

# ***POLICY BRIEF***

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## **A Colossal Failure of Public School Policies**

Some state and local officials are pushing to disband the Duquesne School District as soon as possible. The measure has the support of a state Senator and the school board president who said “(w)e’re just not offering our kids the education they deserve...It’s a matter of economics at this point”. And therein lies the problem in a nutshell. It is the predictable response from the educational establishment: they need more money to spend. However, the fact is that Duquesne’s students’ academic achievement can only be described as abysmal and shows no signs of improvement despite a high level of spending per pupil.

This district’s performance is a testament to the obduracy of the public education establishment and its profoundly destructive allegiance to the teacher’s unions and their mindless resistance to any reform that introduces common sense to the system.

How bad is it? District-wide, the latest data available (2004) shows Duquesne students scoring an 18.3 percent proficiency rate on the state PSSA reading test while only 13.2 percent were rated proficient in math. Breaking the scores down by grade reveals an even greater tragedy. Only 2.4 percent of the district’s 11<sup>th</sup> grade students were rated proficient on the reading portion of the state exam while 4.9 percent were proficient in math. Yet the district boasts an 83.3 percent graduation rate.

How utterly disgraceful and unconscionable it is to send so many kids out into the world with a high school diploma that is obviously meaningless as an indication of academic achievement. Children and parents have been deluded by the school district into thinking significant learning has taken place when, for the bulk of the kids, it has not. This district should be disbanded because it is failing its students, not for financial reasons.

And what about its finances? According to the latest statewide data available (2002), the Duquesne School District spent \$10,770 per student in operating expenses—more than the “rich” districts of Mt. Lebanon (\$8,985), North Allegheny (\$9,514), and Upper St. Clair (\$9,589). However, unlike these districts that are able to raise substantial revenue locally, the Duquesne District relies heavily on state taxpayers who contribute more than \$7,300 per pupil and federal taxpayers \$1,200 per pupil—for a total of 80 percent of the operating expenses with only 20 percent coming from local taxes.

The problem is clearly not the amount of money being spent. The problem is the academic environment. Students in Duquesne are not learning. One of the oft-heard excuses that get trotted out by apologists for the public schools is that there are too many pupils per teacher. But that won’t fly for the Duquesne schools because as of 2004, the student teacher ratio in the Duquesne School District was 11 to 1. Contrast that with the statewide average of more than 15 to 1.

Among Allegheny County school districts, only Clairton has a lower student- teacher ratio (10.6) and no Allegheny County district has lower proficiency percentages than Duquesne.

It is clear that the students and parents in this district deserve better. Indeed, some have already sought better educational opportunities by withdrawing their children from the District and enrolling them into other schools, including area charter schools. In the last five years, the district's enrollment plunged from 1,031 to 750 in the current school year—a loss of 27 percent.

One possible solution proposed by some is to merge the district with others, specifically its neighbors McKeesport and West Mifflin. Both of those districts have rejected the idea. Given the awful state of education one would think that it is time to try some dramatic solutions that have proven to work in other states. For example, this is a perfect place to try vouchers. The state and local government could easily provide parents with vouchers for each enrolled student in the amount of \$9,000. That should be more than adequate to pay the tuition at an alternative school of their choice. Indeed, for that kind of money, it is likely that a number of new non-religious schools would spring up to fill the void of closing the public schools. Charter schools could also expand to serve many of the students.

The state could also choose to hire a private firm to provide education in Duquesne. And unlike the Turner experience in Wilkinsburg, the firm should be given at least five years to implement the needed changes. Moreover, the firm should be given latitude to deal with the incorrigibly disruptive students who make classrooms impossible for teachers to teach in. The firm should be allowed to hire qualified instructors of their choice, not be bound by union rules, and offer merit pay and differential pay to attract hard to find disciplines such as math and science. In short, all the things the teachers' unions will never allow in schools they control.

Troubles at the Duquesne School District represent an abject failure of the current public educational system. The District, one of the worst academically performing districts in the state, has been under state oversight for five years. Their efforts at marginal and education establishment approved reforms have not improved the situation. It is now time to think boldly and try a market-based approach. It is also time for politicians in the Commonwealth to realize that the disgrace that is the Duquesne School District is an indictment of their unwillingness to put children and education ahead of their fear of, and allegiance to, teachers' unions and the powerful educational establishment.

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