Strategic Plan

Adopted April 20, 2012
PITTSBURGH HAS BEEN MAKING STRIDES WITH BLACK STUDENT ACHIEVEMENT

BUT A SIGNIFICANT ACHIEVEMENT GAP STILL EXISTS

Source: A+ Schools
A+ Schools Strategic Plan

WELSPRING CONSULTING
OUR SCHOOLS ARE FAILING BLACK STUDENTS

For 100 starting freshmen
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For 100 starting freshmen

Only about half will graduate
OUR SCHOOLS ARE FAILING BLACK STUDENTS

For 100 starting freshmen

Only about half will graduate

Of those, an even smaller number will be ready for college or career
THESE RESULTS ARE NOT JUST AN INEVITABLE OUTCOME OF POVERTY…

Schools with high concentrations of low income black students are:

• Less likely to have a behavior management system in place and more likely to have high suspension rates (School Works 2009, 2010, 2011)
• More likely to have guidance counselors with larger than average caseloads (School Works 2010)
• More likely to experience regular teacher turnover and have teachers that have been assigned versus teachers who’ve chosen to teach at the school (Tools, Rules and Schools 2009)

Regardless of what school they are in:

• Black boys are 5x more likely to be suspended than white peers (Council of Great City Schools 2010)
• Black students are under-represented in advanced courses (School Works 2009)
• Black students are assigned homework less frequently and are less likely to have books to take home to study (School Works 2011)

…THE WAY OUR SYSTEM OPERATES REINFORCES INCOMING INEQUITIES
NOT PREPARING ALL OF OUR STUDENTS FOR COLLEGE AND CAREER HAS CONSEQUENCES FOR THE COMMUNITY BROADLY

High School Graduates Contribute More

High school graduates earn higher net incomes on average

So they contribute more to our community’s economy through spending and tax revenues

And Cost Less to a Community

Research shows that high school dropouts are:

3.5 times more likely than graduates to be arrested

8 times more likely to be incarcerated
A+ SCHOOLS WAS FOUNDED TO HELP ADDRESS THESE ISSUES

Founded as an outcome of the 2002 Mayor’s Commission Report, A+ Schools grew out of a shared sense of crisis that the public education system was not sufficiently educating its children.

Since then, A+ Schools has existed as the chief independent advocate for improvement in student achievement in Pittsburgh Public Schools.

Its work has focused on improving governance, teaching and equity primarily by creating transparency for the community into District and School Board activities including:

- Community engagement in ongoing observation of the School Board, and advocacy for better governance
- Annual reports to the community on the state of Pittsburgh public education
- Engagement of the community in researching the resources and conditions in schools through principals and teachers (School Works)

In the past four years, A+ Schools has significantly expanded its impact and also its staffing:

- Thanks to increased local support as well as a 2-year investment from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation.
As a result of this increased funding and growth, as well as an emerging sense that A+ Schools’ focus should be on low-income African American students and their families, A+ Schools embarked upon a strategic planning exercise aimed at answering the following question:

Can A+ Schools increase its impact and, if so, how and at what cost?
RESEARCH CONDUCTED TO INFORM THIS PROJECT

Reviewed A+ Schools’ current efforts and position
  • Reviewed and analyzed internal organizational, programmatic and financial data
  • Conducted 15 Board and staff interviews

Benchmarked grass-roots advocacy organizations and spoke with peers and experts
  • Profiled 14 analogous organizations
  • Conducted 6 interviews with peers and experts in the field
  • Reviewed literature on advocacy and organizing

Gathered insight from 5 key civic leaders

Learned from 6 focus groups of youth, parent and volunteer stakeholders
  • Focus groups were conducted by A+ Schools’ staff

The findings were reviewed and discussed in-depth by a Planning Committee made up of Board, staff and other advisors
SUMMARY OF FINDINGS (1 of 2)

A+ Schools is held in high regard by key stakeholders

• Those familiar with A+ Schools view staff and leadership as very strong and programs as well implemented

Despite generally favorable comments on individual programs, some raised questions about A+ Schools’ clarity of purpose and overall impact achieved

There is significant support for A+ Schools to take stronger positions on issues

• Some express concern about jeopardizing A+ Schools’ objectivity
• Many encourage A+ Schools to work with the community to develop its positions

Further, all constituencies see educational inequity as a key issue in PPS and expressed a high degree of urgency around the issue

