



School Works Meeting Report

Preparing Students for College & Career

from the meetings on March 29th & April 7th, 2011



Cosponsors:

- Black Political Empowerment Project
- Communities in Schools
- Pittsburgh Federation of Teachers
- Pittsburgh Interfaith Impact Network
- Pittsburgh Promise
- Pittsburgh Urban Magnet Project
- Urban League of Greater Pittsburgh



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Background on School Works

School Works is community action research aimed to assist the public in understanding what resources and opportunities exist for students in Pittsburgh Public Schools. The goal is to develop a plan for community action to ensure we have an equitable school system in Pittsburgh. The initial phase of A+ Schools' School Works program was to train volunteers to conduct interviews with each principal from Pittsburgh Public middle, high, 6-12 and charter high schools. Based on last year's responses and the community's priorities, this year we interviewed the same schools again and expanded the project to include interviews with counselors in addition to principals.

Volunteers interviewed 20 principals and 18 counselors from PPS schools and the principal and counselor in 2 charter schools. School staff responded to 64 yes/no or short answer questions asked by volunteers, and A+ Schools staff compiled and analyzed the results with assistance from a consultant. The question topics covered the following categories: teaching, behavior management, drop-out prevention, student courses and college/career preparation. Principals' and counselors' responses will be report publicly in increments during the months of February and March. The schools and volunteers are described below.

Pittsburgh Public Schools Interviewed:

School Level

- Grades 9-12: 8
 - Graduation Rate Categories
 - < 69.8%: 3
 - 70-84.9%: 2
 - > 85%: 1
- Grades 6-12: 5
- Grades 6-8: 7

Magnet School

- Full magnet schools: 7
- Non-magnet schools: 13

Public Charter Schools

- 2 Charter High Schools – however, they were not group with Pittsburgh Public Schools for any of the comparisons

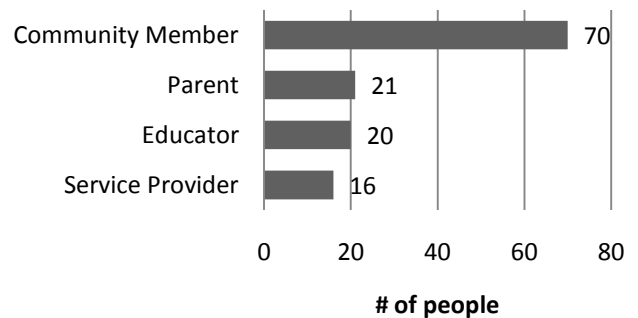
Volunteer Fast Facts:

- 138 were trained
- 42 interviews were conducted by a team of 3 or 4
- 113 volunteered

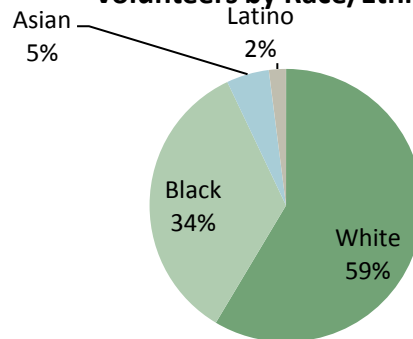
Volunteer Demographics

How do volunteers identify?

(some fall into more than one category)



Volunteers by Race/Ethnicity



School Works 2009-10

Last year, A+ Schools held its second School Works community discussion with 80+ participants in order to present key findings related to the courses that students have access to in middle and high school. Parents, educators, students and concerned citizens agreed that students would benefit most from central office and schools making greater efforts toward ensuring students have access to rigorous courses through a system of course enrollment that is public, fair, and with clear criteria. Included in rigorous courses is teaching every student the skills needed to be successful in college and career. Based on the interview findings and the series of discussions and polls with the community, A+ Schools articulated the following community priorities for reaching equity and excellence at scale based on our 2009-10 School Works action research process:

Equity and excellence at scale requires, at minimum, that for each student every school equitably provides:

- **Access to rigorous courses** designed to prepare students for college and careers that are rigorous in terms of their content and process for engaging students in their own learning;
- **Positive teaching and learning environments** where behavioral expectations are high, clear, and positively, objectively and consistently reinforced; and
- **A system for keeping students in school** that tracks and monitors each child's progress (behavior, attendance, credits) and deploys appropriate interventions so that every child remains engaged in learning and building their future through education.

School Works 2010-11 Findings

In the 2010-2011 School Works interviews, the questions asked by volunteers regarding access to rigorous courses and college and career preparation were designed to draw out how schools were doing this and what, if any, progress has been made. Below are School Works responses from principals and counselors that relate to courses and college & career preparation.

What the Research Says about College and Career Preparation:

Dr. David Conley, a researcher with the Educational Policy Improvement Center, has developed a nationally recognized model for how schools can effectively prepare students for college or careers. According to Conley, creating and maintaining a college-going culture can be achieved by having four key practices in place. They are: 1. Teaching students academic behaviors, 2. Teaching students key thinking and learning strategies, 3. Aligning the school's core academic program with college/ career preparation, and 4. Preparing students for the complexity of applying to college or training programs. The responses from principals and counselors in School Works interviews will be shared in relation to each of the four practices identified by Conley.

What We Learned from School Works 2011

Academic Behaviors are the skills that students would need to develop in order to be able to work independently, study and stay organized to be successful in college or training programs.

- Generally speaking academic learning involves having books available to students. The majority of principals (14/20) reported that they had all of their books ready for the first day of school. The reasons why books were delayed were either that they had more students than were expected or that there were problems with delivery. Charter school principals reported that all of their books were ready for the first day of school.
- An important academic behavior is being able to study independently; this requires being able to take books home to study and complete homework. Students are permitted to take books home in 17/20

schools and both charter schools according to principals. The reasons why students wouldn't be able to take books home are because they aren't assigned by teachers or that there is a limited amount.

