




**PROMISING PATH**

PITTSBURGH IS ABUZZ OVER PLANS TO OFFER HUNDREDS OF CITY PUBLIC SCHOOL STUDENTS A FINANCIAL LAUNCHING PAD TO HIGHER EDUCATION. BUT SEVERAL LOCAL FOUNDATIONS ARE STRUGGLING TO BALANCE THEIR PARTICIPATION IN THE NEW PITTSBURGH PROMISE INITIATIVE AGAINST THE MILLIONS ALREADY INVESTED IN THE SCHOOL SYSTEM'S TWO-YEAR-OLD REFORMS, AMONG THE BOLDEST OF ANY URBAN DISTRICT IN THE COUNTRY. HERE'S A REPORT ON THE KINDERGARTEN CLUB MOMS, THE AFTER-SCHOOL WIZARDS, THE ART TEACHERS-TURNED-CULTURAL GUIDES—EVEN A FROG NAMED READY FREDDY. BY CHRISTINE H. O'TOOLE PHOTOGRAPHY BY JOSHUA FRANZOS



**L**enell Hale is a veteran 33-year-old teacher with a warm smile, a two-way radio to check in with colleagues and a patient ear for parents at Northview Accelerated Learning Academy. Since last fall, he's been a parent and community engagement specialist at the elementary school, helping families understand new expectations in the Pittsburgh district.

"To be realistic, about 30 percent of our families see the vision. They know what we want to achieve," he says. "To the other 70 percent, [the changes are] a bucking bronco."

Pittsburgh families, teachers and administrators aren't the only ones hanging onto their saddles. Two years into a reform effort that's been wrenching in many ways, foundations and community leaders are far too committed to dismount now.

The Endowments has tried to buttress recent reforms by awarding about \$5 million to the Pittsburgh Public Schools and nearly \$6 million to other programs that aid district children. Other local philanthropies have made more than \$9 million in grants to the city schools. That group includes the Grable, Pittsburgh, Buhl, Claude Worthington Benedum and Jewish Healthcare foundations, which along with the Endowments have channeled a portion of this funding through a joint Fund for Excellence. The foundations are holding tight, betting that patient capital and community support will turn the district into a thoroughbred.

“Our grant making reveals support for reform efforts that ultimately will benefit kids in the Pittsburgh Public School system,” says Gregg Behr, executive director of the Grable Foundation, defining its \$2 million commitment to programs in the city.

The 2006–07 school year was a rough ride. In the first major strides for Superintendent Mark Roosevelt’s new plan, 22 failing schools in Pittsburgh’s shrinking school district were closed. New “accelerated learning academies,” with curriculum innovations intended to boost the performance of children in pre-kindergarten through fifth grade, replaced traditional schools in tough neighborhoods like Northview Heights.

Huge middle schools were divided into smaller ones. New curricula for every school level landed on teachers’ desks. And a plan, the Pittsburgh Promise, which would provide scholarships to all district graduates with solid grades, was introduced, though a funding pledge to make the program possible didn’t come through until December. (See “More than a promise” sidebar on page 18.) By the end of the year, the needle had notched up, ever so slightly, on standardized test results.

That school year also marked when the Endowments seized an opportunity to leverage support for the district’s newly stated priorities.

Drawing on four of five program areas—Education, Arts & Culture, Innovation Economy, and Children, Youth & Families—foundation staff crafted an initiative dubbed Pathways to Educational Excellence. The effort focuses grant support on school and out-of-school programs, community resources and parent engagement to promote student achievement in school and life. From kindergarten clubs that get families ready to start school to arts education that responds to the black experience, from transforming high school instruction to galvanizing community attention, the initiative aligns with the district’s reform strategy, but doesn’t direct it.

When Endowments staff members approached Roosevelt two years ago with

an offer to support his reforms, he told them that the district didn’t have the capacity to fill in some of the fundamental gaps many of the students have, gaps similar to those found in most urban communities. He was impressed by the Endowments’ plans to address some of those needs through the Pathways initiative so that the district’s work in the schools would be more successful.

