Results from A+ Schools Community Meeting on Student Supports

In October of 2009, A+ Schools launched a new program called School Works. It is a community action research project that involves volunteers who interviewed the principals of middle schools, high schools, 6-12 schools and charter high schools in the city of Pittsburgh. They asked questions about the resources and opportunities principals are able to provide for students in the building, things they would like to provide but currently can’t and the barriers that stand between them and being able to prepare every student for college or careers. The results of those interviews were released in a series of community meetings, each one focusing on a different topic. The purpose of the series of community meetings is to deliberate on what should be included in a community agenda for equity.

On January 23rd 2010, A+ Schools hosted the first community meeting to release a portion of the School Works interview responses related to staffing and teaching supports. The second meeting, held on March 11th, focused on the responses from principals related to the courses and tools available to students. On April 29th, A+ hosted the third and final community meeting at Calvary United Methodist Church on the North Side, where the focus was the responses related to the types of supports that exist for students in schools.

Those that attended the meeting learned what School Works volunteers found about the types of supports available to students and who has access to them, the extent families are invited to engage in the support system around students, the types of college/career preparation activities that schools provide and the extent to which behavior and truancy are addressed systemically in schools. Together, they discussed the ways that schools, central office, families and students could contribute to the support system around students. Afterwards, they voted on what changes they felt would have the biggest positive impact on students and issues they’d be most likely to take action.

The next few pages of this summary describe the results of the community discussion and the views of those that attended.

Who Was There?

Approximately 80 people attended to learn and discuss the responses from principals related to student supports. Of those that attended, 26% were participating in their first A+ event. About 53.3% of the audience came from east or central neighborhoods, while 31.7% came from the north, 10% came from the south and 5% came from the west. The audience was a diverse group of parents, educators, students, human service providers and concerned citizens represented in the images to the right.
What Did Participants Think?

On a scale of 1-5, the average rating participants gave the value of the information presented was a 4.29, and the value of the meeting and their overall satisfaction was a 4.42. The graphs below describe what they found most valuable and what, if anything, they would’ve changed.

![Graph showing what participants found most valuable and what they would change]

What did you find most valuable about today's meeting?

- Learning results, statistics & data, about A+ Schools: 8%
- Discussions (unique/different perspectives, openness, facilitators): 25%
- Student contribution: 28%
- Voting & technology; voicing opinion: 8%
- Connecting with active & motivating participants; being involved: 33%

What would you change?

- Make it easier to hear (use microphones, move child care area, decrease 'side bar' conversations): 38%
- Nothing: 33%
- More time for group discussions: 29%

How Were People Able to Express Their Opinions?

Everybody got to vote!

After the presentation and discussion, hand-held polling devices were used as a way for each person at the meeting to express themselves as an individual in response to the discussion questions. The community was asked to rank their top 3 choices for each question. A person’s first choice was worth 10 points, the second was worth 9 and the third was worth 8. The numbers in the next few graphs represent the average weight the item received from the group. The higher the number the more important that item was to the community members that voted.

What, if Changed, Would Have the Most Impact on Preparing ALL Students for College or Careers?

⇒ Access to tutoring or mentoring, family engagement and teaching college/career skills are the top 3 changes people thought would be most impactful. The closeness of the rankings of the top 4 issues indicates that the people in the room were concerned by a variety of issues.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Combined views of all attendees:</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Access to tutoring or mentoring</td>
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<tr>
<td>Extent families are engaged in the support system</td>
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<tr>
<td>Extent students are taught college/career skills</td>
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<tr>
<td>Adequacy of the support services provided</td>
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<tr>
<td>Existence of a behavior management system</td>
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<tr>
<td>Adequacy of the college/career support students receive</td>
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<tr>
<td>Existence of a drop out intervention system</td>
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<td>Common definition of drop out risks</td>
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School Works
An Alaskans' Choice Opportunity Program

Community Meeting Results on STUDENT SUPPORTS
When we looked at the differences between the responses of different groups of people to this question, we found that students, educators, parents and concerned citizens each had a different point of view about what would make the biggest difference.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Views of PARENTS/CAREGIVERS:</th>
<th>Views of EDUCATORS:</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Existence of a behavior management system</td>
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<th>Views of CONCERNED CITIZENS:</th>
<th>Views of STUDENTS:</th>
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Interestingly, the changes that each group thought would be most impactful in preparing all students for college or careers, was something that was, for the most part, outside of their control. For example, parents felt most strongly about a behavior management system in the school, educators felt most strongly about family engagement and students felt most strongly about access to tutoring or mentoring.

