

For Immediate Release

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District Presents Findings of 1st Year Implementation of Major Academic Initiatives

PITTSBURGH June 5, 2007 – At tonight’s Education Committee Meeting, RAND presented its findings of first year academic initiatives in the Pittsburgh Public Schools . RAND, at the request of Superintendent Mark Roosevelt, completed an analysis of the Year 1 implementation of major District initiatives and suggested opportunities to strengthen Year 2 implementation. RAND analyzed how each initiative supports *Excellence for All*, the District’s roadmap for increasing the academic performance of all students.

“We are firm in our commitment to being a learning organization that seeks to self-correct and constantly improve,” said Superintendent Roosevelt. “We know improvements are needed and have already begun to make significant changes with our partners to address many of the recommendations to be presented by RAND this evening.”

The RAND analysis included an overview of the District’s four major initiatives;

- A comprehensive reading program, *Treasures* by Macmillan/McGraw-Hill, available for grades pre-K through 6;
- Single district-wide curriculum developed by Kaplan that fosters incorporation across content areas to create a seamless transition for students between grades 6-12;
- Professional development for principals and central staff through the District’s Leadership Academy, in partnership with the University of Pittsburgh’s Institute for Learning (IFL);
- An engaging learning environment that provides order and structure and supports differentiated instruction, through use of the America’s Choice model at the District’s eight Accelerated Learning Academies.

Excellence for All aims to increase student achievement by improving classroom teaching across the District through managed instruction. Motivated by a sense of urgency, due to substantially low proficiency levels, differences in achievement across schools and student mobility, the District introduced district-wide interventions at all grade levels simultaneously.

“We did these things because they needed to be done,” said Superintendent Roosevelt. “Now we are making sure they are being done well. We are dedicated to seeing this thing through for the benefit of all students .”

RAND Findings

RAND found that the District’s Year 1 implementation challenges mirror those documented by studies of other school-districts in reform. RAND key findings include;

- Differentiated instruction is being widely implemented – at least in grade K-5;
- Macmillan reading program, America’s Choice framework, and Kaplan data have all provided useful, concrete support;
- Use of data remains highly dependent on individual staff skills, background and initiative;
- Support from Kaplan and America’s Choice needs improvement;
- District needs to make clear how school staff are expected to use IFL training at the classroom level;
- Coaches are key to deepening and institutionalizing the changes;
- Principals need guidance on balancing their roles as instructional leaders and building managers;

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The RAND assessment was based primarily on a series of interviews with a representative sample of teachers, principals and coaches across the District.

Reading Program

Elementary students in the Pittsburgh Public Schools have been introduced to Macmillan/McGraw-Hill *Treasures*, a comprehensive reading program available for grades pre-K through 6. *Treasures* is based on the most recent reading research and built on five elements of reading as prescribed by the national Reading Panel: phonemic awareness, phonics, vocabulary, fluency and comprehension.

RAND found the Macmillan materials comprehensive, well-integrated and effectively sequenced. In addition, the curriculum and assessment data supported teachers in doing more differentiated instruction, a major *Excellence for All* goal. RAND suggests that deeper professional development on classroom use of Macmillan is needed for teachers to fully utilize curriculum. Macmillan was seen as very responsive to staff in regards to first year glitches.

Single District Wide Curriculum

Kaplan K12 is a custom designed Core Curriculum Solution that fosters incorporation across content areas to create a seamless transition for students between grades 6-12. In partnership with the District, Kaplan is customizing documents and assessments in the following subjects: English language arts, mathematics, science and social studies.

Significant changes are recommended for the District's core curriculum for Year 2. Although the data system is seen as valuable, RAND recommends that more support is needed from Kaplan on the use of data to help teachers differentiate instruction. Kaplan materials were seen as vague and difficult to navigate. RAND recommends deeper professional development to focus on the use of data and how to differentiate instruction.

In preparation for Year 2, the District has developed suggested revisions to the Kaplan benchmark assessments to improve alignment of the assessments to eligible content found on the PSSA. This will provide teachers with the most specific level of analysis in order to inform instructional modifications based on student strengths and weaknesses.

