

Neighborhood summits planned on dropout crisis

by Ron Whitehorne

With a mayor at the helm who promises to make solving the city's dropout crisis a priority, there is also new motion at the grassroots level.

Project U-Turn, which brings together the School District, the city, foundations, and youth-oriented organizations, is planning a series of four neighborhood-based "Turning It Around" summits to raise awareness and spur action. The summits focus on neighborhoods and populations hardest hit by the dropout crisis. One of the meetings, in North Philadelphia, is aimed at African American males, and another at Latinos in Eastern North Philadelphia. Summits will also be held in South and Southwest Philadelphia.

Each summit will share research on the city's dropout crisis, including information specific to each community and neighborhood. Another key goal is to engage participants in developing solutions. At each summit, a workshop will be held to come up with a community action plan.

Organizers have set additional targets for the composition and size of the summits. Highlighting the importance of youth and parent involvement, Proj-

ect U-Turn materials state that the summits will also seek a broad cross-section of the community including "residents as well as educators, business-owners, communities of faith, and nonprofit leaders." The goal is a minimum of 100 participants for each summit.

Many grassroots organizations have offered support for the summits. Parent Dolores Shaw of the Eastern Pennsylvania Organizing Project (EPOP), a supporter of the North Philadelphia summit, expressed the hope that the summits will promote "dialogue between parents, students, and education reform advocates." The summits provide an opportunity to learn about the crisis from the point of view of "the people who are down in the trenches," said Shaw.

Andi Perez, executive director of

Youth United for Change (YUC), has been active in planning the summit in Eastern North Philadelphia that will focus on the Latino community. Perez said the summits will be "a vehicle for long-term reform that will help bring together parents, students and the community." She expects that each community will come out of the summit with an effective plan to move forward.

After the four neighborhood summits, organizers plan to hold a citywide meeting to summarize the results and promote joint work between the various communities.

The Southwest Philadelphia summit is scheduled for April 12. Dates for the other summits have not yet been fixed.

Ron Whitehorne is a retired teacher and member of the editorial board of the Notebook.

FOR MORE INFORMATION:

Call the Project U-Turn hotline (1-877-TURN-180) or visit www.projectuturn.net to get updated information or to register for a summit online.