

Promises and More Promises

The Pittsburgh Promise program that provides scholarships of up to \$10,000 for four years to graduates of Pittsburgh Public Schools who meet certain qualifications continues to grab headlines. The program boasts of having spent over \$55 million on 5,500 students. Most of the money goes to those who earn a 2.5 or better grade point average and meet the 90 percent attendance requirement. Note that no standardized test score minimum is necessary, such as ACT or SAT. Hence, the grade point average is virtually meaningless.

Consider the Keystone exam results for the graduating class of 2014 who were 11th graders in 2013 when they took the exams. 51.1 percent of these students scored proficient on the math test. That test is on Algebra 1, and it taken immediately upon completion of the course. Most 9th graders should have taken Algebra 1. In any event, the math exam is not covering extremely difficult material. 63.5 percent were proficient in literature (used to be reading but is now literature) and only 23 percent scored proficient on science (biology). In short, the Keystone exams are not SAT level exams and should be considered very basic. Note that the average combined math and reading SAT score for the non-magnet high school students is only 827, with half the schools failing to reach the 800 mark.

Nonetheless, 71 percent of the student cohort that began 9th grade together graduated in 2014. If these graduates had to have earned a 2.0 grade point average, then the grade point average is meaningless in terms of indicating education that has taken place.

Then too, consider the 90 percent attendance requirement. If a student misses 10 percent of classes that means they have missed 18 days during the school year. Given the attendance figures for the District's high schools one can easily see why the overall academic performance is poor. At Perry High, attendance last year was 82 percent, Carrick 80 percent, Westinghouse 87 percent, Milliones 85 percent. Bear in mind that Milliones and Westinghouse have 6th, 7th, and 8th graders in the student population who typically have much better attendance than high schoolers. It is a virtual certainty that the attendance rates of 10th, 11th and 12th graders at Westinghouse and Milliones are comparable to Perry and Carrick.

Here's the problem. As stated, Perry's overall attendance is 82 percent and that means the average student is missing 32 days per year. And since that is the average, there must be many students missing 40 or possibly 50 or more days per year. Little wonder that only 28 percent of 11th graders meet the Keystone math standard and 5.6 percent the science standard. High rates of absenteeism are undoubtedly highly correlated with lack of motivation to learn.

The issue with the Pittsburgh Promise then is threefold. First, the Promise program has not resulted in any meaningful improvement in academic achievement of graduates. Presumably, that was a motivating factor in creating the program. Indeed, as we suggested years ago, the promise of scholarship funds for hitting low qualification criteria could actually work against improving academic performance since the scholarships are guaranteed for low qualifications.

To be sure, students going to the purely magnet schools appear to be more highly motivated than those attending the non-magnet schools. At CAPA for example, 82 percent of 11th graders scored proficient in math, 89 percent in literature and 60 percent in science. The combined reading and math SAT scores averaged 1032. All these test results compare very favorably to statewide scoring. And one of the most conspicuous differences between the CAPA magnet high school and non-magnet high schools: the attendance rate at CAPA is 93.4 percent—far above the other schools.

Second, the Promise program has not succeeded in boosting school enrollment. And there can be little doubt as to why. Parents for whom their children's education is very important to them will be very skeptical of moving into the City in order to qualify for the scholarships given the generally poor quality of education, particularly in the high schools. Only those fortunate enough to get into a magnet school would be interested, and except for CAPA, you must be a resident to apply to a magnet school.

Moving into the City is made even less attractive by the fact that a student must enter Pittsburgh schools in kindergarten and go all the way to graduation to be eligible for the full \$10,000 per year for four years of scholarship money. Given the poor quality of educational results, why would a concerned parent put a child through 12 or 13 years of Pittsburgh schools? Then too, coming to the District later qualifies only for a reduced amount. And students coming to the City after the ninth grade are disqualified from any Promise funding. So, there is no inducement to move into the City related to the Promise program for a family with a 10th grader.

Note that graduates wishing to attend a trade school are eligible for Promise funds under certain criteria.

Third, by giving scholarships to so many graduates who by almost every measure are not prepared to do four year college level, or even community college level, work does two unfortunate things. It leads to high failure and dropout rates and that means large amounts of Promise funds are being wasted. And it encourages students who have shown little

interest in getting educated in high school to go college where they have little chance of success.

The Promise program ought to look at ways to offer parents of children who want to learn more options for quality education than just a roll of the dice chance of getting into the better magnet schools. The program ought to set aside some of the money it is not using wisely to offer scholarships for students still in school to attend a private or parochial school. And if Pittsburgh Promise won't do it some of their concerned private sector board members ought to take up the challenge. There is one thing for certain: The Pittsburgh Public School District has had decades to get its act together and has not done so.

The Promise program is a good thing for the motivated, qualified students who are ready to go to college. But if the funders and supporters of the Promise really want to help, they must do something meaningful to give k-12 students in the City who want to learn a better opportunity than they now have. And that would be scholarships to attend private or parochial schools. There is no prohibition on the use of private money to give children scholarships to non-public schools.

After a long enough period of time, perhaps the City schools will improve. But the evidence suggests it will not be soon enough for thousands of children who deserve a better shot at a good education. It is a moral issue. Letting kids languish in the poorly performing schools ought not to be acceptable. Giving those parents who want more for their children the funds to get out of public schools if they choose is the right thing to do and it ought to be done sooner rather than later.

Those who argue against giving parents that option should at least be consistent and recommend the closing of magnet programs. What is that but offering choices? And what's worse it is a lottery that sends a terrible message about life's unfairness to parents and children who do not win by luck of the draw.

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