Professional Development for Principals and Central Staff

The University of Pittsburgh's Institute for Learning (IFL) works with public school districts in reform efforts by translating the best K-12 education research into practice and introducing these practices into districts that strive to implement effort based education. IFL supports the District's Leadership Academy, which provides professional development for principals, coaches and central staff.

RAND reported that a significant buy-in was seen at the leadership level for IFL, but noted there is work to be done in terms of impact at the classroom level. RAND reported that IFL's work with the District in providing professional development has helped coaches define their roles. In addition, the IFL model has helped to build a common language of instructional leadership and teamwork among principals and coaches, as well as, create a network for sharing best practices among coaches.

For Year 2, RAND recommends that training needs to be more differentiated by the experience levels and that the need for clearer expectations for classroom transfer needs to be communicated clearly and district-wide. Many teachers interviewed said they were unfamiliar with IFL or saw limited practicality in helping them raise PSSA scores.

Engaging Learning Environment

America's Choice creates learning environments that engage students, provides order and structure and support differentiated instruction. America's Choice offers professional development and training, on-site coaching, professional development and materials. Currently the America's Choice model can be found in the District's eight Accelerated Learning Academies. RAND noted that the America's Choice framework was seen as in place and consistent with *Excellence for All* strategies.

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In addition, RAND notes the America's Choice writing approach is valued at the school level and tangible elements are in place such as: Writers Workshop, weekly leadership team meetings, Focus Walks, 25 book campaign/principal's book of the month and standards-based student work on walls. RAND found that implementation of America's Choice was hindered by limited professional development and support. America's Choice's use of their accountability plan provided less guidance to schools than needed.

Accountability and Support Systems for Excellence for All

In addition to providing an analysis of Year 1 implementation of the District's major academic initiatives, RAND presented findings on the accountability and support systems in place to champion the District's *Excellence for All* goals.

Coaches

RAND reported that 26 of the 28 coaches in 16 schools were valued by teachers and principals as resources. In all schools, coaches were seen as helpful in the rollout of new programs and the transfer of professional development. RAND found that in most schools, coaches are also key players in data use and are seen as co-instructional leaders. Of the coaches sampled, 1/3 said they face significant distractions from their core role of developing instructional capacity. In addition, coaches believed that professional development for coaches needs to be more differentiated by the experience and more focused on the how-to's of training teachers on each of the major academic initiatives.

Principals

RAND also found that just over half of the principals were seen as instructional leaders by the teachers and coaches interviewed. Of those seen as instructional leaders, 31% were seen as hands-on leaders and 25% as team-based leaders. RAND noted challenges to instructional leadership include: principals face competing role demands, i.e. "running the building," and some lack specific knowledge of content and pedagogy. In addition, principals and their staff need clarity on which functions are core expectations.

RAND Recommendations for Strengthening Implementation in Year 2

RAND made the following recommendations for strengthening implementation of academic the District's major academic initiatives in Year 2;

- Broaden and deepen use of valued data tools through targeted professional development to focus on use of data, school-based support, dissemination of existing best practices and clear accountability for use of data;
- Build on strong start on differentiated instruction in Year 1 through more focused professional development on classroom how to's and a clear focus on coaching and school "learning walks," where leadership looks for evidence of improvement in classroom instruction and student learning;
- Build on existing coaches network to disseminate best practices and to create cross-district consistency;
- Broaden and deepen instructional leadership through continual investment in coaches and promoting team-based leadership;
- Protect the coaches role and ensure coaches time with teachers;
- Provide and protect more school-based professional collaboration time to support deep, sustainable transfer of knowledge and skills ;
- Ensure all staff understands *Excellence for All* is a coherent strategy and that its components are mutually reinforcing.

The public can obtain a copy of this evening's Education Committee presentations by visiting the Pittsburgh Public Schools website at <http://www.pps.k12.pa.us>, the Division of Communications and Marketing, Room 204 or by calling the Parent Hotline at (412) 622-7920. Public feedback can be provided to the Superintendent via email to superintendentoffice@pghboe.net or via mail.

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