To be able to provide students with the level of support they need, there will have to be contributions made by everyone: school staff, central office, families, the community and students. The attendees discussed what could be some ways that each of these entities could better support students and the conversations were recorded by facilitators at each table. Below is a summary of their responses:

**What Could Be Some Ways that Each of the Following Groups Contributes to Supporting Students?**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Central Office</th>
<th>Schools</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Standardize intervention efforts across schools</td>
<td>• Make more time to talk with students</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Establish a district policy for how/when parents are notified in regards to student behavior</td>
<td>• Institute a school-wide behavior management plan in every school</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Establish a district policy that states that principals are not involved in the first behavioral infraction</td>
<td>• Do an audit of what’s working/ what’s not</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Set a district-wide reading goal of a certain number of books per year and publish a list of suggested books</td>
<td>• Create easier ways to engage families</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Bridge the communication gap between central office and schools AND central office and the public</td>
<td>• Tailor home visits to be positive experiences</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Facilitate the sharing of best practices between guidance counselors and social workers across</td>
<td>• Host a standing day/time for families to drop in- similar to open office hours</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Partner with families for behavior management</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Build mutual respect between teachers, administrators and students</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Establish an advisor role for teachers who advise a group of students</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Assign college essays as coursework</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Community Meeting Results on STUDENT SUPPORTS

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<tr>
<th>Families</th>
<th>Students</th>
<th>Community</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Push for a clear definition of what PPS parents should be doing</td>
<td>• Mentor peers</td>
<td>• Engage in the political process around schools</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Be a more vocal and unified voice</td>
<td>• Use peer pressure to enforce positive behavior</td>
<td>• Mentor students</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Visit schools more often</td>
<td>• Report negative behaviors</td>
<td>• Connect law enforcement and magistrates to schools</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Support school staff</td>
<td>• Mediate conflicts for younger peers</td>
<td>• Bring older people together with younger people</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Send students to school regularly</td>
<td>• Student leaders plan around discipline</td>
<td>• Honor positive behavior or good grades</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Identify certain behaviors to partner with schools to manage</td>
<td>• Communicate feelings</td>
<td>• Broadcast education based programming on television</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Volunteer</td>
<td>• Establish a buddy system for taking classes as CCAC</td>
<td>• Donate to the Pittsburgh Promise</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Peer to peer college preparation</td>
<td>• Teach students and parents to advocate for themselves</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

What Areas Should We Address First, as a Community, to Ensure that ALL Students are Being Prepared for College or Careers?

⇒ College/ career readiness activities and skills, family engagement and course structures/placement were the top 3 areas that participants felt we should target first.

The list of issues that attendees voted on were taken from the results of the School Works meeting on courses and the meeting on supports. When the responses were sorted by groups of people, we found that parents and concerned citizens responded directly in line with what was reflected by the entire room.

However, educators and students prioritized a different top 3 than was reflected by the entire group.
What are A+ Schools’ Next Steps?

The purpose of this series of community meetings is to understand what’s important to the public in relation to what we heard from principals during School Works interviews. In response to the priorities expressed by participants at this community discussion and the others, A+ Schools will gather more information and form a collective community agenda for equity. Stay tuned for more and get ready to take action on behalf of students!

The data guide that was distributed to the community at the meeting is included on the next several pages.
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. Volunteers interviewed 21 principals from PPS schools and 2 charter school principals using a survey consisting of 61 yes/no or short answer questions. The question topics covered the following categories: staffing, learning tools and extracurricular activities, student courses and services, student transition support and parent or caregiver involvement. Principals were asked to answer the questions to the best of their ability during the 1 hour interview and in some cases were asked to make approximations. Principals’ responses are being reported publicly in increments between January and May of 2010. Below is a selection of the principals’ interview responses.

Interview results are reported as a breakdown of the number of the 21 PPS principals that responded in specific ways. Schools were also categorized according to school level, magnet status, enrollment, achievement gap size and vulnerability to look for any trends in responses from principals of schools in those categories. Any statistically significant differences in responses according to any of the categories are reported with at least 95% (p< .05) certainty that the differences were not by chance. They are noted in italics. Charter school responses were not grouped with other Pittsburgh Public Schools and because there were only 2, we were not able to determine whether any differences were statistically significant. However, some of their responses are noted.

We intend for this guide to provide the community with information to use in deliberations about the kind of changes that can benefit students. These issues are highlighted throughout this document in magnifying glasses like the one to the right. Our intention is to engage families, youth and the community in what issues are most important to include in our collective advocacy agenda to ensure that all students are prepared for post-secondary education or training.

Principal's Goals for 2009-2010

The first question we asked principals was to share their top 3 goals for the year. The graph to the right shows what principals described. The majority of principals reported their goals for the school broadly, such as improve student achievement or improve school culture. Others reported specific interventions or groups of students they planned to target with programs or services. In the case of many newly established schools, many principals had goals related to creating effective operations systems or implementing school-specific programming.
STUDENT SUPPORTS:
This guide includes information about the availability of academic, social, behavioral and mental health supports that exist within schools and the extent to which families are included in that support network. Our expectation is that these resources would be available equitably and adequately across schools so that all students are supported through their preparation and transition to college or careers. We also anticipate schools with a relatively more vulnerable school population (higher disciplinary incidents, lower achievement and higher poverty) would have additional needs that would require more or different types of support structures.

