



# Connecting with the Community

The School of Social Work continues its rich history of community engagement.

By Adam Reger

As the University of Pittsburgh School of Social Work celebrates its first 100 years, the fall of 2018 marks another important anniversary. Sixty years ago, in the fall of 1958, the school launched its curriculum in community organization, setting in place a legacy of community engagement that today is stronger than ever.

The community organization curriculum—the first program of its kind in the country—emphasized direct interaction with individuals and communities, advancing the small but growing body of scholarship in the field of community practice within social work.

The first graduates of the program—now the Community, Organization, and Social Action (COSA) curriculum—went on to make significant contributions to the War on Poverty and engaged meaningfully in communities in Pittsburgh and beyond. Students and faculty helped to drive the neighborhood alliance movement of the 1970s; fed the rise of community development corporations in the 1980s; made crucial contributions to the community policing initiatives of the 1990s; and established the Pitt Community Outreach Partnership Center, which engages community partners in neighborhoods that include Oakland, Oak Hill, and Hazelwood.

“Community engagement is inherent in the nature of social work,” says Tracy Soska, clinical associate professor and chair of the COSA program. “Engagement is part of the explicit curriculum. But we’re also learning through engagement, by being out there and applying the methodology that comes from the classroom.”

Theory and research, in turn, affect social workers’ direct practice and dictate how faculty and students interact with community partners. The notion of research and practice informing one another comes up often in discussions among the numerous faculty members and students who are engaged in partnerships with community members.

Although some of the issues of the day may have changed since 1958, School of Social Work researchers remain as committed to addressing vital societal problems today as they have ever been, tackling local and national issues ranging from racial and gender disparities to income inequality and intergenerational poverty.

## Using Education as a Lever: Pitt-Assisted Communities & Schools

Led by faculty members John Wallace and James Huguley and program director Esohe Osai, the Pitt-Assisted Communities & Schools (PACS) initiative was founded in 2015. Its mission is to enrich the lives of children in Pittsburgh's disadvantaged Homewood neighborhood, leveraging University of Pittsburgh resources to support students in neighborhood schools, specifically Lincoln PreK–5, Pittsburgh Faison K–5, and Pittsburgh Westinghouse Academy 6–12. The work is funded by the Richard King Mellon and the Pittsburgh foundations.

By establishing a regular and consistent University of Pittsburgh presence in Homewood, the aim is to create a college-going and career-oriented culture not only among neighborhood students but also in the broader community.

PACS grew out of a decade of University engagement in Homewood led by Wallace, a native of the neighborhood who also is senior pastor at Homewood's Bible Center Church. He was inspired by the Harlem Children's Zone, a large-scale nonprofit organization aimed at breaking cycles of intergenerational poverty for families and children, and attended a three-day practitioners institute to learn more about the organization.

"We [the institute attendees] were blown away by what they were doing on behalf of children in central Harlem," says Wallace. "They had all the problems our Homewood kids had, but multiply it by 10. We all agreed that we wanted to pursue a model like that in Homewood."

PACS, like the resulting Homewood Children's Village, seek to use education as a lever to improve the outcomes of the neighborhood's children.

"Our aspiration is to do for poor children what middle- and upper-class parents do naturally: give them access to quality education," Wallace says. "As a Head Start graduate myself, I fully appreciate the importance of education."

PACS partner schools have seen significant improvements in outcomes, including lowered rates of expulsion. Students have benefited from significant exposure to Pitt resources, including meetings with representatives from the School of Nursing, College of Business Administration, and Swanson School of Engineering.

As in the Homewood Children's Village, Wallace and his colleagues use a two-generation framework that considers child, parent, and community rather than viewing children in isolation. That means supporting children's growth and success by building parent and community stability.

