

### **Pittsburgh School District Hammered by Latest Report**

**Summary:** A recently released report by the Council of the Great City Schools gives Pittsburgh schools extremely low marks in nearly every aspect of school operations, particularly the academic performance of students where there has been no progress since the Council's previous report in 2006. Surprisingly, the Council study failed to address adequately the horrendous absenteeism problem and does not mention the extraordinarily high per student spending in Pittsburgh compared to other city school districts that have much better academic results. This Policy Brief discusses those two deficiencies in detail.

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A just completed study of the Pittsburgh Public Schools (PPS) by the Council of the Great City Schools (Council) is brutally scathing in its findings. Indeed, the report is such a severe indictment that the Pennsylvania Department of Education should consider taking control of the District. School board members, the administrative staff and the instructional staff must be in shock after reading the report and seeing the harsh criticism they received.

The report looks at all aspects of PPS operations including instruction, finance and budgeting, research, and facilities management. None was treated kindly. An indication of the scope of problems found by the study is the number of recommendations proffered. Covering in extreme detail all aspects of PPS' shortcomings, the report contains 135 recommendations accounting for 27 of the 110 pages of the body of the report—excluding the appendices.

A few quotes from the synopsis and discussion section will illustrate the exceptionally critical tenor of the report's findings.

- *"...the school district now finds itself in a place where it is achieving limited results from the work, and student outcomes are little better off than what they were before the reforms. In fact, analysis of student achievement trends shows little to no improvements since 2007."*
- *"Paired with the district's lack of research, data, and evaluation capacity to determine what works and what doesn't, this leaves the school system with no clear direction or strategy for improving student achievement."*

- *“The district has not articulated what rigorous standards-based instruction looks like, or provided strong guidance to teachers or other school-based staff on the knowledge or level of understanding that students are expected to develop from instruction or exhibit through their work products.”*
- *“The district’s K-5 ELA curriculum is voluminous but weak, which results in teachers creating extensive work-arounds.”*
- *“The Council team suspected that the rigor of the (math) courses was weak overall and uneven in its implementation.”*

And there are dozens of other equally scathing comments in the study covering the entire range of functions of PPS operations.

In short, the Council’s study is a stunning critique of the ongoing failure of the Pittsburgh school district to make progress in its dismal academic performance despite decades of efforts that have come to naught. Of course, the Allegheny Institute has chronicled that failure for the last 15 years to no avail in terms of moving the series of superintendents and boards to abandon their commitment to a deeply flawed approach to running a school district that has proved incapable of delivering quality education.

Recalcitrance on the part of the educational establishment to implement reforms that would actually lead to improvements are always dismissed as “they are not fair, or they won’t work here.” Sadly, the corporate and foundation communities have been part of the problem by sponsoring or supporting programs that sound good but have done nothing positive or even made matters worse.

The Council report provides interesting data showing PPS academic performance compared to other cities. The Council data compare National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) results by grade, subject and race. NAEP scores for PPS are scaled from PSSA results. While the data are not discussed in any depth by the report, they do point to useful further analysis.

Supplementing the report’s test result data with expenditure data for a couple of other city school systems demonstrates the true magnitude of PPS’ colossal failure.

PPS was compared to 20 of the nation’s largest city school districts. PPS had higher scores for 8<sup>th</sup> grade white students on reading than only three cities (Cleveland, Fresno and Philadelphia—although probably higher than Detroit for which data was not shown) and higher scores than only four cities for black students (Detroit, District of Columbia, Fresno, Cleveland). Of the cities with better black student scores than PPS, all spend less per student and in most cases far less than Pittsburgh.

We look in detail at two of the cities with student scores above or well above PPS. Consider the following spending and NAEP statistics for 8<sup>th</sup> graders in Charlotte, Austin and PPS. Other cities could be selected but they would show the same comparative results. These two cities will serve to illustrate the point.

Expenditures: Charlotte spending per student in 2015-16, \$8,500; Austin, \$8,800; Pittsburgh, \$21,000<sup>1</sup>. Note that the Council in its report never mentions the extraordinary level of spending in Pittsburgh. Nor does it point out that Charlotte schools have four times as many black students as the PPS. The data show:

- 8<sup>th</sup> grade NAEP scores on reading for white students; Charlotte, 284.2; Austin, 289.8; PPS, 265.7.
- 8<sup>th</sup> grade scores on reading for black students; Charlotte, 251.2; Austin, 241.2; PPS, 240.2.
- Scores on 8<sup>th</sup> grade math follow the same pattern and fourth grade results are similar as well.

What does this tell us? For just over 40 percent of per student spending in PPS, white 8<sup>th</sup> graders in Charlotte and Austin are about 20 points higher on the NAEP reading scale. Black 8<sup>th</sup> graders in Charlotte are 10 points higher than Pittsburgh while in Austin the score is just a notch above PPS.

In other words, not only are PPS' scores low, the District is spending well above the national average and far above the Charlotte and Austin district spending to get those poor results. Indeed, the Commonwealth allocates more state dollars per student to PPS than Charlotte or Austin spend in total. And the City taxpayers are providing more dollars per student than the state allocation.

This has been the case for years and yet the state education department has never seen fit to demand accountability for the disaster that is PPS' overall academic performance—there are some pockets of good performance but far more pockets of terrible performance. City taxpayers also ought to be outraged at the level of spending that accomplishes such poor outcomes. And the story is not new as the Council report notes. There has been no improvement in the ten years since the last Council report in 2006.

The latest Council study touches briefly on PPS' attendance problem but does not focus nearly enough on the ramifications of the absenteeism problem. The report data shows that ninth graders in Pittsburgh have the third highest absenteeism of all the schools in the country studied by the Council. Allegheny Institute *Policy Briefs* have pointed out on several occasions that in some high schools in the City official statistics indicate an average absenteeism of 20 percent. That means the average student is missing 36 days of class during the school year. It is a virtual certainty that the official rate is understating the true out of class time. Moreover, to get to an average of 36 days missed per school year many students are missing far more than 36 days. Missed days appear to increase with each higher grade in high school.

Learning problems created by absenteeism of this magnitude dwarf all the other issues the Council study talked about in its discussion of instructional shortcomings. What good is a great lesson plan, course description, or pedagogical skills if the students are not in

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<sup>1</sup> Spending statistics are from North Carolina and Texas Departments of Education.

class? If students are missing large numbers of days they probably are not paying much attention when they are in class and are likely a serious disruption for other students.

Absenteeism is undoubtedly a major factor in the poor academic performance of PPS students—particularly in the high schools. And it makes the annual spending of over \$20,000 per student doubly outrageous. It is unconscionable for taxpayers to be forced to fund the enormous per student outlays when the students average missing school 36 days per year. To be sure, the school board, administration and the faculty ought to be embarrassed to preside over such a terrible situation.

Obviously, it is time for the Legislature to ask very pointedly why PPS gets so many state dollars every year only to see them be essentially wasted on students who obviously do not care about getting an education.

In conclusion, despite its failures to address adequately the massive absenteeism problem the Council study does call the PPS to task for its inexcusably poor academic results in strongest possible terms.

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