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All bun, little beef: The latest Pittsburgh Public Schools plan

By Colin McNickle

“Where’s the beef?!” That was the catchphrase of the comical fast food commercial of 1984. It was the retort of elderly actress Clara Peller when, upon removing the top of a competitor’s “big bun,” she found a diminutive hamburger patty.

The Madison Avenue line quickly entered the popular lexicon, indicative of something presented as quite grandiose when, in fact, it is rife with shortcomings. Put another way – all sizzle and no steak.

Put yet another way: “So many plans and so little to show for them.”

That’s how the president of the Allegheny Institute for Public Policy describes the “sad and long-running story of Pittsburgh Public Schools over the last several decades.”

“Overall student academic performance languishes in a sorry state and the academic achievement gap (between white and black students) persists,” says Jake Haulk (*in Policy Brief Vol. 17, No. 21*).

“And of late, graduation rates for African American students have plummeted,” he reminds. “Now a new superintendent offers yet another plan. It has serious flaws.”

Haulk notes that school superintendents have come and gone about every five years in Pittsburgh since 2000. “Each one has offered new ideas and strategies to combat the long standing problem,” he notes. None has succeeded. “Student achievement” remains an oxymoron in critical disciplines.

The latest plan comes from Superintendent Anthony Hamlet on the heels of January’s devastating report by the Council of the Great City Schools. It found no progress in academic achievement since its last report a decade ago.

While the new improvement blueprint uses many pages to describe “steps and initiatives,” Haulk says it falls woefully short in describing the scope of Pittsburgh Public Schools’ problems. Furthermore, it fails to establish timely metrics by which the progress of the proposed initiatives can be measured, he says.

“The prospect of substantially improving overall student performance while also closing the wide racial achievement gap is daunting at best,” Haulk says. “But before the board and superintendent do anything, they should look at all the failed programs and previous strategies that have been announced with so much fanfare and at a cost of untold millions of dollars and tens of thousands of hours of employees’ time.

“(It’s) time to stop looking for answers in jargon-filled, pretentious-sounding planning.” Haulk says the district, which spends about \$22,000 per student per school year for “pathetic” results, must take two important steps to have any hope of achieving the goals set forth in the latest strategic plan.

First, not only must annual targets be established for measuring overall performance, Haulk says separate goals must be set for African American students “where the gains will have to be much larger than for white students if the gap is to ever be closed.”

Second, the district’s massive absenteeism problem must be reduced. During the 2015-16 school year, 67 percent of students at one school were chronically absent (missing 10 or more days each school year). Attendance rates at many other schools also are unacceptably high.

“The absenteeism issue is too important to keep receiving lip service from administrators and the (school) board,” Haulk says. “Students who are not in class a large number of days a year cannot be expected to keep up with class work and will perform poorly on tests.”

Haulk says the seemingly endless efforts to improve academic standards and close the achievement gap never address the heart of the problems. Administrators and the board “cannot bring themselves to admit they have been unable to solve the problems because they are blinded and hamstrung by politics and special interests,” he says.

Until Pittsburgh Public Schools officials can address the district’s chronic problems honestly, the debate will be long on big bun and short on beef, shortchanging students and taxpayers.

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