- The majority of principals (16/20) reported that they had a school-wide strategy for developing students' academic skills such as note-taking, building study habits, staying organized and managing time. On a scale of 1-5, principals on average rated the effectiveness of their school's strategy as a 3.5. Charter school principals reported having school-wide strategies that were effective to highly effective.

Teaching Key Learning and Thinking Strategies means that students are enrolled in rigorous courses that use real world applications to teach students how to solve problems and think critically.

- On average, principals reported that 77% of their students were enrolled in rigorous English and Math courses regardless school configuration. Counselor reports varied by configuration. Counselors in 9-12 and 6-12 schools reported an average of only 43% of students enrolled in rigorous courses while counselors in middle schools reported an average of 79% of students were enrolled in rigorous courses. Charter school principals reported an average of 59% of students enrolled in rigorous English and Math courses.

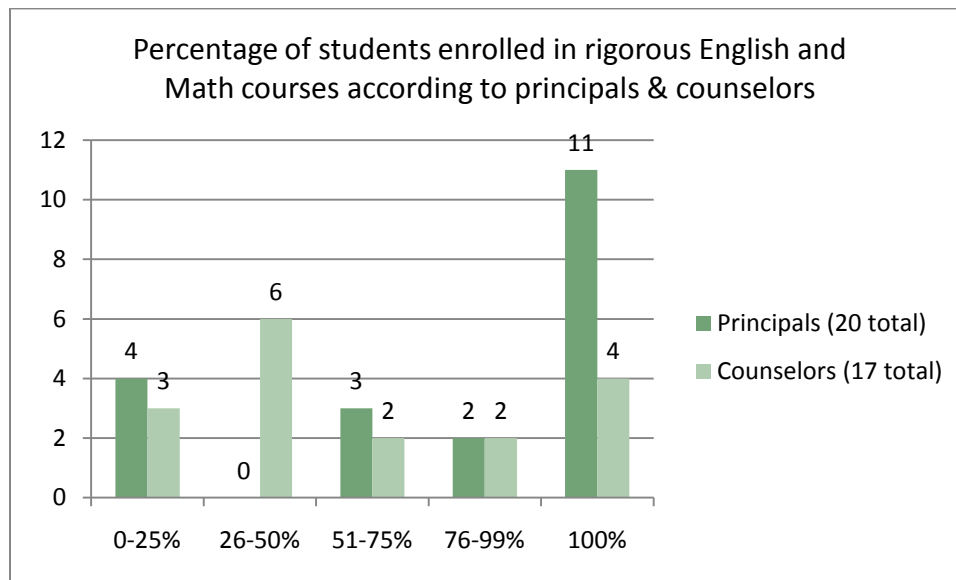


Figure 1

- The majority of principals (61%) reported that if students were working in groups to solve problems in a classroom, it would most likely be because of the teacher in the class and not because it's a part of the school's regular practice or specific courses. The majority of principals (75%) reported the same thing regarding conversations in the classroom focused on critical thinking—that it happened in classrooms because of individual teachers and not their regular school practice. Charter school principals

Principals reported teaching academic behaviors such as studying and time management in the majority, but not all, of schools in the district. There are still some schools where principals report students are not permitted to take books home and their school does not have effective school wide strategies for teaching students how to study, manage time or stay organized.

Principals reported most often that it was either the teacher of the class or the course that students took that determined the extent to which students practiced certain learning and thinking strategies—not the school's regular practice.

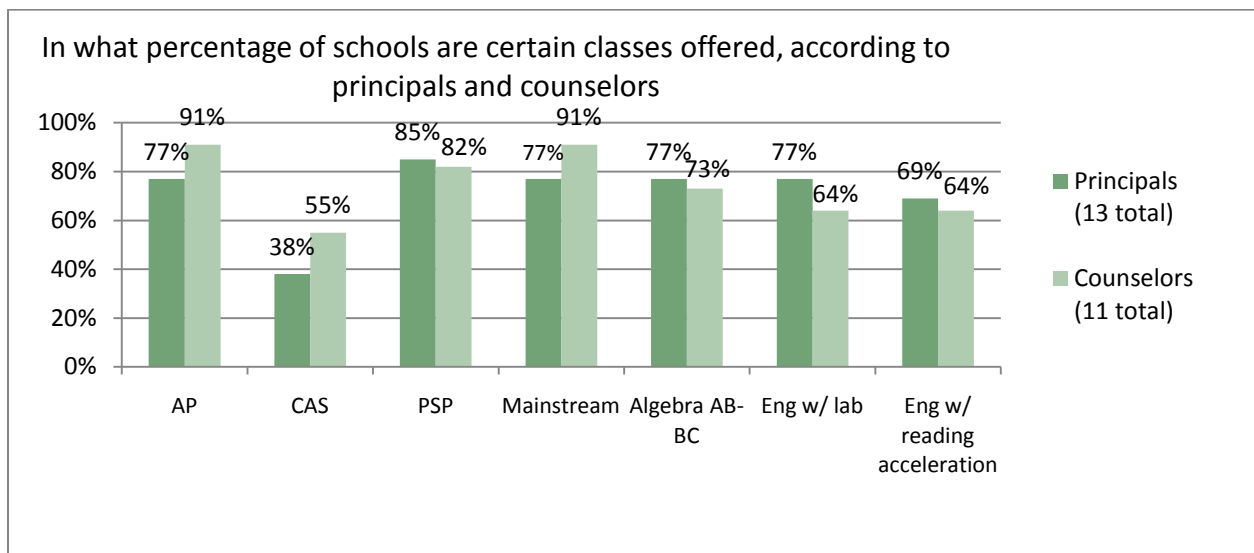
reported that these activities happen as a function of either teachers or students.

