works tie into the goals and mission of A+ Schools?

A: Our goal is to be a community force advancing the highest educational achievement for every public school student. Through School Works, we collect reliable data about our schools that can be used to take action. This ties directly to our mission to inform and mobilize the public to hold both the schools and community accountable for providing high quality teaching and learning for all.

Q: Who are the volunteers?

A: Volunteers are independent and neutral citizens who are recruited, trained and sent in teams to interview school staff. A+ Schools invites participation by all citizens who share our commitment to student achievement.

Q: How many volunteers have been involved in School Works?

A: In 2009 — the year School Works was launched — A+ Schools mobilized over 85 volunteers to interview the district's middle and high school principals. In 2010, the program was expanded with 138 volunteers trained to interview principals *and* guidance counselors. This fall, we plan to recruit and train 150 volunteers to interview the district's middle and high school teachers.

Q: What kind of preparation or training is involved?

A: All School Works volunteers must participate in a training session led by A+ Schools. The training session covers volunteer responsibilities, instruction on how to use the survey, and an overview of what the collected data reveals about opportunities and resources for students.

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Q: What are these School Works interviewers supposed to do?

A: During their 30-minute interviews, volunteers follow a checklist of questions, or interview instrument, to collect specific information regarding the learning conditions and opportunities that exist for the students in each school — the things that make them “work.” Volunteers are expected to remain neutral and objective while collecting information as researchers on behalf of A+ Schools. Principal, guidance counselor and volunteer evaluations from the 2009 and 2010 School Works programs indicate a high level of satisfaction with the experience.

Q: What kind of questions do they ask?

A: This year, our volunteers will focus on such issues as the implementation of the initial parts of the Empowering Effective Teachers plan; the use of the RISE rubric as it relates to contributing to improving the quality of teaching; the ways in which all students access rigorous courses that prepare them for college or careers; how behavior is addressed and managed to create safe learning environments for all students; and the ways in which systems operate to engage and support students most likely to disengage.

Q: How were these questions developed?

A: Actually, questions are still being developed. This year’s questions will include many of the questions from last year along with new questions developed to further understand the priorities identified through last year’s research and learn the unique perspective of teachers. A+ Schools staff members are working with researchers, district administrators, and PFT leaders to develop the questions for the 2011 interviews.

Q: When will the recruitment, training and interviews begin?

A: Recruitment of volunteers begins immediately with October interviews already being scheduled with the district’s high school and middle school teachers. Training sessions for School Works volunteers will be held in September.

Q: How often do interviews take place?

A: We conduct School Works interviews once during the school year. This year’s interviews are scheduled for Oct. 3 through Nov. 4.

Q: Who will be interviewed?

A: School Works volunteers will be sent in teams to interview more than 100 teachers at the district’s high schools and middle schools (including four 6-12 schools). Teachers at the three Pittsburgh charter schools (City Charter High School, Career Connections High School and Northside Urban Pathways Charter School) have also been invited to participate. Ultimately, our goal is to interview a representative number of teachers from all public schools (approximately 10 percent).

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Q: How many volunteers are involved in each interview?

A: We assign two to three volunteers per interview. One person asks questions, one person records the answer and the third person, if available, serves as an extra set of eyes and ears.

Q: How is the information tabulated and analyzed?

A: Volunteers bring the data they have collected to A+ Schools to be tabulated and analyzed.

Q: How will this information be used?

A: Like the previous two years, our goal is to release findings at community meetings in the spring. We will engage the public in these meetings so they can participate in analyzing the information, prioritizing needs and forming recommendations for action aimed at improving the quality of education in all of our schools. **Individual names and school names will be kept confidential.**

Over the past two years, A+ Schools has hosted six community meetings — with nearly 400 people participating — to present and discuss the findings from the 2009 and 2010 School Works interviews. These participants were polled about their view on priorities, which became the basis for the recommendations we made to the District. (Full reports from each meeting can be found at www.aplusschools.org.) In the second year of School Works research, we found evidence that school practices have changed in response to these recommendations and priorities.

Q: Is School Works meant to be an evaluation of schools?

A: No. This information is reported as a description of the overall conditions in high schools and middle schools, and not a school-by-school comparison or evaluation.