As a result, most support the idea of A+ Schools taking up the cause of low income African American students, but with caution

• Many see the need to elevate the voice of this community, and believe that A+ Schools should play a lead role
• Several expressed concerns about potential alienation of other parts of the community and urged A+ Schools to be as inclusive as possible in its work
SUMMARY OF FINDINGS (2 of 2)

Peers and experts assert that *lasting school reform can only be accomplished with engagement of the communities involved*

- A+ Schools is well-positioned to play this role based on its strong reputation, involvement of a diversity of leaders across the community, good working relationship with the school district, and its beginning engagement in traditionally disenfranchised communities

Further, they recommend *tightly integrating research and policy work with community engagement efforts*
A+ SCHOOLS’ 4 STRATEGIC SHIFTS

1. **Equity is Core Purpose:** A+ Schools will explicitly champion educational equity and work to remove any barriers to educational equity in the Pittsburgh Public School system.

2. **Advocate for Stronger Positions:** A+ Schools will shift from an organization primarily focused on creating transparency to one that clearly advocates for strategically chosen positions on school reform issues specifically related to educational equity.

3. **Strengthen Engagement of African American Students and Families:** To build political will for lasting change, A+ Schools will shift and strengthen its community engagement efforts:
   - Explicitly focusing on elevating the under-represented voices of low-income African American students and parents.
   - Strategically and deliberately engaging all key voices, including a continued partnership with the District.

4. **Sharpen & Strengthen Communication:** To augment clarity, impact, and reach, A+ Schools will:
   - Sharpen its communication efforts and ensure potency, clarity, and consistency in its messaging.
   - Align its existing programs with its newly articulated objectives and focus.
   - Employ technology to empower and engage volunteers, and allow for real-time data collection.
A+ SCHOOLS’ DEFINITION OF EDUCATIONAL EQUITY (1 of 2)

We believe in the promise of opportunity that our country makes to its children, and that educational equity and excellence are central to delivering on that promise and building widespread prosperity.

An equitable educational system provides each student with the individual support necessary to reach and exceed a standard of success that includes graduating from high school and completing an advanced certification or degree.

Achieving educational equity requires a collective commitment to understanding and valuing the differences among students, recognizing that equity is not an even split of resources but instead a strategic allocation, and acting on that understanding by using the following strategies to guarantee students of color a high quality education:

• **Ensure effective teachers** in each classroom who increase student learning at accelerated rates through distinguished and student-appropriate teaching practices
• **Assign and distribute resources** such as dollars, materials, and staff according to student and school need
• **Guarantee all students access to opportunities** that boost learning and position students for success such as Pre-Kindergarten, Full-day Kindergarten, advanced courses, college/career preparation, music, art, career and technical education, foreign languages, quality after school programming, etc.
• **Provide differentiated supports**, such as special education, gifted education and interventions related to behavior or staying in school that can unlock the potential of individual students

Source: A+ Schools’ staff; developed in conjunction with other educational organizers in Pittsburgh; Board committee

A+ Schools Strategic Plan
A+ SCHOOLS’ DEFINITION OF EDUCATIONAL EQUITY (2 of 2)

For durable change, we believe we need to engage and build ownership among multiple stakeholders, including diverse communities, families and students, and district leaders and staff. These stakeholders have a critical and central role to play in identifying and removing barriers that deny students of color a high quality education as well as promoting the practices and policies that equitably serve all students.

An equitable school system will be characterized by the following outcomes:

• Race will not be a factor in determining which students: are in the highest and lowest achievement categories, graduate from high school or matriculate in training programs or colleges and universities.

• Overall student achievement will rise. We share PPS’ goal of 100% of students graduating, and 80% finishing a training program, 2 year or 4 year university program.

• Every school will be high performing; there will be little difference in student achievement within and across schools in the district.

• All students will have assigned schools that serve them well.

