

Pittsburgh Millionses students, staff seek to 'change the narrative'

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By Molly Born / Pittsburgh Post-Gazette

Amir Hutchins had plenty to look forward to after graduation from Pittsburgh Millionses 6-12. When he's not working his summer job as a junior counselor at Mount Ararat Baptist Church, he's poring over college guides in preparation for his freshman year at Indiana University of Pennsylvania, where he'll study fashion merchandising and human resources.

But unlike most seniors, he wasn't exactly in a rush to get his diploma.

"I wish I had another year," he said. "I want this school to be better for everybody. I still wanna help."

In a way, Mr. Hutchins, 18, of Stanton Heights, has grown up with the school. He attended Millionses, also known as University Prep, from sixth grade on, watched teachers come and go and stayed through what the school principal calls "the unfortunate incident." The fight involving 30 girls in February 2016 made national news and likely contributed to the loss of more than a quarter of the student population there the following fall.

That school year "felt like chaos" to Branden Ballard, project manager of the district's We Promise program, whose goal is to help African-American boys boost their grades and attendance to become eligible for the Pittsburgh Promise college scholarship. But this past year felt "orderly": Kids wanted to go to class; they showed up on time. The building was cleaner — administrators say more students will be inside it this fall.

Mr. Hutchins agrees. As a student leader, he and his peers together worked to "change the narrative" of the school, which he asserts "definitely got a lot better over time."

After years of the Hill District school falling short of the promise of the university preparatory theme it was founded on, some observers have expressed cautious optimism about an apparent culture change underway. Others, like Sala Udin, who will represent District 3 on the school board this fall, are more skeptical.

“Improvement from having 30 girls perp-walked out of the school is not necessarily a great improvement!” he wrote in an email, adding that academic performance remains lackluster for most students there. “That’s what we are mandated to do, not to just keep students from violent melees.”

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The idea to connect Millions students, which draw mostly from the Hill District and Garfield, with the expertise at the University of Pittsburgh less than a mile away took root in 2008, after the closing of Schenley High School.

In the first year, “we had Pitt teachers doing remarkably strong professional development work,” working with district staff, said Alan M. Lesgold, former dean of Pitt’s School of Education.

“Then the next year, they’d be told at the last minute, ‘You can’t have the time. We need it for some other thing.’” he said.

A Pitt administrator had an office at the school, but it wasn’t long before something else took up space there. A new principal arrived the next year.

Two district administrators from that time either declined or didn’t respond to an interview, but Sherry Hazuda, a then-District 6 board member, said, “If there were problems, [Mr. Lesgold] didn’t share.”

“I hate to finger-point, but if we weren’t doing what we were supposed to, I certainly wish he had let us know,” she said.

Tom Sumpter, the District 3 school board member, didn’t return a call for this story.

“Whatever that partnership was supposed to be, it hasn’t moved the needle.” said Rick Swartz, executive director of the Bloomfield-Garfield Corporation, whose College & Career Readiness Program has worked with students at the school for several years.

Indeed, the school has long struggled academically. According to an evaluation of the 2016-17 school year included in U Prep’s yearly School Improvement Plan — recently approved by the state — no students scored proficient or advanced on the winter literature Keystone exam. Only 8 percent achieved that designation on the winter math Keystone. No sixth- or seventh-graders, and only 5 percent of eighth-graders, scored in those categories in math.

Notably, U Prep’s graduation rate was nearly 90 percent for the 2015-16 school year, the most recent available. But James Fogarty, the executive director of A+ Schools, cautioned that such a figure “is only as good as the kids’ readiness for the next step.” According to data gathered by his watchdog group last fall, only nearly half of graduates qualified for the Promise and only 45 percent went to college or a trade school.

“The amount of offerings is anemic,” Mr. Fogarty said, giving the scarcity of Advanced Placement classes compared to other district high schools as one example. “If we’re gonna say it’s truly a university preparatory [school], then it needs to have the things in place to make it [one].”

At a community meeting last month, Milliones principal Christopher Horne offered an auspicious assessment: Suspensions were down. A later start time for high-schoolers (8:38 a.m., the latest in the district for that population by far) meant improved attendance. The latter change was geared especially for students who work part-time jobs late at night or were taking siblings to school early in the morning.

Fights were down 85 percent in 2016-17 over the prior year. Macedonia Family and Community Enrichment Center said it has seen its trauma-informed weekly “girls circle,” which began shortly after the February 2016 fight, become a safe space to share experiences and struggles.