“That’s very unusual,” he says. “They were thinking through how all kinds of community groups—support groups, mental health groups—could coordinate their efforts in a more systemic approach.”

Sustaining a good relationship between school district and foundation staff requires a delicate balance with carefully defined rules of engagement.

“Our one-on-one meetings made us realize that we needed a closer ongoing collaboration with the senior leaders of the district,” says Marge Petruska, senior director of the Endowments’ Children, Youth & Families Program and chair of the Pathways initiative. “They vetted the Pathways goals and strategies, and we worked out the mechanics—how often we should meet with them, the real nitty-gritty.”

Through the Fund for Excellence, Pathways supports district priorities like the establishment of the accelerated learning academies, leadership training and school redesign. Separate from the



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**Camellia Nelson**, shown with her 4-year-old son, Trevon Johnson, at the K-Club in the Northview Heights Family Support Center, where both are members

fund, Pathways also advances “complementary learning,” a new name for the oft-repeated adage that it takes a village to raise a child. The concept, developed by the Harvard Family Research Project, advocates deliberate, effective links among schools, opportunities for family engagement, early childhood programs, recreation, mentoring, arts, and health and social services. Omaha, Cincinnati and New York are among cities adopting the strategy.

Heather Weiss, the founder and director of the Harvard Family Research Project, helped the Endowments draft its new initiative and flesh out the complementary learning aspect.

“The framework is based on the recognition that interventions are spotty,” she explains. “The piecemeal approach is not getting us where we want to go—we find the gains don’t last. What we are learning is that we must have early continuous intervention. We are saying you need an array of supports, particularly for low-income families. The evidence is strong for the components, but we are just beginning to develop the links across time. In the next five to 10 years, the challenge is to test the concept.”

A strong evaluation component built into the Pathways initiative will help build a national research database.

“Complementary learning needs to be in everything we do,” says Roosevelt.

## MEASURING SUCCESS

In 2002, when the Mayor’s Commission on Public Education recommended the formation of an independent oversight group to review the Pittsburgh school district’s performance and push for school improvement, the Endowments stepped in to support the new watchdog, A+ Schools.

“At the time, there wasn’t any public voice focused on improving quality,” notes Joe Dominic, director of the Endowments’ Education Program. “A+ pays attention to strategies, outcomes and the quality of change, and keeps citizens informed.”

Since 2001, there’s been no dearth of school performance data. School report cards are mandated by No Child Left Behind, examining student performance by grade level, race and family income status. A+ Schools has refined the statistics in school-by-school listings published annually.

“You could say it’s the silver lining of [the federal No Child Left Behind Act],” notes A+ Executive Director Carey Harris. “It’s shown a light on disparities in education and has given the public a mandate for demanding student achievement.”

In its third year of community reporting, the group mailed a copy of the full report to all parents in the district and inserted it into a Sunday edition of the Pittsburgh Post-Gazette, with a circulation of 332,000. It’s also turning attention to the next school board elections, when five seats will be opened on the nine-member group.



“For kids who show signs of losing their way, we need to provide a portal. We want to connect them to something positive, and use that connection to convey academic content.”

Is complementary learning the educational buzzword *du jour*, or an organizing principle for real reform? Roosevelt acknowledges that adopting a relatively untested concept could be viewed as a risk for the district. “What we are doing is traditional, aggressive urban school reform. This piece [complementary learning] is different. It’s cutting edge. But risk implies to me that harm might be done, and I have trouble conceiving that is the case here.”

### Building Bridges

When Roosevelt assumed the helm at the Pittsburgh Public Schools in 2005, he faced a student-demographic minefield in which 69.2 percent of the district’s black 11th-graders—compared with 28.4 percent of their white peers—failed to crack the proficiency barrier in reading. Nearly 83 percent of the African-American high school juniors—compared with 41 percent of white students in the same grade—missed the proficiency mark in math. And more than 60 percent of the district’s 29,000 students were black. Closing the racial achievement gap was a clear priority not just for the district, but for the city as a whole.