Types of Support Offered
Principals were asked about a whole list of supports in terms of if it was available in their school, whether or not it was accessible to all students and who provided it. Below is a graph that represents the responses from 21 PPS principals. The blue bar is the number of schools that offered that particular type of support. Of those that offered it, the yellow bar describes how many schools provide the service in-house, the green describes the number of schools that have a community partner that provides the service and the peach bar depicts the number of schools where volunteers provide it.

- As you can see, all of the different types of support were provided by a combination of community partners and school staff and in the case of mental and behavioral health services, more schools offer that through a community partner than those that provide it in-house. Both charter schools were able to offer the same list of services with the majority of them offered by the school and only a few offered by community partners.
  - In school tutoring was most likely to be available in larger schools compared to smaller schools and in 6-12s or 9-12s compared to 6-8s.
  - After school tutoring was most likely available in non-magnet schools compared to magnets and in 6-8s or 9-12s compared to 6-12s.
  - Mentoring was most likely available in magnet schools compared to non-magnets. Mentoring was also the only type of support that the majority of principals who said yes, they were able to offer mentoring, also said that it was not accessible to all students.
No significant relationships were found between the schools that were the most/least vulnerable and the schools that offered tutoring or mentoring.

Family Engagement

The questions in this section related to how families were involved in the school as a part of the support system around students. We asked questions about the support that schools receive from central office in terms of engaging families, how they share information with the parents and caregivers of their students and in what ways do they specifically ask families to be involved in the school.

- From central office, the majority of principals (19/21) receive support with marketing and communications. Many of the ways that the communications and marketing department supports schools is illustrated in the graph below that shows the ways that schools share information with families.

- 13 principals reported receiving support from student services in engaging families as well. Student support services provides district-wide supervision and technical assistance in the areas of student discipline, attendance, transfers, work permits, guidance counseling, social work services, health services, gang intervention, interscholastic athletics, alternative education, programs for students with special needs and crisis intervention

- The graph below shows the different ways that families are invited to engage in schools.

  In terms of inviting parents to participate in transition planning for college or careers, non-magnets were more likely to report that they do it than magnets; while 9-12s were more likely than either 6-12s or 6-8s.
Drop-Out Prevention

The questions related to drop out prevention were for the purpose of gaining a better understanding of the factors that principals monitor to determine when a student is at risk of dropping out and whether or not the school has a system in place to coordinate an intervention.

- When asked if they had a system of pre-identifying students who are at risk of dropping out in order to coordinate an intervention, 12 principals (57%) said yes and 9 (43%) said no. Both charters said yes.
- Of those that said they have an intervention system for students, we found that all of the principals also involve the parents/caregivers and other administrative staff. The majority also involve a community partner from inside or outside of the building and the rest of the staff. Some principals also involve student services at the central office level.
We found no relationship between whether or not the school had an intervention system in place and any other factors such as vulnerability, school size, magnet status or configuration.

We found that in 8 out of 21 schools, there are no factors being monitored to identify a student at risk of dropping out. Of those 8, 2 of them were 6-8s, 2 were 6-12s and 4 were 9-12s. In the other schools, principals monitored a combination of factors such as academic performance, behavior or attendance. Both charter school principals reported monitoring similar factors.

We found no relationship between school configuration, magnet status, size or vulnerability and the factors (or lack of factors) monitored in relation to a student’s potential for dropping out.
Behavior Management

The questions related to behavior were to gain a better understanding of the volume of referrals principals receive in a given month and whether or not the school had a system in place for managing student behavior.

- When principals were asked if they had a school-wide behavior management plan, 14 (67%) said yes and 7 (33%) said no.
  - Smaller schools were significantly more likely to report having a behavior management plan than larger schools. In terms of configuration, 6-8s were most likely and 9-12s were least likely to report having a plan.

- Principals were asked to approximate the number of referrals they received for the month of September and the number of those referrals that resulted in suspension. Their responses are represented in the graph below. There were 2 principals that weren’t sure enough to answer with an approximation.
  - Schools that were most likely to report a higher number of referrals were non-magnets compared to magnets and 9-12s compared to the other school types.
  - Non-magnet schools were also most likely to report a higher number of referrals that led to suspension.
  - No relationship was found between the number of suspensions and school configuration.
  - No relationship was found between referrals or suspensions and school size or vulnerability.