In support of that goal, PACS includes the Parent Education and Employment Initiative, which supports community members with parenting resources through the Pittsburgh Parenting Project and workforce development opportunities via Talent Pathways Through Community Engagement, a pilot program aimed at serving economically disadvantaged populations in neighborhoods proximate to the Forbes/Fifth corridor. And the Manufacturing Assistance Center (MAC), a Swanson School-supported program, offers advanced manufacturing machinist training certification programs that result in living wage jobs for its graduates.

The neighborhood has seen promising changes, Wallace says, from the relocation of MAC to Homewood to the opening of the Everyday Café, a much-needed social gathering space where community members can meet.

"All of this is built with the needs and aspirations of the community at the center," Wallace says. "The goal is to normalize a neighborhood many have forgotten and hopefully catalyze social and economic development."

PACS also mobilizes student engagement through service learning and volunteer opportunities. Several School of Social Work students have conducted their field placements at the Homewood Children's Village, while Pitt Center on Race and Social Problems fellows have worked in the neighborhood. The recent opening of the first Pitt Community Engagement Center (CEC) on North Homewood Avenue has opened the door to a significant uptick in the number of student volunteers.

Just as important, the Homewood CEC creates a permanent University presence in Homewood, undergirding the creation of a college-going culture in the neighborhood by shifting the idea of the University of Pittsburgh from a distant cluster of academic buildings to a center just down the street, operated and staffed by faculty members and students whom residents encounter regularly.

"This is not an overnight project to transform communities that have been neglected," Wallace says. "But we are heading in the right direction and making progress."



Attendees, including Chancellor Patrick Gallagher and Senior Vice Chancellor for Engagement Kathy Humphrey, celebrate the grand opening of the CEC in Homewood on October 18, 2018.

## Diverting the Pipeline: Just Discipline



Huguley, the coprincipal investigator on PACS, also is helping to steer pioneering research on racial disparities into how in-school discipline is applied.

The report issued by Huguley and his team, *Just Discipline and the School-to-Prison Pipeline in Greater Pittsburgh*, collected data from area school districts, comparing district suspension rates to the state average and tabulating racial disproportionalities. The report and other work of the project was funded by The Heinz Endowments.

“We were startled to find that Black students in Allegheny County were more than seven times as likely as their White peers to be suspended,” says Huguley. That figure is substantially higher than the 5.5 to 1 rate at which Black students across Pennsylvania face exclusionary disciplinary practices compared to White peers.

Exclusionary disciplinary practices, which remove students from the classroom, have been found to have serious negative consequences for students, including lower academic performance and an increase in school dropouts.

The project grew in part from Huguley’s academic interest in looking at the way that school climate affects student achievement, particularly among Black students.

“We were very interested in how students of color were experiencing school discipline,” Huguley says. “Suspensions have been a major issue, particularly in connection with the school-to-prison pipeline, where school discipline can contribute to student engagement with the criminal justice system.”

The school-to-prison pipeline is perhaps the gravest effect of the excessive use of exclusionary discipline. The term school-to-prison pipeline refers to the process whereby in-school discipline increases students’ likelihood of encountering the juvenile justice system, which in turn is associated with significantly higher negative personal, educational, and economic consequences for youth.

Digging deeper into the project, the researchers identified a quandary with regard to Black students. In urban schools, the overall rate of suspensions was higher than in suburban schools, meaning the average Black student was more likely to be suspended. But in suburban schools, where there are typically fewer Black students enrolled, the overall rate of suspensions was lower, but the likelihood of Black students being suspended relative to White classmates rose significantly.

The report offers as a solution the Just Discipline and Climate Model, an integrative approach to school discipline that builds on a foundation of school community buy-in, getting everyone from teachers and staff to students and families on the same page regarding effective discipline reform.



Homewood community member Jaden McDougald (left) chatted with Marcus Poindexter (SOCWK '18G), teaching assistant in the School of Social Work, outside the CEC before the ribbon cutting at the Homewood Community Engagement Center Grand Opening.

