

Pittsburgh Magnet Schools: How Are They Doing?

The superintendent of Pittsburgh Public Schools (PPS) recently reported on the 2014 results on the state achievement tests taken by City school students saying she was grateful for the work principals and teachers had done to achieve a modest improvement in scores. Unfortunately, the “modest” improvement has two big problems.

First, while the District’s overall PSSA results in math, reading and writing for grades 3 through 8 showed a slight uptick from 2013 levels, the school by school picture is quite disappointing with some elementary and middle schools showing significant drop offs from the 2013 performance. Indeed, there were quite disturbing declines at Banksville K-5, Lincoln K-5 and West Liberty K-5 on the writing portion of the exams. For the 47 City schools with K through 8 students taking PSSA tests, 19 had declines in the number proficient in math, 17 had a lower percentage scoring proficient or better in reading while in writing and science 24 schools (not necessarily the same 24) showed drops in percentages scoring as proficient or better. Many of the decreases fell in the double digit range.

Second, while the District overall had minor increases in reading, writing and math, the small pickups were not enough to reverse the declines of 2013. In fact, 2014 numbers were well below the figures posted in 2011 and amazingly were still below 2008’s percentage scoring proficient or advanced. Thus three years of modest gains have been lost and not yet recovered.

A major difficulty with the data as reported by the PPS is the failure to report PSSA results by grade for all schools. Moreover, the Department of Education has yet to post 2014 data by school and grade on its website. Thus, in order to compare Pittsburgh schools to schools around the state and to compare grade performance between “regular” schools and magnet schools within the PPS, it is necessary to use 2013 test results data.

An interesting question arises regarding magnet schools. The schools require would be students to apply for slots in schools that purport to have limited openings, establish requirements that must be met, and finally have some sort of selection process administered to determine who gets accepted. The concept of limited enrollment magnet schools is something of an odd concept in a school district that opposes vouchers that would allow parents and children to choose the school they would like to attend. The very notion of a school that students are allowed to apply to because it offers the education and environment a child would like to attend is tantamount to believing in school choice. But why limit it to those fortunate enough to be accepted into the magnets, or worse, still lucky enough to win the lottery to get in? What kind of signal about life’s fairness is that to students who fail to get in?

Although the PPS does not show cost per students at the magnet schools or for individual non-magnets, it is reasonable to assume that the specialized instruction and facilities at magnets raise the per student costs compared to “regular schools” assuming everything else—such as transportation expenses—are equal. With average expenditures per student in the district over \$20,000, it seems the height of financial irresponsibility for the PPS not to create \$12,000 vouchers for students who would like to attend some school, private or public, other than the ones they are locked into. It is also hypocritical for the PPS to say we will allow some lucky students to go to higher quality, specialized schools but not all will make the lucky list.

And that brings us to the question: Are PPS magnets really superior to “regular” schools? And are they better than any of the “good” schools in the County or state? To answer these questions, 2013 data on reading and math PSSA scores and algebra and literature scores for 6th, 8th and 11th graders for several magnets have been collected. In addition, the schools’ rankings among schools across the state are collected as well.

There can be no question that with two exceptions the magnets selected for this study are better academically than the district’s regular schools—in some cases dramatically so. For example, the 11th graders at the Obama magnet school are far outperforming other 11th graders in the PPS with 71 percent scoring proficient or better on the Keystone algebra test compared to 50 percent for the district. And on the literature exam 88 percent scored advanced or proficient in contrast to 63 percent for the district. In fact, they scored higher on the Keystone exams for algebra and literature than the statewide averages. Good enough to rank 145th among the state’s almost 600 high schools.

Meanwhile, CAPA (academy for the performing arts) is even stronger with 80 percent proficient or better on algebra with 95 percent proficient or advanced on the literature exam. Combined these two scores were strong enough to rank CAPA 45th among Pennsylvania high schools. However, the CAPA middle school scores were only high enough to rank 170th, still much better than the middle school averages of all 6 to 8th graders in the PPS. Finally, it is noteworthy that the Science and Technology Academy 11th graders tested well enough to rank 176th statewide.

Thus, it can be said with assurance there are magnet high schools in the PPS that are achieving respectable results—far better than the average of the remaining high schools and better than the best of the non-magnets by a sizable margin in the state rankings of high schools. On the other hand, the magnet at Perry is not successful in terms of academic performance as shown by the very low percentages of 11th grade students scoring proficient in math (27 percent) and literature (35 percent) on the Keystone exams.

At the elementary level there are magnet schools performing better than the district average. Fifth graders at Liberty K-5, Linden K-5 and Dilworth K-5, for example, had a greater percentage of students scoring proficient or higher in both reading and math than the district average in 2013. Sadly, two of these schools (Liberty and Dilworth) had seen test performances drop markedly from 2012. On the other hand, Linden managed a small pickup in its scores from 2012 to 2013. Meanwhile, the Allegheny K-5 magnet had been scoring above district averages for fifth graders but saw its percentage of students showing proficiency in math slip below the district average for fifth graders in 2013.

In general, PSSA scores were lower from 2012 to 2013, in some cases dramatically, for both magnets and non-magnets.

Overall, the data for 2013 show almost all magnet schools at all grade levels as having better academic performances than the averages for non-magnet schools. Still, at the middle and elementary level the magnets are not exceptional performers compared to schools across the state. For example, Liberty K-5 elementary ranked only 858 out of 1492 elementary schools in Pennsylvania in 2013. Similarly, the magnet at Sterrett Middle School, one of the better performing middle schools, ranks only 546 out of 745 middle schools in Pennsylvania.

It is important to note that the better performing schools have far higher percent attendance than the poor and average test score schools. Magnet schools tend to have well above district average attendance percentages, and the elementary schools usually have higher percentage attendance than the upper grades. For example, Dilworth (96.3 percent), Liberty (96.7 percent), and Allegheny K-5 (95.5 percent) clearly reflect a commitment to education among parents and students. At the middle school level, Sterrett, Carmalt and Obama middle grades have very good attendance records and all have test results better than district averages, especially Carmalt and Obama 6-12.

Among the high schools, the Science and Technology magnet reports strong attendance and well above average test results. Meanwhile, attendance at Perry High, Westinghouse and Millions are all below 90 percent with students missing an average of 20 days per year, with many likely missing far more than 20 days. Thus, one could argue that the magnets are doing better than other district schools in large measure because students actually show up for classes.

Poor attendance undoubtedly reflects lack of interest and motivation. Fix that problem and perhaps Pittsburgh schools will start to fare somewhat better academically. Little wonder some serious parents choose to try for magnet enrollment. They can see that magnet students appear to come from homes where education and discipline are highly regarded.

So, the question is raised again: Given the academic success achieved by most magnet schools relative to the District's other schools—albeit for most still short of the performance of the top 50 percent of schools across the state—why do the powers that be in the district not offer voucher dollars to any parent in the district who would like to get their child or children into private or parochial schools? The district has established that choice works for parents who care enough to get their children into the magnets. The lesson to take from this is that all dedicated parents and children ought to be awarded opportunities to look outside the inadequate schooling offered in most “regular” district schools.

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