

Transformation and Turnaround at the Wilkinsburg School District





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The Wilkinsburg School District is undergoing transformative changes. The 2016-2017 school year brought a new Superintendent, Dr. Linda Iverson, who has already shown herself to be an effective agent of change. And the new partnership with Pittsburgh Public Schools has begun to bear fruit in the form of improved outcomes overall and a number of impressive success stories.

To create the type of outstanding school district that provides students with an exceptional elementary experience to prepare them for high school, college and careers in the 21st century, the district must maintain its momentum. With that in mind, the district has developed this outline of the past year's improvements and of its agenda for the near future.

Areas of improvement and change include enrollment, finances, human resources, WSD/PPS partnership, professional development, renovations of the elementary school buildings and staffing and curriculum.

Enrollment

A number of students who were previously enrolled in charter schools returned to the district, which is gratifying evidence that the community recognizes that the district is moving in the right direction.

For the 2017-2018 school year, the district expects to have approximately 302 students enrolled at Kelly and 225 students enrolled at Turner, but the district projects that these numbers will grow over the year as word is shared to the community about its educational programs and successes.

The district anticipates that a number of the Pre-K students from Hosanna House, who live within the Wilkinsburg School District boundaries, will attend Kelly or Turner Elementary School for kindergarten next year. Of the 56 Pre-K students enrolled last year, the district expects 45 to be enrolled in kindergarten classrooms this year.

Finances

The district is proud to say that it is rapidly improving its financial standing. While the district has operated with an accumulated negative fund balance of \$2,456,000 over the past 3+ years, it will be ending its fiscal year on 6/30/2017 with a positive fund balance.

In years past, the district accumulated as much as \$2.5 million in past-due invoices. Now, all its payments to the state, charter schools, vendors and the Allegheny Intermediate Unit (AIU) are being made on time and, in some cases, in advance. The district currently has no past-due invoices and will be ending the year current in all its obligations.

Current local tax collections are up almost 2% from previous years and delinquent tax collections are up almost 30%. For the first time in the past five years, the district did not have to secure a "Tax Anticipation Note" to start the fiscal year and cover operating expenses.

Rick Liberto, the district's Director of Finance and Business Operations, has worked diligently to complete and submit required state reports from previous years and, as a result, it has received additional funds that were due to the district from past years.

While concentrating all district efforts on education, the district must also be good stewards of the public funds used for that purpose and give the public confidence that it is spending those funds wisely and effectively.

Human Resources

At the beginning of the 2016-2017 academic year, Dr. Iverson met with district faculty and staff in both group and one-on-one settings during her Listen and Learn Tour. It was through these conversations that she learned that many staff members didn't have a clear understanding of their job responsibilities. After significant effort, administrative processes have been tightened up.

Now, the school district has accurate files on all employees, an updated organizational chart, and a clear staff-wide understanding of individual job responsibilities. The district has also updated its website and cleaned up its phone systems to reflect staffing changes both on a district and school level.

Partnership with Pittsburgh Public Schools

In partnership with Pittsburgh Public Schools, the district ensured the smooth transition of 7-12 graders into Pittsburgh Westinghouse Academy, where they have access to state-of-the-art facilities, course offerings, advanced placement courses, CTE programs, extracurriculars, clubs and other opportunities not available at the former Wilksburg Middle and High School.

Students not only have access to the resources at Pittsburgh Westinghouse Academy and the Pittsburgh Public School District, they also have the scholarship support of the Pittsburgh Promise. The 9th-12th graders who meet academic, attendance and post-secondary institution requirements are eligible for the Pittsburgh Promise – enabling them to take advantage of the college support offered to Pittsburgh’s students. Students may be eligible for up to \$7,500 per year (based on eligibility criteria) and up to a total of \$30,000 for post-secondary expenses.

