

# Rising up: Stories from our schools

**I**n response to the Covid-19 pandemic, we devote the entire “Rising up” section of the report this year to exploring how the Pittsburgh Public Schools (PPS) and the community are supporting students’ needs.

## Read on to find out:

- What the district’s core support processes and interventions are, and how Superintendent Wayne Walters plans to improve them (below)
- How district staff and teachers create social and emotional learning opportunities, and what students have said about themselves on surveys (page 10)
- How the Student Assistance Program addresses students’ well-being (page 12)
- Superintendent Walters on how teachers can best support students (page 16)
- How the wider community has created tutoring opportunities in response to the crisis of missed learning time (page 14)
- Snapshots of tutoring in action (pages 18 and 19)
- Where to find resources to support your child (“Where to turn” on pages 16 and 17)
- What key indicators of student well-being and achievement tell us about where students are (in the graphics on pages 11, 12, 13, and 15)

## Visit [ourschoolspittsburgh.org/2022-rising-up](https://ourschoolspittsburgh.org/2022-rising-up), to read:

- Special education: The view from Langley PreK-8
- A parent’s perspective on tutoring
- How to help your child with reading and math at home
- Helping children in Pittsburgh: What you can do
- Links to relevant research
- “Rising up” stories from 2021, 2020, and 2019



## Supporting Pittsburgh’s students for a new day

By Faith Schantz

**A**cross the country, researchers and educators have begun to take stock of the harm the Covid-19 pandemic has caused school-aged children. Students’ mental health, which affects every aspect of their lives, is widely considered to be in crisis. The release of results from the National Assessment of Educational Progress, given in a sampling of districts, showed historic losses. A RAND Education study described how virtual schooling fell short, especially in districts that kept buildings closed for long periods, like Pittsburgh. Schools that were fully remote for most of the 2020-21 school year reported less instructional time, fewer completed assignments, and more student absences compared to schools that re-opened sooner.

In Pittsburgh, the city’s most vulnerable children are likely to attend the Pittsburgh Public Schools. In the 2021-22 school year, 66% of its 19,160 K-12 students lived in poverty, and 69% were Black or Brown. Twenty-one percent received special education services (excluding gifted education), higher than district averages for Pennsylvania and the nation. All of these groups suffered disproportionately from the pandemic. And it’s not over: Allegheny County recorded more than 27,000 Covid-19 cases among school-aged children during the last school year.

We asked: How did students in the city schools fare during the pandemic? And what is in place to support them?



Here, we take a close look at some of the district's support systems—what they are, how they are intended to function, how students themselves fit into the picture, and how parents can be involved. In the main story and in snapshots on pages 18 and 19, we consider how the wider community has stepped up to meet students' social and academic needs with one-on-one and small group tutoring. Throughout this section, we address how students are doing on key indicators of well-being and academic achievement, in the graphics on pages 11, 12, 13, and 15. (For more on where the district stands, see the executive summary beginning on page 26).

### The view from Central Office

Within district administration, the Office of Student Support Services is a department with an exceptionally broad scope, responsible for everything from monitoring student attendance to evaluating school nurses. Student Support Services oversees student discipline, including the **Positive Behavior Interventions and Supports (PBIS)** framework, which lays out expectations for behavior and interventions, and **restorative practices**, which involve shifting the focus from punishment to addressing the harm and repairing relationships. Staff from that office also are responsible for the **Student Assistance Program (SAP)**, a state-mandated process within schools to identify and address nonacademic issues that negatively affect students' well-being and achievement. They also work with staff from the Office of Curriculum and Instruction to help teachers regularly include **social and emotional learning (SEL)** skills and practices. "**Multi-Tiered**

**Systems of Support"** (MTSS) is another decision-making framework, intended to help teachers identify students who need more academic help, and to provide that help more quickly and intentionally. MTSS falls under the purview of Curriculum and Instruction. When the MTSS process leads to a referral for **special education**, a third department, the **Program for Students with Exceptionalities (PSE)** becomes accountable for how that student is supported.

**"We know what we have to do academically—and what a huge lift that is, but we also know that if we don't situate ourselves better culturally, and with our students' mental health and well-being in general, we may never get to the academic side of things with certain kids."**

The district's goal is for these core processes and interventions to work together seamlessly in schools. "When it goes well," Superintendent Wayne Walters says, "we see unified language, we see unified practices, we see unified behaviors, we see unified mindsets and understanding about how it works, not only [among] those who are implementing the system, but those who are receiving the services from that system."

## Rising up: Stories from our schools

Both Walters and Rodney Necciai, assistant superintendent for Student Support Services, acknowledge they do not see that happening system-wide. To some extent, this is simply because of differences among schools. The district depends on outside agencies to provide many of the services students need, and schools' access to them varies. Walters points out that it's easier for schools in the East End, where four of the city's universities are located, to recruit college students who are willing to serve as in-person tutors or mentors, compared to schools in other regions. Some schools are "community schools" that partner more intentionally with community providers to offer integrated services. Others haven't adopted that model. Some have "SAP liaisons"—staff from partnering agencies who help find services for students. Others don't. Changes in the workforce have made it difficult to fill some vital support positions, such as school nurses, or even to find services outside the district, such as therapy for students who need it, Necciai says. Then there are budget challenges. "We know what we have to do academically—and what a huge lift that is," he says, "but we also know that if we don't situate ourselves better culturally, and with our students' mental health and well-being in general, that we may never get to the academic side of things with certain kids." Sometimes "those resources aren't there," meaning principals have to make choices.

