



Pittsburgh Superintendent Wrongly Blames Legislature for School Problems

While alternately blaming Harrisburg for her District's woes and then asking for funding formula changes to provide more money, the Pittsburgh School District (PPS) superintendent, in testimony before a legislative commission, was completely disingenuous in failing to mention the serious educational disaster that exists in most of the District despite the expenditure of over \$21,000 per student.

Nor was she at all appreciative of the \$9,000 per pupil the District receives from the state. And that in itself is interesting. The average amount of state funding across Pennsylvania is about \$5,300 per pupil with a range from around \$2,000 in several richer districts to a high of \$14,264 in Duquesne. But even more interesting is that PPS—in terms of wealth and income—is much more able to fund its schools than the average district in Pennsylvania.

The Department of Education calculates what are called aid ratios used to determine the funding districts will receive. One of the ratios is based on personal income per student in the district; another aid ratio is based on market value of taxable real estate per student. See *Policy Brief Volume 14, Number 50* for a discussion of the strong correlation between aid ratios and state funding of Pennsylvania's school districts.

On both measures of financial ability the Pittsburgh District is better off than the state average with \$431,597 in market value of taxable real estate per weighted daily membership (WADM) (latest data available from Department of Education website) and \$204,998 in personal income per WADM. The averages for all 500 districts are \$383,320 in taxable real estate per WADM and \$154,093 in personal income per WADM.

The WADM is calculated by multiplying the number of 7th through 12th grade students by 1.36. This gives a number that will be significantly greater than just counting the students enrolled. It presumably is done to account for the likelihood that teaching older children will be more expensive than teaching younger ones.

Of the 500 districts in Pennsylvania, PPS ranks as the 63rd most financially able (437 are less able than PPS) to fund education as measured by the personal income aid ratio and the 125th most financially able as measured by the market value of taxable real estate. And yet the District collects far more state revenue per student than the average district. In the 2012-2013 school year, PPS was allocated \$8,648 per student in state funds and raised \$10,095 per pupil locally in taxes and other local sources.

Meanwhile, the North Hills School District had virtually identical ratios of income per pupil (\$204,185) and market value of real estate per pupil (\$431,872) to those of PPS and therefore essentially identical calculated state aid ratios. However, North Hills received only \$3,411 per pupil from the state and generated \$12,776 per student from local sources—mostly taxes. Moreover, PPS got \$2,362 per student in Federal funds while North Hills was allocated only \$233 per student in Federal funds.

On its face, the difference in PPS and North Hills state funding per student of \$5,200 is preposterous given the nearly identical aid ratios for the two districts. Note that to fund its schools, North Hills levies taxes sufficient to raise almost \$13,000 per pupil, nearly \$3,000 more than PPS. Thus, all the very generous state money and all the Federal money PPS receives relieve the district from having to burden its taxpayers as heavily as many suburban districts are forced to do.

Interestingly, at its current per pupil spending, if PPS enrollment per 1,000 residents matched the student to population ratio in say, Mt. Lebanon, PPS would need about \$400 million more revenue to cover expenses.

And yet, despite spending well over \$100 million in special education programs, early intervention, Pre-K programs and so on, PPS just cannot get the job done in terms of education. Outside the magnet schools and Allderdice, educational attainment is dreadful. In fact, the PPS average scores on PSSA tests on math, reading and science are lower than in 2008 and much lower than 2011 notwithstanding a small improvement in 2014. Sadly, at the five non-magnet high schools over 70 percent of 11th grade students failed to score at the proficient level on the Algebra I test given in the 2013-2014 school year. But even if one is proficient in Algebra I, that is hardly enough math to score strongly on SAT exams.

One obvious explanation of inadequate high school performance is extremely poor attendance. Average attendance at the five non-magnet high schools was 82 percent. With students missing an average of 32.5 days during a school year at these schools and probably more days for the juniors and seniors, one should not be surprised to see academic achievement levels as terrible as those occurring at these schools. Poor attendance is a strong indicator of a lack of interest in school, unwillingness to study, and a generally negative attitude toward education.

And almost as bad as the high schools, barely 60 percent of all K-8 PSSA exam takers in PPS schools scored proficient or better in math, with only one magnet school (CAPA) having 80 percent or more of its students scoring proficient. Worse still only 53 percent of K-8 students scored proficient or advanced in reading.

So how does North Hills stack up academically with \$5,000 less per student to spend? In a word, it is doing very well by comparison with 82 percent of 11th graders scoring proficient or better on math and 85 percent proficient or advanced on the reading exam. Attendance at North Hills High is 94.5 percent. In the middle school 88 percent of students scored proficient or higher on the PSSA math exam with 70 percent advanced. The reading percentage was also 88 percent. Attendance was 95 percent.

In short, PPS spends \$100 million on special programs for children to help them learn, receives over \$7,000 per student more in state and Federal money than North Hills and yet, other than a few magnet schools, compares extremely unfavorably in academic achievement.

To top it off, PPS enrollment continues to fall. Over the last ten years from school year 2004-2005 to school year 2014-2015 enrollment dropped from 34,131 to 24,301. This despite the Promise Program that gives scholarships to PPS graduates if students attend a PPS school for at least four years. The slide in enrollment is related to overall population loss, parents taking their children out of PPS schools and parents with children leaving the City in search of better, safer schools.

To make matters even worse still, almost all the increase in state funding the District will receive is dedicated to shoring up the pension programs for the district. In fact, since 2010 PPS retirement contributions have climbed from \$11.3 million to \$45.3 million. As a result, the \$28 million in salary savings achieved through cuts in the employee count over the four years have failed to produce net savings in employee compensation for the district.

No wonder the Superintendent wants the state to ignore enrollment declines in the funding formula and hold schools harmless, i.e., maintain previous funding levels regardless of enrollment declines. But, why should a district that is so bad academically that it causes people with school age children to leave the City be rewarded with more money for the students that remain as opposed to having that money follow the students to their new districts—if they are still in the state? Otherwise, total state funding would have to rise even faster than planned, which, given budget constraints, is very unlikely.

Here's a better idea. Figure out how to get the kids to go to school and while there to pay attention and learn something. It is outrageous to have taxpayers pour all the hundreds of millions of dollars into a school system that cannot persuade its students to take full advantage of the education being offered to them. But even more outrageous is to complain about a state funding formula that is extraordinarily generous to PPS compared to funding of districts with similar financial ability.

According to newspaper accounts, the Superintendent told the legislative panel, "While I like you folks in Harrisburg, the ability of the commonwealth to actually run school districts in fiscal distress does not have a strong track record..."

The Superintendent might have exercised a little humility in light of her own district's less than sterling record. Far above average spending per student combined with well below average academic performance is hardly a platform from which to criticize people from whom one is seeking more money.

Spending large amounts of money is one thing. But not getting decent academic outcomes should never be acceptable.

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