

School Works

Each year, the *Report to the Community* shows that high schools have made little progress or even have lost ground. Why do high schools have the largest racial achievement gap? Why do the majority of high school students struggle to find their way? What do high schools currently offer and what else should they offer so that every student graduates and transitions to college or a career?

Last year, A+ Schools began a program called School Works to engage the community in finding answers to these questions. School Works involves gathering and analyzing information from district middle and high school principals about available resources and opportunities in their schools. Trained School Works volunteers interview principals (and this year, guidance counselors) using a strict protocol, and A+ Schools analyzes the compiled information. Through public discussions and polling, community members review the issues and establish priorities. The 2009-10 results are summarized here.

Highlights of the 2009-10 issues and priorities

1. Issue: Access to advanced courses and college preparation support is limited and uneven, particularly for high school students who haven't been identified as "gifted" and for black students. For example, some principals said that enrollment in Pittsburgh Scholars Program (PSP) courses depended on a student's grades, others said test scores, and still others said behavior. Only slightly more than half of the principals interviewed said that students are deliberately taught study skills.

Priorities:

- Increase academic expectations for all students; teach all students college-ready skills such as note-taking, independent study, and time management strategies.
- Establish clear, fair, and public criteria for enrollment in advanced courses. Simplify course offerings to minimize tracking and maximize student access to challenging courses.

2. Issue: Most high schools lack clear, consistent methods of teaching and reinforcing positive student behavior. Insufficient behavior management negatively affects students' attendance, achievement, post-secondary preparation, and eligibility for the Pittsburgh Promise scholarship program.

Priorities:

- Every school develops a behavior management system, in collaboration with teachers and students, and with district support. The system should include clear rules and fair consequences, with suspension as a last resort.
- Establish a districtwide system for tracking student disciplinary actions to help ensure that rules are reinforced objectively and consistently.

3. Issue: Schools lack a system for identifying students at risk of dropping out, as well as effective interventions to prevent students from disengaging. For example, six high schools reported that they didn't monitor any indicators of drop-out risk. High schools reported various college and career activities to keep students engaged, but only a few activities were available systemwide.

Priorities:

- Establish a districtwide data system to track individual students' attendance, behavior, and course credits, for the purpose of identifying students at risk of dropping out. Form school-based support teams to coordinate appropriate interventions for each at-risk student.
- Infuse college/career preparation into the curriculum. Provide students with staff members who will help them monitor their own progress and make informed decisions on matters that affect their post-secondary goals.
- Monitor and report the overall well-being of the student population—for example, by participating in the Gallup Student Poll.

For the complete text of the issues and priorities, to join our mailing list for updates, or to find out how to volunteer for School Works, visit our Web site at www.aplusschools.org.