This year, Walters hopes to strengthen core support processes by taking a systems approach, and by making the purpose of interventions explicit for those charged with carrying them out. For example, the summer academy for school leaders and Central Office teams included a restorative practices "re-set." Though the district did a lot of work to begin restorative practices, he says, some still questioned, "Does this mean that students don't get disciplined?" "Does it mean that they just get to do whatever they want?" The session, and the ongoing professional learning activities that followed, involved "really digging into the 'why' to inform the 'what,'" he says, as well as more specificity around the "how."

While Central Office provides support and guidance, the what and the how play out in schools. What do these processes look like in school offices and classrooms, and how do they make a difference for students?

**When students struggle with a problem, the teacher can say, "Man, this is really tough. We tried these three and they were easy, but this one is really a stumper. Let's pause, let's take a deep breath."**

### Social and Emotional Learning

Concerns about students' well-being in recent years have led to a national focus on social and emotional learning (SEL), a set of skills and competencies that reflect students' awareness of themselves and others as learners. It's common sense—and research shows—that students learn more when they believe they can learn, they have strategies for learning new things, and they know how to participate in a learning community. By extension, schools that commit to SEL must attend to every aspect of school culture.

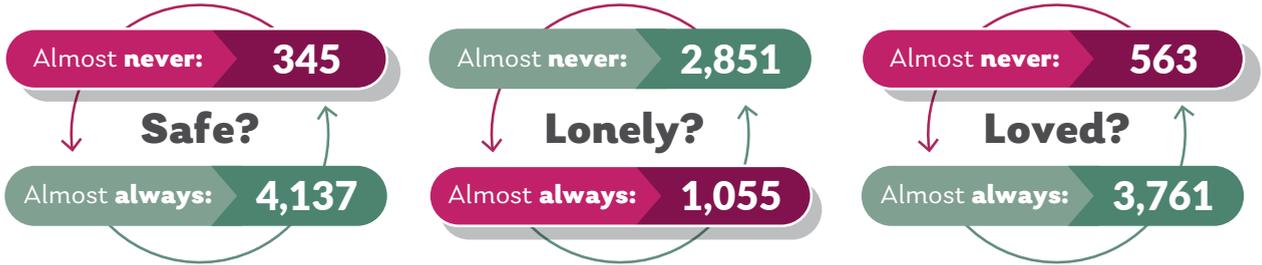
While the district has purchased SEL lessons and activities from the ed-tech company RethinkEd, the goal is for teachers to infuse the development of these skills within the teaching of all academic content.

Christine Cray, director of Student Services Reforms, offers an example as a former science teacher. When students struggle with a problem, the teacher can say, "Man, this is really tough. We tried these three and they were easy, but this one is really a stumper. Let's pause, let's take a deep breath." Along with modeling a strategy—pausing and naming a feeling—the teacher is creating "a space where struggle and failure is part of the norm and part of the learning process," she says. Talking about safety in the lab taps into elements of self-management and responsible decision-making, which are SEL competencies. In an English class, a teacher who points to what a character is thinking and asks if students have had similar thoughts is helping them develop self-awareness, Cray says. Of course, she notes, many teachers are already doing these things. Her department is working with the Office of Curriculum and Instruction to "elevate these practices and make them routine across our classrooms."

## How do Pittsburgh students feel?

Responses to the spring 2022 Panorama Social-Emotional Learning: Student Competency & Well-being Survey

During the past week, how often did you feel...



8,995 students in grades 3-12 responded to the survey.

Source: PPS

Beyond these specific practices, it's the teacher's job to set up a learning community that students want to belong to and participate in. While students are responsible for learning and practicing social skills, such as listening to and considering the views of others, the adults determine whether a school or a classroom has a learning culture. SEL is intertwined with classroom culture, including students' sense of safety and belonging, whether they feel seen and heard as individuals, and whether they feel ownership of norms for classroom behavior. In turn, these aspects of culture are intertwined with academic learning. (See "Superintendent Walters on how teachers can best support students" on page 16 for more on how teachers foster a learning culture.)

One tool for both promoting and monitoring SEL is the "Panorama Social-Emotional Learning: Student Competency & Well-being Survey" from Panorama Education, given to students in grades 3-12 twice a year. The survey asks questions such as *How sure are you that you can do the hardest work that is assigned in your class? How often did you get your work done right away, instead of waiting until the last minute? How often are you able to pull yourself out of a bad mood?* Before the survey is administered, parents receive a letter describing the survey, noting that it's optional for students, and telling them how to opt out, if they choose to. Students who take the survey receive a summary of their responses, along with targeted "Try this!" suggestions, such as *When you have a hard task to do, think about another time that you did a great job on something that was hard, or Write a homework plan.* Parents can view the report in the Home Access Center (see "Where to turn" on page 16 for more information).