Q: What are the bottom line results A+ Schools hopes to achieve through School Works?

A: As a community advocate for improvement in public education, A+ Schools seeks to mobilize the public through the School Works program to make sure that for every student in Pittsburgh, “school works.”

Q: How long does A+ Schools plan to continue the School Works program?

A: A+ Schools will continue the School Works program as long as it is able to produce reliable data about our schools that can be used to take action and fulfill our mission to inform and mobilize the public to ensure our schools are places where teachers can teach and students can learn at high levels.

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SCHOOL WORKS 2010 Outcomes

When students have access to excellent teaching, rigorous courses, learning tools, and appropriate support, they can succeed, regardless of background or circumstance. A+ Schools' aim is to ensure that School Works for all students in the Pittsburgh Public Schools – especially our low-income African American students – so that the racial achievement gap disappears and all students achieve at high levels.

In the second year of the School Works initiative, volunteers visited Pittsburgh Public Schools' middle and high schools (including two charter schools) to ask 22 principals and 20 guidance counselors how their schools were functioning. They also asked about the implementation of A+ Schools' first year [School Works priorities](#) and the Empowering Effective Teachers Plan. School Works 2010 findings show overall improvement in the school policies and practices we prioritized, including improved hiring, more effective teaching, better course offerings and an improved learning environment for students.

Improved Hiring Process

- Ninety percent of principals said they completed teacher hiring by the first day of school (for teachers), compared to 81 percent in 2009.
- Fewer principals experienced hiring challenges in 2010; 19 percent fewer principals reported not having enough quality candidates and 15 percent fewer reported not having enough candidates, in general.
- According to principals, of the 126 new teachers hired, 78 percent demonstrated a passion for teaching students at their school and 70 percent provided evidence of effectiveness.

More Effective Teachers

- All 20 PPS principals said they were implementing the Research-based Inclusive System of Evaluation (RISE).
- Eight of nine principals in the second year of RISE said it was proving effective in identifying and developing effective teachers.
- All high schools reported having Promise Readiness Corps teams in place which are teams of highly effective teachers that work together to support 9th and 10th grade students.

Positive Teaching and Learning Environments

- Schools indicated progress in both behavior management and dropout prevention.
- Seven more principals (19 schools) reported having a system of identifying students at-risk of dropping out and coordinating an intervention.
- The suspension rate dropped from 36 to 27 percent, despite an increase in the number of referrals received by principals, indicating that schools are using other disciplinary measures to manage student behavior.

Improved Access to Rigorous Courses, College/Career Preparation

- Three more schools (16 schools) reported having plans in place to intentionally teach students note taking, good study habits, organization and time management skills.
- Three more schools (20 schools) reported taking steps to update students on their Pittsburgh Promise eligibility more than once a year.
- Following the School Works 2010 interviews, the PPS board adopted a new policy allowing students not identified as gifted to enroll in Center for Advanced Studies courses if they have met other achievement-related criteria.

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A+ Schools Fact Sheet

Who: A+ Schools is an independent, non-profit community advocate for improved student achievement in the Pittsburgh Public Schools. Our vision is a community mobilized to produce successive generations of young people who thrive and who build their families and futures in Pittsburgh.

What: Our goal is to be a community force advancing the highest educational achievement for every public school student.

How: Our purpose is to regularly report back to the public and engage a range of community partners in an effort to improve the educational outcomes of public school students. We seek to ensure objective oversight and steady support for school improvement initiatives while serving as a non-partisan advocate, resource and catalyst for change.

Why: We believe that a strong public school system must have effective leadership that is fully accountable, fiscally responsible and strategically focused on moving the district forward. An effective school system also requires equitable access to excellent teaching, academic resources and support services, as well as an involved community committed to improving achievement of all children.

When: A+ Schools was founded in 2004 after three major Pittsburgh foundations withdrew financial support from the Pittsburgh Public Schools. The Commission on Public Education, created by then mayor Tom Murphy to address the crisis, called for the establishment of an organization to provide the leadership needed for school reform.

A+ Schools: Pittsburgh's Community Alliance for Public Education is the organization called for in the Commission's report.

Contact: For more information on A+ Schools, call 412-697-1298 or visit our Web site at www.aplusschools.org.

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