College or Career Readiness

The purpose of the questions related to college or career readiness were to gain a better understanding of the ways that schools are supporting students in preparing for college or careers.

- The graph below shows how many schools have a person on staff whose specific responsibility is to support students in planning for college or careers. It also how many schools systematically assign students to an adult for help or only provide help if students ask. There are some schools that do not employ a specific person for transition planning, but that still systematically assign all students to adults to receive support.
Non magnets were more likely than magnet schools to have a specific person on staff responsible for transition planning for students.

Activities Available in High Schools

- In PPS high schools, 100% of principals said that in their school students are assisted in filling out applications for college, training or apprenticeships and applying for financial aid through the Pittsburgh Promise or Federal government. However, only 75% of high school principals said that the status of students’ applications is tracked and students are reminded of next steps.
  - Smaller schools were more likely than larger schools to pay the SAT or ACT registration for students taking the test. Noteworthy point: In this year’s Report to the Community, A+ schools found that smaller schools were more likely to have higher rates of poverty.

Activities Available in All Schools

The next graph shows the variety of opportunities that are available to PPS students in 6-8s, 6-12s and 9-12s.

- All of the PPS schools offered a combination of several opportunities for students related to preparing for college or careers.
  - Non-magnet schools were more likely to organize or participate in visits to college campuses or trade schools. Most principals also added that this opportunity was available through community partners.
  - 9-12 schools were more likely to have trade school or apprentice program representatives speak to their students.
  - 9-12s and 6-12s were most likely to educate parents about financial aid options.

- Both charter schools reported providing the same list of opportunities to their students as well. Some additional offerings that are available at the charter schools are a required 130 hour internship in order to graduate, classes in career planning and senior projects that include mock job interviews with community leaders.
**Additional Support Principals Would Like to Provide**

As in other sections of the principal interview, volunteers asked what supports, if any, would principals like to provide for students but can’t and what is it that stands in their way. Their responses are described in the graphs below.

- The response said most frequently by PPS principals was that they wanted a better way to deliver support services to students.
  - Charter schools reported they wanted to follow students for a year after graduation, partner with groups to reach out to families or provide more advanced or honors classes. The barriers they described were space and social issues within families.
**Barriers to Offering the Support that Students Need**

- Money: 10
- Human capital/expertise/capacity: 9
- Time in the school day: 5
- Family support or transportation: 4
- Student interest: 3
- Bureaucracy: 1
- None: 0

**Additional Supports that Principals Would Like to Provide**

- Better or more systematic support system delivering counseling (mental, behavioral, drug and alcohol, grief): 8
- Academic/career planning: 5
- Additional mentors: 4
- Family Engagement: 4
- Character development: 3
- Better data tracking at the district level: enrollment, graduates, paperwork for meals: 3
- Meeting basic needs (food, clothing): 3
- Activities outside of the school day: 3
- More teachers: 2
- No more are needed than what's already given: 1

The extent to which funding in distributed for student services.

Accountability for delivering student support programming.
What the Community Can Do To Help

In order to understand ways that the community can participate in supporting students in school, principals were asked about the tasks that volunteers could potentially do.

- Mentoring or being a community resources for career days, job shadowing and the like were the top 2 things that principals said volunteers could do in their school.
- A potential barrier to engaging volunteers would be the capacity of the school to manage outside help working in the school. When asked if they had a process to engage volunteers, 16 (76%) of principals said yes and 5 (24%) said no. Therefore, a system to engage volunteers would be an important first thing to establish in schools before community members would be able to effectively engage with the school.
- Things volunteers can do outside of the school are sponsor clubs that interest students or help the school to advertise or promote events in order to help with attracting students and engaging families.

IN SUMMARY:

Based on the principals’ responses to the questions regarding student supports, we have identified the following potential issues to explore:

- Adequacy of the academic, behavioral, mental, emotional supports in schools
- Access to tutoring or mentoring
- The extent families are engaged by the school
- Existence of a school-wide drop out intervention strategy
- Common definition of drop out risk factors
- Existence of school-wide behavior management system s
- Adequacy of the college/ career support student receive
- The extent students are taught college/career skills

The purpose of sharing the information we learned from principals is to uncover some of what may be standing in the way of all students being prepared for post-secondary education or training. Some overarching questions that would need to be explored before we can begin to advocate for solutions to address any of the above issues are:

- How can funding be distributed according to enrollment AND need?
- Who should be responsible for providing student supports?
- Does that entity have the authority, capacity or structure to deliver the support that’s needed?

The issues that we have highlighted are by no means an exhaustive list of the challenges that principals, teachers or students face. Neither is it a to-do list of items that we can tackle at once. We hope that, together with the many Pittsburgh residents who care about how we educate our students, we can use this list as a jumping off point to decide what areas we need to understand better and what would be most important to include in a collective advocacy agenda.