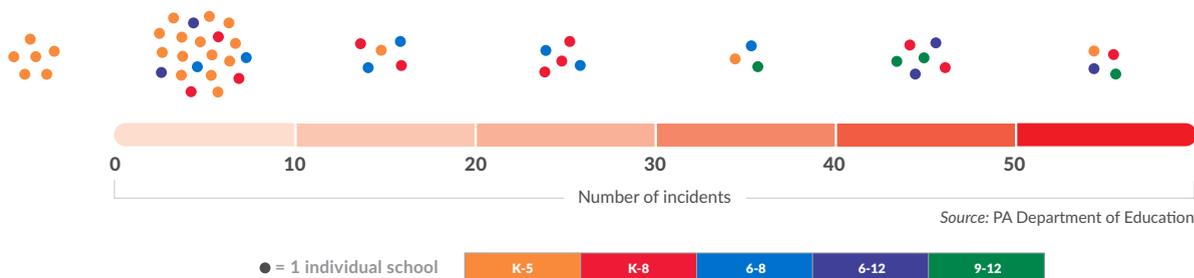
Student Support Services staff use trends in the responses to plan lessons and activities, and Cray discusses them with the Superintendent's Student Advisory Council, whose members share information with their schools. Teachers can see demographic trends for their classrooms, such as differences in responses by race, as well as their students' individual reports. Cray's office provides resources to help teachers talk students through the report. "It's very much a questioning stance," she says. "Let's look at our report. What do you see that surprised you? What did you see that aligned to what you thought you would see? What area do you think you want to work on? If you worked on this area, what help would you need from school? What help would you need from home?" Rather than an end point, the report offers a way to open up a conversation, she says.

**SEL is intertwined with classroom culture, including students' sense of safety and belonging, whether they feel seen and heard as individuals, and whether they feel ownership of norms for classroom behavior.**

The extent to which such conversations are happening depends on the school. In schools that have "advisory" periods, "absolutely it's happening," Cray says. Some schools have also begun to use Panorama data to inform their school improvement plans. In others, the response rate is too low for the data to be meaningful.

# Rising up: Stories from our schools

Number of violent incidents in schools in 2021-22, by school level



The survey has offered the district a way to gauge how students have weathered the disruptions of the past two years. Last year, Cray worried about one question in particular. “I was really nervous that we would see kids who said, ‘I don’t have an adult at home or at school or a peer at home or at school that I can be myself around or that I can go to.’ And that was not the case,” she says. More students also said that they had strategies to help them learn new things, possibly because they had to manage more of their own learning while school buildings were closed. Perhaps counterintuitively, the number of respondents who felt they could do a good job on their school work declined, especially for older students. In follow-up conversations, Cray says, they explained that when schools were closed, “teachers were assigning a whole bunch of stuff and they were feeling really overwhelmed.”

**Anyone—from a parent to a friend to a cafeteria worker to students themselves—can make a referral to the Student Assistance Program.**

On the national level, the concept and practices of SEL have been attacked, on the one hand, for appearing to suggest that children can rise above poverty and institutionalized racism if they have enough resilience and “grit,” and on the other hand, for appearing to push particular adult values on students. Cray is clear that the responsibility for SEL lies with adults. She calls the idea that if students only had enough resilience, adults wouldn’t have to change systems or practices a “fantasy.” As for imposing values, she notes that

their work with students is intentionally open-ended, so “students know different strategies and skills and can choose what’s best and right for them,” rather than what the adult thinks they should do.

Overall, she believes the SEL competencies reflect broadly held goals. “When you ask educators or any adult to think about what we want students to know and be able to do when they leave our system,” she says, “the things that we hear the most are not knowing the quadratic equation or being able to write a five-paragraph essay or be conversationally fluent in Spanish. It’s [the] skills that we know are going to be necessary for success.”

## The Student Assistance Program

One core intervention for providing students with direct help is the Student Assistance Program (SAP). Anyone—from a parent to a friend to a cafeteria worker to students themselves—can make a referral to SAP. Elena Runco, director of Student Support Services for Social Workers, says a SAP referral can be for any issue that affects a student’s well-being. “So whether it’s someone noticing that academically they’re struggling, a student sleeping in class, a student voicing feelings of depression, feelings of anxiety, grief and loss, homelessness... whatever they may identify is affecting their ability to function in school.”

The confidential process involves input from the student, a parent or guardian, and the school’s SAP team, which usually includes an administrator, teachers, the nurse, a psychologist, and the social worker or counselor, all of whom are accountable for outcomes, Runco says. If the school has one, an SAP liaison—a staff member from a partnering agency or provider—also participates. Once they have decided a referral is warranted, a team member contacts the student’s parent for permission to begin.

While it differs by school, Runco recommends that teams assign a case manager, who is responsible for gathering data about the student. Teachers are asked to complete forms, the case manager interviews the student, and parents are asked to complete a "Parent Checklist." The checklist asks parents to indicate the strengths and positive traits their child exhibits, such as *Recognizes and respects appropriate boundaries* and *Works well in a group*. A section with open-ended questions includes *Describe any recent changes at home that may be interfering with academic or behavioral progress* and *What does your child tell you about school?* Parents are also asked to share any particular concerns about their child's academic progress, behavior at home, emotional well-being, and/or relationships with peers.