Source: A+ Schools’ staff; developed in conjunction with other educational organizers in Pittsburgh; Board committee
OVERVIEW OF APPROACH FOR ACHIEVING THE STRATEGIC DIRECTION (1 of 2)

To achieve the greatest impact given limited resources, we propose organizing our work around a focused theme within the overall goal of championing equity

• The theme would be an issue of top relevance to educational equity in Pittsburgh Public Schools
• We would anticipate themes to endure for 2-3 years, but likely no less than 2 years

The work around this theme is depicted as a cycle on the next page to capture the natural rhythm of the work

• However, the depiction is not intended to indicate strict sequencing as efforts will overlap

In addition to the efforts around a focused theme, we will also invest in maintaining our position as the community leader of equity-related school reform. Accordingly, we will continue to:

• Strengthen our link to the community through our organizing efforts
• Shape public discourse with broad education and awareness building
• Build a sizable contingency of Pittsburghers who are organized, skilled and mobilized for equitable and excellent public schools
OVERVIEW OF APPROACH FOR ACHIEVING THE STRATEGIC DIRECTION (2 of 2)

A. Determine a focusing theme

B. Engage the community in development of specific positions

C. Sharpen communications to advance key messages

D. Align existing programs with positions

E. Mobilize local communities to set the example for district-wide change

F. Drive broad community advocacy

G. Review progress and determine next steps

H. Continue to strengthen A+ Schools’ role as the community leader on equity-related school reform by:
   - Strengthening links to the community through its organizing efforts
   - Engaging in broad education and awareness building to shape public discourse
   - Building the political will in the community to advance change

(1) Step E is portrayed as optional as it may not be a relevant tactic for advancing efforts under all rallying themes

Note: Letters above correspond to circles in the upper left corners on the following pages of approach detail

A+ Schools Strategic Plan
FIRST RALLYING THEME
“Great Teaching”

Effective teaching is the most significant school based factor contributing to student learning yet we know that students of color are less likely to experience effective teaching.

Current barriers to experiencing great teaching include:

- Teacher placement and furlough decisions are seldom based on student needs.
- Budgetary and political pressures threaten efforts by PPS and PFT to implement and use measures of effective teaching in meaningful ways.
- Teaching and learning environments in PPS' most vulnerable schools are anemic. These schools lack strong practices, such as school wide behavior management systems, core teams of teachers working together, course placement connected to college and career readiness, etc.
- School staff, including teachers, report challenges engaging students in rigorous work.
- Community demand and support for school and teacher improvement in low-income communities is minimal and not strongly organized.

Staff and Board have coalesced around a theme of “Great Teaching” as a core equity issue, with the goal that high caliber teachers be in front of our most vulnerable children. To enable this goal, we will rally the community to demand and support that PPS and PFT act with urgency to:

- Develop measures of effective teaching that include student achievement, classroom observation, and student feedback
- Enable the measures to be used in making staffing decisions to ensure that our most vulnerable students have effective teachers.
- Apply deliberate, sustained effort to create positive teaching and learning environments that enable teachers and students to do their best work in our most vulnerable schools.
HOW A+ SCHOOLS WILL FOCUS ON THE THEME OF “GREAT TEACHING” (1 of 2)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Approach</th>
<th>Programs and Activities</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>B</strong> Engage the community in development of specific positions and priorities for effective teaching</td>
<td>• School Works 2011 engaged over 400 Pittsburghers in building a commitment to great teaching. The Call to Action at the summit articulated specific positions for change.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>C</strong> Sharpened communication to advance key messages of effective teacher in every classroom</td>
<td>• Through our community organizing work we are building 7 teams in communities where African American families live led by 40 skilled, informed Ambassadors. These teams and ambassadors are engaged in determining specific positions</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
| **D** Align existing programs to raise public awareness and build demonstrated political will for ways to get effective teachers in classrooms | • Develop strong communications capacity to:  
  • Articulate key messages  
  • Build fluency of staff, board, ambassadors and teams  
  • Develop strategies to advance messages to broader community and media |
|                                                                 | • Focus Report to Community’s executive summary on teaching indicators  
  • Board Watch: Monitors and advocates for teaching policy  
  • Voter Education: candidates vetted on teaching policy positions (2013)  
  • Focus Budget Analysis on teaching supports  
  • Staffing Pattern Analysis using measures of effective teaching (2013)  
  • Advocate for CBA that incorporates reforms (on-going) |
## HOW A+ SCHOOLS WILL FOCUS ON THE THEME OF “GREAT TEACHING” (2 of 2)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Approach</th>
<th>Programs and Activities</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mobilize local communities to create exemplar of community involvement advancing great teaching in every classroom</td>
<td>Community teams will focus on 5 targeted schools in the first year, building to 13 schools by year 4. Team leaders and members trained and active in targeted schools using tools developed by A+ to conduct on-going monitoring and problem solving resulting in stronger schools and exemplars of engagement.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Drive broad community advocacy</td>
<td>Refine communications of key messages based on D-E; implement campaign style engagement for key positions e.g. petitions, testimony, letters, etc.</td>
</tr>
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</table>
| Assess whether our efforts are yielding success | To review progress, we’ll assess:  
  - Increased number and percent of effective teachers in vulnerable schools  
  - Improved learning environments  
  - Core teams of teachers in vulnerable schools  
  - Constructive community-school partnerships in target schools  
  - Sustained public commitment to teaching effectiveness reforms (key positions) |
| Strengthen position as community leader | Utilize Report to the Community, Staffing Pattern Analysis, budget reports and other public reports to educate and build awareness to shape public discourse about teaching and equity |
A+ SCHOOLS WILL MEASURE ITS PROGRESS IN FOUR KEY AREAS

