



Comments on PPS Strategic Plan

A+ Schools is an independent community advocate for improvement in student achievement. Our vision is a community mobilized to improve public education to produce successive generations of young people who thrive and who build their families and futures in Pittsburgh.

Our Strategic Priorities are to engage, educate and advocate such that:

- Pittsburgh has a school board that functions effectively is focused on student learning, and sets and monitors policy.
- Pittsburgh has a public school system that is accessible, deliberate, transparent and accountable.
- Excellent Classroom instruction benefits every student in the Pittsburgh Public Schools.

These priorities represent the lens with which we view the District's strategic plan. From our perspective, the purpose of an effective strategic plan is to educate the public about the factors that drive the need for reform, define the overall goals for Pittsburgh Public Schools, outline how the district can meet those goals and specify how the community can participate in the process. As a result, the public will have a map for reform that they can use to hold the district accountable to meet the benchmarks that were set and have a clear picture of the direction of the district.

Therefore, it is necessary for this strategic plan, as a microcosm of district operations, to model transparency and be completely understandable and accessible to the general public. To this end, we are providing the following feedback:

Section A

I. How this Plan is Structured

The chart on page 12 could be an opportunity to demonstrate how expansive the reform actions will be in the next few years; as it stands the chart is confusing. The chart would be a more effective summary if across the top of the chart there were column headings that reflect the department in which the action will take place. Some examples could be: Teachers, Principals, Human Resources, Facilities, Budget/ Finance, etc. It would reiterate the point that the entire district is accountable for reform on all levels.

III Mission, Goals and Beliefs

In earlier presentations to the public, the district showed a Theory of Change with teaching and learning at the center and human capital, structure and culture revolving around it. Including this theory in the strategic plan illustrates the district's approach to reform and is necessary for the public to understand.

IV. Key Caveats that Form the Basis of this Plan

A caveat is defined as a qualification or an explanation. This section is really describing key issues that are pushing the district to go through extensive reform. These factors should be quantified so that public can see what is motivating the district to make changes.

V Unique Aspects of This Plan

This section should be renamed Unique Aspects of Our District, rather than This Plan. The new title provides the opportunity to emphasize the unique characteristics of the district such as the Pittsburgh Promise, The Pittsburgh Pledge, the recent success measures that have been achieved as a result of the last strategic plan and the Excellence for All approach to reform.

The section of the plan indicates a focus on the whole child and the whole community. Elements of the whole child – healthy, safe, engaged, supported, and challenged are not evenly evidenced throughout the plan. There is a noticeable absence to the lack of reference to child health in particular.

Page 16 refers to a promise to give students the opportunity to attend college and post secondary training “for free.” This is not our understanding of the scope of the Pittsburgh Promise. This should be clarified.

Pathways to the Promise goal is to focus on the whole child and design a framework for the community to come together to serve children in a more holistic fashion. Additionally, it is stated that it is still in the design phase and what’s listed in the plan is just a draft. Therefore, we see this as an opportunity to engage the greater community in the design process in order to best meet the goals of holistically serving children. Specific reference to how the community will be engaged in the design process should be included here and throughout the plan.

IV. Other Aspects of the Plan

Focus on Becoming a High Performing, Service Oriented Culture of Excellence. The project planning described in this paragraph is very encouraging as this kind of thorough and inclusive approach has not be evident to the community thus far. This approach must include external content area experts as well as community stakeholders. Transparency would inspire public confidence in this process as a deliberate and thoughtful approach.

VII. PA Achievement Outcome Requirements

This section is an example of the level of specificity that each of the goals listed in the next section should have in order for the public to be able to hold the district accountable for meeting its goals.

Under the Graduation Requirements, section C states that all students should demonstrate proficiency on the PSSA in order to graduate. If this is the case, then the proficiency goal should match the graduation rate goal and it currently does not. Additionally, this is a change that is new to the public and should be fully understood by the parents, teachers and students before it is implemented.

Section B

Overall, the public will have a better idea of what to expect each year if time was indicated for the strategies or if they were at least differentiated as continuing, short term or long term. Strategies that will be continued should be supported by data that illustrates their success. Additionally, many activities are redundant and difficult to understand. Activities should begin with a verb in order to more clearly define the action that will take place.

Goal 1: Maximum Academic Achievement of All Students

What are the specific measurable outcomes that the district is trying to reach and by when?

Strategy 1.9: This strategy to implement a Strong Career and Technical Education plan is essential and will drive or be driven by other high school reform initiatives. The plan should be finalized in short order.

Strategy 1.10: Activity 1.10h describes parent engagement and involvement in terms of “informing parents,” of district expectations and student achievement. The activity should reflect a two way communication and interaction between schools and families.

Strategy 1.11: Activity 1.11e should read, “Engage East End, Homewood, (and North side) communities in a transparent, accessible, and deliberate planning process for high schools, including career and technical education.”