## MORE THAN A PROMISE

It's a 14-karat carrot: a public scholarship program that guarantees qualifying graduates money for higher education. The Pittsburgh Promise, introduced to Pittsburgh two years ago, mimed programs in several cities that deliver thousands of dollars in tuition money.

The Promise program will give members of the Class of 2008 up to \$5,000 each year for up to four years. By 2012, the annual award will rise to \$10,000 per year at 100 schools: regional community colleges, the state university system, some private Pittsburgh universities and some vocational schools.

The program gives students a reason to stay in school, and their parents a reason to stay in the school district. Compared with other U.S. cities, the percentage of college graduates in the Pittsburgh workforce is low—just 23 percent. Only 62 percent of the school district's students graduate on time, compared with a 74 percent average across Pennsylvania and 70 percent nationally. The school district's enrollment has tumbled by 10,000 students in just seven years, and projections suggest that it could plummet to 22,000 by 2014.

"We are facing a potentially catastrophic population decline that, absent some bold stroke, will impoverish not only the city but the school system and the urban core for the entire region," says Grant Oliphant, president and CEO of the Pittsburgh Foundation, which will oversee a seven-person board for the scholarship fund. The Promise, adds Oliphant, formerly vice president of programs and planning at The Heinz Endowments, "provides an immediate incentive for parents to stay in the district and stay engaged."

The oldest citywide scholarship plan, the two-year-old Kalamazoo Promise, cites encouraging early results. Since 2006, enrollment in the school system has increased by more than 1,000 students. Eighty-three percent of eligible seniors are using Promise money for college, and real estate values in that city have risen significantly compared with those in the region and the state.

Pittsburgh's initial response to the Promise concept announced by Mayor Luke Ravenstahl and school Superintendent Mark Roosevelt was tepid. The Promise fund didn't become viable until December, when the University of Pittsburgh Medical Center offered \$10 million toward scholarships for the Class of 2008, with an additional \$90 million offered in the form of a challenge grant to motivate other donors.

To date, no donors have stepped up to match UPMC's commitment. But Pittsburgh foundations, especially those already funding primary and secondary education, realize that their participation is crucial to the Promise's funding plan.

"The Promise is another bright star in the constellation of school reform presented by Mark and his team," says Endowments President Bobby Vagt. "It is the logical

consequence of—and can be effective only as the result of—the other pieces of this agenda. Our challenge is to find a way to contribute to the Promise, but not at the expense of our support for the reform program commitments of our Pathways group."

Parents are asking questions, too. Pointing to gaping disparities in academic achievement, they say the district hasn't acknowledged the enormity of the task ahead: making failing students into college scholars.

"The Promise will motivate students who are already headed for college or the fence-sitters—those who would like to go," says Marilyn Barnett, a city parent and educator who chairs the education committee of the local NAACP chapter. "But I spent 30 years with the Pittsburgh Public Schools, and I saw the differences in access to educational opportunity. The majority of students don't have access to counselors and support. I would hope that, first, Pittsburgh could level the playing field. When that happens, the Promise will be able to be fulfilled."

Another city parent sees hurdles for families that can't navigate the college admission process. "How do you apply for [federal] financial aid if you don't have access to a computer?" asks Ronell Guy, executive director of Northside Coalition for Fair Housing.

Guy also wants details on how students' conduct will affect their eligibility. "I am really concerned that people look at this broadly and don't exclude kids who deserve this amazing opportunity."

School board member Randall Taylor strongly supports the program but echoes those concerns. "It's a great opportunity for this city, particularly for African-American families... But I think a lot of African-American children are going to be left out unless there's a special coordinated effort to make it real for African-American families. We have to work to make sure there's not a 'Promise gap.'"

District officials have pledged to make students "Promise ready."

"We are going to have to do more of almost everything," acknowledges Roosevelt. He envisions examining sixth-graders' "trajectories" to make sure students are kept on track for high school, advanced placement courses and career planning.

