

School Works Findings 2013

Staff instability and school climate concerns common at high poverty schools. Progress made on equitable resource distribution despite budget cuts.

The findings from A+ Schools' 2013 School Works community action research are set in the context of another year of enormous change and challenge in the Pittsburgh Public Schools (PPS). Although PPS is among the highest spending districts in Pennsylvania, the 2012-13 school year bore witness to significant budget cuts of over \$50 million resulting from both decreased investment from the state as well as increasing costs internally. The cuts resulted in: reduction of about 500 employees, mostly through retirement but also through 170 teacher furloughs, closing of seven schools, and the establishment of a new educational delivery model. Our findings therefore cannot be seen in isolation.

Despite decreasing resources, PPS has increased some opportunities for students at high poverty schools and has focused on one of the greatest levers we know to close the achievement gap: great teaching. Yet staff stability remains a major concern, especially at our most vulnerable schools. Progress must be acknowledged and celebrated while additional changes necessary to make schools work for every child must be pursued with urgency. To this end, parent leaders working with **A+ Schools Parent Nation** have articulated a call to action for improved school climates to support the changes already underway at our schools:

- ✂ PPS should make significant changes to school climate policies including changing some zero-tolerance policies that suspend students on a first offense for minor and subjective infractions.
- ✂ Parents want increased parent engagement in schools by involving parents in decision-making.

Key Findings:

- 👍 Principals feel able to provide better support to teachers. About 3 out of 4 principals said that RISE (PPS' observational evaluation process) was either very or exceptionally effective at helping them identify effective teachers (78%) and differentiate support for teachers at different levels (68%).
- 👎 Staff instability is higher at our more vulnerable schools. Schools with higher vulnerability were more likely to report a higher percentage of teachers new to their buildings, more classes taught by long-term substitutes, and more substitutes in the building daily (as a percentage of total teachers).
- 👎 Creating positive school climates is a challenge for many schools. While there has been an increase in schools reporting positive behavior management plans, only 1 in 4 principals said their school was very or exceptionally effective at teaching social and emotional learning skills, and only 50% said the same about the effectiveness of their school's behavioral supports.
- 👍 Students in most schools have the same if not more access to art, music, languages and advanced courses since last year, despite budget cuts. PPS students were more likely than the suburban schools that participated to have art, music, and library access. Unfortunately, students at more vulnerable schools were less likely to be able to take textbooks home.