



# IMPROVING PENNSYLVANIA'S LOW-PERFORMING SCHOOLS:

## WHY GOVERNOR WOLF'S PROPOSAL IS NOT REAL ACCOUNTABILITY

***School improvement efforts must be paired with staffing flexibility to enact significant change***

When the Pittsburgh School District opened a postsecondary preparation school in 2008, expectations were high. UPrep, as it has come to be called, started off with a comprehensive plan for changing the culture of education in one of Pittsburgh's poorest neighborhoods. The plan included a wide range of innovative ideas such as extending the school day by 45 minutes, partnering with the University of Pittsburgh (Pitt) to provide professional development, and allowing the school's principal to handpick teachers, among others.

Unfortunately, UPrep has never lived up to its promise. Why? Because the District and teachers' union were unwilling to reach an agreement on the systemic changes needed to make UPrep successful. Here are a few examples of how the collective bargaining agreement doomed the school to failure:

- Adding an additional 45 minutes to the school day would have cost \$2,100 per teacher annually based on the District's contract with the union, and the District and the teachers were ultimately unable to come to an agreement on extending the school day.
- The relationship between UPrep and Pitt splintered because the contract allows senior teachers to "bump" educators with less seniority. This made it extremely difficult for professional development initiatives (a six-figure investment by Pitt) at UPrep to make a significant impact.
- Without a carve-out in the District's labor contract, it was impossible for UPrep's leadership to have a hand in selecting the school's educators, who shared their vision for a community school focused on preparing students for college.



*Education reform "implies something systemic, not just tinkering around the edges."*

FORMER PITTSBURGH SUPERINTENDENT MARK ROOSEVELT, EXPLAINING THE MEASURES AND COMMITMENT IT WOULD TAKE TO MAKE UPREP A SUCCESS, IN A 2008 INTERVIEW.

Today, UPrep (“Pittsburgh Millions 6-12” if you are checking the data) has a score of 42.1 on the Pennsylvania Department of Education’s School Performance Profile (SPP), which is well below the failing score of 60. In addition, during the 2014-15 school year, 58 percent of students were chronically absent (classified as 18+ missed school days) and only one 12<sup>th</sup> grade student was considered college-ready (based on the SPP metric of students scoring 1550 on the SAT or a 22 on the ACT) — a staggering statistic for a school which promised to put students on the path to college.

***The Research is Clear: To improve low-performing schools, school leaders need more power to manage their workforce.***

*“The most important and most commonly lacking condition for principal effectiveness is the authority of principals to create appropriate staffing models for their school.”<sup>1</sup>*

*“School effectiveness improves when principals have autonomy over decision making”<sup>2</sup>*

<sup>1</sup> Gina Ikemoto, Lori Taliaferro, Benjamin Fenton and Jacquelyn Davis, “Great Principals at Scale: Creating District Conditions that Enable all Principals to Be Effective.” New Leaders and The Bush Institute (2014), p. 19, accessed Mar. 9, 2016, <http://www.bushcenter.org/alliance-reform-education-leadership/great-principals-scale>

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***Real Accountability in Action:  
Case-Study: MLK College Preparatory  
School, Memphis TN***

In 2010, Tennessee enacted legislation that gave the commissioner of education the authority to create a special school district focused on turning the bottom five percent of schools into high-achievers within five years. The “Achievement School District” (ASD) has its own superintendent, selected by the commissioner, who either directly manages schools or contracts out to charter operators. In all ASD schools, administrators have broad flexibility in the areas of hiring, leadership development, professional development, curriculum, scheduling and community outreach. At the conclusion of the 2013-14 school year, the ASD encompassed 17 schools and saw tremendous results across the district. Serving a student population that is 96 percent black

and 94 percent low-income, the District had faster growth than the state average in reading and math.

In 2014, Frayser High School was converted to an ASD charter school and became MLK College Preparatory School. The existing teachers had to reapply to keep their jobs. Ten reapplied, only five were rehired. The principal invested significant time in teacher observation and support, including hiring a retired principal to spend three days per week working with teachers who needed the most support. Immediately, there were improvements in school culture, as evidenced by the absence of fighting and students arriving on time and in uniform. At the end of the first year, there were increases across the board in end-of-course Algebra 1, Biology, English 1 and English 2 exams, and the school outpaced state levels of growth in three of four subject areas.