

POLICY BRIEF

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Pittsburgh Public Schools Need a "No Excuses" Approach

Last week the Allegheny Institute hosted Heritage Foundation Education Fellow Megan Farnsworth, who presented Heritage's research on its "No Excuses" campaign. The Foundation's research challenges the conventional wisdom of the education establishment that low-income students are too handicapped to learn at the pace of other children.

The basic finding of the "No Excuses" campaign is that all of the conventional solutions for improving academic performance--more money, smaller class size, credentialed teachers, and retooling curricula--haven't had much success. Over the last few decades spending (adjusted for inflation) has increased and class sizes have been reduced, yet academic performance has languished.

At the same time there are many examples of schools-- public, private, and charters--that have embraced a "No Excuses" policy and consistently produce academic achievement that would put many of the highest spending schools to shame.

There are three key elements of a "No Excuses" school: (1) Decision-making latitude for school principals, including hiring and firing decisions for teachers and staff as well as full authority to make curriculum choices. Those principals are then held completely accountable for the school's performance. (2) A real belief among all school staff that all students can and will learn the material and make continuous improvement. (3) An academic program that is clearly defined and constantly evaluated through a rigorous program of testing and feedback.

At "No Excuses" schools the expectations are high and the entire staff is devoted to the success of the overall product. Teachers have genuine motivation toward the achievement of their students and are driven to acquire more expertise in their subject and in their teaching methods.

The Pittsburgh Public Schools, the largest district in the county, and currently the subject of much criticism, would be well served to embrace a commitment to the child that places a premium on academics and instruction time and abandon programs that are aimed at the failed solutions mentioned above. The Pittsburgh district currently conducts 65 "supplemental" programs--not including special education programs--that supposedly provide remediation for the failure of regular school instruction.

While Heritage's research focuses on innovation at the school level, the “No Excuses” methods also require a totally different dynamic in the governance of the district and the role of other stakeholders outside the system that can influence changes. This is particularly true in places where the school district is at the center of political quarrels. The decision of three local foundations to pull some of their funding out of the district is a case in point. Take the example of Atlanta as well: there the Chamber of Commerce spearheaded a measure that ended tenure for all school teachers that were hired after June of 2000, thus allowing principals to control teacher performance. By removing layers of decision-making and stumbling blocks to hiring and firing teachers, accountability took precedence over more dollars going to remedial programs with poor results.

If the Pittsburgh School District wants to get serious about dealing with poorly performing schools, then it ought to take the bold step of sponsoring a charter school that will adopt the “No Excuses” philosophy. Require only that the school have a principal that is committed to the "No Excuses" approach and to the academic achievement of students. Give the principal hiring and firing authority, authority over curriculum, and then hold him or her accountable for results. Set high goals for the school and after three years evaluate the results to see how well it is doing.

There is no excuse for not trying, on a limited basis, a program that has produced excellent outcomes in many schools across the country. At this point there is nothing to lose and the children have a lot to gain.

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