

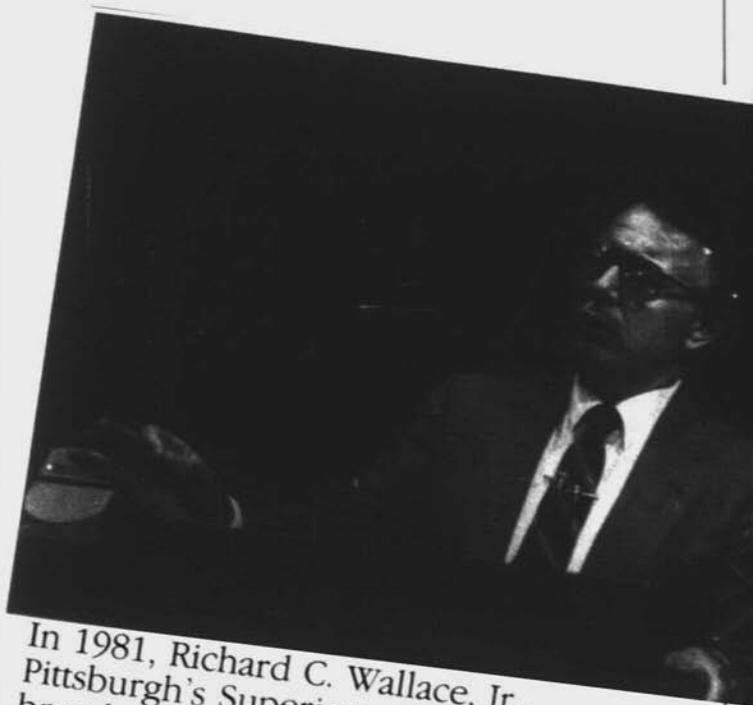
# On School Improvement in Pittsburgh: A Conversation with Richard Wallace

**P**ittsburgh is widely recognized as a school district on the move. What do you do to get these things to happen?

We have a set of priorities, established by our board in 1981, that have energized the district. A good example is our Schenley High School Teacher Center. When we started planning it, I pulled together a group of people from all levels. I typically do this for several reasons: I want a cross section of people to begin thinking through a problem, and while we're doing that I look for people who have ideas, who have ambition, who are willing to take risks.

**When you called the group together did you already have such a center in mind?**

Yes. In fact, I had recommended it to the board, in a two-paragraph memo. When they asked how much it would cost, I said I really didn't know; probably between a million and a million and a half a year, but I couldn't tell them more until I had worked out details. Naturally they said they'd be more comfortable if I handed them a more definitive plan, so that's how we got started. I asked people in the district about potential talent; I got the names of a lot of people, including



In 1981, Richard C. Wallace, Jr., Pittsburgh's Superintendent, initiated a broad program of educational reform to improve quality of instruction, educational performance of students, and the professional workplace for educators.

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Judy Johnston, now director of the center, and I convened a group of about 16. We worked together over a period of five or six months developing the proposal. Each of them, by the way, was also on a satellite committee. We had 200 teachers all told involved in the planning.

**Whose idea was it to organize that way?**

I guess it was mine. I firmly believe that if something is going to work you’ve got to involve the people who will be implementing it. We presented the plans to the board, they adopted them unanimously, and we got planning money from the Ford Foundation. The person I felt had the most leadership potential was Judy Johnston, so she was appointed director.

**How did you go about getting money for something like the Schenley center? For most school districts that would seem impossible.**

Well, it was a little difficult. We got a one-year \$120,000 planning grant from the Ford Foundation. Once the board agreed to go ahead with it, we thanked the 200-member teacher steering committee and convened another group of 75 teachers to do detailed planning with Judy when she was appointed director. Then, during the course of that year I went to a committee of local foundation people and told them, “Our board is making a very substantial commitment to improve the quality of education in the city, and you need to demonstrate that you appreciate what they are doing. I want to sell you endowed chairs. I want you to support the resident teachers at Schenley by paying half their salaries.” They said they didn’t like that idea, so I asked what they would be willing to do. We spent four to five months deciding how we would seek funding.

Then they did a very smart thing. They convinced me to compile a kind of shopping list of potential support activities and sponsors for Schenley. One committee member said, “We’ll put up the first \$25,000 to hire a part-time development director who will go around to all these foundations and do the fund raising you don’t have time to do.” We were able to raise

over \$1.4 million from local foundations to support Schenley.

