On A Journey To Excellence And Equity For All.

Pittsburgh Public Schools

The Pathway to the Promise.
November 15, 2012

Dear Pittsburgh Families and Community,

For the past six years, we have been on a journey together – a journey to help all of our students achieve excellence so they can earn the Pittsburgh Promise® scholarship.

It has not been a straight path to success. We’ve endured some bumpy stretches of road, rickety bridges and the occasional traffic jam. We are, however, making progress.

We realize there are no shortcuts, and that the destination is sometimes farther than we think. Instead of asking, “Are we there yet?” We ask ourselves, “Are we still on the right path, and are we getting closer?”

In my view, the answer to these questions is, “Yes.” We are on the right path. Our commitment is strong, our mission is clear and we are making progress toward reaching our goals of:

- Accelerating academic achievement;
- Eliminating racial disparities; and
- Becoming a District of first choice.

We know to meet our goals and fulfill our promise to students we must continue “dreaming big” and “working hard” so our students realize their full potential and walk two stages, high school and college or trade school. At the same time, we must keep our eye on our finances and invest our resources wisely. We must re-envision and reshape the District in order to support a competitive model for public education that is sustainable.

To advance our progress, we need partners. Please take a few minutes to read through this booklet and review our progress in five important areas. We welcome your support in helping us stay on course. I think you will agree that by working together, we can go even further in the years ahead.

Sincerely,

Dr. Linda S. Lane
Superintendent
Pittsburgh Public Schools
We believe that every child, at every level of academic performance, can achieve excellence. That is why we have made a commitment to a more rigorous curriculum that starts with early childhood and continues through college- and career-readiness programs in our high schools.

Our District has made Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) for two of the past four years. Although this is far from perfect, we continually strive for improvement, and are looking at a variety of measures that prove we are heading in the right direction.

District-wide, the percentage of students in all grades scoring Proficient or Advanced on both Math and Reading Pennsylvania System of School Assessment (PSSA) exams has been on the rise, but experienced a dip in 2012. But PSSAs aren’t the only way we track progress.

During the 2011-2012 school year, approximately 39% more seniors took the Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT), and in the past two years, the number of students taking Advanced Placement (AP) classes has increased 15% – with 30% of those students being African-American.

We’re offering more supports to help our students get where they’re going. A new Gifted and Talented Model gives more students opportunities to challenge themselves. The Summer Dreamers Academy builds and remediates knowledge in fun ways. And in our schools, our Response to Intervention efforts provide K-8 students with 30 minutes of extra help every day.

This is just the beginning.

The road to increased student achievement is bolstered by our efforts to hire and retain the area’s most effective teachers, to improve our teaching and learning environments, and to invite more families and communities into our educational partnership.

As of 2012, achievement is a reality for 3,200 of our graduates who have received the Pittsburgh Promise Scholarship and enrolled in 91 different colleges, universities, career or vocational training programs. Nearly 600 have completed their two- or four-year degrees or workforce certification programs, and several hundred have been hired or have started their own businesses in the Greater Pittsburgh region.

Building on this progress, the journey continues.
Today everyone must think differently about his or her finances. It’s no different for the Pittsburgh Public Schools. We are committed to living within our means and allocating our resources wisely so we can serve students better with less.

We are making progress due to the courageous actions already adopted by the Board. From June 2011 to July 2012, nearly $50 million in budget reductions were adopted. We have made adjustments to classroom sizes, school locations and feeder patterns to align the District’s infrastructure with declining enrollment numbers. After years of enrollment decline, we have seen some bright spots in 2012. At the start of school, our kindergarten enrollment was up by 11% over the previous year. Additionally, our student retention rate has increased by five percentage points over the past four years from 94.3% at the start of school in 2008 to 99.3% in 2012.

Our 2013 budget represents a 1.5% decrease from 2012, but that does not offset increasing expenditures over which we have no control, such as employee health care and pension costs, rising utilities and a tax base that is not growing. In spite of these challenges, we continue to explore ways to offer the depth and breadth of services that our students deserve.

We know we have more options and offerings than most other districts. We have embraced a more rigorous core curriculum, improved support for all students, initiated a new Online Academy, and continue to offer magnet programs across all grade levels. Increased competition from charter schools and voucher programs will not daunt our efforts.

Two extraordinary initiatives give our students an edge. Our Empowering Effective Teachers effort is not just important. It’s critical because all of our children deserve the best teachers. And the Pittsburgh Promise scholarship, the most extensive program of its kind in the nation, reduces financial barriers, so all our children can have the opportunity to go to college or obtain technical training after high school.

When it comes to education, we need to think differently to move forward. We must be diligent and creative and re-envision how we deliver education in spite of our financial challenges. The road ahead will be bumpy, but we’re on the right path.
Effectiveness

Empowering, evaluating, evolving.

