

For Immediate Release

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Consultant Outlines District's Progress on Eliminating Academic Disparity

PITTSBURGH, May 10, 2010 --- The elimination of the academic disparity between African-American and white students was the focus of tonight's Board Education Committee Meeting. According to the National Assessment of Education Progress (NAEP) there is an academic gap between white and African-American students across the nation. Asked by the District to evaluate this disparity, education consultant Dr. Johnson Martin presented his findings on the District's work that concentrates on helping all students who fall below basic in reading and math as determined by the PSSAs (Pennsylvania System of School Assessments). Dr. Martin particularly focused on the potential effect that the various initiatives have on closing the achievement disparity.

"What I did was take a look at how African-American students are doing in the Pittsburgh Public Schools and whether the initiatives that the District has put in place will help them," said Johnson Martin, PhD. "Initiatives such as a district-wide curriculum, the addition of a 4th year math, the use of diagnostic assessments and high school reform bode well for improvement. Successful implementation of these initiatives will be key towards their success." Dr. Martin's report was gathered and researched after interviewing 32 program personnel consisting of directors, curriculum coaches, and field coordinators in 15 program areas.

A disproportionate number of the District's African-American students are not achieving at grade level, which makes the elimination of the academic disparity between African-American and white students one of the priorities of the District. On the 2009-10 PSSAs the District made progress in reducing the disparity on 9 of the 14 PSSA exams. Since 2005-06, the most progress was made in grades 4, 5, and 8. In the 8th grade, progress was made in eliminating the disparity in Reading by 5.5 points and in Mathematics the disparity decreased by 4.3 points. In grade 4, the Mathematics disparity decreased by 4.6 points. In grade 5, the Mathematics disparity decreased by 6.8 points.

Over the past four years, the District has put into place the core elements for improving student achievement, including:

- Implementing a new, rigorous PreK-12 curriculum;
- Launching The Pittsburgh Urban Leadership System of Excellence (PULSE), a comprehensive system to recruit, train, support, evaluate, improve and compensate principals in order to ensure strong school leadership;
- Providing ongoing training for instructional staff so that they continually enhance the engagement of students and teach the curriculum at a high level;
- Using diagnostic assessments to improve student learning;
- Introducing the Positive Behavior Intervention Support program to establish common expectations for good behavior; and,
- Expanding early childhood offerings so a child's school experience gets off to a better start when transitioning to Kindergarten.

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District's New Rigorous Curriculum

The steps the District has taken to implement a new curriculum was a major focus of Dr. Martin's report. According to Dr. Martin, good academic curriculum is not designed for one ethnicity but instead is designed to allow for supplemental programs and differentiated learning instruction. He believes this is the case for the Pittsburgh Public Schools.

Dr. Martin acknowledged the steps the District has taken with its new K-8 mathematics curriculum. He notes the inclusion of supplemental programs such as Compass Math, better resource materials and differentiated learning procedures such as cooperative learning groups have the potential to benefit African-American achievement. The report states, "Opportunities are given to students to not just work a particular problem, but to justify the results through diagramming; peer discussion and at times, explanations are written outlining the steps to solve a mathematical problem."

Dr. Martin further praised the District for the removal of "general basic" math courses for high school students. These were courses in which African-American students were frequently placed. Now all high school students must take Algebra by their 10th grade year.

In the report Dr. Martin states, "According to Robert Moses, algebra is the gateway to the 21st century. The Pittsburgh Public Schools have taken this statement very seriously and now all students must take an algebra course sequence." Robert Moses, PhD is the *President and Founder of* The Algebra Project, Inc. and Eminent Scholar at the Center for Urban Education & Innovation at Florida International University Cambridge, Massachusetts and Miami, Florida.

Recommendations

Dr. Martin stressed that with strong implementation District initiatives have the potential to improve the academic progress of African-American students. Since the District has identified closing the achievement as a major goal, Dr. Martin provided several recommendations to aid in this effort. A key recommendation includes the constant evaluation of the use of differentiated learning procedures. He further recommends principal involvement with early childhood programs, better monitoring of gifted African-American students to ensure continued involvement, and greater understanding of the peer pressures faced by African-American students.

A copy of Dr. Martin's presentation and report is available for review at the District's website at www.pps.k12.pa.us.

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