- On the other hand, when asked about when principals would be likely to see coursework incorporating real world applications or relating to college or career options, the majority of them (50% and 60%, respectively) reported that it would depend most on the type of course rather than the school's regular practice or the teacher. Charter principals reported that this activity would depend on either the students or teacher.

Connecting Content Knowledge to College/ Career Preparation means that the courses that students take are connected to a greater plan for preparing students for college or careers. Doing this effectively would entail coaching students to map out career paths, enroll in courses and participate in activities that would advance them along a path to college or a training program.

Types of Courses Available in PPS:

- In the majority of 6-12 or 9-12 schools, students are separated into at least 4 different levels of Math and 5 levels of English. According to principals or counselors from 13 schools: at most 10 offer AP courses, 5 offer CAS courses, 11 offer PSP courses, 10 offer Mainstream courses, 10 offer Algebra AB-BC, 10 offer English with a lab and 9 offer English with reading acceleration (Figure 2). Charter schools offer multiple levels of courses, including AP, courses for gifted students, Honors level courses, mainstream courses, and remedial Algebra and English for non-special education students.



- When asked which type of class (AP, CAS, PSP or Mainstream) was most likely to have students in it who are likely to go on to post-secondary education or training after high school, only 25% of principals said all types.
 - AP classes were reported by the most principals (58%) to have less than 15 students in the class, while 50% of principals reported that no specific type of class was likely to have more than 30 students.

Figure 2

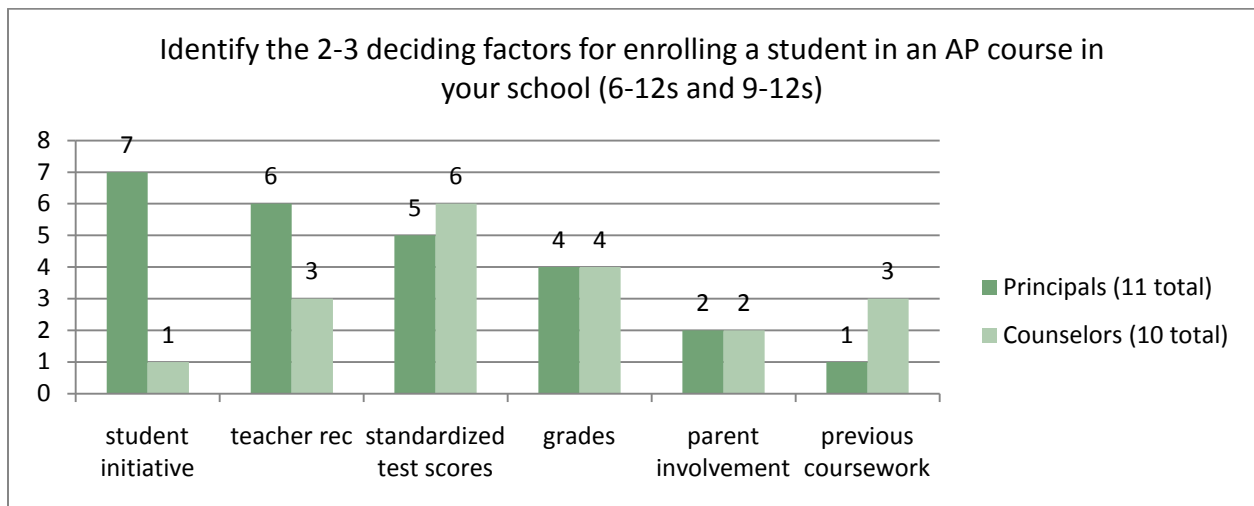
Pittsburgh Public Schools course structure is fairly elaborate. There are between 4 and 5 different levels of English and Math in most high schools, independent of the courses students take at each grade level. Overall, principals and counselors perceive the connection between course scheduling and college or career preparation to be neutral in terms of effectiveness.



- AP and PSP classes were reported by the most principals (75% and 83%) to be classes of students who earn mainly A's and B's. Charter school principals said that all of their classes were likely to have students earning mainly A's and B's.
- Mainstream classes were reported most often to be a class of mainly black students (reported by 75% of principals) and students who earn mainly D's and E's (reported by 67% of principals)
- The majority of principals (58%) including the charter school principals reported that none of the classes were more likely than another to be a class of mainly white students.
- Mainstream classes were also reported by the most principals (67%) to have a highly effective teacher.

Course Scheduling:

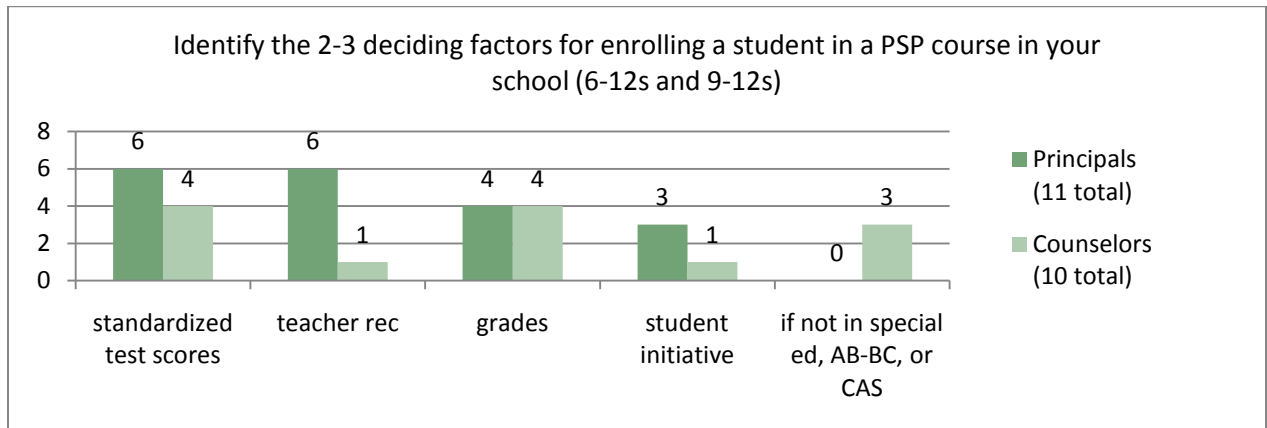
- According to counselors, the main individuals responsible for making students' class schedules are counselors (reported by 12/18) and principals (reported by 8/18). In charter schools it's a shared role between people such as education manager, teachers/advisors, and curriculum specialist/director.
- 6 counselors reported that schedules were made in the winter or spring for the next school year. 3 counselors reported that schedules were made over the summer for the following school year and 6 reported that student schedules were made at the start of the school year. 3 counselors reported that schedules were made twice, once in the spring of the year before and then again at the start of the school year. Principals and counselors reported that the deciding factors for enrolling students in Algebra 1 in grades 6-8 were standardized test scores (PSSA, 4Sight), grades, teacher recommendations, or placement tests. These factors align with PPS's documented requirements.
- The deciding factors for enrolling a student in an AP course varied across schools and between counselors and principals. The criteria cited most often by counselors (reported by 6 out of 10) was standardized test scores from PSSA, PSAT or 4Sight exams. The criteria cited most often by principals (reported by 7 out of 11) was student initiative. Other responses were grades, teacher recommendations, parent involvement, and previous coursework. According to PPS' selection criteria for AP courses (revised 2/17/2011), students must have a QPA of 3.0, 90% attendance, and 80% or better in specific courses taken previously. If one criterion is not met, students can submit a teacher or principal recommendation for review. (Figure 3).



- The factors for enrolling students in PSP courses reported most often by principals and counselors of 6-12 and 9-12 schools were standardized test scores, teacher

Figure 3

recommendations, grades, and student initiative. In the cases of schools without mainstream courses, all students are enrolled in PSP courses if they are not in special education, AB-BC, or CAS courses. There was no factor reported by a majority of counselors. The first three factors are aligned with PPS course selection criteria for grades 9-12, which may also include parent recommendations. (Figure 4).



Courses as College/ Career Planning:

Figure 4

- According to principals and counselors, the main people responsible for supporting students in planning their transition to college or training are counselors and other support staff (18 or 19 out of 20). Teachers were reported the next most often by 7/20 principals and 4/18 counselors. Charter school staff shared this responsibility in teams of teachers, counselors, and other advisors.
- Both principals and counselors were asked to rate the degree to which their course placement practices are connected to a college or career preparation strategy on a scale of 1-5 and 9/17 counselors and 13/20 principals rated their school a 3 or less. Charter schools rated this connection as very high (4-5).
 - For 6-12 and 9-12 schools, the average rating from principals was 3.46 and from counselors was 3.95. For middle schools, the average rating from principals was 3 and from counselors was 2.71.
- Counselors were asked to describe the main ways that course placement practices and college/career preparation are connected and there was no strategy that was given the majority of counselors- 4 reported they offer advanced courses, 3 reported scheduling courses based on post-secondary plans, 3 reported using graduation requirements or Pittsburgh Promise eligibility requirements and the others reported a wide variety of different activities. Charter school counselors said they monitor courses as part of an education plan, encourage honors and interest in career, and utilize best teaching practices to focus on achievement.

Prepare students for the complexity of applying to college

- When asked if there was a school wide strategy for preparing all students to transition into college or careers, 15 out of 18 counselors and 12 out of 20 principals said yes. The average rating of the effectiveness of the school’s strategy was a 3.2 out of 5 according to principals. The charter school principals and counselors reported having school wide strategies that were very highly effective.
 - The schools that reported having the most effective college/ career preparation strategies also reported providing support to students during a specific time of the day such as homeroom or advisement period and connecting students to apprenticeship programs, internships or job shadowing experiences.

School Works Results: Preparing Students for College & Career

2011

- Out of 11 schools, 9 principals and 7 counselors reported that they tracked the percentage of graduates that go on to post-secondary education or training after high school with the average percent between 62-64%. Charter school principals and counselors reported tracking their graduates' post-secondary education placement, with an average rate of 88%.
- Principals and counselors describe a wide range of activities and practices that their schools use to prepare students in planning their transition to college or careers. Their responses are in the table below:

Reported in more than 75% of schools:	Reported in 50-76% of schools:	Reported in <50% of schools:
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Students are updated more than once a year on their eligibility for the Pittsburgh Promise - Students set goals and actions plans for ensuring Pittsburgh Promise eligibility - Trade school and college representatives meet with students - School organizes at least 1 college tour for students - School provides ACT or SAT preparation activities - School pays SAT or ACT fees for students - Students are assisted in filling out college, training or apprenticeship applications - Parents are educated about financial aid options - Students are assisted in applying for the Pgh Promise - Families are assisted in filling out the FAFSA 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Military recruiters meet with students - Schools place students in internships or job shadowing experiences - School conducts activities such as mock job interviews or resume writing workshops - School conducts activities to develop students' financial literacy - The school tracks the status of students' applications and reminds them of next steps - The school tracks the schools or programs that graduates are accepted into 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Apprentice program representatives meet with students - School organizes at least 1 trade school tour for students

What are the Barriers to Preparing Students for College or Careers?

