



### **A Proposal for The Mayor's Education Reform Task Force**

Back in 2007, Mayor Peduto's predecessor, along with the Superintendent of Pittsburgh schools and the head of UPMC, worked to put together the Pittsburgh Promise program, wherein graduates of Pittsburgh high schools can receive scholarship funding to attend college or other post-secondary education. UPMC was to provide \$100 million over ten years to kick start the program. Since its inception, the program has raised \$170 million, awarded 4,735 scholarships and handed out \$42.9 million to grantees.

The program was begun with several objectives but certainly central was the idea the program would be an enticement for students to stay enrolled in Pittsburgh schools and that the promise of funds would improve academic achievement. Surprise. Seven years into the program neither objective has been achieved. Of course, there is no denying that the students receiving the aid have benefitted from the program. However the Promise program, along with the countless others that have been implemented in the school system, have not solved the problem of very poor academic performance in Pittsburgh public schools, especially at the high school level. SAT scores remain well below national average and the PSSA results point to startlingly low scholastic achievement (*Policy Brief [Volume 12, Number 46](#)*).

To his credit, the Mayor recognizes that a poorly performing, very expensive school district is detrimental to efforts to grow the city's economy and population, especially the population of families with children. Far too many families with middle and high school age children have moved out of the City and are not being replaced. Unfortunately, the City depends on net in-migration of unmarried and mostly young who are prone to leave once they get married and have children rather than put them in the public school system.

Moreover, with costs over \$20,000 per pupil, the school system is very expensive for taxpayers in the City even though the state provides over 40 percent of the funding for the district budget. Indeed, the school district is predicting ruinously large budget deficits in the next three years. Jumps in the amount the district will have to spend to cover its pension and health care obligations are driving expenditures through the roof (*Policy Brief [Volume 13, Number 57](#)*).

The Mayor not only recognizes the obstacle to growth the school district represents, he apparently would like to do something to help. That's probably the major reason he has chosen to appoint a task force on the schools. Here is what he should focus on. He ought to place emphasis on children getting a quality education and then look for ways to make that happen. Unfortunately, dozens of programs designed to improve performance over the years have done precious little to make a dent in the awful academic record of the high schools. And that is the true test of a good educational system. It matters little if a child is doing okay, if not great, in the 5<sup>th</sup> grade. What matters for the child's future is whether they learn enough in high school to prepare them for the working world or for post-secondary education and training once they graduate.

So, the Mayor should begin by thinking outside the normal limited set of solutions that focus on trying to fix school district problems. One solution comes to mind quickly. Offer a program to help students and parents who truly care about learning get into schools, private or parochial, where there is discipline and laser like focus on academic achievement.

One possibility would be to ask the Promise program to set aside a sizable portion of funds to be used to create scholarships for students who would like to get out of the public schools and into a non-public alternative. There must be thousands of parents in the City who feel their children are trapped in subpar schools who would jump at the opportunity to find a good alternative for their children. The state does administer the opportunity scholarship tax credit program, which provides scholarships to students in low achieving school districts to attend non-public schools. There are income guidelines and restrictions on the use of the scholarship. In the current school year, twenty-one of the district's schools are on the list of low achieving schools. Still a broader, more generous approach is needed.

To satisfy the desire for alternatives, the Mayor could head up special fund raising efforts to supplement the Promise program assets. There might be a number of local foundations, corporations and individual donors who would be glad to provide financial assistance to a dedicated fund within the Promise program that offers scholarships to public school students that would enable them to attend a non-public school of their parents' choice.

And if the Promise program board feels that it would be inappropriate to be involved in an effort to focus on improving education for K-12 students as opposed to giving scholarships to those who make it through to graduation, then the Mayor could put together another program that would raise private funds to provide scholarships to K-12 students to move to non-public schooling.

Some will say, as they always do, that such a program would take the better students out of public schools. Maybe, maybe not. Perhaps some potentially good students are not achieving as they should because the environment they are in is not conducive to learning or challenging enough. In any event, students—whether good or currently not doing well but would be better suited to a different school environment—should have an opportunity to get out of the situation they are in.

It will be argued that the program would undermine the public schools. On the other hand, it could be argued that competition might cause them to improve. Certainly, there is no possibility that per student spending would be lowered in the public schools. If the public schools do not or cannot respond in a positive way to the loss of students—which will arguably be a small number at the beginning—what does that tell us about the attitude and culture of the public school establishment? The school district is a creature of the state with a mission to educate the City’s children. If they cannot deliver on the fundamental commission they have been given by the Commonwealth, they should not expect to be coddled or to have their inadequacies swept under the rug.

Granted, there are many details to be worked out and a lot of serious discussion about how to proceed in the development of such a program as the one being recommended. The difference in this approach if adopted by the Mayor would be that he does not have to get involved with the school board and its prerogatives. Undoubtedly such a move would be bold and likely very unpopular among defenders of the school establishment and unions, particularly the teachers’ union. The question is; to whom and what objectives does the Mayor owe allegiance? It would seem to be a no brainer that opportunity for quality education for the City’s children should trump politics and powerful interest opposition.

It is too bad the state government, with all its financial support for education, has not been able to thwart the power of the public education establishment through the creation of substantial meaningful education alternatives and better use of taxpayer dollars. Thus it is necessary to seek bold private sector solutions to save children from the poorly performing public schools in Pittsburgh.

---

**Jake Haulk, Ph.D., President**

---

*Policy Briefs may be reprinted as long as proper attribution is given.  
For more information about this and other topics, please visit our website:  
[www.alleghenyinstitute.org](http://www.alleghenyinstitute.org)*

<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: <a href="mailto:aipp@alleghenyinstitute.org">aipp@alleghenyinstitute.org</a></p>
---