And others in Pittsburgh are hailing the program for the opportunities it offers.

"There isn't anything wrong with the Pittsburgh Promise," says Steve MacIsaac, executive director of the community group Wireless Neighborhoods. "It's easy to look at things in infancy and point out gaps. This is of the single most generous acts of kindness I've ever seen. It's good for the city at every level, and it gives community partners something to rally around. It's going to take all of us."

At Northview, 97 percent of the school's enrollment is African American. The same percentage qualifies for lunch subsidies. Last year, 35 percent of the school's third-graders scored at proficient or advanced levels in reading, compared with a district average of 59 percent.

The district's strategic plan, adopted in May 2006, emphasized third-grade reading instruction as crucial to future learning. The ambitious plan also called for five new early childhood education centers in the district to spur reading readiness.

The focus on reading provides a glimpse of how complementary learning can work in the Northview Heights community.

National research has documented how strong, stable families influence student success, even in the first year. While nearly half of all children struggle with the emotional and academic demands of kindergarten, children in poverty are particularly at risk. Their parents are less likely to be involved with their schooling, and behavior and academic problems may persist.

To help address such problems in communities like Northview, staff at the University of Pittsburgh's Office of Child Development stepped in, and with the support of a \$650,000 Pathways grant, developed a school readiness project with city school officials. The office has been a





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**Wanda Henderson**, a member the Advocates for African American Students in Pittsburgh Public Schools, shown here after speaking to some local grandparents about the responsibilities they face in having to raise their grandchildren

longtime grantee of the Endowments, providing technical assistance for family support and early education programs.

“They laid out the big challenges: get children ready to attend school, get them enrolled in school, get them to school every day and get them to school on time,” says Laurie Mulvey, director of demonstration programs for the Office of Child Development. “Kindergarten attendance is a big predictor of long-term success.”

Mulvey’s staff embarked on a program that adopted the school district’s own kindergarten checklist and a mascot: a green frog named Ready Freddy. The pilots would be placed in two family support centers that serve neighborhoods near accelerated learning academies: one at Northview and one in Pittsburgh’s Hill District. But before the child development workers could offer school-readiness activities, they first had to find the children.

“We knocked on 234 doors around Northview,” recounts Ken Leistico, who coordinated the project and wrote its first curriculum. Sometimes families wouldn’t let the Pitt staff members in. Other times, they got through the door but were still viewed with suspicion. “But when we said ‘kindergarten,’ there were usually big smiles.”

Families got school registration information for older children, listings of local family resources and invitations for 4-year-olds to attend six-week kindergarten clubs with their parents.

Ten families out of about 50 deemed eligible from the canvassing joined “K Club” at the Northview Heights Family Support Center last spring. Among them were Camellia Nelson and her 4-year-old son, Trevon Johnson.

Nelson worried that her son didn’t spend enough time with other pre-schoolers. The two-hour club meetings mixed family time with brief separations. As a result, “the kids learned how to interact with other kids, how to enjoy each other’s company and how to respect each other,” recalls Nelson. “The parents did too.” Trevon demanded extra “homework”—family crafts, books and learning activities—to take home.

With that momentum, the pair enrolled in Raising Readers at the family support center. The family literacy program sponsored by Beginning With Books, another Endowments grantee, provided parent training at the center, more books for the Nelsons’ home library and long-term support for the school district’s reading priorities. Nelson joined a parents’ book club at the family center, and Trevon enrolled in kindergarten in the fall. Although transportation is a problem—the family struggles with the two bus rides required to reach Trevon’s new school—his mother knows attendance is important.

Up the road, Northview Academy teacher Lenell Hale asked Beginning With Books to provide programs for Black History Month celebrations at his school. “The choices were terrific.

The illustrations alone would blow you away,” he recalls. As the school launched a reading drive, he invited fathers to participate in a read-a-thon.

