

Pittsburgh, the U.N. and the schools

Summary: Pittsburgh's mayor has decided to adopt the United Nations' goals for sustainability—which include providing quality education. However, based on the most recent achievement test scores for Pittsburgh Public Schools, the goal of quality education will require more commitment by all concerned than we have seen.

Recently Pittsburgh's mayor, along with members of city government and local organizations, announced the city's plan to adopt 17 sustainable goals the United Nations (U.N.) has identified for its future efforts.

The goals are “no poverty, zero hunger, good health and well-being, quality education, gender equality, clean water and sanitation, affordable and clean energy, decent work and economic growth, industry, innovation and infrastructure, reduced inequality, sustainable cities and communities, responsible consumption and production, climate action, life below water, life on land, peace and justice, strong institutions and partnerships.” The mayor said, “Working with stakeholders across the city, these goals will allow us to aid residents who need our help now and future generations of Pittsburghers to come.”

Sounds like Utopia in the making. Bear in mind, however, that one of the biggest failings of the U.N. is its so-called Human Rights Council that supposedly works to apply the “rights and freedoms” enumerated by the U.N. With recent outgoing members including China, Cuba, Saudi Arabia, Egypt and Rwanda and incoming members including Indonesia, Somalia, Pakistan, Bahrain, Sudan, Qatar and Venezuela it is reasonable to ask how much attention to basic human rights such as freedom of religion, freedom of speech, right to own property and other fundamental rights the council actually intends to pursue diligently. These basic rights are just as or more important than a long wish list that cannot possibly be achieved absent honoring and protecting essential freedoms.

But one thing is sure. The U.N. has its work cut out on the poverty goal. In 2018, the world average GDP per capita was \$11,355, according to the International Monetary Fund. Of the 186 countries listed 126 have below world average GDP per capita while 44 are below \$2,000. By comparison, the U.S. GDP stood at \$62,600. Income figures by country track the GDP figures closely. U.S. and Pittsburgh median per capita incomes are close at around \$34,000 in 2017. In short, poverty in the U.S. is certainly a far cry from poverty in most of the third-world countries.

Indeed, compared to most of the world, Pittsburgh and its population are doing very well on virtually all the listed U.N. goals. No doubt there is room for improvement in Pittsburgh, especially in the areas of economic and job growth, quality education and its water and sewer system. While the universities, colleges and hospitals add greatly to the city's economy and quality of life, the public schools as a whole are in woeful shape with far too many children not receiving the education necessary to be successful in today's, or tomorrow's, economy. There is little hope of solving the city's pressing social problems unless or until there is substantial improvement in the public schools' performance.

Pennsylvania System for School Assessment (PSSA) achievement test statistics for the Pittsburgh Public Schools for the school year 2018-2019 are now available. The news is not good. Statistics for third grade reading achievement, regarded by some educators as a key to future academic performance, show half the students are not ready for the fourth grade. In the 35 schools with third grade enrollment, 48 percent scored below the proficient level at the basic or below basic level in English Language arts—reading and writing. In 16 of the schools, over 50 percent were basic or below and in 10 over 70 percent were basic or below. Math scores for the third grade were even worse.

In the 22 schools with eighth graders—Oliver and Online Academy not included—56 percent of PSSA test-takers scored at basic or below in English Language arts. Seven schools had 70 percent or more in the basic or below group with three at 80 percent or higher. Math results for eighth grade were even more appalling. Of the 1,362 PSSA test-takers, 80 percent scored basic or below (53 percent below basic). In 10 of the schools, 90 percent or more fell in the basic or below category. In three schools not a single student scored at the proficient level. Two thirds of the mere 66 test-takers—out of the 1,362—scoring at the advanced level were accounted for by CAPA, Colfax and Greenfield.

Compared to Pennsylvania's all-school scores, Pittsburgh trails by significant margins despite atrocious percentages of scores below proficient for the state as a whole with 41 percent of Pennsylvania eighth graders basic or below in English Language arts and 70 percent basic or below in math. As noted in previous briefs, terrible scores from most of the schools in the huge Philadelphia district play a major role in the state's overall poor academic performance.

Statewide, 63 percent of 11th graders scored proficient or better on the math exam. In Pittsburgh 50 percent of test takers were proficient or better. However, absent the relatively good performances at CAPA, Allderdice and the Science and Technology Academy, only 37 percent scored proficient or advanced.

But, as a reminder, spending more money on education does not necessarily translate into learning. Consider Peters Township School District which spends \$8,000 per student *less* than Pittsburgh and yet has 95 percent of 11th graders advanced or proficient in math with over 50 percent advanced. Not as dramatic but the same pattern holds true for advanced and proficient scores at Pine-Richland (90 percent), Mt. Lebanon (90 percent), and North Allegheny (86 percent). And consider the Windber School District in Somerset County where spending is \$10,000 below Pittsburgh and a high percentage of kids come from poor families and yet they have 76 percent scoring advanced or proficient.

As demonstrated in *Policy Briefs (Vol. 15, No. 30 and Vol. 19, No. 30)*, a high percentage of Pittsburgh schools suffer from extraordinary levels of absenteeism; a virtually perfect indicator of all the social and attitude problems that afflict education and learning. A school system that tolerates such woeful attendance problems will be incapable of achieving better academic results.

Why is school performance important? It is equivalent to the canary in the coal mine. Failure to address massive academic weakness makes any real progress on the U.N.'s social goals wish list impossible. When children are not educationally prepared to take on the responsibilities of adulthood, including economic self-sufficiency, the problems of dependency never end. And that means addressing poverty and other social ills are made manifestly more difficult.

So, if the mayor is really looking for the most important thing he can do for the city, he should make dramatic improvement in school performance a top priority. Granted, the school district is a creature of the state and has its own governing powers and funding sources and can claim independence from the mayor. However, there are steps he can take. He can go to the governor and Legislature and ask that the state create a voucher program that will allow any and all parents who want to remove their students from failing district schools the ability and funding to enroll them in private or parochial schools of their choice. The district has magnet schools for limited numbers of students. Why not choice for all? The cost per student for those using vouchers would almost certainly drop precipitously compared to the \$24,000 the district spends.

Second, the mayor can use his bully pulpit to call attention to the enormous negative impacts the poorly performing district has on the city's ability to attract and keep people with school-age children. And it could also lead to lower a tax burden for property owners and residents paying the school earned-income tax.

The degree to which city officials want to reverse the decades long slide in population, especially families with school-age children, can be gauged by the seriousness they attach to finding ways to improve school performance.

Of course, it will be hard. The entire political clout of the teacher unions will be arrayed to fight meaningful changes. That is a major reason nothing ever gets done other than throwing money at the problem. It is not working.

Year after year, graduation after graduation, a huge percentage of students are going into the world with totally inadequate reading, writing and arithmetic skills thinking they are prepared. This charade is a sham and immoral. Yet the district will spend \$24,000 per student per year for 13 years to achieve this outcome for more than half of the students passing through.

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