Teachers are the #1 school-based factor for improving student outcomes. That’s why we are committed to growing, recognizing and rewarding effective teachers. Our evolving definition of an effective teacher is a professional, who knows his or her subject, and teaches it well, inspires and engages all students as individuals, and accelerates learning so that all students are ready to receive the Pittsburgh Promise scholarship.

Because our children deserve the very best, we solicited and won more than $80 million in private and public grants to support our Empowering Effective Teachers initiative.

It’s been a team effort. More than 700 teachers and administrators, along with the Pittsburgh Federation of Teachers, have contributed to re-imagining teacher evaluation, growth, recognition and reward.

Today, we’re able to use data in new and meaningful ways so our educators can improve their skills and thereby improve student achievement.

For example, since 2009 we have been using a new system of classroom observation known as RISE. Through RISE, teachers get feedback on 24 areas of teacher practice through multiple observations. It currently serves as the basis of every teacher’s year-end summative rating. 70 percent of our teachers agree that RISE “supports and encourages their professional growth.”

In 2011-2012, for the first time, teachers had the opportunity to learn from students. More than 50,000 of our students participated in surveys that told teachers how they were contributing to student learning and growth. Nearly one-third of our teachers has access to their results so far, and can use the feedback to improve their teaching practice.

Our goal: An effective teacher in every classroom, every day.

In 2012 Pennsylvania joined 24 other states that require measures of student achievement be used as part of teacher evaluation.

We’re ahead of the curve, but we’re not stopping here.
When we listen, we learn. At Pittsburgh Public Schools, we’re using student, parent and teacher surveys to improve on what we’re doing, and to better serve students and parents by creating environments in which teachers can do their best work.

The 2011-12 school year marked the third Teaching and Learning Conditions Survey, which is taken by teachers and other licensed professionals. Use data like never before to get better at what we do. This year, 94 percent of our professional staff participated, leading to increased discussion, collaboration and problem solving.

This survey allows individual school communities to come together to identify issues and develop strategies for improving the teaching and learning environment for our students. On the District level, administrators have a broader picture of common needs and can target areas to be addressed.

Since nobody has more first-hand experience in any particular classroom than the students, the District conducted its first Tripod student survey in 2011-2012. Administered in more than 3,000 K-12 classrooms, this survey gave teachers insight into how well they are engaging students and helping them become Promise-Ready. More than 1,800 teachers have received feedback that reflects their impact on student success.

Family feedback is also important to us. Pittsburgh Public Schools has been surveying families annually since 2008 to measure changes in awareness and opinions relating to key initiatives underway in the District. In 2012, we asked more questions than ever and delved deeper into school-level data. As a result, we received twice the number of responses, with 74% agreeing or strongly agreeing that they were satisfied with their child’s social and academic progress.

With partners focused on the success of our children, it’s easier to move forward.
In Pittsburgh Public Schools, it’s about every student in every classroom every day. The fact that 55% of our students are African-American, and the achievement level of these students is, on average, lower than that of other students, presents a challenge. But this can – and will – change.

Urban sociologist, Dr. Pedro Noguera, who is working with our District, said: “Pittsburgh is doing all of the right things. So it’s not about doing more things, rather what you are already doing better.” Our goal is to do the right things better.

We have a plan in place that sets specific goals for now through 2017 for eliminating racial disparities within seven years.

We’re working with teachers across the District to address the classroom culture, determine unique needs and develop a rigorous, culturally inclusive K-12 curriculum. At the same time, we are providing training and are tailoring professional development so teachers, administrators and staff better understand the impact of race in the classroom.

We’re making sure that all of our schools have everything they need. That means, they not only have teachers who specialize in core content, special education and the arts, but also a counselor or social worker, librarian, gifted support and in secondary schools, career and technical education.

Because families and communities play a valuable role in eliminating racial disparities, we’re reaching out to them in special ways. We’re making sure families feel welcome in our schools. We’re communicating more. And in the spring of 2014, we will sponsor our first Family Leadership Conference.

In addition, we have identified a staff member in every building to help support parent engagement. In the past, we had only eight schools that had an identified person to work specifically with parents.

Our commitment is strong and our mission is clear. We know that with effective teachers, we can produce gains in student achievement that, if accumulated over several years without decay, could erase gaps between black and white students and between PPS and statewide averages.

We know where we must go, and we have a map for getting there.
Travis and Sarah are two of more than 3,800 Promise scholars. As former Pittsburgh Public Schools students and college graduates, they have a bright future living and working in Pittsburgh. As they and other Promise graduates become part of the region’s life and economy the outlook gets brighter for all of us.

www.pittsburghpromise.org