



February 7, 2018

Allegheny Institute Op-Ed

565 words

Broken promises for Pittsburgh's students

By Colin McNickle

Pittsburgh's public school district has broken major promises financial and academic to parents and students, says the president of the Allegheny Institute for Public Policy.

The first breach involves the much-ballyhooed Pittsburgh Promise college scholarship whose total per-student award has been halved since the program's inception a decade ago.

The second faithlessness, if not an outright perfidy, involves Pittsburgh Public Schools' continuing promise to offer its students an "excellent education" when that, as the record shows, is far from the reality.

Ten years ago, The Pittsburgh Promise pledged a \$40,000 college scholarship to those who attended the district from kindergarten through their 12th-grade graduation, maintained a 2.5 grade-point average and had a 90 percent attendance rate.

But three years ago, in 2015, the maximum yearly amount was cut to \$7,500 or \$30,000 total. And just this past January, the scholarship again was reduced, to \$5,000 and \$20,000, respectively, effective with this year's graduates.

Now only months away from receiving their diplomas, some children (and, of course, their parents) have been left in a financial lurch.

"To rub salt in that wound for those who have stayed since kindergarten, the new plan will extend the maximum stipend to students who only attended 9th through 12th grades," reminds Jake Haulk, president of the Pittsburgh think tank (*in Policy Brief Vol. 18, No. 6*).

But while Pittsburgh Promise officials say trimming the financial awards will allow the program to continue through 2028, it also suggests lagging corporate and foundation support. Eleven years after the program's inception, it remains \$50 million short of its original goal – even with \$100 million received from healthcare and insurance giant UPMC.

Further compounding The Pittsburgh Promise's diminishing stature is the inflation in college costs. "Over the last 10 years the cost of tuition and room and board at public colleges on average has gone up 30 percent," Haulk says. "Thus, the promised \$10,000 per year 10 years ago would have been worth only \$7,600 today in 2008 dollars."

The new, lower maximum annual award of \$5,000, valued in 2008 dollars, would be valued at \$3,800 today.

"One can only conjecture how many parents who were staying in order to get a \$40,000 payoff and who now are looking at a real payoff of only \$14,000 or so would have made the same decision," the Ph.D. economist added.

"And given the wretched academic performance at the non-magnet schools, parents who care about education will be even more inclined to leave."

To wit, Pittsburgh high schools overall have nowhere near the academic performance (based on SAT scores) of several Allegheny County schools – think Upper St. Clair, North Allegheny, South Fayette, Pine-Richland or Mt. Lebanon – all of which have significantly lower per-pupil expenditures than city schools.

"Then, too, the achievement level of far too many Pittsburgh 11th graders bodes poorly for getting a Promise scholarship – if they graduate," Haulk says. "And even if they were to somehow manage to qualify for one, they simply are not academically ready to get into college or succeed if they were to be admitted."

There is no "happy face" to put on Pittsburgh Public Schools' abysmal academic record, the Allegheny Institute chief concludes.

"Broken promises indeed."

Colin McNickle is a senior fellow and media specialist at the Allegheny Institute for Public Policy (cmcnickle@alleghenyinstitute.org).

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<p>Allegheny Institute for Public Policy 305 Mt. Lebanon Blvd.* Suite 208* Pittsburgh PA 15234 Phone (412) 440-0079 * Fax (412) 440-0085 E-mail: aipp@alleghenyinstitute.org</p>