The proposed solution builds on this foundation with approaches such as creating a strong relational climate; adding full-time staff; and paying explicit attention to poverty, social context, and race by having staff take bias tests, hiring a teaching staff with strong racial representation, and investing in culturally responsive classroom management.

Huguley and his team have partnered with the Woodland Hills Intermediate School to create a pilot project, currently in its second year, that implements the team's proposed solutions, also taking into account consultations with leading practitioners across the country. So far, Huguley says, the results are promising, with the number of suspensions and fights both down. And surveys of student and teacher perceptions have shown an improved school climate.

Although ultimately the aim is to make the program available widely as a model for schools, Huguley emphasizes the importance of paying close attention to what the team's findings have shown, allowing research to drive practice by using observations from the field to make adjustments and improvements to the pilot project.

Huguley also pointed to the importance of advocacy in addressing issues like exclusionary disciplinary practices and the school-to-prison pipeline.

"As social workers, we have the very best evidence of things that need to happen," he says, "and we need to use our platform and knowledge base to move policy in the right direction."

## Focusing on People: The Pittsburgh Wage Study

As debate around raising the minimum wage, including the national Fight for \$15 campaign, picks up steam, a team of School of Social Work researchers is exploring the real-life effects of wage increases and considering the broader policy implications of such decisions.



The Pittsburgh Wage Study has its origins in the public testimony of Associate Professor Jeffrey Shook before Pittsburgh's City Council, which led to a partnership with local representatives of the Service Employees International Union (SEIU). While data existed on the effects of smaller wage increases, only a few localities, Seattle, Wash., among them, had raised the hourly minimum wage all the way to \$15.

"Although the wage issue has gotten a lot of attention, not as much has been paid to what effect this will have on people," says Shook.

Both SEIU and the research team had a strong interest in exploring that question. By attending meetings of workers, the research team connected with union members employed by a hospital that had recently granted a wage increase to \$15 per hour.

The team conducted in-depth interviews with workers aimed at discovering what changes the wage increase had brought, constructing a diverse sample with regard to age, race, and whether respondents had children or not.

Interviewers had the employees fill out household budgets to identify areas of financial hardship. Researchers complemented that qualitative data with a large-scale quantitative survey of workers.

“One thing we’re learning is that raising wages is not the only consideration,” says Shook.

Unintended consequences of the wage hike include resentment among employees who may have seniority over colleagues now receiving the same pay and a lessened incentive for employees to join a union. And a rise in wages can create what Associate Professor Sara Goodkind calls a “benefits cliff,” with workers’ increased wages making them ineligible for public benefits meaning that some workers may actually be worse off after a wage increase.

The Pittsburgh Wage Study is driven in part by a common interest among team members in studying the pervasive effects of poverty.

“Poverty underlies so much of what we study in social work practice and research,” says Goodkind.

Associate Professor Rafael Engel agrees: “Whatever topic someone is addressing in social work, poverty may not be the cause, but it’s almost certain to exacerbate the problem.”

“It’s really important that we engage with these broader structural issues,” says Shook. “Social workers can bring a much different perspective to the conversation compared to economists. There’s been so much focus on what the macroeconomic effects are going to be, but how does this affect people?”

In September, the Pittsburgh Wage Study team held a two-day symposium to share its findings with a broad range of stakeholders. Day one of the symposium featured scholars sharing their findings based on the wage increases in other cities, while on day two, policymakers were invited to respond to these findings and members of the public were given a chance to voice their opinions.

The Pittsburgh Wage Study represents a “ground-up approach” to the topic, says Sandra Wexler, former director of the school’s master’s program and a consultant on the project. Every phase of the project has been carried out in collaboration with SEIU partners. That approach is in contrast to experimental studies that attempt a specific intervention and then measure the results.

“There’s a relationship between what we do in the classroom and in the field,” says Wexler. “Sometimes we go top down, but at other times, we begin with relationships in the field. That’s consistent with social work’s philosophy of working in partnership with communities and integrating theory into that work.”

The notion of translating research into practice has strongly informed the Pittsburgh Wage Study.

