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Where is the Taxpayer Outrage About Education Spending?

A recent report by Standard and Poor's examined the relationship between education spending and school performance in Pennsylvania. In a nutshell, the report found that higher spending levels do not translate into higher academic achievement. Their results substantiate the findings of a recently released Allegheny Institute study that shows conclusively that per-pupil spending levels are not meaningfully correlated with scores on Pennsylvania's achievement tests. Moreover, our analysis demonstrates that other indicators such as student-teacher ratios and teacher salaries are not statistically significant in explaining variation in achievement across Pennsylvania's school districts.

The Allegheny Institute's report also confirms Standard and Poor's assertion that community factors such as the percentage of low income students in a district and whether or not the district is in an urban area are far more powerful in explaining variations in school performance. This suggests that the philosophy that dominates Pennsylvania's educational establishment needs to be re-evaluated.

However, instead of acknowledging the Standard and Poor's findings and using them to implement policies that will benefit the district and its students, a few local school administrators chose to criticize the report. In true "educrat" fashion, they trotted out old, shopworn clichés to debunk the findings.

They first complained about the use of PSSA test results, arguing that the test results do not tell the whole story and suggesting the tests are faulty and biased. If this is the case, then they are faulty and biased for everyone. Why then do some districts manage to do very well despite the PSSA shortcomings?

Every fifth, eighth, and eleventh grade student must take a test that measures math and reading skills (writing was recently added). Math and reading are THE building blocks of education. If these skills are not mastered, the education system has failed. According to the 2001 PSSA results, nearly one quarter of the participants statewide scored "below basic" on BOTH the math and reading portions of the exam. What story is left to tell? Whether Johnny has a great "portfolio" won't matter much to his future if he doesn't achieve proficiency in reading and arithmetic.

Furthermore, if "educrats" do not like the PSSA, there are other standards that can be used to compare schools. For instance, students aspiring to attend college take the SAT or the ACT. Pennsylvania's statewide average SAT score for 2001 is 999. The national average SAT is 1020.

Bear in mind that Pennsylvania's total per student spending is much higher than the average across the country. It is also worth noting that Pittsburgh's average SAT score of 918 is more than 100 points below the national figure. This, despite spending \$18,500 per student, including tens of millions of dollars of outlays for supplemental programs.

There are objective evaluations of student performance in Pennsylvania's schools. Unfortunately, in too many schools these evaluations do not correspond to the grades students are receiving because of the decades long trend of grade inflation. And while the illusion of good performance created by inflated grades might make parents happy, it is not good for the students or taxpayers in the long run.

Clearly, it is time for taxpayers to demand stricter accountability from their school district managers and teachers. As important as education is, there is no excuse for the inadequate academic achievement in many schools given the amount of money being spent. Moreover the high taxes that necessarily follow high education spending are creating a very unfavorable economic climate as well as considerable financial distress for property owners. For instance, Allegheny County has one of nation's highest property tax burdens with two thirds of those taxes going to schools.

What does all this mean? The answer is simple. Instead of trying to figure out how to raise more money for education, Pennsylvania's legislators and gubernatorial candidates ought to be focused on how to get better results with the money we are currently spending. They would do well to take a look at how districts with very low per pupil spending, such as Windber in Somerset County, achieve better than state average achievement scores. Rationalizations about the lack of parental involvement or inadequate funding must not be allowed to excuse schools from doing their job. If resources were the answer, Pittsburgh schools would rank among the state's best performers. Indeed, with its spending levels, the Pittsburgh school district should be nationally known for academic excellence.

The Commonwealth's education system is saddled with stagnation and inertia brought about by years of allowing rationalizations for poor performance to go unchallenged. Pennsylvanians who care about the state's economy and their children's and grandchildren's futures must demand an end to excuses. Of course, in light of the stranglehold the educational establishment has on the state, meaningful changes such as real school choice will be extremely difficult. Still, how unfortunate it will be if ten years from now another study finds that per pupil spending has continued to rise while academic achievement has not improved.

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