



# *Pittsburgh Federation of Teachers*

## **Questions and Answers about "Empowering Effective Teachers" and Other Issues**

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### **Introduction**

We know that our District is undergoing significant change, and we're all feeling it. This truly is an era of unprecedented movement as we continue our efforts to attain financial stability, reach Adequate Yearly Progress in each school, and work to ensure that all students have access to the Pittsburgh Promise. The PFT supports those efforts and also is unwavering in our determination that our members' work is recognized and respected. The PFT has engaged in the "Empowering Effective Teachers" project for a number of reasons, but especially so that our teachers' voices and ideas can play a role in the changes in public education that are anticipated, in part by expected revisions to the Elementary and Secondary Education Act and by a new, keen focus on educational reform emerging from Washington, D.C. We are striving to collaborate with our district in these reforms. Many other urban districts are simply imposing unilateral, drastic changes on their employees.

PFT Staff have heard your questions and concerns and attempted to be as transparent as possible as work was done to complete the "Empowering Teachers" Proposal. Most recently, two "Empowering Effective Teachers" Workshops (November 30 and December 9) were conducted here at the PFT. They were facilitated by PFT President John Tarka, Superintendent Mark Roosevelt, and Deputy Superintendent Linda Lane. Those who attended raised questions and recommendations, and each multi-hour meeting provided extensive opportunity for analysis and discussion of the proposal. Earlier, the project was discussed at PFT General Membership and Grass Roots meetings, at the May, August, October, November Building Representatives Meetings, and at the May and November Building Representatives Workshops. Furthermore, various forms of communication about the project were sent to the entire membership, including letters and updates.

For months, the entire "Empowering Teachers" proposal has been posted on the PFT website for members to examine. There is also a link where members can ask direct questions about the proposal (or rumors that may have been heard). We will publish commonly asked questions and their answers.

PFT staff members also continue to be willing to visit individual schools to meet with members before or after school to discuss this project, as well as any other topics that impact or interest our members.

The PFT has also instituted a series of Frequently-Asked Question and Answer documents in order to address issues and rumors. This document includes the second installment of those FAQ&A sheets.

Other ideas for PFT information dissemination include greater personal email communication, a phone-based communication update system, and an expansion of the PFT website. If you have any ideas about how we can better communicate updates with our members, please contact the PFT at (412) 431-5900 or via the website at [www.pft400.org](http://www.pft400.org).

## **Questions and Answers about "Empowering Effective Teachers" and Other Issues**

1. *I heard that the "Empowering Teachers" Project is a "done deal" – that there will be no opportunities for teachers to provide input into how the project unfolds...*

Not true! Now that Pittsburgh has been chosen as one of the four recipients for foundation funding, the real work begins, as the PFT and its members will collaborate with the district to "add meat to the bones" of the proposal. Though the Board of Public Education has every right to unilaterally dictate some parts of the plan, such as restructuring the Human Resources Department, we are fortunate that many of the ideas in the proposal are subject to collective bargaining.

Furthermore, last week a meeting of PFT and District representatives, along with AFT and Mathematica representatives, met to discuss the best ways to encourage our members to be part of the planning and implementation processes. Some standing teacher committees will be engaged in discussions on certain topics, and new committees will be formed to discuss others. After the holidays, we'll be able to tell you more complete details about how the teacher involvement piece will be rolled out.

2. *The local newspapers seem to focus only on the performance pay aspect of the "Empowering Teachers" project, but the Board of Public Education and the PFT insist that it is only a small piece of the plan. What is the real story?*

Newspapers choose headlines and the focus of articles to suit what they think will interest their readers and what they think will sell newspapers. Though interviews with President Tarka may cover a number of aspects of the expansive, 60 page "Empowering Teachers" proposal, it was no surprise that in a recent Post-Gazette article, the reporter chose to hone in what is clearly the most controversial piece of the proposal – pay for performance. Unfortunately, topics that interest us such as career ladders and/or the statistical value added measures don't always sell newspapers or intrigue the public.

It is with this perspective that members should read articles involving this project or other topics like negotiations. Be sure to stay in touch with your PFT Building Representative or your staff representative if there is a slant, a quote, or a statement that concerns you.

3. *I heard that principals were directed to put a certain number of teachers on "Employee Improvement Plans" (EIPs) – any truth to that? Also, I heard that the increased focus on these EIPs is a direct result of the "Empowering Teachers" proposal.*

In recent years, the PFT has certainly noticed an increase in the number of EIPs as more and more effort has been placed on schools to increase their scores and achieve AYP. The PFT continues to closely monitor the number and types of EIPs.