Hale shared his ideas with Bethany House Ministries, which operates an after-school program attended by many Northview students. “We need to create a model. We have the same goal, and we should all be pushing the same message,” he says. Bethany’s after-school group provided the entertainment for the Northview holiday celebration: an African drumming presentation that earned enthusiastic applause. “The rhythm of the drums really riveted the kids.”

### Improving Community Connections

**A** Pathways grant of \$500,000 to the school district will introduce more African- and African-American-centered arts into the curriculum. The Culturally Responsive Arts Education grant will fund demonstration projects that match three or four schools to teams of black teaching artists, whose creative vision involves the sharing of the culture and history of the African Diaspora.

The initiative will “employ arts of the African Diaspora as one strategy to engage and empower African-American children and their families,” explains Endowments Program Officer Justin Laing, a member of the Pathways team. “Our goal is to offer the community additional models to facilitate the achievement of African-American children and demonstrate that the arts

can be very useful in the larger discussion of education reform.”

The grant also comes at a time when the Endowments is considering ways to support an agreement brokered by the Pennsylvania Human Relations Commission between the district and a group called the Advocates for African American Students in Pittsburgh Public Schools. The Advocates is an organization of parents and former parents who sued the school district in 1992, alleging discrimination against black students. After 15 years, the state Human Relations Commission credited the allegations and said the district had to address the concerns.

“Culturally responsive education is a good start. It’s a very important part of the solution. But I ask, why did it take them so long?” asks Wanda Henderson, an Advocates member. “African Americans have been ignored. It’s not a new issue.”

Health education and wellness programs have been supported by the Endowments within the district for several years. Programs like Healthy Class 2010 and Girls on the Run have encouraged middle-schoolers to pay attention to nutrition and exercise. Now the Pathways initiative will be the source of most of the foundation’s health-related support to the city district, such as a \$150,000 grant to introduce yoga classes. To more rigorously address physical and mental health, the Endowments also has commissioned a RAND Corp. analysis of health and wellness activities in the Pittsburgh schools and the community.

The long-term forecast for the Pittsburgh schools: more change.

New models for upper-level instruction include proposals for four new themed schools containing grades six to 12, an international baccalaureate school, a university-partnership school in the Hill District, a science high school, and a merger of the magnet middle-grade and high school creative arts program.

Community and parent buy-in will have a major impact on the success of these projects, but cultivating that support has not been easy.

Celeste Taylor is a board member for A+ Schools, a local advocacy group, and state coordinator for the People for the American Way Foundation, a national civil liberties organization. She’s also the mother of twin sons who will spend their senior year in a building that had been a middle school. She believes that the district’s reform efforts hit a major speed bump with the handling of the closing of her sons’ high school. Despite a new parent-outreach policy, Taylor contends that district officials did not listen to many parent concerns about the changes, pointing to a difference between policy and practice.

“I am a big supporter of public schools . . . I don’t want to be an adversary. I want school board members and the superintendent and teachers and everybody to be [my children’s] advocate,” she says, but quickly adds that schools still need parental involvement to more effectively educate children.

Pathways team members agree,

which is why parent engagement is a top priority in the initiative’s strategy, says Petruska. Through the initiative, the Endowments has awarded grants to the district totaling \$320,000 to help stimulate more family involvement.

