

The Advocates for African-American Students in the Pittsburgh Public Schools

The Advocates for African-American Students in the Pittsburgh Public Schools is a grass-roots community group organized in the mid 1980s in response 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 for organizing 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* consistently provided testimony and recommendations to the Board to address the ever-widening achievement gap with little response.

The Pittsburgh Board of Education's actions during August 1992, was the proverbial "straw that broke the camel's back." The school district hired a white candidate for Superintendent over an African American candidate who many believed was better qualified, leading many community advocates to conclude that the Pittsburgh Board of Education could not and would not cease 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 the complaint, *The Advocates for African-American Students in the Pittsburgh Public Schools* alleged that the school district practiced discrimination 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
- 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 district's hiring of a Superintendent and dismissed that one issue.

In September 2006, a conciliation agreement was reached between the *Advocates for African-American Students in the Pittsburgh Public Schools* and the School District of Pittsburgh. This lengthy, detailed agreement itemizes 94 issues of concern that the school district must remedy.

As part of that agreement, the *Advocates for African-American Students in the Pittsburgh Public Schools* insisted on the establishment of a volunteer Equity Advisory Panel (EAP) to monitor the district's system-wide compliance, and to recommend research-based strategies, methods, and programs to address the disparities. The Equity Advisory Panel Members (selected jointly by the *Advocates for African-American Students in the Pittsburgh Public Schools*, the School District of Pittsburgh and the Pennsylvania Human Relations Commission) are: Dr. Larry Davis, Ms. Wanda Henderson, Ms. Celeta Hickman, Ms. Tamanika Howze, Dr. Anthony Mitchell, Sr., Ms. Maria Searcy, and Dr. James Stewart.

The members of the Equity Advisory Panel have a five-year commitment to this arduous task, so our work is just beginning. We need the full support of the community to effectively advocate for the academic success of our students.