When it comes to creating an intervention plan, the most important information is whatever the student has volunteered. During the interview, "The students are revealing what they need or what's going on with them," Runco says. For example, a student might say it's hard to come to school because she has trouble making friends. To address the issue, the team might recommend a social skills group, and might check in with the student to see if there was an attendance incentive that would work for her. Necciai adds that when students have input into the nitty-gritty of the plan, it creates a level of ownership that motivates them to participate.

**"The first plan you put in place or the second or the third isn't really it. You have to continue... before you get to something that's ultimately what everybody's looking for."**

Ideally, parents continue to be involved as well, through check-in calls with the case manager, social worker, or SAP liaison about how the interventions are going at school, what they are seeing at home, and whether they have been able

### How many days of school did PPS students miss last year?

Chronic absence: missing 10% or more of school days for any reason



**4,969** PPS students missed 10-19% of school days in 2021-22.



**3,308** PPS students missed 20% or more of school days in 2021-22.

**8,277** PPS students missed at least 18 school days last year.

Source: PPS

to access any recommended services outside of the school. Often, Necciai says, "The first plan you put in place or the second or the third isn't really it. You have to continue...before you get to something that's ultimately what everybody's looking for. And I think parents have to be involved in every step of that process." When they do have to tweak the plan, he says, open communication helps to alleviate any frustration or anxiety parents may feel.

Both Necciai and Runco encourage parents to introduce themselves to school staff before the need for an SAP referral arises. "We don't want that to be the first interaction," Necciai says. Runco adds that she hopes parents will talk to a teacher, social worker, or counselor when a student has suffered a loss or a trauma, including a separation or divorce, whether or not it triggers a referral to SAP. "It goes both ways," she says. "We want to make sure we're communicating to families, but it really helps us as a school to have parents trust us enough to have that communication back, so that we can head off anything that might be going on, and provide support right away."

# Rising up: Stories from our schools

## Tutoring

Children who lost crucial learning time during the pandemic, and those who weren't well served before, need new forms of academic support. Research shows that one of the most effective strategies to help students reach grade-level goals is "high impact" tutoring—meeting with the same tutor one-on-one or in a small group several times a week over many months.

The city schools are using federal pandemic recovery funds to provide tutoring after school. As the school year began, Superintendent Walters said many schools were working with existing partners while others were "just beginning to frame" their after-school learning opportunity. Early this fall, the district released an RFP (Request for Proposal) for in-person after-school programming; Walters says another RFP is forthcoming for providers who offer tutoring services virtually.

In the wider community, efforts to address students' academic needs began in the spring of 2020 after schools closed. Organizations that had provided in-person tutoring moved their work online, and others added a tutoring component for the first time. A+ Schools, along with a group of community partners, started what's come to be known as the Pittsburgh Learning Collaborative (PLC) as a response to the pandemic. Over the past three years, the PLC has grown to become a coalition of almost 90 organizations that support students and families, with academic support as one of its focus areas.

OpenLiteracy and ASSET (Achieving Student Success through Excellence in Teaching) are two local organizations that pivoted to offer tutoring. OpenLiteracy, founded by Sarah Scott Frank, has provided tutoring through out-of-school-time providers and currently partners with the Environmental Charter School at Frick Park (ECS), serving almost 100 ECS students virtually. Tutoring is offered for free by the school. ECS pays OpenLiteracy with federal pandemic relief funds, and Frank in turn pays her tutors, who are students at top colleges around the country.

## The acronym soup

*Common acronyms and what they mean*

- IEP:** Individual Education Plan (the key legal document that outlines a plan for special education services to meet a student's needs)
- MTSS:** Multi-Tiered Systems of Support (a decision-making framework that helps teachers identify students who need more academic help)
- PBIS:** Positive Behavior Interventions and Supports (a framework that lays out expectations for behavior and interventions)
- PSE:** Program for Students with Exceptionalities (district office that supports special education)
- SAP:** Student Assistance Program (a process for addressing non-academic issues that affect students' well-being)
- SEL:** Social and Emotional Learning (a set of skills and competencies that reflect students' awareness of themselves and others as learners, supported by a school's culture)



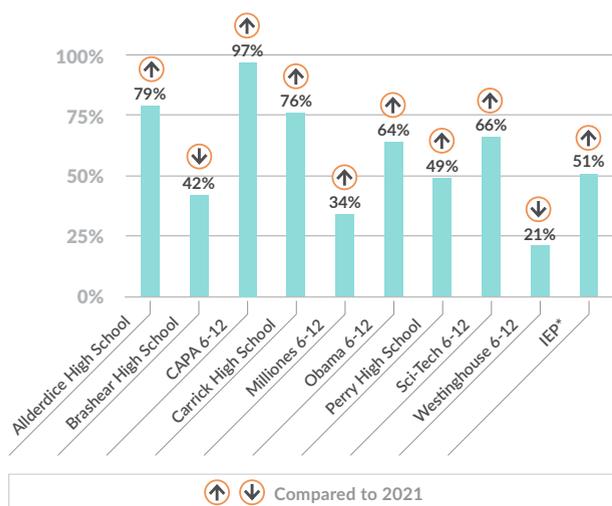
ASSET created the PALS (Partnerships to Advance Learning in STEM) program not only to help children, but also for the sake of college students in education programs (known as "pre-service" teachers) who were missing out on classroom experiences. The PALS model brings pre-service teachers together with K-12 students who participate in after-school programs or through drop-in hours. ASSET staff created and piloted PALS in coordination with A+ Schools, the PLC, and Duquesne University.