**How do you get a board of education to approve such a project?**

In our case it grew out of a comprehensive needs assessment. Probably the smartest thing I ever did when I arrived in Pittsburgh in September of 1980 was to get Bill Cooley and Bill Bickel [of the University of Pittsburgh] to work with me, because at that time I had only one evaluation staff member, who managed testing. We conducted a very broad-based needs assessment, surveying samples of public school and private school parents, community leaders, and every level of employee in the district. We got huge amounts of data in the fall of 1980, and then in January 1981 we presented the results to the board. I reminded board members that they had been part of the data pool, and I said, “This is what people in this city say are the problems of the district. Now what do you think are the problems? I want you to identify priorities for me to go to work on.” I did that for two reasons. One, for self-protection; I recognized that their concerns about the schools were so diverse that there was no hope of my succeeding unless I could focus their attention on a few achievable priorities. Second, the board had been bad-



ly divided over desegregation when I arrived, so I felt they had to be unified some way.

So the board voted their priorities. The top priority was improving student achievement, the second was improving the quality of personnel evaluation, and the third was managing enrollment decline. It was very apparent that we had to close three high schools and a number of elementary and middle schools. After spending about nine months talking about school closings, I said, "I think you have a unique opportunity here. You've got to close at least three high schools, but if you do you're going to lose 100-150 relatively young veteran teachers (teachers with 7 to 15 years' experience) that I don't think you can afford to lose. And how can you achieve your top priority of improving academic achievement with staff who haven't been back to graduate school in probably 15 to 20 years? Here's an opportunity to take one of the high schools that is slated for closing and make it a clinical center for staff revitalization. If we do this, everybody in the district will know what we expect of them instructionally." So the board members said, "Let's go."

**You're saying the board supported the plan partly because the need had been carefully established.**

Yes. They didn't know exactly what they were supporting, obviously, and most of the staff didn't either. I did, because I had experienced it before. As a student and as a junior faculty member, I had been in the Harvard-Lexington and Harvard-Boston programs back in the mid-60s. When I was director of elementary and middle schools in Holliston, Massachusetts, we had the opportunity to open a new middle school. I got some federal funds and made it a condition of employment (that was in the days before collective bargaining) that to teach in that middle school you had to go through a clinical summer training program similar to the Harvard programs.

Both of those experiences paved the way for Schenley, but the Holliston program, like Harvard-Lexington, had been held during the summer. Not only was the Schenley program to be

in a fully operating school during the regular academic year; it was to be at the *high school* level (the Harvard-Lexington program was for elementary and junior high).

**Schenley is completing that first big four-year effort and moving into a new phase, isn't it?**

Yes. We're considering a proposal to provide the Schenley training program to high school teachers from suburban communities in Allegheny County.

We're also working on ways to disseminate the "spirit of Schenley" to all high schools in the district. We call them "Centers of Excellence." We'd like to see each high school develop, demonstrate, and disseminate its own unique instructional, organizational, or pupil service technique to improve pupil performance, and share it with other schools. The Schenley faculty, for example, plans to concentrate on personalizing instruction for students and on interdisciplinary teaching.

**That sounds like a very ambitious agenda. Can it really happen?**

Absolutely. We have created such a powerful group of professionals at Schenley that they believe they can do anything—and they can.

**What makes them so powerful?**

Well, we've put them in a highly professional environment, and we've given them an opportunity to develop their individual talents to the fullest. Whenever one of them has come up with an idea, we've found ways to support it, so they believe they can make a difference.

**You say when they come up with an idea you support it. Surely people have bad ideas now and then.**

Well, bad ideas don't work, so you don't continue them.

**But you don't shut them off earlier?**

No, because you never know what's going to work.

**I understand that you typically have lots of things going on at any one time in Pittsburgh. Why?**

You've got to have many things going on simultaneously because you don't know which ones are going to work. If you put all your eggs in one

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basket, you increase your likelihood of failing. There are lots of things to be done in schools. The more ideas you are trying out, the more people you have involved, the greater the likelihood of creative solutions to problems.

**You seem to be saying that it’s perfectly okay if some things don’t work.**

Oh sure.

**But there are people who say that our schools shouldn’t be laboratories where we test untried ideas. They say we should know whether something works before we use it.**

We’d never make progress if we played the game that way. We have to guarantee parents that at a minimum, their kids will be educated, and I think we have to take all the appropriate safeguards—which is why we typically pilot-test programs very carefully before we implement them throughout the district.

**Say a little more about that minimum guarantee.**

One of the most important things we’ve done is to turn around student achievement and significantly narrow

the gap in black/white achievement. There is still a gap—about 18–20 percent—but when we started it was 35–40 percent. Both groups of students are now above national norms, by the way. On the average, white students in the elementary schools have gone from about the 60th to the 80th percentile on standardized tests, and black kids have gone from about the 36th to the 60th. We think it’s quite dramatic—and it demonstrates what the process I call “achievement monitoring” can do. I’ve been working on the idea professionally for about 25 years, and I think I’ve made all the mistakes one can make. We’ve now got a system in Pittsburgh that’s simple, workable, and clearly effective. We call it MAP: Monitoring Achievement in Pittsburgh.

