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School Lessons from Milwaukee

Pittsburgh's population continues to fall and could dip below 300,000 in the 2010 Census if recent trends continue. There can be little doubt that much of the population loss can be blamed on the outrageously expensive, poorly performing Pittsburgh Public School District. Substantial numbers of parents interested in a better education for their children, and who cannot afford private schooling, are moving out of the City to take advantage of better schools. Is there a way to stem this outflow? Former Milwaukee Mayor John Norquist believes school choice offers a real opportunity to stop and eventually reverse this long time trend.

In a recent Allegheny Institute forum, Mayor Norquist spoke of his experience instituting one of the nation's first voucher programs in Milwaukee. In what he calls the "educational-finance monopoly", families are compelled to send their children to public schools. Those who can afford to move out of the city typically do so as their children approach school age—and take their tax dollars with them.

As a result, poorly performing school districts can drain a city's tax base. Norquist recognized this in Milwaukee and began a push for school choice noting that "school choice is especially good for cities" in helping to maintain their tax base. He further observed that "under the traditional government monopoly in education, children from affluent families were leaving the public schools, and leaving children from less-affluent families behind. Instead of choosing an alternative school for their children, wealthy parents were choosing an alternative place to live. Our city, and too many other cities, were left behind."

In Milwaukee's voucher system, the parents are assigned an amount equal to the state's share of the per pupil expenditure to spend at the school of their choice—currently about \$8,000 per year. The local per pupil share, derived from property taxes, remains with the school district. According to the Pittsburgh School District's budget, state aid in 2008 is placed at \$7,392 per pupil. Thus, if Pittsburgh had a voucher system similar to Milwaukee's, parents in the City would have over \$7,000 per year per child to send their children to the school of their choosing. This amount would cover most non-public grade schools and many private/parochial/other religious high schools.

Many factors contribute to the decline of a city's population, but there is no doubt that the performance of the public schools is one of the major determinants. Note that in the ten years between 1990—just before vouchers were available—and 2000, combined private and public school enrollment in Milwaukee rose by 14.4 percent. During the same period Pittsburgh's combined enrollment rose a relatively small 4 percent as non-public enrollment climbed while the public school count actually fell 3 percent. This occurred even without a voucher program to create an outflow from the public schools. Moreover, since 2000, Pittsburgh's public school student population has plunged by 25 percent as parents continue to move away or find alternative ways to educate their children rather than send them to the public schools.

To further demonstrate the differences in the two cities, it is important to note that while both cities experienced a population decline from 1990 to 2006, the 15.5 percent drop in Pittsburgh was nearly twice that of Milwaukee's 8.7 percent decline.

So what are the lessons Pittsburgh can draw from the Milwaukee experience if there are folks in the District who would like to adopt a voucher system? First, they will need a lot of help from the Legislature. Milwaukee had Polly Williams in the Wisconsin Legislature to help push through the legislation to make the voucher system possible. Secondly, there needs to be support from the school board and superintendent. Norquist notes that as mayor of the city, his influence was used to get pro-voucher school board members elected who then hired a superintendent willing to reform the public school system. While this may seem a daunting task in a Democrat controlled town such as Pittsburgh, keep in mind that Norquist was a Democrat mayor who fought for this enormous reform of Milwaukee schools.

The Milwaukee voucher system is less than twenty years old and with its current limit of 22,500 students who may participate is not yet a completely free choice system. But it was a good start and has shown the way for other cities around the country, including Cleveland and Washington DC. Will Pittsburgh follow their lead? Given the current attitudes toward school choice in this area by teacher unions and other powerful public sector unions, the battle would be long and hard, but anything is possible if the resolve is there.

Parents who are fed up with their child's under performing school must take a leading role in the fight for school choice. Help from civic groups, business groups, and the philanthropic community will almost certainly be needed to reach the desired goal of a generous, far reaching voucher program for Pittsburgh's children. By the way, this is a far superior way to keep and attract kids than the so called "Pittsburgh Promise" program.

It must be recognized by people in the City who care about its future that school choice is a fundamental component of freedom and freedom is always a good thing in promoting competition and economic vitality. It is not pie in the sky rhetoric. The question has to be asked, "Why are parents being forced to send their children to poorly performing, sometimes physically dangerous schools that are egregiously failing the majority of

students and where there is little or no improvement year after year?” In fact, the case can be made that for many schools things continue to get worse over time.

At the very least, if there is a shred of honesty and human decency left in the education establishment—teachers, board members, administrators, and paid defenders of the status quo—they should loosen the monopolistic, ironfisted grip of the public schools over the education of the City’s children. Are they afraid that an experiment in choice would lead to such a massive demand for the available vouchers that it would be impossible not to expand the program? If that is the case, it is tantamount to admitting they know in their heart of hearts that their system is a failure even with all the money being spent and all the programs and all the promises year after year that things will get better.

It is time for Pittsburgh to take what might be one of the most important steps it could ever take. Create some real school choice opportunities for those currently being held hostage by force of state law and school board governance of a system that fails far too many of the City’s young people. This is a moral issue. Preservation of the school district and the self-preservation of those who are employed by it are not the foremost consideration here. Offering opportunities for parents to seek the best education for their children without having to leave the City should be everyone’s primary goal.

In sum, we need to have a leader such as Norquist in this community—a leader who truly believes and understands that the City’s long term best interests and the education of the City’s children must take precedence over the beneficiaries of the failing status quo system. Such a leader inevitably reaches the conclusion that parental school choice financed through a generous voucher program is the single best policy that can be adopted.

Jake Haulk, Ph.D., President

Frank Gamrat, Ph.D., Sr. Research Assoc.

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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>