- Demonstrated political will for equitable and excellent public schools
- Substantive community engagement
- Extensive reach in the community
- Impactful policy analysis

Note: New Salesforce Instance Enables Tracking Robust and Accurate Engagement Metrics
A+ SCHOOLS PROGRESS MEASURES (1 of 3)

**Extensive reach in the community**

Size and influence of reach
- Overall list (# of individuals, demographics including # of families)
- Attendance at in-house and partner-led events (# of individuals)
- Community leadership in attendance at events (# of recognized community leaders)
- E-blast recipients and open rate (# emails sent, # and % opened)
- Followers on social media sites; web traffic (# of individuals, # of distinct web hits)
- Mentions in media (# of references in print and online media)
- Distribution of reports (size of mailing list, # of downloads from website)

Representation of diverse stakeholders (particularly low-income African Americans)
- Geographic diversity and demographics of audience (# and home neighborhood of e-blast recipients, event attendees, volunteers)
- Engagement of Community Ambassadors (# of Community Ambassadors, frequency of involvement, # of team members)

**Impactful Policy Analysis**

Clear, insightful policy analysis that moves issues
- List of key policy analyses conducted (record of policy analyses generated by A+ Schools)
- Citations of policy analysis at: community meetings, in press, at School Board meetings, by PPS officials (# of references in print and online media, qualitative assessment of citations by community leadership)

A+ Schools Reach is Growing

[Graph showing A+ Schools Reach is Growing from 2004 to 2012]
A+ SCHOOLS PROGRESS MEASURES (2 of 3)

Substantive Community Engagement

Aware, involved, and effective volunteer network (including teens)
- Volunteers active and trained (# of volunteers, hours involved)
- Awareness level of equity-related issues (survey responses by subset of volunteers)

Strong engagement with partner organizations
- Events held on A+ Schools key issues (# of events by issue)
- Involvement of partners in advocacy actions (qualitative assessment)

Influential Community Ambassadors
- Engagement levels of their community in A+ Schools’ actions and meetings (# of event and meeting attendees by neighborhood)
- Through demonstration sites:
  - Changes to school practice achieved (# and degree of practices changed, partially qualitative)
Demonstrated political will for equitable and excellent public schools

Voter turnout for school board races (% of eligible voters)

Contested school board races with credible candidates (# of contested races and candidates; qualitative assessment of credibility)

Media coverage of school board races (# of print and online media references)

School board responsive to Board Watch activity, recommendations (qualitative assessment of Board decisions related to Board Watch recommendations)

Advocacy activity that directly engages elected officials (School Board or state) (# of calls, visits, letters, petitions, testimony)
A+ SCHOOLS WILL ALSO TRACK PPS’ PROGRESS ON THE STRATEGIES FOR ACHIEVING EQUITY...

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Strategy for Achieving Equity</th>
<th>Metrics</th>
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</table>
| a) Effective teachers in classrooms                               | • Number and percentage of highly effective teachers (as defined by MET) increasing
• Highly effective teachers concentrated in vulnerable schools
• Teaching and Learning Environment assessment
• Core team of highly effective teacher in every school
• Turnover rate at vulnerable schools                            |
| a) Resources assigned according to student need                   | • Budget allocations by school and student
• Resources actually available to students (assessed through a resource audit)                                                      |
| b) Access for all students to opportunities that disproportionately advantage those who receive them | • Learning opportunities available by school and race, including:
  – Pre-Kindergarten
  – Full-day Kindergarten
  – Advanced courses
  – College/career preparation
  – Music, art, career and technical education, foreign languages
  – Quality after school programming
• Learning opportunities utilized / accessed                       |
| c) Sufficient differentiated supports that can unlock the potential of individual students | • Support services by school, race and child, including:
  – Special education participation
  – Gifted education participation
  – Drop out rate
  – Suspension rate                                                |

