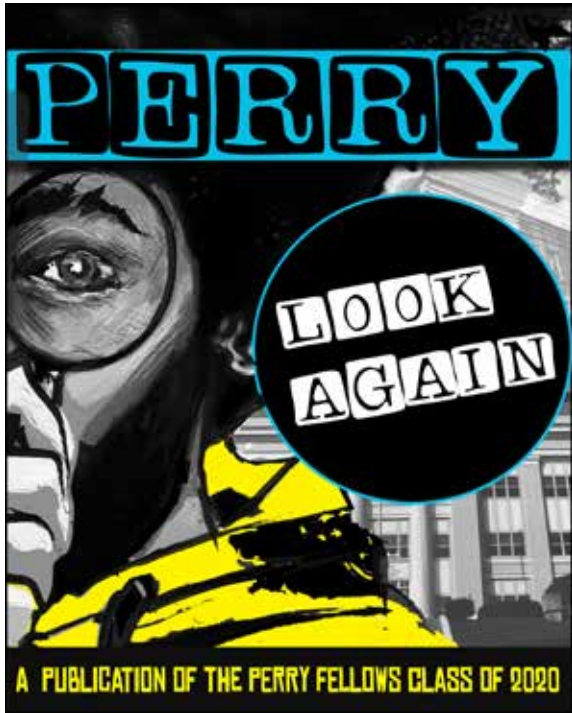


Rising up: Stories from our schools

Opening a new door at Perry High School

By Tom Lisi



The cover of the Perry Fellows' zine. To view the full publication, email Christa Drew, TeenBloc Creative Lead, at cdrew@aplusschools.org.

Some eight years ago, 10th grade social studies teacher Sharon Brentley and other staff at Perry High School began to worry that the storied building might close. Enrollment had been declining.

Perry had been a fixture of the community since it opened in 1901, and it was the last neighborhood high school left on the Northside. Brentley met her future husband there as a student in the 1970s. She sent four of her five children to Perry, and has devoted her career to the generations of students who followed her.

But today, even in the midst of a pandemic, Brentley says she believes Perry is on the road to a renaissance. Over the past two years, a group of

students, Brentley and other teachers, community partners including A+ Schools, and school administrators has met to lay the groundwork. This careful work has focused on the school's existing assets and taken an approach of creating doable short-term projects while also building a vision for the future. The work grew out of a community process facilitated by One Northside, an initiative of the Buhl Foundation. Through that process, residents identified having a high performing high school in the Northside as one of their top priorities.

The vision that's emerging among staff, students, and community partners is to create a comprehensive high school that gives students a strong grounding in a liberal arts education, opportunities to earn college credits in high school, and pathways to learn technical skills that are in demand in the current job market, with supports that help the whole family.

James Fogarty, executive director of A+ Schools, says of the effort, "We believe that we have everything we need in our city to meet the promise of every child. What we're doing at Perry is putting that belief into action since we know there are dedicated staff, promising opportunities, and amazing kids who are best suited to design a school that can work for them."

Over the past two years of thoughtful planning and working collaboratively, morale is starting to shift. "We haven't had this much energy about pulling the school together in a very long time," Brentley says. This collective effort has won the support of district administration through their Imagine PPS planning process. Perry is one of three high schools identified in that process for improvement, and the



Photo credit: 232 Creative

Perry Fellows from left to right: Madina Mada, Malique Beatty, Imani Caroline, Stacia Randolph, JaMese Williams, Alyssa Vogel
Perry Fellows not pictured: Siobhan Barnett, Aleyjah Hill, and Aniya Givner

Perry students work to build pride and shift culture

Perry students are active participants in deciding how to improve the school and identifying what's missing. The "Perry Fellows" were created last year to be a cadre of student leaders. They met throughout the summer for training in civic engagement, leadership, and school-based advocacy. Through a Buhl Foundation grant, ten students earned stipends to produce a publication that tells the story of their experiences at the school.

