

For Immediate Release

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District Unveils *Excel.9-12, The Plan for High School Excellence*

Year One Priorities Focused on Ensuring Positive Learning Environments

PITTSBURGH April 10, 2007 –At the Board’s Education Committee Meeting this evening, Superintendent Mark Roosevelt and representatives of the District’s High School Reform Task Force unveiled *Excel.9-12, The Plan for High School Excellence*. The presentation of the multi-year plan focused on the priorities for Year One, which will ensure positive learning environments for all students. Initiatives for years two through five include establishing university partnerships and theme-based schools.

“This is critical work that needs to be done to set the stage for student success,” stated Superintendent Roosevelt. “In addition to the academic initiatives already underway, in Year One we need to ensure that we are providing a culture and atmosphere that will allow for positive learning in all of our schools.”

Excel.9-12 was developed based on input from many District stakeholders, including students, teachers, administrators, parents and the community. Consistent with national best practices for high school reform, *Excel.9-12* is organized around five core principles: Safe and Welcoming Schools, Relationships, Rigor, Student Support and Relevance.

The Challenge

District data demonstrate the challenge that must be addressed:

- Over 27% of the District’s high school students choose to attend schools outside the Pittsburgh Public Schools ;
- Over 35% of Pittsburgh Public Schools students drop-out;
- Of the 11th graders who remain in school, 49% are not proficient in reading and 60% are not proficient in math;
- A RAND Corporation study, released July 12, 2006, revealed that only 64% of the District’s high school students graduate.

“Too many students opt-out, drop-out or zone-out of our high schools,” said Superintendent Mark Roosevelt. “We must improve our high schools so that students graduate and are prepared for education beyond high school.”

Safe and Welcoming

“To ensure that our schools are physically and emotionally safe places that support learning, the District will focus on providing a continuum of positive behavior support,” said Dr. Kaye Cupples, Executive Director of Support Services.

School-based staff will receive professional development in the Positive Behavior Intervention Support Model, which will be implemented in all schools. In addition, staff will be trained in the areas of cultural competency, trust and team-building, differentiated instruction, student engagement and customer service. Training also will be provided to ensure the consistent enforcement of the Code of Student of Conduct district-wide. Teachers will instruct students about appropriate behavior by modeling acceptable behavior.

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“It is important that we teach students how to develop strong and respectful relationships, take ownership for learning, achieve high academic standards and graduate with a plan for the future,” said Roosevelt.

With the support of new, district-wide Attendance/Tuancy Officers, school social workers will have increased opportunities to intervene effectively and assist students and their families.

The District also plans to change the current long-term suspension policy to keep students in a school environment rather than sending them home. Alternative settings outside the home school will be established where students with 4-10 day suspensions will be provided an opportunity for continued learning.

Relationships

“Ninth grade sets the stage for a student’s success or failure in high school,” said George Gensure of the Pittsburgh Federation of Teachers.

Excel.9-12 recommends a week-long summer orientation program to teach students District and school-wide expectations. In addition, this time will be used to conduct team and trust-building activities as well as connect students to school athletics, extracurricular and community activities, and service learning projects, creating a connection between the student and the future high school. During this time, families will receive information about high school curriculum, graduation requirements and program offerings. Families will also learn ways that they can become involved with the high school and their child’s education. The District will hold the Summer Ninth Grade Transition Program, August 13 – 17, 2007, at the high schools the students will be attending in the fall.

Additionally, communication will increase between middle grade and high school staff members prior to the completion of eighth grade. Staff will schedule exchange visits between middle grades and high school students and staff. Parent meetings will be held at both middle grade and high schools.

For the 2007-2008 school year, the District will introduce a new mandatory Civics course, called "Be the Change," a new 9th grade course about young people beginning the journey of civic awareness, empowerment and engagement. The city of Pittsburgh will be the lens through which District students will examine civic values, as well as a laboratory for investigating enduring civic issues in a new required 9th grade course. Students will participate in rigorous project-based activities including, investigating a challenge faced by the City of Pittsburgh, designing a report and presenting possible solutions at a city-wide PPS Youth Roundtable event for the Greater Pittsburgh Chamber of Commerce and assisting local government officials on ways that Pittsburgh can thrive in the global economy. In addition, through Student Voices, a nationally recognized program, students will investigate local government, policy issues and political campaigns.