“You can easily see their longing for peace and wanting to be centered,” said Soleil Meade, who leads a group.

Then-superintendent Linda Lane said that brawl resulted from a neighborhood rivalry that Mr. Horne acknowledged is “ever present.” U Prep student leaders from the Hill District and Garfield are working together to address that tension, and school leaders plan to monitor it over the summer, he said.

The chronic absence rate in 2016-17 decreased 10 percent from the previous year. Eighth-grade science and math state standardized tests increased by 6 percent and 5 percent, respectively, from 2015 to the next year, according to the plan the district gave to the state.

“Things this year are different. Things this year are better,” Mr. Horne said.

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A founding math teacher at University Prep, Mr. Horne left to take an assistant principal role at Penn Hill High School, then returned in fall 2015 as U Prep principal. But he’s circumspect about whether the school has lived up to its pledge.

“I believe there were some really good intentions and visions around the start,” he said.

Resources “shifted” after the first year, but he values the current work of Pitt’s Kathy Humphrey, senior vice chancellor for engagement and chief of staff, “and I know that she is committed to making our partnership above and beyond what it ever was.”

Ms. Humphrey’s efforts included providing snacks this past year to students who come to school hungry. (She wasn’t available for an interview.) Pitt’s Center for Urban Education wrapped up the third year of its

Ready2Learn tutoring and mentoring program that pairs trained Pitt students with kids at Millions. Fifteen Heinz Fellows from across the country will work with teachers at the school in the fall.

A founding feature of the U Prep model was that students wear uniforms. But Mr. Horne found it to be a “barrier to learning,” as students were being suspended for coming to school without one, a practice he said he discontinued shortly after he arrived in 2015. He eased enforcement of the policy and will drop it entirely this fall.

“I have made that decision that it’s more important for me that they come as they are and be in class learning,” he said.

Despite the improvements, some closely watching U Prep observers are uneasy about a plan for the fall that will “displace” eight teachers and two support staff members. About 80 students participated in a walkout in May to show support for them.

Enrollment at U Prep went from 548 in 2015-16 to 392 the next year. The projected population for this fall is 420. Every year the school system aligns the number of staff with its expected enrollment, and U Prep was already overstaffed this past year, the district has said.

“That worries me because I really do feel it’s much more than a numbers game; it’s much more than a formula. They need the supports,” said Nina Esposito-Visgitis, president of the Pittsburgh Federation of Teachers.

The school lost five other teachers who voluntarily resigned after this past school year. Mr. Horne said he didn’t want to speculate on reasons behind their departures. Ms. Esposito-Visgitis didn’t have any insight on them but said she was generally “really proud of the staff and students at U Prep.”

“I think things are taking hold. I think in order to do that, they need the human capital available to make those visions come through.”

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Mr. Udin, co-chair of the Hill District Education Council, hopes the constellation of offerings at the school will make a difference.

But, “my fear is that many of these programs touch a segment of the study body but does not change the culture of underperformance and failure of the entire institution,” he said.

Part of the school improvement plan allows for the addition of Keystone remediation classes for math, literature and science to the master schedule, as well as software and other materials to help those struggling in math and English.

Mr. Horne said continuation of the Early College in High School program, first offered to 25 freshmen this spring, “will help us live up to our name.”

And the district has entered into a partnership with The Fulfillment Fund, a Los Angeles nonprofit, who will provide free mentoring, college counseling and other resources to Millions students beginning in January.

As it prepares to implement those plans, University Prep is in the midst of a campaign to change its image. At a community meeting last month, staff eagerly handed out “Always Reppin’ U Prep” T-shirts, similar to those presented to honor roll students “so they can walk around proud in their community, and their school community, in their academic accomplishments.”

Victor Gariseb, a recent graduate who Mr. Horne said represents “our new U Prep student,” said the work of the student-envoy leadership program especially helped to make “a major change in our school.” The group raised money for materials to make blankets they then donated to Catholic Charities, met biweekly with college students and built a trophy case. The district earned a \$7,000 STEAM grant that paid for healthy cooking seminars for students and a greenhouse for which U Prep students won an award from the Allegheny County Sanitary Authority.

“People didn’t have anything good to say about us,” said Mr. Hutchins, the recent graduate who also a student envoy. “We have a lot of good things. We wanted to showcase that and show we can come together. This school is not all bad.”

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