#### **How does it operate?**

Let me tell you how we started, because again you’ll get the notion of participation, which is so important. When I’d been in Pittsburgh just a couple of months, I made an assumption that student achievement was going to be the board’s top priority. I had done a lot of work over the years in developing achievement monitoring programs; in fact one that my colleagues and I developed in Fitchburg, Massachusetts, was validated for statewide dissemination. Here’s how it works: we pull together a group of teachers—English, math, science, and so forth—and we ask them to tell us the 20 most important learning outcomes in their academic disciplines at each grade level. We ask for 20—not 22—because I’ve learned over the years that teachers can manage effectively only about 20 objectives a year, give or take a few. Once we have achieved reasonable consensus among that group, we ask all the other teachers whether or not they agree with their colleagues that these are the most important learning outcomes in math or whatever, so we involve everybody. And the rule is that if you do not agree, you must provide a constructive alternative. When we have consensus on what the most important learning outcomes are, we dismiss that group and convene another group. We say to them, “Your colleagues say these are the most important learning outcomes. Your job is to develop what

you’re willing to accept as evidence that these outcomes have been achieved.”

#### **So it’s not technicians who develop the test items?**

No, the teachers do it. Once again we send the materials out for everybody to agree or disagree with and bring back the data. Then we dismiss that group and call in another group of teachers and say, “Okay, your colleagues say that these are the outcomes, these are the measures; now you take a look at the instructional materials you have and tell us whether these materials are adequate to the task that’s been laid out. If not, we want you to find materials that will help teachers teach to these objectives.”

Then we call in representatives from the three groups of teachers who have participated in this multi-tiered process and ask them to develop a plan for implementing the program, including teacher training. Well, in that process, we’ve involved an awful lot of people. It usually takes a year to a year and a half to go through this entire process for one subject. Now, I knew I could do math very quickly because I had done it a number of times in the past, so we were able to crank up the system within six months and get the math program operating in all the schools, grades one to eight, by September of 1981. Math is relatively easy. Writing, grammar, composition are much more difficult—and reading is the most complex. We now have monitoring systems in all those subjects. On top of that, we have added critical thinking.

We test kids on multiple occasions during the year. We test them on *all* objectives on all occasions, whether they’ve had instruction on the objectives or not; thus we are constantly foreshadowing for the kids what we expect them to learn. And we test them using one item per objective, because we don’t want the test to consume too much instructional time. We give computer printouts to the teachers, but also to the kids to take home to their parents, so everybody knows where everybody is at any given point in time. The kids and the teachers know what’s expected of them.

**Is this process so complicated and expensive that smaller districts just couldn't do it?**

No, it isn't. I did it in a small district in Massachusetts, and the cost at that time was less than \$2 per student per year for any academic subject.

**What about the security problems involved in having only one item per objective?**

That's not important. Being able to divide fractions is being able to divide fractions. We expect teachers to teach to the objectives. There's no point in cheating, anyhow, because the real criterion performance is on the California Achievement Test.

**In this and other things you seem to have an idea in mind for where things might lead when you start something. Many times you're thinking two or three years beyond where you are now.**

Yes. Let me give you an example. We're now working on what we call

our "syllabus-driven" examination program. We've been building up to this for six years. We've established that virtually every youngster can master the basic fundamentals of learning—but that's not education. At this point, we are defining the educated person as a person who can respond, both orally and in writing, to higher-order questions that deal with concepts, generalizations, and themes coming out of the academic disciplines. We expect to model our questions after the advanced placement examination systems, with one very fundamental difference: these exams will be for all kids. Also, rather than administering the test just once and making a pass/fail judgment about the youngster, we will test quarterly. As in our achievement monitoring program for skills, we will be constantly communicating to the students what we expect them to learn.

We did a feasibility study on the examination system a year or so ago in a world cultures course that's taught to every tenth-grader. We found that all

kids can move constructively in the direction of mastery. So we're now in the process of developing a brief syllabus, four to five pages in length, that will lay out for the kids what it is that we expect them to learn by the end of tenth-grade English or eleventh-grade U.S. history. We'll give them examples of how they will be tested—sample multiple-choice questions and sample essay questions—so they will understand what the expectations are.

This, by the way, reflects a very strong bias of mine: you figure out what your goals ought to be, you move immediately to criterion outcomes, and then you look at how you get from here to there. Eventually our syllabus-driven examination system will be the way we judge how well our kids are being educated. □

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