Additionally, after one year at Pittsburgh Westinghouse Academy, Wilkinsburg students are eligible to apply to magnet schools within the Pittsburgh Public School system if they choose to do so. Magnet schools and programs allow students to pursue special interests, talents or career goals. Magnet schools are not neighborhood specific, so students who reside in Wilkinsburg or anywhere in the Pittsburgh Public School District can apply to attend. 2017-2018 sixth grade students should apply for the 2018-2019 school year as soon as registration opens, but CAPA Applications are due by mid-October: <http://www.pps.k12.pa.us/Page/496>.

Extensive transition planning activities including joint field trips, school tours, team building days, club meetings, extracurriculars and summer programs, helped prepare Wilkinsburg 7-12 grade students and their Pittsburgh Westinghouse peers for the 2016-2017 school year.

In the first semester alone, Wilkinsburg students have made honor roll and even high honors; they have competed successfully on sports teams; and increased their GPAs and attendance records. Students have also reported that many of their new friends are the ones they made at Pittsburgh Westinghouse. Just recently, a Wilkinsburg High School student was crowned Prom King, and another Wilkinsburg resident was named co-valedictorian of the class of 2017.

The sixth graders at Kelly and Turner Elementary Schools have also been meeting and communicating with their sixth-grade peers at Pittsburgh Westinghouse throughout the year. Much like the 7th-12th graders before them, they have toured the school, met teachers, and enjoyed joint field trips and team building days with their future classmates.

The sixth graders also participated in a Pen Pals project that paired them with students currently attending Pittsburgh Westinghouse Academy. In one such pen pal letter, a Pittsburgh Westinghouse student gives advice on how to overcome shyness.

The sixth-grade classes also wrote lists of questions in preparation for a visit by four former Turner and Kelly students currently attending Pittsburgh Westinghouse Academy. The four middle schoolers were brought to the elementary schools to answer questions about their experiences by LaToya Hamm, Pittsburgh Westinghouse’s middle school social worker.

They were asked questions like: “What time do classes start each day?” “What do I have to do to get the Pittsburgh Promise?” “Do middle school and high school students eat together?” “Are there incentives for good behavior/good GPAs?”

Going forward, the district will continue to plan these transition activities for future incoming classes in partnership with Pittsburgh Public Schools, because it is paramount to ensuring a smooth transition and the success of Wilkinsburg students.

Professional Development

Across both schools this year, the district focused on creating systems, structures and processes that ensure consistency in adult practice and cultivate a culture of shared responsibility and collaboration through the formation of Instructional Leadership Teams. Dr. Jeff Nelsen of Targeted Leadership Consulting was contracted to assist the district in the development of this model, which provides its principals and instructional leaders with the requisite tools they need to strengthen their leadership and improve student academic achievement.

Professional development sessions were led by Cindy Tucker of Targeted Leadership. Next year the district will continue using the Distributive Leadership model to build consistency and collaboration within schools and across the district by strengthening Instructional Leadership Teams and transition to Teacher Grade Level Data Teams. The book *The Data Team Experience* by Angela Perry will be purchased for all teachers.

The district also rolled out *Cycles of Professional Development* at its schools. This research-based framework was designed by On Hands Schools, Inc. and Targeted Leadership to build the capacity of administrators, teachers and staff in PA Core Standards and district-wide instructional strategies, including text dependent analysis and small group guided reading. The cycles began with presentation of theory, professional reading and time for teachers to do coaching and peer review of model and practice. Deep and meaningful learning only occurs when all Cycles of Professional Learning are implemented.

Dr. Steve Biancaniello, of On Hands Schools Inc., was contracted to provide the content to the district's teachers. Coaches and interventionists played a pivotal part in providing leadership to all classroom teachers on this high yield strategy. Dr. Biancaniello will return and lead the district's professional development work focused on universal small group guided reading instruction.

The district is taking the professional development of its teachers very seriously. Teachers must be able to provide examples of how they use district instructional strategies in their classrooms. They also conduct walk throughs of classrooms at each building to provide each other with constructive feedback.