“There is a limit to what quantitative research can provide,” says Engel. “Each half of our research informs the other. We may find out we’re not always asking the right questions and then make changes. That interplay is one more reason community engagement is important—it drives and informs research. The two aren’t siloed.”

Going forward, the team plans to continue sharing its results, creating an ongoing conversation and eventually making specific recommendations for policymakers and employers.

One opportunity Engel hopes for is to present workers’ perspectives directly to employers.

“Many employers don’t realize exactly what their workers’ experiences are,” he says. To back up employees’ accounts with data could provide a compelling case, one many employers may not have fully appreciated. “The aim is that they [employers] will end up understanding in multiple ways what this means for people’s lives.”

## Redefining Resilience: Gwen’s Girls

In addition to contributing to the Pittsburgh Wage Study, Goodkind is one of three partners in a research project aimed at enhancing programming for high school-age participants in Gwen’s Girls, a local nonprofit that offers holistic programs for at-risk girls.

Founded in 2002 by Gwendolyn J. Elliott, one of Pittsburgh’s first Black female police officers, Gwen’s Girls provides needed services and support to girls and young women. It has helped more than 2,500 young Black women to avoid the most common pitfalls facing them, and a recent survey found 100 percent of participants advancing to the next grade level, avoiding pregnancy, and staying out of the juvenile justice system.



Pitt-Assisted Communities & Schools staff meet with community members during the CEC Homewood grand opening (see page 10).



“This is a time when social work is desperately needed. Social work is critical for moving the country forward and bringing us together.”

— Elizabeth M.Z. (Betsy) Farmer  
Dean, University of Pittsburgh  
School of Social Work

## COVER STORY

The project, titled *Redefining Resilience and Reframing Resistance: Evaluation of a Violence Prevention and Health Promotion Empowerment Program for Black Girls*, is a collaboration among Goodkind, Gwen's Girls Executive Director (and daughter of its namesake) Kathi R. Elliott, and Britney Brinkman of Point Park University. Its goal is to supplement existing offerings with programming that addresses the specific needs of high school girls.

"We realized that we needed to engage differently with high school girls," Goodkind says. "That fit really well with our work on creating systemic change to reduce barriers to Black girls' equity."

The team's approach is to involve girls in advocacy efforts and in leading community and political change.

"A lot of programs focus on fixing girls, but our premise is that we're going to involve girls in fixing society," says Goodkind. "These challenges exist not because something is wrong with them but because of social inequities that exist around them."

The program enlists girls in fixing society by training them as researchers who are in effect investigating the conditions of their own lives by performing community-based participatory research. Girls review and critically assess statistics about Black girls in the region as well as reflect on and analyze their own experiences. They may interview each other, policymakers, or other decision makers they come in contact with, asking questions that they want to know more about.

"We really want to base the research component off conversations with the girls and have them decide what questions they want to explore," says Goodkind. "What do we need to know to make Pittsburgh a better place for Black girls?"

The project developed from Kathi Elliott's invitation to Goodkind to join the Gwendolyn J. Elliott Institute, which advised Gwen's Girls on programming targeted at Black girls. The collaboration grew naturally out of that work, Goodkind says, and when the researchers became aware of a funding opportunity from the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation Interdisciplinary Research Leaders program, it was a natural fit, because the program provides funding not just for academic researchers but also for community partners.

"Part of the theory behind this project is thinking critically about what empowerment means," says Goodkind. "I think we'll see more individual changes in these girls by connecting with broader change efforts so that they start to hear a very different message from 'Something is wrong with you,' which so often is what they hear. When they're given the support to try to change the world instead, it completely transforms the story."

The project demonstrates social work's ability to focus on both individuals and broader societal factors, Goodkind says, by thinking about how both individuals and communities can contribute to social change. ■



Edoukou Aka-Ezoua (left), a Pitt MSW student intern, has fun doing arts and crafts with neighborhood children.