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A Pittsburgh Education Success Story

So much concern is focused on public education in the City with its low test scores and high costs that a local education success story goes largely overlooked. The Extra Mile Education Foundation, with the Pittsburgh Catholic Diocese, has quietly been providing a quality education for many of Pittsburgh's disadvantaged youth at its elementary schools, three in Pittsburgh and one in Wilkinsburg. About 800 students, predominantly African-American and non-Catholic with more than 70 percent economically disadvantaged are being educated in the Extra Mile supported schools. All families pay a nominal tuition. Extra Mile's support enables the schools to charge tuition that is affordable to urban families.

A study of the schools for the year 2005-2006, prepared by researchers at the University of Pittsburgh, reports that Extra Mile schools have had considerable success in educating students. Success is especially pronounced for students who have spent several years in the Extra Mile program. The latest Pitt study found an improving trend in test scores compared to the findings of their 2001-2002 study. Achievement levels had improved in all grades and subject areas between the 2001-2002 school year and the 2005-2006 school year.

Students who enrolled by third grade and continued through to the eighth grade scored at or above national norms for eighth grade. The researchers found that students who enter the schools late—in the fifth or sixth grades—often have below norm scores upon entry but improved their scores substantially by eighth grade, although some might not catch up completely.

Graduating Extra Mile elementary school students have demonstrated they are prepared for success in high school. For example, the most recent eighth grade graduates to complete high school (Extra Mile classes of 2001 and 2002) recorded a 94 percent graduation rate. By comparison, a RAND study showed Pittsburgh Public Schools have a graduation rate of 64 percent—placing Pittsburgh schools in the middle of graduation rates among large urban school districts across the country. It is also noteworthy that, thanks to assistance from the Crossroads Foundation, Extra Mile eighth grade graduates are able to attend a Catholic high school of their choosing if they so desire.

The success of students at the Extra Mile schools and their impressive high school graduation rate demonstrate that kids from any background can do well academically if placed in the appropriate school environment with caring, qualified education professionals. Extra Mile schools are doing a commendable job with kids who are, on average, more disadvantaged than the elementary school population in Pittsburgh as whole. And yet the students are doing quite well.

Tuition charged to parents was \$1,580 per child in 2005. Parents are required to pay at least a portion of the nominal tuition fee. More importantly, the \$1,580 parental charge represents only 30 percent of the \$5,300 average per pupil expense incurred by the extra Mile schools. The difference is made up by Extra Mile through donations from those who are concerned about the quality of education of Pittsburgh's children, especially the most economically disadvantaged.

The achievements of the Extra Mile schools prove that disadvantaged students can receive a good education and be prepared for success in life. Unfortunately, most of the City's children are not being afforded this opportunity. While donors to the Extra Mile Foundation are very generous, more money could open up educational opportunities for many more students. UPMC has offered \$100 million (\$10 million per year if matching funds are forthcoming) to the Pittsburgh Promise scholarship program for Pittsburgh high school graduates. Ten million dollars per year could provide enough to send 2,000 or more students to Extra Mile schools or other non-public schools that are producing good academic results.

Or better yet, the Pittsburgh School District could follow in the footsteps of Milwaukee, Cleveland, or Washington DC and begin a voucher program to provide the City's students an option of attending an Extra Mile school or any other school parents might choose. The District could provide \$8,000 per year per child currently enrolled in the public schools for all parents who would like a non-public school option. And since the District currently is spending \$18,000 per student, the Pittsburgh schools would be able to save taxpayers a lot of money as more and more students took the vouchers.

Extra Mile schools are showing what can be done. Why is Pittsburgh still so unwilling to acknowledge that it could greatly assist its own children by allowing them real education choice through a publicly funded scholarship or voucher program? Why not try being a leader for real improvement for a change?

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