

# The Advocates for African-American Students in the Pittsburgh Public Schools: A 30-year struggle for educational equity continues

By Mrs. Wanda Henderson

The Advocates for African-American Students in the Pittsburgh Public Schools is a grass-roots community group organized in the mid-1980s by the late Dr. Barbara A. Sizemore in response to the dismal plight of our students within the school district. For over a decade, the Advocates consistently provided testimony and recommendations to the Pittsburgh School Board to address the ever-widening achievement gap between African-American and white students. The district claimed to be concerned about the gap. However, there were no consistent actions to remedy the situation.

The Pittsburgh Board of Education took an action in August 1992 that was the proverbial “straw that broke the camel’s back.” The board hired a white candidate for superintendent even though the African-American candidate was the best qualified according to the district’s own written qualifications. At that point, we felt that the Pittsburgh Board of Education could not and would not cease discriminatory practices without legal intervention. Therefore, on August 24, 1992, the Advocates initiated a complaint against the Pittsburgh Board of Education with the Pennsylvania Human Relations Commission (PHRC). The complaint asserted that the district had unlawfully discriminated against its African-American students with respect to suspensions and discipline, distribution of class grades, and exclusion from certain special programs; and by virtue of a large academic achievement gap between African-American and white students in violation of the Pennsylvania Human Relations Act.

In September 2006, the Advocates, the district, and PHRC entered into a Conciliation Agreement and Consent Order itemizing over 90 terms of settlement to be remedied by June 2012. The Agreement authorized PHRC to monitor compliance and settlement terms, and to evaluate the district’s progress. As part of that Agreement, the Advocates insisted on the establishment of a volunteer Equity Advisory Panel (EAP) to monitor the district’s system-wide compliance, and to recommend research-based strategies, methods, and programs to address the disparities.

At the conclusion of the initial monitoring and evaluation period, PHRC found that the district had not made enough progress to terminate the Agreement. PHRC also did not believe it was in anyone’s best interest to enter into an adversarial dispute resolution process (required by the Agreement). PHRC recommended that the district and PHRC enter into a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) extending most of the terms of the current Agreement for two years, ending August 30, 2014. (PHRC had not issued any report or findings at the time this report was written.)

The Advocates and the EAP have had many challenges during the past eight years in attempting to move the Agreement and the MOU forward to address the decades of disparities affecting African-American students. Although we are not close to achieving significant progress, through consistent pressure we have accomplished the following:

- Because of the Agreement, the district must maintain a full-time administrator who coordinates the district’s equity programs and reports directly to the Superintendent. (Viola Burgess holds the position of executive director, Equity Office.)
- The EAP helped develop the district’s first ever Equity Plan in 2012. The *PPS Equity: Getting to All Plan* is designed to reduce racial disparities in achievement, college and career readiness, and student engagement and special programs, by 2017.
- “The Power of Advocacy, Families & Communities Working Together,” which took place in August, was the result of EAP recommendations.
- The group also recommended that the district consult Dr. Huberta Jackson Lowman, associate professor of psychology at Florida A&M University, to assist the district in addressing racial disparities in discipline and suspensions.
- “Beyond Diversity” and “Courageous Conversations about Race” trainings are designed to help teachers, administrators, and staff understand the impact of race on student learning.
- Exploring the Restorative Justice Approach to resolving inequities in discipline is in the planning stages.

The Advocates and the EAP recommended other initiatives that have been implemented, such as the WE Promise program, African-American book selections, culturally responsive pedagogy and curricula, and additional training for counselors.

As we begin the 2014-2015 school year, the glaring disparities persist. Large percentages of African-American students are functionally illiterate. This is unacceptable, unlawful, and immoral. We all know that the academic achievement gap results in an opportunity gap. We have a responsibility to advocate on students’ behalf to ensure they can attain a quality public school education that prepares them for life and career success.

*For more information, e-mail the Advocates for African-American Students in the Pittsburgh Public Schools: [1992equityadvocates@gmail.com](mailto:1992equityadvocates@gmail.com).*