Note: School Works’ interviews and data collection is a main source of (and dissemination vehicle for) these metrics
...AND THE CHARACTERISTICS OF AN EQUITABLE EDUCATION SYSTEM

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Characteristics of an Equitable Education System</th>
<th>Metrics</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>a) Race is not a factor that is related to the types of students who are in the highest and lowest achievement categories</td>
<td>• Racial distribution across student performance levels</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>b) Overall student achievement is raised</td>
<td>• District-wide student performance data</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>c) Every school is high performing</td>
<td>• School-level performance data</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>d) Every student has an assigned school that serves them well</td>
<td>• School-level performance data (not too much variation among schools)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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Appendix
HOW WE WILL INCREASE OUR IMPACT ACROSS THE CYCLE (2 of 2)

E. Mobilize local communities to set the example for district-wide change

Focus on a few key schools or neighborhoods to develop programs that engage the community in addressing specific positions:
- Develop training and tools for ambassadors and teams to monitor teaching, school environments, and resources
- Work with community ambassadors, teams, and school staff to solve problems and address issues

F. Drive broad community advocacy

Actively promote advocacy opportunities\(^{(1)}\) and engage the community
- Gain deeper engagement of the low-income African American through Community Ambassadors and their team members
- Work with partners and neighborhood organizers
- Encourage Teen Bloc participants to step into leadership roles and make their voice heard for change

G. Review progress and determine next steps

More formal review of positions and progress by staff and Board on an annual basis

Engage the community through the full-cycle by reporting out on positions, progress, and indicators of success, as well as any next steps

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\(^{(1)}\) For example: action teams, petitions, letters to the editor, testimony, volunteering for Board Watch or School Works, voting, etc.
HOW WE WILL INCREASE OUR IMPACT ACROSS THE CYCLE (1 of 2)

**B** Engage the community in development of specific positions

Deliberately engage the under-represented voices of the low-income African American community through a standard protocol

Engage the community throughout the whole process, including reporting back on positions taken so that they hear how their input has been used

**C** Sharpen communications to advance key messages

Generate broad awareness and understanding of our focus on equity, the specific theme, and what actions we propose to take

- Develop and articulate key messages
- Ensure consistency throughout all of A+ Schools communications
- Build fluency internally, across staff and Board

**D** Align existing programs with positions

Recognizing elected officials as a key leverage point, modify governance work to address theme

- Advocate for positions
- Evaluate Board mbrs on stance on positions
- Enable assessment of candidates on their stances on positions

Engage Teen Bloc to take on efforts related to positions

Write summary and analysis of School Works and Report to the Community to support positions, as appropriate
CONTINUE TO STRENGTHEN POSITION AS THE COMMUNITY LEADER ON EQUITY-RELATED SCHOOL REFORM

In addition to continuing its existing programs (e.g., the Report to the Community, Board Watch, voter education, School Works, budget work, and cultivating community partners), A+ Schools will increase its impact through the following:

Strengthen links to the low-income African American community through organizing efforts

- Continue to recruit and train Community Ambassadors to fill leadership gaps in the community
- Continue to support Ambassadors in building teams of 5+ to mobilize with A+ Schools

Engage in broad education and awareness building to shape public discourse

- Hone A+ Schools’ core, “bread and butter” messages on equity and excellence that A+ Schools should always speak to and that change little from year to year
- Utilize messages as a basis to shape public discourse
WE WOULD UTILIZE A QUICK RESPONSE PROCESS TO FLEXIBLY ADDRESS KEY WINDOWS OFOPPORTUNITY

Issues and opportunities for action may arise at any time during the year

As such, A+ Schools will need to stay agile to respond to these timely opportunities
  • Recognizing that A+ Schools should stay true to its overall focus on educational equity

These issues may include:
  • Issues that require engagement for A+ Schools to remain relevant and maintain a leadership position in the field, and/or
  • Areas that are strategically beneficial to educational equity, but not directly correlated to the rallying theme

A quick response process leverages modified versions of steps B, F and G to respond to these opportunities in a timely manner: