



## Looking at the Right Data in the Right Way: Pittsburgh Public Schools

PETER LAVORINI

*Pittsburgh is using its college readiness indicator system to focus on the most useful information to monitor and the most effective way to analyze it to help students stay on track.*

Thanks to the Pittsburgh Promise, the children of Pittsburgh have an opportunity that few other children in our country do: to attend college without the additional, often insurmountable obstacle of financial obligation.<sup>1</sup> Because of this, Pittsburgh Public Schools has a unique imperative and is uniquely positioned to do the College Readiness Indicator System (CRIS) work well.<sup>2</sup> Graduates of one of our nine high schools can earn up to \$10,000 a year to attend college anywhere in the state of Pennsylvania, as long as they attain a 2.5 GPA and a 90 percent attendance rate during grades 9 through 12.

- 1 The Pittsburgh Promise is a nonprofit organization that grants college scholarships to all Pittsburgh Public Schools students meeting the academic requirements. See <http://pittsburghpromise.org> and the article by the Pittsburgh Promise's executive director, Saleem Ghubril, in this issue of VUE.
- 2 CRIS is a partnership between the Annenberg Institute for School Reform at Brown University, the John W. Gardner Center for Youth and Their Communities at Stanford University, and the University of Chicago Consortium for Chicago School Research, with funding from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation. See the inside front cover and the introductory article to this issue by Jacob Mishook for more information.

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## PITTSBURGH PUBLIC SCHOOLS AT A GLANCE, 2012-2013

Superintendent	Linda Lane
Number of schools	54
Student enrollment	26,463
Free/reduced-price lunch	71%
English language learners	2%
Special education	18%
Hispanic	2%
African American	55%
Asian	3%
White students	33%

Source: Pittsburgh Public Schools

Since 2008, more than 4,000 students have received a scholarship, funded entirely by the generosity of private donations. The Pittsburgh community has promised our students that if they, in turn, promise to work hard, finances will not prevent them from a better future. We in Pittsburgh Public Schools have promised our students and community that we will make sure that their hard work pays off, that the work is rigorous and aligned toward post-secondary preparedness, and that our students are aware of the possibilities that await them after high school.

### CRIS: LOOKING FOR THE RIGHT DATA TO HELP IMPROVE STUDENT OUTCOMES

While we are proud of those 4,000 students, we know that we have a long way to go before we can say we have held up our end of the Promise. We've worked hard, but we need to work smarter. CRIS has given us the language and support to start to work smarter. When I think about Pittsburgh Public Schools prior to our participation in the CRIS program, I think about the story of the person looking for his lost keys under the streetlight:

One night a man was on his hands and knees under a street light looking through the grass. A second man walked by and asked what he was looking for. "My keys," replied the man. Feeling generous, the second man joined the first man in his search. When it became clear that the keys were not going to be found so easily, the second man asked: "Where were you when you lost your keys?" "Over there by my car." The man gestured. The second man, now quite confused, asked: "Then why are you looking for them here?" The man without keys explained: "This is where the light is!"

Historically, our district would look for ways to improve the post-secondary outcomes of our students by looking "under the streetlight" at the data that were most readily available to us and easy for us to access, which are not necessarily the data that indicate later success. Perhaps not surprisingly, we didn't find our keys very often, and our rates of student success to and through college have been frustratingly stagnant. What we in Pittsburgh appreciate the most about our participation in CRIS, then, is how it has provided us with the pathway to change that story to one in which we know where the keys are and we have the right lights to help us find them.

I joined the Pittsburgh CRIS team in June of 2012, two years into the project. "Turnover" is probably the best way to describe that team. Only one member of the original CRIS team is still with our project – the rest have moved on to other opportunities or transitioned to new positions within the district. This turnover has obviously impacted the project, as the new members with new priorities impacted the direction of the team and existing work, and it has been probably been the biggest challenge to making this work successful.

Moreover, the scope of the project grew with each new member. At one point we had identified *nine* indicators that had a cycle of inquiry associated with each, and it was incredibly challenging to support. Couple a large scope with a diverse, often in-flux team, and you find a project with much promise and much stagnation.

## FOCUSING ON THE MOST USEFUL INDICATORS

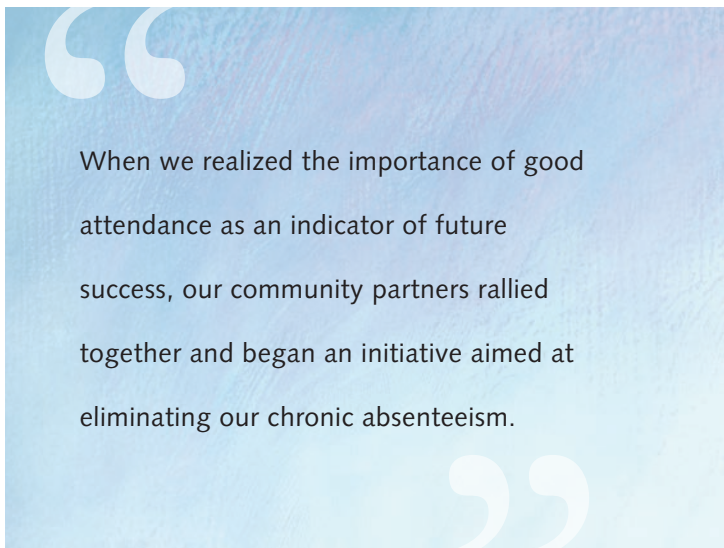
The CRIS team went through its last reshuffling right around the time that I started. We quickly shifted our focus to three areas: narrowing the scope of the project toward the indicators that had the most leverage on ensuring later success, establishing a sense of ownership of the project, and laying the groundwork for sustaining the work past the life of the grant. Using our CRIS grant, we brought on a research analyst, Kyle Siler-Evans, to help us find “the right streetlight” – the indicators that would tell us the most about our students’ success after high school – by looking at National Student Clearinghouse data.<sup>3</sup> What he found was so obvious that it was surprising – students who are successful in college do two things well: they show up to school and they get good grades. Since attendance and GPA are the two criteria for the Promise, we realized we were already looking at the right data, we just weren’t looking at it in the right way.

Fortunately for us, we found a community in Pittsburgh and an infrastructure within Pittsburgh Public Schools that was ready and willing to focus on these indicators. We have partnered with the Promise, United Way of Allegheny County, the Allegheny County Department . . . . .

<sup>3</sup> The National Student Clearinghouse is a nonprofit organization that supplies student performance data from 3,000 institutions of higher learning. See [www.studentclearinghouse.org](http://www.studentclearinghouse.org).

ment of Human Services, the local universities, and others to create a holistic approach to improving student attendance rates in grades K–12, including sharing data with afterschool partners and new programs to incentivize good attendance.

For example, when we realized the importance of good attendance as an indicator of future success, our community partners rallied together and began a “Be There” initiative, aimed at eliminating our chronic absenteeism issue. Organizations such as United Way, the University of Pittsburgh’s Office of Child Development, and the county’s Department of



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Human Services have worked to create materials aimed at promoting good attendance and training for after-school partners on how to make attendance a central part of their work. As this issue of VUE goes to press, the Be There campaign is scheduled to really take off on October 10, when close to 250 people will attend a “School Attendance Matters” conference designed to provide school communities with strategies and resources to address the barriers to good attendance that their students face.

Focusing on attendance taught us two important lessons for this work: ask for help from your community partners, particularly in those instances when they're in a prime situation to help, and be transparent with your stakeholders about the urgency and imperative of improving these indicators. Like the good Samaritan in the streetlight story, the community wants to help, they just want to help in the right place.

### SUPPORTING DECISION-MAKERS WITH DATA

Similarly, the CRIS work has arrived at a prime opportunity to leverage other initiatives within Pittsburgh Public Schools to scale up and sustain the CRIS work, particularly around supporting decision-makers with data. In Pittsburgh, we are focusing on teacher effectiveness as the major factor in improving student outcomes through our ambitious Empowering Effective Teachers (EET) plan, funded by a \$40 million grant from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation and more than \$40 million in state and federal grants. By measuring differences in teacher effectiveness and using this information to help teachers improve, we now have ways to understand and respond to differences in teacher effectiveness.

The EET plan, then, has created an appetite for more information about students, staff, and initiatives that can lead to better student outcomes, and with that appetite has come major investments in data infrastructure (including a data warehouse and reporting platform) and structures within schools to review and respond to that data. CRIS has graciously funded my participation in the Strategic Data Project at the Harvard School of Education's Center for Education Policy Research, which has given me and the two other data fellows within

PPS opportunities for new ways of thinking about using our student and teacher effectiveness data. Furthermore, our CRIS team has played a major role in developing new types of analysis and reports to improve the effectiveness of teachers and principals – and we're just warming up.

After the first three years of the CRIS project, we're confident that we're looking under the right streetlight. District leadership is supporting our work and our school staff feel empowered by the cycles of inquiry and supporting data and resources to respond to those indicators. We are hard at work incorporating additional data into our framework for understanding college readiness and are building off of the work we've done around attendance and GPA to focus on our students' college knowledge.

We have a long way to go, however, before we see our students succeeding at the level we want. Our schools need more support with instituting cycles of inquiry and strong data cultures. Our students need more support with creating healthy habits early and they need to know how to access the promise of a college education. Our CRIS team needs to find ways to sustain the work after the life of the grant, including ensuring that personnel can stay dedicated to the work in a time of budget constraints. We're confident that our plans for addressing all of those concerns can be successful, and we're thankful that we have the support of our partners at AISR and the John Gardner Center to help us carry out those plans.

There's a lot of promise in Pittsburgh Public Schools. CRIS has helped us get that much closer to delivering on that promise.