Activity 1.11f: states that the West and South communities will be engaged in planning in the 2008-09 school year. This is not consistent with earlier plans the district has released which indicated community planning in 2009-10.

(Add) Strategy 1.12: Reducing teacher and staff absenteeism should be added as a goal (with success measures).

Strategy 1.14: This describes development of a teacher induction plan. We’d like to understand the hiring projections for the next 3, 5, and 10 years to understand how much of a priority this effort is.

Strategy 1.15: It is not clear what “Pathways to the Promise” really is; perhaps because it is still being developed.

(Add) External content area experts and community stakeholders should be included in cross-functional planning teams to offer expertise and perspectives not available within the district.

1.15i: We recommend an RFP process to solicit partnerships with service providers to insure equal access and competitive bidding.

(Add) 1.16: Closely monitor student attendance in all grades and develop attendance interventions in schools with rates higher than x%

(Add) 1.17: Closely monitor drop out rates in all grades and develop drop out prevention interventions in schools with rates higher than x%

Goal 2: Safe and Orderly Environments

What are the specific measurable outcomes that the district is trying to reach and by when?

Safe and orderly school environments are of critical importance for students, teachers, and parents. Yet it is not clear from this plan how the issue is being defined and measured and therefore hard to comment on whether these strategies are or will be effective.

Strategy 2.1a: this is completely unclear. What does this mean?

Strategies 2.2 and 2.3 are good examples of strategies that require success measures'.

Strategy 2.4: The deliverables that CEP is being held accountable to should be articulated here. Does the District implement Clayton Academy or does CEP?

Goal 3: Efficient and Effective Support Operations

What are the specific measurable outcomes that the district is trying to reach and by when?

(Add) Strategy 3.1a6: Regularly provide financial reports and forecast presentations at public school board meetings to raise the public visibility of and accountability for district's financial challenges.

Strategy 3.4: Should include goals and activities to increase minority and women owned business opportunities to do business with the Pittsburgh Public schools.

Strategy 3.6: A+ Schools strongly supports the Districts' efforts to develop a long-term facilities plan that considers building condition, market value, population projections, access and other factors to build a long term plan for facility usage

and disposition. We advocate for a transparent, accessible, and deliberate public process to inform this work.

Strategy 3.10: A+ Schools strongly supports work to improve employee evaluation systems that assess staff competencies and direct professional development of staff.

Goal 4: Efficient and Equitable Distribution of Resources

What are the specific measurable outcomes that the district is trying to reach and by when?

Strategy 4.3: see 3.6

(Add) 4.3c: Develop a building disposition policy and process that protects the interest of the District **and** the communities where vacant school buildings exist. The process should involve external expertise and functional support.

(Add) 4.5: Reach out to all parents, specifically targeting neighborhoods that are underrepresented in the enrollment data of current magnet programs, to inform them of their ability to choose schools for their children and the process by which to navigate enrollment

(Add) 4.6- Assess the extent to which transportation is a barrier to access all new and established magnet programs to ensure that geography is not the main barrier for any student to access quality programs.

Goal 5: Improved Public Confidence and Strong Parent/Community Engagement

What are the specific measurable outcomes that the district is trying to reach and by when?

(Add) The School Board is whom the public has elected to ensure that the needs of their students are being met by the schools through effective governance practices. Absent from this strategic plan are ways in which the board plans to assess the extent to which their proceedings encourage public certainty and modify their strategies if necessary. We strongly advocate for additions to the strategic plan that pertain specifically to the ways in which the school board plans to inspire public confidence.

Strategy 5.3a3: Grassroots plans for engaging parents/families should include external partners already engaged in this work (neighborhood based community groups, head start, churches, after school providers) in a deliberate and meaningful way.

Strategy 5/3a5: Parent teacher conferences should be held at least 2 times per year at appropriate intervals so that parents can be made aware of any academic, behavioral, attendance issues.

Strategy 5.3e4: Does the district intend to publish the equivalent to the 2008 Report to the Community? If so, A+ Schools can re-evaluate what we report.

Strategy 5.4: The website needs to be totally overhauled. Specific issues include: cannot locate phone numbers for staff easily; information on new and emerging programs is uneven and difficult to find; the calendar is not kept current and is not a reliable source of information; while press releases and power point presentations are helpful – more concise information summaries should be posted in html on the site.

Strategy 5.6: The Pittsburgh Public Schools needs a transparent, deliberate, and accessible format for engaging the community. There should be protocols for community processes that include criteria for decision making and other accountability measures so that the public knows what to expect from the District and knows where they can provide valuable information.

(Add) There was a community engagement plan for high school reform announced recently and it does not appear in this plan. Stating it as a specific strategy that PPS intends to use would reinforce the sincerity of the plan that has already been presented and invoke more likely public support.

Strategy 5.7: The role of the Pittsburgh Public Schools Board should be clarified here.