Rigor

“We know we have to push from the bottom and pull from the top, moving all learners to higher levels of achievement,” stated Deputy Superintendent Linda Lane. “We know that successful improvement plans are built around improving teaching and learning and must include an effective delivery model and comprehensive professional development.”

As outlined in *Excellence for All*, *Excel.9-12* will focus on meeting the following goals by the 2008-2009 school year:

- The number of African-American students who take AP courses will quadruple;
- The number of African-American students taking IB courses will double;
- The total number of students who take AP exams and IB diploma exams will double;
- The number of AP exam scores of 3-5 will increase 50%, while IB diplomas double.

To ensure the District meets these goals, Advanced Placement (AP) course selections in all secondary schools will now be required. All schools will identify 15 to 25 students for AP and IB programs. Principals will begin to hold AP and IB Information Nights and organize meetings with African-American families to promote greater participation in the AP and IB programs. All AP and IB students will receive mentors. In addition, the District will require that all AP students take the exam and will supplement the cost of the exam.

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In order to ensure student achievement, the District will continue to provide core academic programs and implement curriculum that is challenging, engaging and culturally inclusive.

The District has begun the implementation of Kaplan Math and English, a researched-based core curriculum that is comprehensive, coherent, uniform and customized to meet State standards for proficiency in its high schools for grades 6-10.

Student Support

District staff will work with the Harvard Family Research Project to develop strategies to increase family involvement. To support students academically, school staff will be trained to identify students' needs early and intervene immediately to assist. In addition, the District will conduct full-day Summer Regional Extended Learning Camps for grades K-8 from June 25 to July 20 this summer to help students who are behind.

Relevance

“Regardless of a student’s plan for the future, we need to get it right every time so that all students are college-ready,” said Alan Lesgold, Dean, School of Education, University of Pittsburgh.

The role of the high school counselors will be enhanced to support students, families and teachers. Counselors will receive professional development to increase their ability to personalize career counseling, determine the best scholarship opportunities that meet student needs, facilitate outreach to students and promote *The Pittsburgh Promise* to every student. *The Pittsburgh Promise* is a college access program aimed at helping Pittsburgh Public Schools students and their families plan, prepare and pay for education after high school.

Looking Ahead

“This work will require careful planning, hard work and deep partnerships,” cautioned Roosevelt. “Over the next five years, we will redesign District high schools to offer high-quality choices for students and families.”

For years two through five, the District’s High School Reform Task Force will consider establishing small learning communities, examining a later high school start time, increasing rigor of the African-American History course, increasing mentorship/internship partnerships, exploring pilot schools and gender-separate schools and creating special leadership programs for high school administrators.

Superintendent Roosevelt concluded the presentation by proposing the Pittsburgh Pledge as a means for ensuring a common shared commitment to clear expectations and high standards on the part of everyone involved.

The Pittsburgh Pledge

We know that education is the key to our future.

All of us – students, teachers, administrators, families, community, board members and other civic leaders – will take an active role in helping all students.

We pledge to:

- Have high expectations,
- Work hard,
- Achieve academic excellence,
- Keep our schools safe,
- Set a positive example,
- Be respectful and considerate of one another,
- Listen and be open to new ideas.

Together, we will hold ourselves accountable for achieving “Excellence for All.”

“We need to have everyone step up for children and their future,” said Roosevelt. “I see *The Pittsburgh Promise* as the community pledge to help all students plan, prepare and pay for education beyond high school.”

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Background on the High School Reform Task Force

The High School Reform Task Force consists of leaders from both secondary and higher education, foundations and businesses, experts in workforce development, parents, and members of the community. It has been created to evaluate and reinvent Pittsburgh’s high schools as part of the District’s *Excellence for All* reform plan, which provides a roadmap for improving the academic performance of all students in the Pittsburgh Public Schools.

The planning done by the High School Reform Task Force, which began in July 2006, is funded through a grant of \$255,000 from The Fund for Excellence in the Pittsburgh Public Schools, a fund established in 2006 by the local foundation community to support the Superintendent’s district reform agenda, *Excellence for All*.

Public Participation in the Process

The public can obtain further information about *Excel.9-12, The Plan for High School Excellence* by calling the **Parent Hotline at 412-622-7920**, visiting the Pittsburgh Public Schools website at <http://www.pps.k12.pa.us/Excel912.asp> or stopping by the Division of Communications at Room 204 in the Administrative Building in Oakland. Public feedback can be provided to the Superintendent via email to superintendentoffice@pghboe.net or via mail.

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