

Statement on Behalf of
***The Advocates for African-American Students in the
Pittsburgh Public Schools***

By Wanda Henderson

Pittsburgh Board of Education
Education Committee Meeting March 6, 2007

The Advocates for African-American Students in the Pittsburgh Public Schools is a grass-roots community group organized in the mid 1980's due to the dismal plight of our students within the school district. The late, Dr. Barbara A. Sizemore, an internationally recognized educator and scholar was the catalyst to organize the community around the glaring gap in academic achievement between African-American and white students. For many, many years, ***The Advocates for African-American Students in the Pittsburgh Public Schools*** have consistently provided testimony and recommendations to the Board to address the ever-widening achievement gap. However, although there was plenty of rhetoric claiming the district was concerned about the gap, there were no consistent actions to remedy the situation.

The Pittsburgh Board of Education's actions during August 1992, was the proverbial "straw that broke the camels' back". It was then that the school district blatantly hired a white candidate for Superintendent even though the African-American candidate was the best qualified according to the district's own written qualifications. It was now completely obvious to the entire community that the Pittsburgh Board of Education could not and would not cease their discriminatory practices without legal intervention. So on August 24, 1992 ***The Advocates for African-American Students in the Pittsburgh Public Schools*** filed a complaint with the Pennsylvania Human Relations Commission against The Board of Public Education of the School District of Pittsburgh. The late Attorney Leroy Hodge, one of the complainants, initiated, filed, and argued many of the legal issues in this complaint.

In our complaint, ***The Advocates for African-American Students in the Pittsburgh Public Schools*** alleged that the school district discriminated against us by:

- 1) Hiring as Superintendent a white candidate who was less qualified than an African American candidate who had applied for the position,
- 2) Suspending and disciplining African-American students at a higher rate than white students,
- 3) Distributing class grades disproportionately based on race,
- 4) Maintaining a large academic achievement gap between African-American students and white students, and
- 5) Excluding African-American students from certain special programs and projects such as the Gifted and/or Scholars programs because of their race.

After many appeals by the school district, the opinion of Commonwealth Court dated September 23, 1996 (4 years later) held that *The Advocates for African-American Students in the Pittsburgh Public Schools* lacked standing to challenge the school districts' hiring of a Superintendent and dismissed that one issue. The opinion did not claim that the district did not discriminate.

In 1992, some of the statistical data released by the Pittsburgh Public Schools based on the 1990-1991 school year was as follows:

- 1) In secondary schools, "the grade most commonly issued to black students is 'E' representing 28%..." while the grade of 'E' was issued to 15% of white students.
- 2) In no secondary school, with the exception of CAPA, did African-American student performance as a group approach the national norm.
- 3) Nearly 75% of African-American students at certain middle schools failed to reach the national norm in reading and mathematics.
- 4) Almost half (45.8%) of African-American male students in middle and high schools were suspended, while 23% of white male students were suspended.
- 5) African-American female students in middle and high school were suspended at a rate of 30%, while white female students were suspended at 14%.
- 6) In elementary school, almost 19% of African-American male students were suspended, as compared to 6.7% of white male students being suspended.

Not only did the statistical data reflect discriminatory practices, the overall culture of the Pittsburgh Board of Education reflected discriminatory practices. Prior to casting his vote in favor of the white candidate, one of the former board members stated to the effect that he would not vote for the

African-American candidate because “she is Black...and if she gets in, then the school district would turn Black...we can’t have that...”

As of today, March 16, 2007 those students that were in middle and high school in 1992 are now young adults. As Malcolm X stated “Education is the your passport to the future”. What kind of future has the Pittsburgh Public Schools prepared these students for? What kind of future are they prepared for if they are achieving well below basic in secondary (high) school? What kind of future are they prepared for if they are not able to comprehend what they read, perform mathematical computations and use critical thinking skills? What kind of future have we created for these students if they spent 23% of their school days out of school? What are the economic and social effects of this sub-standard education and/or mis-education?

- 1) Many of these young adults were not prepared with the necessary skills to secure decent employment to provide for their families. So many fall prey to the lure of illegal drugs and fast money. Their schools could not or would not teach, but the drug gangs will. They will teach them math (weights, measures, multiplication and division). They will teach them economics (the law of supply and demand). They will negatively develop all their talents and skills that were ignored by the school system.
- 2) Many of these young adults and their children (another generation) will live in poverty.
- 3) Many of their families will be destroyed due to drugs, violence, jail or death.
- 4) Many grandparents are forced to become primary caretakers.
- 5) Many of the children of these young adults, our future generation have developed social and emotional problems due to the destruction of the family (i.e. an increase in the children in CYS, increase in mothers incarcerated, increase in violence against babies and children).

Closing the racial academic achievement gap while simultaneously reaching high academic achievement benchmarks for African-American students is not a misnomer. It has been done nationally and locally, right here in Pittsburgh. Based on the data from the 1991 California Achievement Tests, Madison Elementary School was the highest achieving of the Pittsburgh Public Schools 51 elementary schools. Ninety percent (90%) of the students scored at or above the national norm in reading with 60% in the top quarter nationally. In mathematics, 92%

scored at or above the national norm with 77% in the top quarter nationally. Madison Elementary was the only school which closed the gap between African-American and white students in reading (the white norm was 71%).

Vann Elementary and Westwood Elementary were also high achieving schools with 91% scoring at or above the national norm in mathematics. Vann missed closing the gap in reading by only point. However, Madison, Vann, and Westwood Elementary Schools all closed the achievement gap in mathematics (the white norm was 77%). All of these schools are high poverty schools located in poor neighborhoods. A majority of the students receive free and reduced lunch and live in single female-headed households. (These are the same situations that some use as excuses for low achievement).

In closing, I will quote from one of the many public statements made by the late Dr. Barbara Sizemore before the Pittsburgh Board of Education. "What makes a Madison, Vann or Westwood is what goes on inside the school by the people who get paid to produce quality education. The outcome of an organization is a result of what people do inside it. When will this Board of Education believe this and act on that belief?"