- There were 6 principals and 2 counselors that reported there were no barriers to enrolling every student in rigorous English and Math courses. Of those that reported barriers, the majority of both principals (10/13) and counselors (13/15) cited student related issues being a top barrier to enrolling all students in rigorous English and Math courses (Figure 5a). Charter school principals and counselors also reported student-related issues as a top barrier.

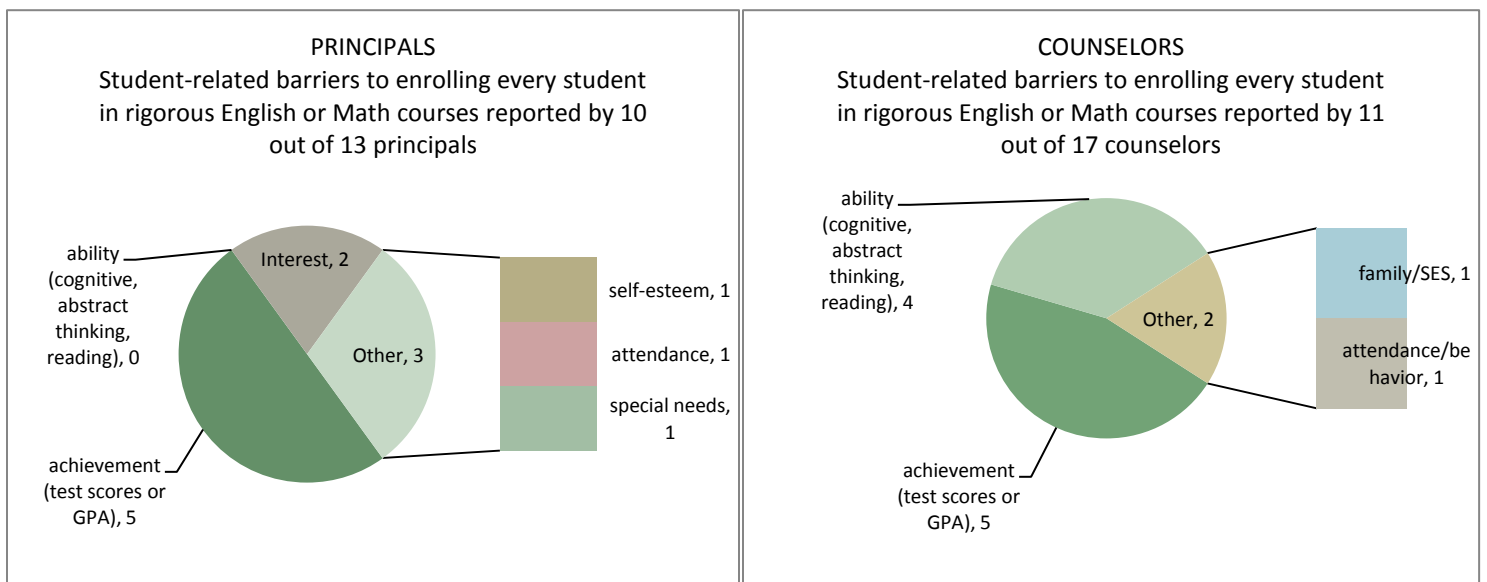


Figure 5a

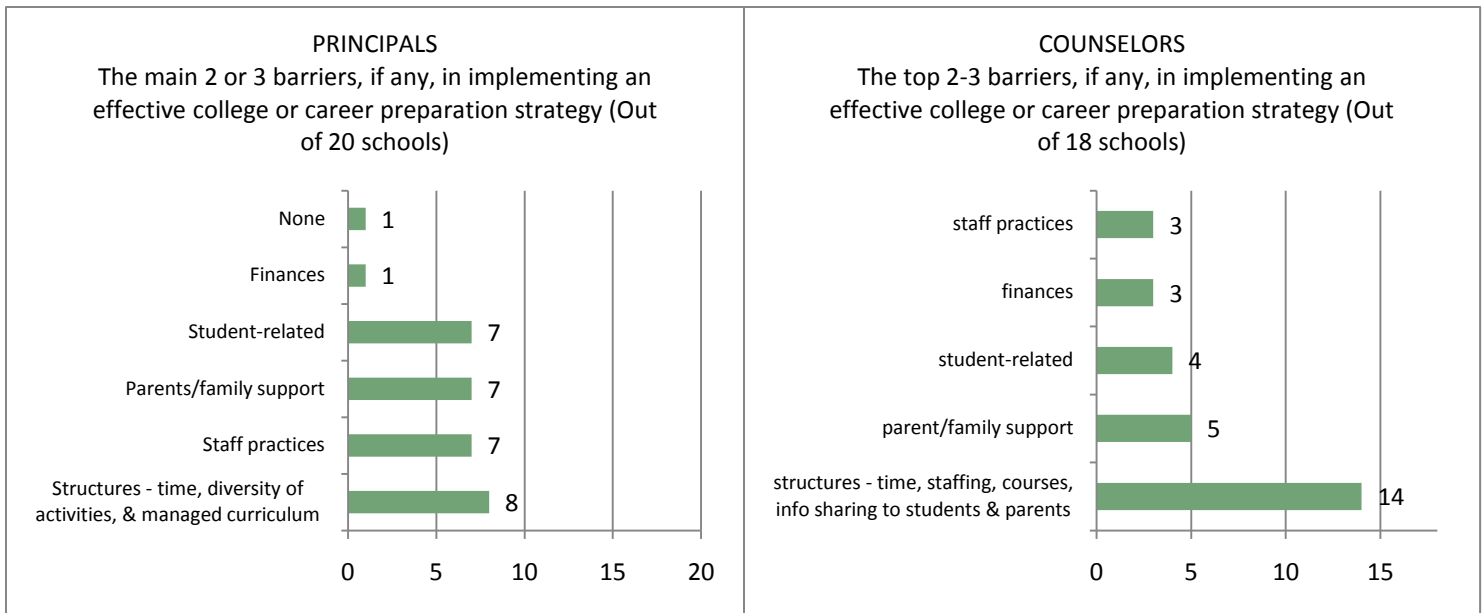
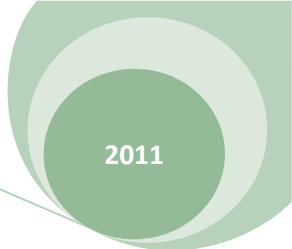