Next year, the district's number of teacher professional development days will increase. In addition to the full 6.5 days it currently has, the district will also be adding 8 monthly half days. And the district has put additional funds in the 2017-2018 budget towards professional development to support its teachers' efforts to provide students the best possible education.

Renovations to Elementary School Buildings

The renovations at Kelly and Turner Elementary Schools will create learning environments that students and teachers can be proud of. The scope of work at Turner includes upgrading building systems such as heating, cooling, plumbing, lighting and safety/security technology; replacing exterior windows and doors, repairing masonry, repainting, installing new ceilings and floors, as well as making ADA and Code improvements. When renovations are complete, the schools' facilities will be more energy efficient, as well as look polished and new.

To accommodate these extensive renovations, for the 2017-2018 academic year, PreK-6th grade Turner Elementary School students and staff will move to the former Wilkinsburg High School building, while heavy construction takes place at the elementary school. The temporary move ensures the least amount of disruption possible to instruction and learning – staff and students won't have to contend with noise, dust and frequent movement of classrooms during the different phases of construction.

A portion of Turner's renovations budget has been set aside to reopen the former high school building. This budget includes funds for cleaning up the building and decorating its spaces so that it is welcoming to elementary students.

A part of preparing the former high school building for elementary students includes furnishing it with the smaller desks, chairs and tables moved from Turner. The classrooms and hallways will also be outfitted with colorful charts, bulletin boards, posters, rugs and all the other hallmarks of a typical elementary school. The first and second floor classrooms will be reopened to students, as well as the gymnasium, auditorium, cafeteria and library.

Over the summer, Kelly Elementary will also undergo renovations to the outside entrance of the building, the internal lighting system and to the kitchen. These renovations will continue throughout the next school year but will cause minimal disruption to the daily operation of the school and to the classrooms.

Staffing

Staffing improvements will be done with a constant focus on having the right people in the right positions and giving them the support they need to be successful. While there will be staff reassignments, they will be in the context of creating some very positive improvements, including:

- The district has expanded the STEAM initiative to include *two full-time STEAM positions*.

- In both schools, the district added two Positive Behavior Intervention Support (PBIS) classrooms for students who need behavioral support which will be staffed by *two full-time PBIS coach positions*.
- To strengthen the climate and culture in the district's schools, *a full-time Social Services Coordinator* was hired. This individual will work with families and students to help alleviate barriers that impact student success in school, such as chronic attendance issues.
- The school district has partnered with a new service provider called **Family Services of Western, PA**. They will provide mental health services to families, students and community, working collaboratively with the district's schools to assist in the coordination, consistency and implementation of its Student Assistance Program (SAP) process.
- The district hired *an Elementary Literacy Coach*. The job description for this position has been rewritten to include more direct support to teachers and students.
- The Math Coach job description was rewritten to include more direct support to teacher instruction and students.
- Special area and library teachers will provide push-in intervention support within classrooms during the periods when they are not scheduled for a class.
- The district will be offering Instrumental Music in both elementary schools next year and have posted a position for *a part-time Instrumental Music Teacher*.

Curriculum & Behavioral Support

This year, a new literacy series and math program were implemented in district classrooms and, going forward, the district plans on:

- Revising its current intervention pull-out model to a full universal Response to Intervention Instruction (RTII/MTSS) model to provide additional academic support to students.
- Implementing the Dolch Sight Word List of Frequently Used English Words in grades K-3, consisting of words students must know and easily recognize while reading to achieve reading fluency in the English language.

- Improving how it monitors its performance and progress by using the district-wide Data Driven Decision Making (DDDM) Protocol process to analyze data at the building and teacher grade levels.
- Implementing a new diagnostic assessment called the Developmental Reading Assessment (DRA2) for grades K-6. With it, teachers will better diagnose student reading levels and use reading data to inform instruction in small guided reading groups. Horseshoe tables will be ordered for classrooms so teachers can provide small guided reading instruction to students as a universal practice in all classrooms.