Senior Alyssa Vogel, one of the Fellows, says she and her classmates are aware that Perry doesn't receive the same technology and resources as other high schools due to low enrollment, and it

makes them feel disrespected and devalued. "This city needs to believe that everyone at Perry is just as deserving as any other school is," she says. "If people are told they are less deserving of respect, even if it's said inadvertently, people will begin to believe it, and begin to act as though they do not have respect, nor want it."

If students did feel respected, she says, they would develop more pride in Perry and themselves. "The question is not, 'How do we make students behave?'" she says. It's "'How do we make our students feel more pride in our school?' We can improve any situations if we ask the right questions."

team that started this work has grown to include school board members, Superintendent Anthony Hamlet, and other administrators to help guide the effort.

"Greatness is on the horizon for Perry High School," says Perry's new principal, Dr. Robert Frioni. "We are committed to reestablishing Perry as the powerhouse for academics, athletics, and

the arts coupled with enhanced CTE and elective course offerings alongside JROTC. We are doing right by the kids. This is big for both Perry and the Northside."

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opportunities to earn college credits in high school, and pathways to learn technical skills that are in demand in the current job market, with supports that help the whole family. To enact this vision, careful year over year planning is taking place right now that will phase in programs and services that are responsive to the needs of students and staff.

The end goal is likely several years away, but the process of getting there is already paying dividends, says Rev. Brenda Gregg, executive director of Project Destiny, a social services organization and partner with A+ Schools and One Northside. To facilitate the goal of a vibrant Perry, the project's plan makes services and supports available when requested by families and students. Some of that work has already started, says Gregg, who is also an A+ Schools board member. It has helped organizations access and form deeper relationships with Northside families. "It empowers, I think, community organizations to enhance what they do," she says. "We have formed a very tight-knit group where we can work with each other. So the work that I'm doing at Perry is not necessarily new work, but it's given me a bigger open door to be able to do what I do best for the students that I've always wanted to reach."

Brentley says she had seen other consultants and organizations try to make positive changes at Perry and in the surrounding community in the past. People would sit around at a table and talk about what would help students, and then no real change followed. "But this time, it is real," she says. "This time you have One Northside, A+ Schools, and the Buhl Foundation that are serious about making sure that we don't lose our high school, and making sure the families on the Northside stay within our Perry community."

The planning structure includes three teams with representatives from different parts of the community, from the Pittsburgh Promise scholarship program and the Buhl Foundation to the Pittsburgh Federation of Teachers (the teachers union) and the larger Perry community of students, alumni, and parents. The Action Team focuses on near-term projects, gathers input, and builds support for the overall project. A Steering Committee makes sure the right resources and

policies are in place, and the Planning Team meets regularly to develop Perry's long-term vision and planning framework.

Over the coming years, A+ Schools will invite Northside residents to be a part of supporting the school as a model for secondary schools in our region. Be on the lookout for community engagement sessions and surveys in the coming months.✦

See Perry's data on page 120.

Learning on a continuum: The present and future of PPS' Early Childhood Education program, with a classroom view at Fulton

By Faith Schantz

When Carol Barone-Martin, the Pittsburgh district's executive director for Early Childhood Education, visits a pre-k classroom, joy is the most important thing she wants to see.

The district's Early Childhood Education (ECE) program reaches every area of the city, with classrooms for three- to five-year-olds in most K-5 and K-8 schools, in stand-alone centers, at the Children's Museum of Pittsburgh, and at the Carnegie Science Center. Two 6-12 and two 9-12 schools offer infant-toddler programs for students who are parents. Children aged 3-5 who need special education services come under the ECE umbrella, regardless of setting. And the district partners with child-care agencies to extend the school day for working parents. According to Barone-Martin, it's the most comprehensive program of its kind in the state. And given that it has federal, state, and local funding streams, the program is also comprehensively evaluated. One form of evaluation is the state's Keystone STARS. All of the district's pre-k classrooms have met the STAR 4 standard, the highest rating.