Whether it's face-to-face or through a screen, the relationship between a student and a tutor is key. Deborah Luckett, associate executive director of ASSET, says that came as a surprise to many of

their pre-service teachers, who said they hadn't realized how important relationships were to learning until they started tutoring. In the first training session, "We're clear with them," she says. "Don't just jump into work. Get to know the students, ask them questions."

### How many PPS seniors are ready for college?

Percentage of PPS seniors with GPA at or above 2.8, 2022



Among other indicators, a grade point average (GPA) of 2.8 or above can predict college success.  
 \* Students with an Individual Education Plan (IEP) for special education, excluding students identified as "gifted"

Frank says OpenLiteracy tutoring has "a big mentoring piece." Students see that their tutors have "made it to a college, and they're at good colleges," including CMU, and colleges students have heard of because their football games are on TV. Students see their tutors' dorm rooms or the campus union; they ask questions and the tutors share their experiences. She's also been able to create a tutoring workforce that is much more diverse than the local teaching corps. "We had a Puerto Rican family who was matched with a Puerto Rican tutor who was a student at Yale, and the tutor spoke Spanish with the mom," she says. "That student's attendance was amazing that semester." Some of her tutors are first-generation college students, many of whom participated in similar programs at younger ages. Frank says, "They're thrilled to be a tutor in a program that's serving K-12 kids."

Lockett has seen students' sense of agency—the belief that they have a say in what happens to them—blossom over the course of tutoring

sessions. She notes that students who sign up are often the ones who don't advocate for themselves at school or who process things differently than other children. Compared to a noisy classroom with other students racing to answer a teacher's questions, tutoring proceeds at a child's pace, toward goals the child has helped to define. And PALS students know their tutors are also students. Once, when Lockett was monitoring a session, a 2<sup>nd</sup> grader reached out through the chat. "I know he's learning to be a teacher," the student said, referring to his tutor. "But he doesn't know how to ask questions. ...I keep telling him I don't understand it. And he keeps repeating the same question." Monitors request feedback from students if they don't offer it. "This is an experiment," Lockett tells the students. "And it's an experiment that involves you." Such experiences give students a sense of ownership, she says, which promotes greater learning.

While schools are open this year, Lockett and Frank both say that tutoring is here to stay, and so is the virtual learning space. Lockett tells pre-service teachers that to be an educator in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, "You need to learn how to teach in this space and be present in this space." Superintendent Walters notes that when learning moved online, students showed their teachers the extent to which they live in a technological world. Sometimes that dawned on teachers when students volunteered to be tech support during class. For those teachers who were willing to flip roles, "it put them in a truly vulnerable space," he says. "But it also put them in a lifelong learning community."

Students were "shaping the experience of learning" in those cases. As one of the lessons of the pandemic, "That should have been the design to begin with," he says. ☺

**Turn the page for more.**

*A+ Schools staff can coach parents/guardians through conversations with school staff about a child's academic progress, a disciplinary action, a Student Assistance Program referral, a special education referral, and other issues. Contact us by emailing [info@aplusschools.org](mailto:info@aplusschools.org) or calling the PLC Family Hotline at 412-256-8536 if you need help supporting your child.*

# Rising up: Stories from our schools

## Superintendent Wayne Walters on how teachers can best support students

*Condensed and edited from an interview*

The classroom teacher is the first line of support for students. The following teacher actions, classroom norms, and features of the classroom environment indicate that the teacher is thinking about how to support all students, according to Superintendent Wayne Walters.

### Teachers' approach to their lessons shows evidence of planning and preparation, including:

- Understanding the content and how to teach it coherently
- Thinking through their instructional goals and how they will assess them
- Assigning tasks and activities that ask students to think

### Teachers pay attention to the nature and quality of classroom interactions.

- They use language that creates a culture for learning. They demonstrate that it's safe to learn and safe to share ideas.
- Students have strategies to make corrections.
- The room is set up to allow for student talk.
- Students keep each other accountable.

### Teachers promote deep thinking and learning.

- Questioning strategies and discussion techniques are designed to push student thinking toward true understanding.
- Teachers use the arts to engage students and deepen their learning.
- Teachers share the what, the why, and the how of a lesson with students. They make their thinking visible to students, including statements such as, "Hey, you know what, last time we did this lesson, I didn't think it went that well."

### Teachers are invested in equity.

- They consider the experiences of all students.
- They find ways to enrich the curriculum with multiple perspectives.
- They give students agency in what they're learning.
- They work to build the capacity of all learners and to eliminate racial achievement disparities.

