

THE FIRST ANNUAL

REPORT TO THE COMMUNITY

ON PUBLIC SCHOOL PROGRESS
IN PITTSBURGH

BY

A + SCHOOLS

Pittsburgh's
Community Alliance
for Public Education



A+ Schools

Pittsburgh's Community Alliance for Public Education

Mission

A+ Schools is a community advocate for improving student achievement by supporting an action agenda shaped by the issues of high standards, quality teaching, leadership accountability, financial responsibility and community involvement. A+ Schools seeks to involve the community in a range of efforts to improve the educational outcomes of public school students in Pittsburgh. It is an independent non-profit.



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INTRODUCTION

A+ Schools believes that public schools are the backbone of the city. The quality of our schools is of vital interest to children, parents, taxpayers, residents and all those who care about the city's future.

The primary goal of this report is to provide a fair and comprehensive look at the progress each public school is making in Pittsburgh. Depending on the reader, a school's progress will be significant for different reasons. For a parent, the report may help generate questions for the principal or teachers. For school board members, the report may prompt questions for the superintendent about why certain schools with similar student bodies seem to be progressing at different rates. For those outside the system—parents considering whether to enroll their children in the city schools, business leaders and taxpayers in general—the report provides information related to workforce readiness and other economic factors. Increasingly in recent years, due to such influences as the rise of state standards and the federal “No Child Left Behind” law, these conversations and decisions rely on data, making common, accessible information ever more important.

We wish to thank the Pittsburgh Public Schools for its cooperation in making data available to A+ Schools. Information in the report includes:

- Data about each school for the 2004/05 school year
- How each school compares to district averages
- How each school measures up to the state standard—“proficiency” on PSSA tests—and whether proficiency levels are increasing or decreasing over time
- An estimate of the progress students typically make in each school, measured by RAND Corporation's “School Performance Index”
- A+ Schools' summary of each school's strengths and challenges (see page 89 for an explanation of how these were identified)
- Information about each level (elementary, K-8, middle, high) on the cover page of each section

Many of the comparisons we make are based on PSSA test results. However, we urge readers to approach test scores with caution. Except in K-8 schools, only one or two grade levels are tested (third and fifth, eighth, and eleventh). Depending on a school's size, scores may represent only

one or two classrooms. Although comparing a school's scores to its previous scores may seem to be a fair measure of its progress, keep in mind that some students may have transferred into the school the year they were tested. Regardless of the number of students tested or which students were tested, results (for the PSSA and other tests) may not adequately represent students' achievement, due to personal factors such as students' test anxiety, and/or technical reasons for score fluctuations including changes in the test itself.

Reporting by race and family income

Readers may wonder why, for some schools, the “strengths and challenges” we identified categorize test results by students' race and family income. After all, research has shown that the quality of teaching in the classroom is the most important factor in whether or not a student succeeds. We draw these comparisons for two reasons. First, as is the case nationally, Pittsburgh has a large achievement gap between African-American and white students and between students from low-income families and other students. Yet the report shows that in some schools, African-American students and students from low-income families do better than city averages. Second, we hope to show which schools may need further resources or interventions, such as providing targeted professional development, hiring master teachers (teachers certified by the National Board for

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INTRODUCTION

Professional Teaching Standards, for example) at key grade levels, team teaching, building the skills of the principal, and/or taking other actions to improve instruction.

The “indicators” of school progress (categories of data) were selected by an A+ Schools’ committee headed by Dr. Alan Lesgold, dean of the School of Education, University of Pittsburgh. These selections were based on a body of knowledge and current research about school quality, necessarily limited by which data were available. However, our goal is not to promote the indicators we chose as the only influential factors. Our goal is to provide information that can serve as a basis for readers’ conversations about how school quality should be measured. Please use the enclosed feedback form to share your views.

Special education

The district provides special education through a range of services at schools and in three special education centers.

How to use this report

This report is intended to help readers define questions and identify areas where they need more information about a school. Here are some possible next steps.

- Ask the principal or a teacher about the school’s plan to raise student achievement. Ask for specifics: “What is being done right now to help struggling readers?” Compare the plan to the information in the report: does the plan appear to address school needs?
- Ask the principal or a parent leader to schedule a parent/community meeting to discuss this report. Ask participants to help define the school’s needs based on data shown here. Discuss the school’s plan to address them and how the community can help.
- If you are a parent, join a parent group at your school. Research shows that most high-achieving schools have high levels of parent involvement. Share your ideas for increasing parent participation, or your strategies for the school improvement plan.

Call A+ Schools at 412-258-2660 if you need help interpreting this report, to discuss school improvement strategies, to request a facilitator for a parent/community meeting, or for help planning a classroom visit.

See page 88 for definitions and sources of data.

This report does not include any information about the centers, or any specific measures of the district’s special education program. (Test scores and proficiency levels that we report for each school include all students who took the tests, regardless of whether or not they receive any special education services.) For future reports, A+ Schools plans to work with parents of students receiving special education services to try to define indicators capable of providing accurate information about the progress of this important student group.

“No Child Left Behind”

The primary rating of schools today is by their “Adequate Yearly Progress” (AYP) under federal “No Child Left Behind” guidelines, which indicate whether the overall performance of students in the school and the performance of various subgroups are meeting federal goals. We believe this one-dimensional “grade” is inadequate. AYP relies almost solely on PSSA results in reading and math. Although it’s based on

two years of test scores, AYP is not the true measure of progress its name suggests because it fails to take into account where a school started. One school not making AYP may actually have made great progress, while a school surpassing the AYP threshold may be stagnating. Also, since the State of Pennsylvania placed the initial bar very low for a school to make AYP, some schools that are meeting the standard have achievement rates that are not satisfactory. Because our goal is to help identify educational effectiveness, and because we understand that is a complex matter, there is no reference here to a school’s AYP status.

This report is not a substitute for visiting schools and observing in classrooms. Many aspects of student learning and school quality can’t be translated into numbers. For example, test scores may not reflect the value for students of keeping writing portfolios, engaging in arts experiences, or conducting science inquiries. Currently, we have no adequate measures of teachers’ enthusiasm for their work, principals’ leadership skills, or meaningful parent and community involvement in a school. We urge readers to consider this report as a tool for framing further questions as they continue to seek information about the quality of our schools.



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