Figure 5b

- There was no single barrier to implementing an effective college or career preparation strategy cited by a majority of principals; however, 8 out of 20 principals and 14 out of 18 counselors cited school based structures being a top barrier to implementing an effective college or career preparation strategy (Figure 5b).

Preparing Students for College or Careers Keeps Kids In School

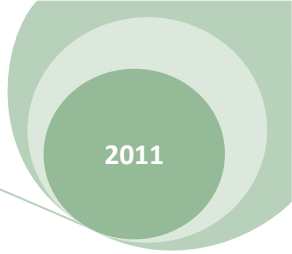
To graduate from college or training program, students must first graduate from high school. The strategy schools use to keep kids in school could be the same strategy that they use to prepare students for college or careers. We found high school graduation rates to be highly correlated to the practices that Conley outlined as effective ways to prepare students for college or training. Schools with the lowest graduation rates were most likely to report the following in School Works:

- A lower percentage of students enrolled in rigorous courses
- Not having a school wide system of preparing all students to transition into college or careers
- Course placement not being connected to a college or career preparation strategy
- Not conducting activities such as mock job interviews or resume writing workshops
- Not tracking the schools or programs where graduates are accepted
- Most college or career preparation activities are broadly made available to students who sign up or ask, rather than be actively provided to all students.

In Summary

We learned 3 major things related to course placement and college and career preparation from the responses of principals and counselors: 1. One way that schools are effectively battling the drop-out epidemic is by implementing strategies that prepare students for college or careers; 2. Three out of the four most effective preparation strategies according to national research occur within students' coursework in Pittsburgh; and 3. Pittsburgh Public Schools is doing a lot of encouraging work to inform students about college options and assist them in applying to the Pittsburgh Promise and to schools and programs. This work will best benefit those students who are prepared to be successful in college or a career.

We must ensure that all students in Pittsburgh Public Schools participate in a rigorous course curriculum throughout their education that connects them with a college or career path. The promising work that's being done to support students to transition into college and careers will be more effective if students are prepared to be successful once they get there. A+ Schools is committed to monitoring our schools, supporting their staff and advancing policy changes that will ensure that students have what they need to be successful.



School Works 2010-11 Community Response

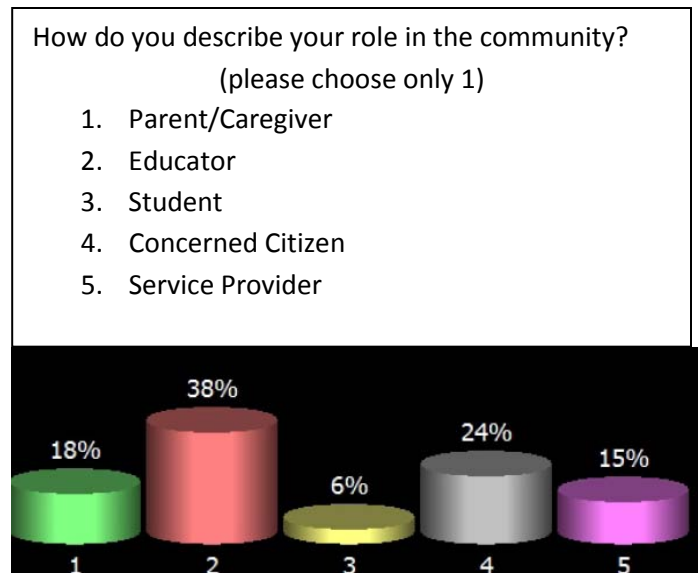
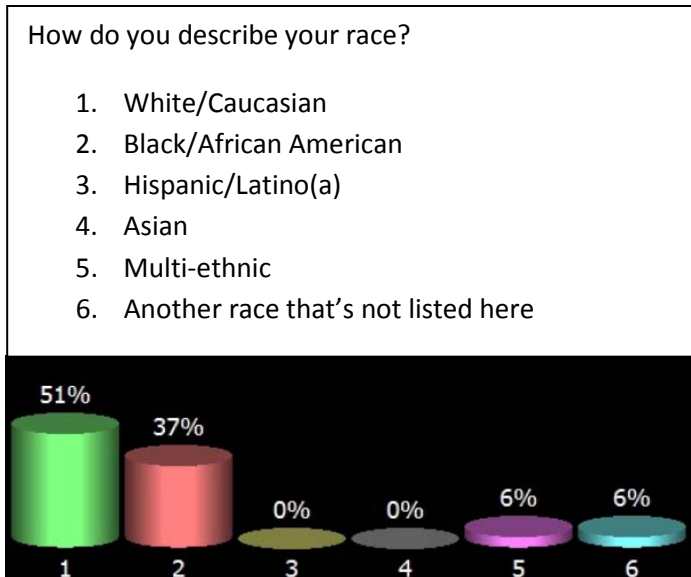
During the community meetings at Oliver and Carrick High School in March and April 2011, A+ Schools reiterated the community priorities related to access to rigorous courses and preparing students for college and career based on the 2009-10 School Works action research process. These priorities include increasing expectations of all students so they all learn the skills needed to be successful in college or career, including independent study, note-taking, and organization. They also include ensuring all students have access to rigorous courses through a set of clear and fair criteria for enrollment in advanced level courses. A+ Schools shared the results of principals' and counselors responses to questions in these areas before moving .