**The classroom space promotes joy, comfort, and safety.**

## Where to turn

*In the following section we share district and community resources to help parents and guardians support their children's education. We have many more! If you don't see what you need here, email [info@aplusschools.org](mailto:info@aplusschools.org) or call the Pittsburgh Learning Collaborative (PLC) Family Hotline at 412-256-8536. Please note: district resources apply to PPS families only, except early intervention services. Community resources apply to PPS families and other families.*

### How's my child doing?

PPS parents have the right to view all information the district has about their children's progress, including grades, grade point average (GPA), test scores, and transcripts. **To find out how your child is doing academically**, you can ask to speak to a teacher at any time during the school year, and/or log into the Home Access Center ([pghschools.org/hac](http://pghschools.org/hac), or your school's home page) to view your child's schedule, grades, absences, and more.

### How do I request additional support?

You have the right to **request that your child be screened** for academic support, behavior support, or gifted education. Contact your child's teacher to make the request (a gifted education screening should be sent in writing).

### Who should I talk to about an issue?

Your first **point of contact** is your child's teacher. You can also talk to your school's social worker or counselor (type in "social worker" or "counselor" in the search area of the staff directory on your school's home page for names and contact information, call the school's main office, or find them at [pghschools.org/counseling](http://pghschools.org/counseling)), or the principal. **If you're not satisfied with the response to an issue or concern**, you can call the PPS parent hotline at 412-529-4357, email [parenthotline@pghschools.org](mailto:parenthotline@pghschools.org), or complete a "Let's Talk" ticket ("Let's Talk" requires you to download an app for a mobile device). *Be sure to note your ticket number.* You can also contact a district-level staff member (find the appropriate

department on the PPS website: [pghschools.org](http://pghschools.org)). If you're still not satisfied or you haven't heard back within a reasonable time, you can contact the superintendent or your school board member through the district website.

### ***How do I get help if my child is having trouble attending school regularly?***

This school year, you should receive a letter and/or text messages with offers of help from Everyday Labs if your child is at risk of becoming **chronically absent from school**. (Everyday Labs was made available to the district by A+ Schools with a grant from the Richard King Mellon Foundation.) Chronic absence means missing 10% or more of school days—just two days a month—for any reason. Chronically absent students are more likely to read below grade level and eventually drop out of high school. If you're having trouble getting your child to school for any reason, contact us or talk to your school's social worker or counselor to get connected to resources.

### ***How do I get my child mental or emotional support?***

Seek help right away if you think your child needs **mental or emotional support**. Talk to your child's teacher and/or the school counselor or social worker. District staff members want to hear from parents if a child is experiencing stress for any reason. You or your child can also request help through the Student Assistance Program (see pages 12-13 of the main story). Resources to address **bullying** can be found at [pghschools.org/bullying](http://pghschools.org/bullying). Call or text 988 to reach a free, 24-hour **suicide prevention and crisis support hotline**. UpStreet Pittsburgh ([upstreetpgh.org](http://upstreetpgh.org), or 412-586-3732) offers **free therapy services** for 12-22 year olds, as well as suicide prevention resources, including for LGBTQI+ youth, at [upstreetpgh.org/suicide-prevention](http://upstreetpgh.org/suicide-prevention). For more resources, visit [pghschools.org/suicideprevention](http://pghschools.org/suicideprevention).

### ***How do I get my child a tutor?***

Pittsburgh has many options for students to participate in tutoring, mentoring, and after-school programs that meet their interests. To request information about tutoring opportunities, visit [bit.ly/Request-A-Tutor](http://bit.ly/Request-A-Tutor) to complete a form or call the PLC Family Hotline at 412-256-8536. You can view a list of partnering organizations at [projectplusus.org/pittsburgh-learning-collaborative](http://projectplusus.org/pittsburgh-learning-collaborative) to find programs. Other options include PGHreads.com for reading supports for younger students, the Khan Academy ([khanacademy.org](http://khanacademy.org)), which provides free online lessons

and personalized learning activities, and the Carnegie Library of Pittsburgh ([carnegielibrary.org](http://carnegielibrary.org)). With a library card, students can sign up for free tutoring from Tutor.com, or choose tutoring offered by the library. If your child needs accommodations to participate in a program, plan to have a preliminary conversation with the provider. For more information about tutoring, see "Helping children in Pittsburgh: What you can do" at [ourschoolspittsburgh.org/2022-rising-up](http://ourschoolspittsburgh.org/2022-rising-up), and pages 14-15 in the main story.

### ***Where can I get help if my child has a disability?***

If your child receives **special education services**, you can find resources at the PEAL Center ([pealcenter.org](http://pealcenter.org)), including help for families new to special education. The Pittsburgh Local Task Force on the Right to Education ([pghschools.org/PSEparentresources](http://pghschools.org/PSEparentresources)) is a family support and advocacy group. Each district school is assigned a program officer for special education ([pghschools.org/contactpse](http://pghschools.org/contactpse)) and parents may contact them. The district provides **early intervention** evaluation and services for any child under 5 ([pghschools.org/earlyintervention](http://pghschools.org/earlyintervention), or 412-529-4000). Another local early intervention resource is the Alliance for Infants and Toddlers ([afit.org](http://afit.org), or 412-885-6000).