STEAM

With the help of the Allegheny Intermediate Unit, both Kelly and Turner Elementary Schools began experimenting with STEAM makerspaces projects this past year.

One project taught students how to use various types of media equipment. They showcased their skills during Black History Month by conducting and videotaping interviews with African American staff members, asking questions like: “What does Black History Month mean to you?” and “Who do you most identify with?”

The students loved working on these STEAM projects, and district faculty observed a significant increase in their self-confidence and pride for their work. Next year, the STEAM program will be incorporated into a year-round class for all grade levels and is creating two full-time STEAM positions.

Second Step Social Skills Curriculum

The district has instituted a behavioral curriculum called Second Step, which strengthens students in their ability to listen, stay calm, maintain control, have empathy, manage emotions and solve problems. After bringing the Second Step curriculum into the classrooms, students have been meeting behavioral expectations and are more productive.

Positive Behavior Intervention Support (PBIS) Rooms

To strengthen the district’s universal Positive Behavior Intervention Support (PBIS) programs in both schools, it is adding two PBIS student support classrooms for students who need behavioral support. These rooms will be staffed by two full-time PBIS coaches.

With the installation of PBIS rooms, an alternative to in-school suspension, the district is proactively working to reduce the number of behavioral disruptions in the classrooms.

It will serve as a pull-out room, with the goal of deescalating emotions and turning behavior around so students can return to their regular classrooms. It will give them a safe, quiet space to work out their issues with an adult, who will help them calm down and manage their own behavior using positive language.

However, going to the PBIS room doesn't mean a free period. Students will be expected to bring their classwork.

Special Education

In special education this year, the district has met a major requirement of the State's "needs assistance" status and will meet additional requirements needed for this status to be changed to "meets requirements" at the next annual determination.

An **Emotional Support Classroom** has been added to the Special Education Department and will support students district-wide with social and emotional challenges. The district has hired a full-time paraprofessional for that class.

Also, Individual Education Program (IEP) meetings have been held for all students owed Compensatory Education since the closing of the high school last spring. The Supervisor of Special Education has attended most of these and other district IEP meetings to assure compliance.

Assistant to the Superintendent

At the recommendation of Dr. Iverson, the School Board hired Dr. Cathleen Cubelic for the role of Assistant to the Superintendent. She brings a wealth of experience working with school districts, principals and teachers, and her expertise will help materialize the district's vision of a world class elementary school system that prepares students in grades PreK-6 for the 21st century.

Dr. Cubelic began in May and works closely with the Superintendent and the Director of Finance and Business Operations. She is also transitioning into the role as liaison for the Wilkinsburg School District in its partnership with Pittsburgh Public Schools. Her numerous responsibilities as Assistant to the Superintendent include oversight of:

- Curriculum, Instruction and Assessment Alignment with PA Core Standards
- Analysis of PSSA/PVASS Data to Inform District Goals
- State Principal/Teacher Effectiveness Evaluation Tools
- District State Assessments & Testing
- Comprehensive District and School-Level Improvement Planning
- Management of Grants, Title I and Federal Programs
- Wilkinsburg School District/Pittsburgh Public Schools Partnership

Dr. Cubelic was chosen because her background and perspective from the state's side of the teaching – learning equation brings critical strength to the district leadership team. The administration is confident she will play a pivotal role in the growth and success of the district.

Conclusion

In a recent letter to staff, Dr. Iverson summed up her thoughts about the progress the district has made to date:

“We are embarked on a long journey and we are in it together. We are restoring this district’s reputation by restoring its commitment to integrity, to professionalism and to excellence in all we do. We are setting high expectations for our students and for ourselves.

“I can see the future we all hope for on the horizon and have been heartened by the response our efforts have received from the school board and from many others in the community who are partners with us in turning the school system into a real asset for Wilkinsburg.”