The Discussion

We asked participants to discuss what criteria determine whether a student is college or career ready and what factors are related to a student's successful graduation from college, then we compared their answers to current national research. We also asked how Pittsburgh should measure college and career readiness, sharing examples from other public school districts across the country. We asked participants to tell us what strategies related to higher graduation rates should be prioritized for all schools and whether addressing college and career readiness should be prioritized by the School Board. In anticipation of continuing to monitor how PPS and schools implement systems to prepare students for college and career, we asked participants to share what actions they would take to follow up.

Polling Results

Who was there - Approximately 36 people attended to discuss access to rigorous courses and the strategies through which Pittsburgh Public Schools prepare students for college and career. As seen in the following images, audience members reflected a diverse group of parents/caregivers, educators, students, concerned citizens, and service providers from all parts of the city who represented 8 of the 10 School Board Districts in Pittsburgh.



How did people express their opinions - Similarly to the previous year's community meetings, small table conversations were held and afterwards, hand-held polling devices were used as a way for each person at the meeting to express him/herself as an individual in response to the discussion questions. The community was asked to vote for either a single response or to rank their top 2 or 3 priorities for the questions. For the priority questions, a person's first choice was worth 10 points, the second was worth 9, and the third was worth 8. The numbers in some of the following graphs therefore represent the average weight the item received from the group. The higher the number, the more important that item was to the community members who voted.

What did community members understand about factors related to college success – each table held a facilitated discussion about the criteria they believe determine whether a student is college or career ready. Among the topics addressed were the importance of offering courses that directly prepare students for the rigor of college, including courses taught at schools such as the University of Pittsburgh. People also discussed the importance of having high expectations of students while acknowledging that not everybody will choose to attend college after high school.

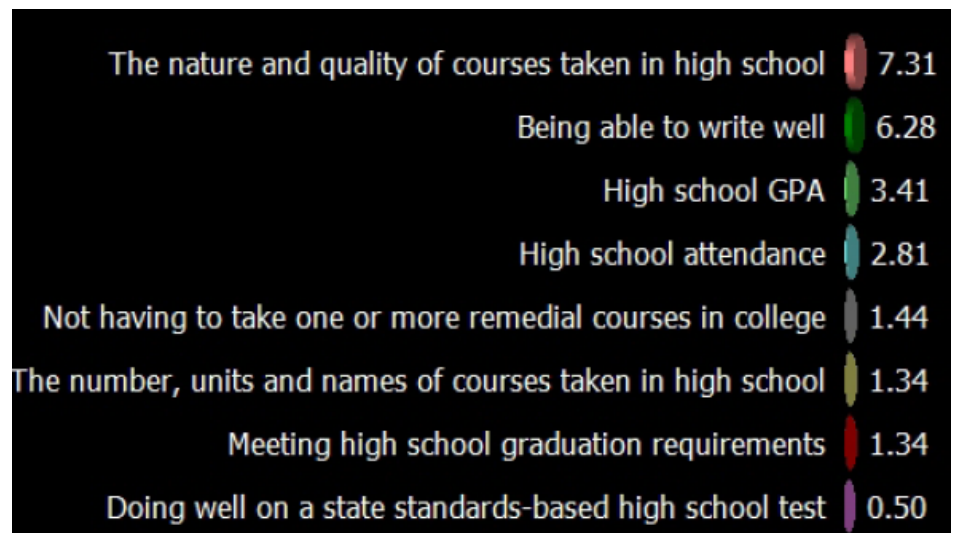
Below are participants' responses when asked what relates to a student's successful graduation from college. We created separate identical polls with all of the responses as options and asked participants to vote on their top three choices.

Question: What 3 factors are most related to a student's successful graduation from college?

→ The majority believed that the nature and quality of courses taken in high school as well as being able to write well are most related to successful college graduation

Takeaway: After polling participants on the question, we explained that the following

factors are most related to successful graduation from college: the nature and quality of courses taken in high school, being able to write well, and not having to take one or more remedial courses in college. The majority of participants were correct about the first two factors; however, fewer participants guessed that not having to take remedial courses in college was related to successful graduation. This information highlights the importance of continuing to track student success beyond acceptance into college or postsecondary programs.