### ***Where can I find help if we speak a language other than English?***

PPS families with English Language Learners have the right to have **school information translated** into their home language and/or have an interpreter who speaks that language at meetings. Call PPS at 412-529-NINE (6463) to request translation/interpretation services or to speak to someone about a school issue in your home language. Local organizations that offer **tutoring, mentoring, and support for immigrant and refugee students and families** include ARYSE ([arysepgh.org](http://arysepgh.org)), Casa San José ([casasanjose.org](http://casasanjose.org)), Hello Neighbor ([helloneighbor.io](http://helloneighbor.io)) and the Latino Community Center ([latinocommunitycenter.org](http://latinocommunitycenter.org)). For more support in Spanish, call the PLC Family Hotline at 412-335-7446.

### ***How can I choose a school for my child?***

Check out our School Choice and Enrollment Guide at [ourschoolspittsburgh.org/schoolchoiceguide](http://ourschoolspittsburgh.org/schoolchoiceguide). Magnet school and program applications for the 2023-24 school year are due by December 9th. Visit [pghschools.org/magnet](http://pghschools.org/magnet) or contact the Magnet Office at [magnetoffice@pghschools.org](mailto:magnetoffice@pghschools.org) or 412-529-3991.

# Rising up: Stories from our schools

## Tutoring snapshot

Ander Rosales Peraza, student,  
and Melanie Bozic, tutor

### Latino Community Center

Ander Rosales Peraza, a 3<sup>rd</sup> grader at Beechwood PreK-5 in Beechview, lives with his family in Mt. Oliver. Ander was born in the US after his parents emigrated from El Salvador. Like most children his age, he loves to play. He doesn't mind playing video games in English, but he prefers to speak Spanish when playing with others, such as the friends from Honduras and Mexico who were in his class last year. Ander also loves to do math—especially measuring things. During an interview, he holds up a ruler and notes that he's had it for one year. When he grows up, he wants to be a doctor.

Ander was in kindergarten when he met Melanie Bozic, a retired PPS teacher who volunteers as a tutor for the Latino Community Center in East Liberty. It was April of 2020, just after schools closed, so they met online, twice a week for two hours. Over the years their meeting times have fluctuated, but they've settled into meeting on Saturdays now, still mainly virtually. Sometimes Bozic, who speaks conversational Spanish, travels from her home in Oakland for a lesson on Ander's porch.

Ander first learned to read in Spanish from a book he had at home. "My brother helped me learn the words," he says. "And then I started reading. And after that I started reading English." He remembers that the first book he read with "Miss Melanie" was *Big Shark, Little Shark*, by Anna Membrino. They moved on to *Pete the Cat* books, written by various authors, followed by the *Magic Tree House* series, by Mary Pope Osborne.

Bozic prepares lessons for Ander using her knowledge of the PPS curriculum. When he was in kindergarten, they read books that emphasized particular phonic elements, and she showed him how to count using tally marks. In their English Language Arts lessons she incorporates social studies and science, including weather, climate, and animal facts, because Ander loves animals. She keeps track of what he knows and can do. When reading, he can draw logical conclusions, predict outcomes, identify characters and the setting, and talk about the plot. In math, he can add and subtract 4-digit numbers and use symbols for greater than and less than, she says. Ander adds that he also knows his 3-D shapes, but problems such as "9 take away 10" (a skill not usually taught as early as 2<sup>nd</sup> or 3<sup>rd</sup> grade) are still difficult.

Bozic calls Ander "a tenacious learner." Even in kindergarten, "His attention was remarkable," she says.

"There's not a lot of down or silent time between us because Ander is not very shy and he'll give his thoughts." He also has felt free to personalize their learning space. At times, "he'll have his little toys or little men sit with us during class."

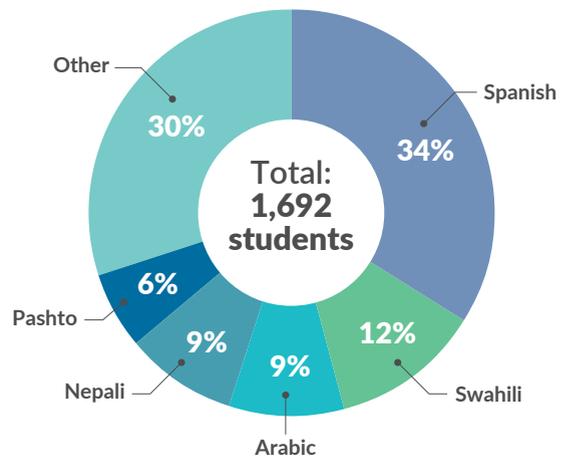
Speaking two languages may give him an edge. Studies have shown that being bilingual has many cognitive benefits. For example, having to make spot decisions about which words to use requires flexibility and the ability to focus. In addition, people who speak more than one language are more likely to understand math concepts and solve word problems than those who speak only one.