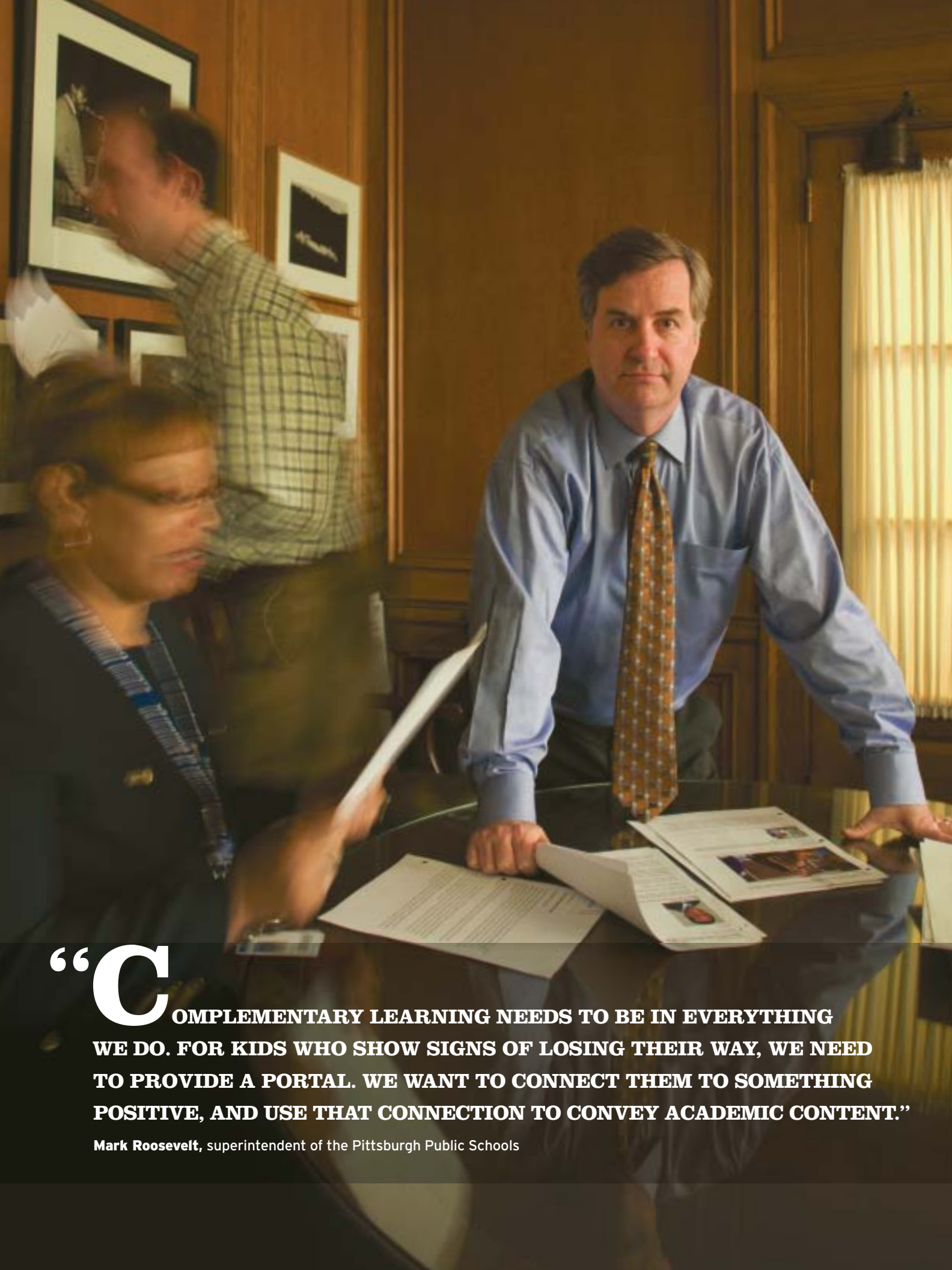
One grant, for example, supported a new district-wide Welcome Back to School Program. Before the beginning of this school year, a variety of informative, fun, family-focused back-to-school events took place. And for the first time ever, Pittsburgh Public School families were given a neighborhood community resource guide with information about after-school programs and other community resources and activities designed to inspire, educate and entertain their children.

Another grant will help the district inform families about the Pittsburgh Promise—what it holds for them and how they can ensure that their children are prepared to take advantage of the opportunity to secure funding for college or other post-secondary school.

Future funding plans through the Pathways initiative include support for developing a pre-kindergarten mathematics curriculum, restructuring the district’s only Montessori program and creating an after-school department.

“We recognize that school reform is complicated and challenging,” says Petruska. “But it’s an investment we’re making that can reap dividends that will last for generations to come.” *h*





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