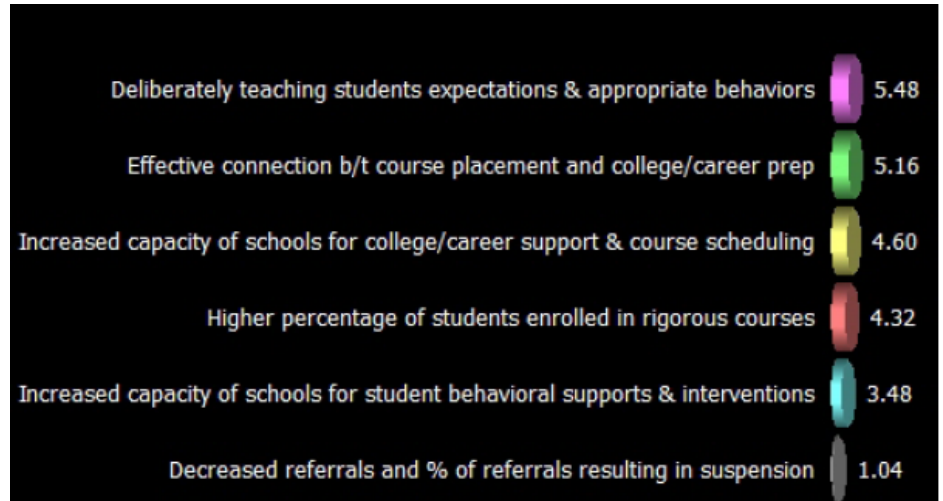


What did community members think schools should prioritize – each table held a facilitated discussion about how Pittsburgh should measure college and career readiness. We shared examples of how other states were doing so, including success in specific college/career courses (CA), enhanced graduation requirements (TX), graduation exams (NY), SAT/ACT/College Placement Test Scores (FL), ACT/WorkKeys (AK), and End of course

exams (TX). Meeting participants discussed the challenge of measuring college and career readiness without a formal definition of what it means to be college and/or career ready. Issues raised included evaluating the benefits of a college or career readiness strategy with strict guidelines for teachers to follow versus programs like International Baccalaureate (IB), where teachers have more flexibility. Community members also discussed the possibility of end-of-course exams that are district-wide or statewide in order to hold all students to the same standards of achievement. We then polled participants on the top three practices connected to higher graduation rates that should be prioritized for ALL SCHOOLS.

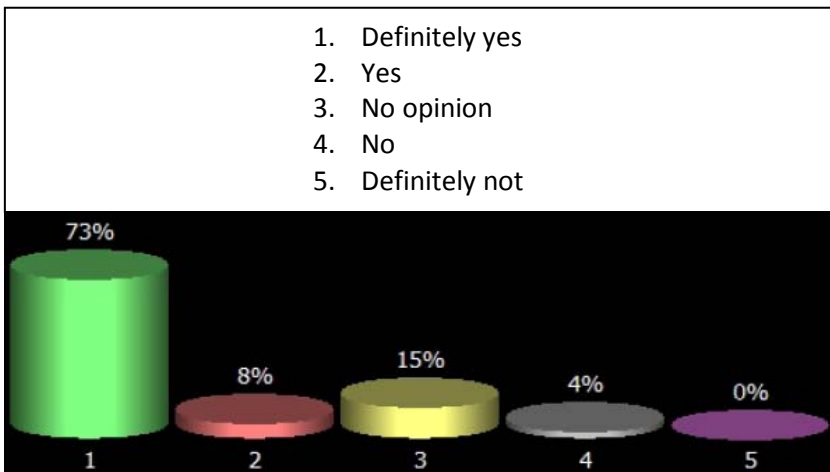
Question: What 3 things connected to higher graduation rates do you think we should prioritize for ALL SCHOOLS?

→ *The practices that attendees felt should be prioritized for all schools were weighted fairly evenly by participants with two coming out on top: deliberately teaching students expectations & appropriate behaviors and effective connection between course placement and college/career preparation.*



Takeaway: Because the responses received point values that are close in range, we know that the participants prioritized a variety of issues, rather than the majority of people picking the same top 3. All of the choices above are found in schools with higher graduation rates, so any of these options could be beneficial in addressing drop-outs in the district.

How did the community feel about the role of the School Board in defining college and career readiness?



Question: The role of the School Board is to set priorities and goals for the district, monitor progress and put policies in place that ensure all students are served equitably by your tax dollars. Do you agree that defining college and career readiness should be a priority for the School Board to address?

→ *Attendees strongly believed that the School Board should place priority on defining college & career readiness*

What did community members want to do as next steps - We asked everyone in the room in which two actions they would like to participate as a follow up to the meeting. Different groups prioritized different choices, which told us that it could be useful to explore any of the below options as follow up steps.

Question: Which 2 things would you like to do as a follow up to this conversation?

→ *Learning how to recognize if a school has an effective college & career preparation strategy, asking PPS to collect & publicize its students' placement & success, and advocating for Board policy to increase expectations for college and career readiness were most important to meeting attendees*

Learn how to recognize if a school has an effective college & career prep strategy	5.07
Ask PPS to collect & publicize its students' placement and success	4.24
Advocate for a Board policy to increase expectations for college and career readiness	4.21
Hear more student perspectives	2.93
Participate in School Works for Teachers	1.28

Summary - What Are A+ Schools' Next Steps?

A+ Schools is committed to monitoring our schools and supporting their staff to ensure that all schools have what they need show results. Last year, community members asked us to prioritize monitoring students' access to rigorous courses and the strategies by which PPS and schools prepare students for college and careers. This year, we have seen that PPS provides many different resources for preparing students for the complexity of college and career as well as criteria for enrollment in advanced courses, but there is no formal definition for college and career readiness to help measure the relationship between these efforts and whether students are successfully achieving college or career readiness. We also see that schools fall along a range of effectiveness when it comes to teaching students academic behaviors, teaching key thinking and learning strategies, and connecting core academics with college & career preparation. A promising finding is that certain strategies related to college and career preparation are also linked with higher graduation rates; thus, instituting school-wide college and career preparation strategies might also help to decrease the drop-out rates in PPS. A+ Schools will continue to monitor course access and college and career preparation through the upcoming year's School Works, gaining further perspectives from teachers and incorporating the priorities expressed by community members. We will explore the feasibility of implementing follow-up actions to support community members in gaining knowledge and a sense of accountability for helping Pittsburgh Public Schools prepare all of its students for college and careers.

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