Ander appreciates that Miss Melanie loves pupusas, an El Salvadoran dish his mother makes that "tastes yummy," he says. He also appreciates that their relationship is one-on-one. Compared to his experience at school, "Miss Melanie helped me more because we were just two, and my teacher needed to help a lot of the kids in the classroom."

To request a tutor for a child whose first language is Spanish, call the Latino Community Center's Family Hotline: 412-335-7446.

To volunteer, visit [latinocommunitycenter.org/volunteer-pittsburgh](http://latinocommunitycenter.org/volunteer-pittsburgh) to see the range of opportunities and sign up. Tutors are not required to speak Spanish fluently but it helps if a tutor has a background in Spanish or another language.

## Major home languages other than English spoken by PPS students



This graph shows the languages other than English spoken at home for 1,692 students whose parents provided that information, as percentages of the total. "Other" includes languages spoken by 4% or less of the total group.

Source: PPS

## Tutoring snapshot

Michael Wells, student

### Ready to Learn

The need for high quality math learning experiences for underserved students led the Center for Urban Education at Pitt to partner with PLUS Personalized Learning<sup>2</sup> at CMU on the math mentoring program Ready to Learn. With funding from the Heinz Endowments and the Chan Zuckerberg Initiative, the program combines human mentors with computer-aided learning, for 6<sup>th</sup> through 8<sup>th</sup> graders at Milliones 6-12, Science and Technology Academy 6-12 (Sci-Tech), and Westinghouse Academy 6-12. (A+ Schools Executive Director James Fogarty is a member of the PLUS Personalized Learning<sup>2</sup> Advisory Committee.) Though full implementation started as recently as the 2019-20 school year, Ready to Learn participants have already shown significant increases in math achievement (see the graph below).

Sci-Tech 9<sup>th</sup> grader Michael Wells, who lives in Brookline, participated in both the after-school and summer components of the program over the past several years. Before the pandemic, the mentors, Pitt and CMU students, came to his school. He could choose Monday and Wednesday or Tuesday and Thursday to attend the two-hour sessions, which were organized around social time, one-on-one time with a mentor, online tasks, and working on projects in small groups.

He recalls meeting one of his mentors. "We just started talking casually," he says. As it turned out, they shared the same musical tastes, and they both liked shoes. "So that's how we bonded. And then we started getting into math-related questions, like where I'm at in my class and why I was in the program, and we just grew from there."

Michael wants to go into computer engineering, and he wasn't "horrible" at math, but he wasn't the best at it either, he says. During the school day, he sometimes took advantage of the lunchtime support sessions teachers held. Along with the hope of boosting his skills at Ready to Learn, he was attracted by the stipend students were offered. But as time went on his motivation changed. "I started to enjoy math," he says. "I liked going so I could get more involved."

The software the program uses involves an "intelligent tutor" that modifies lessons based on the student's responses and offers individualized resources. Michael regularly looked at his data with his mentor and they worked together to set and monitor goals.

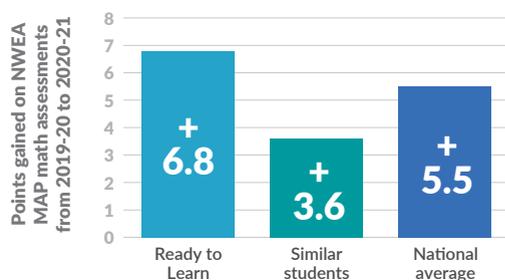
The program includes a social justice component designed to make math more meaningful for students. Michael remembers calculating percentages for a project that related the presence of food deserts in Pittsburgh to residents' incomes. During the pandemic, students figured out quantities of basic supplies a household would need to get through a period of quarantine. Michael liked working on the projects "because it showed me that you could really use math to solve real-world situations," he says.

The mix of one-on-one time with a mentor, working in small groups, and working alone at a computer suited him well. "I'm open to a lot of ways of learning. I like the one-on-ones. They're cool. And I like the small groups because I like talking to other people, working with other people," he says. Small groups could be stressful when he felt like the only one who didn't understand what was going on. Over time, though, he saw that others didn't always understand either, and it wasn't as big a deal as he had thought.

Now, in the classroom, he says, "I feel more confident when I'm asked a question. And not really scared too much if I get it wrong."

For more information, including how to register a student for Ready to Learn, visit [cue.pitt.edu/ready-learn-program](http://cue.pitt.edu/ready-learn-program).

### Growth in math achievement for students who participated in Ready to Learn mentoring compared to other students



This graph shows gains in scores on the NWEA Measures of Academic Progress (MAP) tests from the 2019-20 school year to the 2020-21 school year for Ready to Learn students and two comparison groups. Data include 70 Ready to Learn participants, most in 6<sup>th</sup> or 7<sup>th</sup> grade in 2019-20, who attended Milliones 6-12, Science and Technology Academy 6-12, and Westinghouse Academy 6-12, and 380 PPS students with similar demographics. The national average gain reflects the typical growth in scores for students who took the same tests across the country.

Source: PLUS Personalized Learning<sup>2</sup> ([Tutors.plus/research.html](http://Tutors.plus/research.html))