However, there has been no evidence found that principals were given "quotas" or percentages to fill in their schools. PFT members, Building Representatives, and principals have reported that some schools have no EIPs – some schools have more. Rumors

started when one school reported an inordinately high numbers of teachers put on EIPs – and this situation was directly addressed by the PFT and the appropriate Executive Director.

Please be aware that there are fairly explicit rules and procedures in order to implement and document an Employee Improvement Plan. Also note that EIPs are supposed to be a “good faith” effort to help a teacher improve his or her practice. In order to address concerns and to make sure that processes are followed fairly and properly, PFT staff members have been working closely with teachers who received EIPs and contacted the PFT. If you have received an EIP and want help in dealing with it, don’t hesitate to contact the PFT directly.

Also note that, due to the high level of concern about EIPs, the PFT has altered the agenda of the next PFT Building Representatives Workshop to focus on the EIP process. Please note: The workshop date has been changed to January 19. If you care to attend, please register at the PFT at 412-431-5900.

4. *I’ve heard that the plan to loop the ninth and tenth grades in our high schools is already completed and that some principals are already looking for volunteers to take on the looping for the 2010-2011 school year. Is this true?*

A central initiative in the “Empowering Teachers” plan -- aimed at our high-needs high schools -- is the concept of “teaming” to provide the structure and support that ninth and tenth grade students need. Looping will be a part of the teaming plan that is known as the Promise Readiness Corp (PRC). Being a member of the PRC is a career ladder position and has compensation incentives built into the opportunity. It will not be a mandatory assignment and, when in full implementation, will be an opportunity for teachers who have demonstrated success with student learning. As with all the initiatives in the “Empowering Teachers” plan, the PRC is dependent on a ratified collective bargaining agreement to provide the language for the career ladder role. Because the situation in some high schools is urgent, the preparation for potential scheduling changes needs to be done now. Teachers need to be and will be at the center of the discussion and decision-making regarding how the PRC will be implemented. Meetings will begin in January and the hope is that teaming will begin in our high-needs high schools this fall. Success will depend on good preparation and a ratified contract.

5. *I’ve heard that the “Pay for Performance” piece in the “Empowering Teachers” proposal has already been agreed to and will eliminate all mentions of salary schedule.*

That assertion is simply not true. The “Empowering Teachers” proposal makes brief references to performance pay, and each of those references emphasizes the fact that compensation is a subject of collective bargaining. The district and the PFT have not reached agreement on changes to our pay formula. Rumors that say we have are absolutely false.

Both parties have strong positions about this complex issue, and we are determined to resolve our differences. It should be clear that the PFT recognizes the importance of solid

salary schedules/base pay and continues to advocate that all of our members be compensated fairly for the hard work that is done daily. We also have advocated for additional compensation for extra work done and in recognition of our members' efforts.

6. *I've heard that the "Value Added Measures" (VAM) being discussed attaches a number to every teacher based solely on student test scores. Will teachers get their rating and their pay based only on these scores?*

No. VAM involves complicated statistical calculations on student progress and gains. Factors such as gender, race, attendance, disabilities, and social economic status are calculated into a variety of assessment measures to determine whether a student, a class, or a school makes at least a year's worth of growth in a year's time.

Though VAM is being studied closely to see if it can give us some reliable clues when attempting to measure teachers' effectiveness, it will only be a part of a small number of the 24 RISE components – on which our classroom teachers will be rated.

Though VAM could be part of a possible performance pay plan – discussions of that option, which will most certainly include teacher input, have not even begun.

7. *I have heard that there will be opportunities available to interested teachers in a number of career ladder positions. What are some of these positions?*

For some time, the PFT has been interested in providing additional career opportunities and compensation for classroom teachers. The Instructional Teacher Leader program is one long-standing example of that interest.

In this proposal, in addition to the Promise Readiness Corps positions described in question 4, other career ladder positions include:

- Clinical Resident Teachers – will serve as lead teachers and work with new and veteran teachers at the PPS/PFT Teachers Academy.
- Turn-Around Teachers – will serve on teams of teachers who troubleshoot in low-performing schools or schools in distress.
- Behavioral Specialists – will work with students and teachers focusing on improving learning environments, which has been a primary focus of the PFT's involvement in this project.

Each of these positions will include differentiated responsibilities as well as additional compensation. Qualified, interested teachers will apply for these positions and undergo an interview and selection process.

See page 25-29 of the "Empowering Effective Teachers" proposal (on pft400.org) for more detailed descriptions of these and other career ladder positions.

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Visit pft400.org regularly for updates on the "Empowering Effective Teachers" project and other information important to PFT members.