



December 2, 2013

The Honorable Paul Clymer
216 Ryan Office Building
Harrisburg, PA 17120-2145

RE: PPS testimony for House Education Committee hearing on December 3, 2013

Dear Chairman Clymer,

I am writing to express A+ Schools' support for House Bill 1722. A+ Schools is an independent advocate for equitable and excellent public education in Pittsburgh. We serve as a resource and catalyst for change, relying on quality research and data to inform the community and to identify ways parents, students, and community members can help make our schools great. It is with this in mind that I write to implore you to take action that will give districts across our state the flexibility they need to keep our best teachers in the classroom.

Pittsburgh's Recent Efforts to Improve Teaching

A teacher's effectiveness ultimately depends upon whether he or she delivers instruction that helps students learn and succeed. Identifying effective teachers, as well as ones who need to improve, requires a fair evaluation system that has clear and rigorous expectations, provides meaningful feedback to help improve teaching and learning, and utilizes multiple measures of performance.

After nearly five years of intentional collaboration between Pittsburgh Public Schools (PPS) and Pittsburgh Federation of Teachers (PFT), teachers, and principals, PPS has produced a strong teaching evaluation system that is focused on improving teacher effectiveness. Our recent analysis of the new teacher improvement system found it to be reliable, accurate, and focused on providing feedback for improvement. Therefore, we support changes in state policy that will allow districts to factor comprehensive measure of effective teaching under Act 82 into staffing decisions that will result in greater numbers of highly effective teachers and greater achievement for all of our students.

Effective Teachers Are Critical to Student Success

Decades of research have shown that the quality of education received by a student depends more on the quality of his or her teacher than on any other in-school factor. Numerous studies document large differences in effectiveness from one teacher to another, even after adjusting for student characteristics such as baseline test performance, race/ethnicity, family income, and gender. These differences are also clear in Pittsburgh, where research on multiple years of teacher data by Mathematica Policy Research has led to the following conclusion:

"The most effective teachers in PPS produce gains in achievement that, if accumulated over several years without decay, could erase achievement gaps between black and white students, or between Pittsburgh averages and statewide averages."

Effectiveness Matters More to Student Learning than Seniority

Yet while our schools are finally doing a better job of differentiating among performance of our teachers, students still lose too many effective teachers when furloughs occur because seniority is the only factor considered. Seniority-based layoffs overlook the fact that more senior teachers are not always the most effective ones. According to a study conducted in 2010, more than 80 percent of seniority-based layoffs would result in better teachers leaving classrooms and less effective teachers staying. (Goldhaber et al., 2010). In that study only 13-16% of teachers laid off would also have been cut under a system based on effectiveness.

Seniority Only Furlough Policies Hurt our Most Vulnerable Students

The current system for laying off teachers, based on seniority, disproportionately affects our most vulnerable schools which have high student poverty, low achievement, and high racial achievement gaps. These schools also have high percentages of black students. For example, schools such as King, Faison and Arlington lost between 30-50% of teachers to layoffs because they have higher numbers of new teachers. Ironically, these schools were just re-staffed with new teachers as part of a school improvement strategy. Teacher layoffs based on seniority meant that these schools had to re-staff with more senior teachers who have been displaced and may not feel equipped to teach in these schools.

The Public Supports Policies to Retain our Best Teachers

In Pittsburgh the majority of the public and approximately half of teachers support using factors other than seniority when dismissing teachers. In a recent survey of 500 registered voters and 150 teachers in Pittsburgh, four out of five—80%—of the public in Pittsburgh and 48% of Pittsburgh teachers believe that when it comes to making decisions about which teachers to let go first, the school district should be able to take things other than seniority into account (Winston, 2011). It's not surprising then, that more than 30 community groups and 1,500 individual parents, students, teachers, and community members stood with us last summer in urging PPS and PFT to use more than just seniority when PPS needed to make painful staffing reductions. They could not come to an agreement, which meant that our students lost great teachers and public confidence in the quality of our schools eroded.

Teacher Evaluations Must Matter

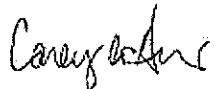
Even the best evaluation system will fail to achieve student gains if the information it produces has no consequence. As it is in most professional settings, an effective evaluation system should be a primary factor in decisions related to tenure, how teachers are assigned and retained, how teachers are compensated and advanced, what professional development teachers receive, and when and how teachers are dismissed.

Evaluation systems that have clear performance standards, frequent feedback and support for teachers failing to meet the standards are fair for all teachers, including those teachers whose performance ratings are unsatisfactory. Currently, Pittsburgh offers salary increases for a number of specific career ladder positions, as well as financial awards for teachers in Promise Readiness Corps teams and in schools where students achieve certain gains in test scores. These positions and performance incentives recognize and reward teachers for working with vulnerable students and for taking on greater responsibilities toward fostering effective teaching in their schools. **If performance is a strong enough basis on which to determine rewards, it must also be a strong enough basis on which to base staffing decisions.** We support these efforts by the district and union to value

and reward effective teaching, and we hope these performance measures will be used in the future to make decisions about who teaches and where.

We urge you to consider the changes laid out in HB 1722 and provide our students the assurance that policy will not be a barrier to them experiencing great teaching in the classroom every day. We know that these changes are difficult and that it will take courage, vision and tenacity to see them through. We thank you for your leadership and your willingness to consider revising a generations old practice to be more in line with the demands of our times.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script, appearing to read "Carey A. Harris".

Carey A. Harris
Executive Director