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### More Nonsense about School Funding and Academics

A recent newspaper story about the recently released School Performance Profiles contains the following quote from the acting superintendent of the Wilkesburg School District: "You didn't even need to look at the scores....All you need to look at is the market value of commercial and industrial buildings in the district and wealth-to-aid ratio to see how well those students perform." Once again we see a superintendent of his/her failing school district trying to blame lack of resources for the deplorable academic achievement in the district.

Well, let's take a look at the superintendent's assertion that poor districts do not have adequate resources to achieve academic success by comparing his district to another Pennsylvania district, namely, the Windber School District in Somerset County.

Using the latest data posted on the Department of Education's website, one sees that the state calculates three aid ratios using a formula comparing districts to the state average: the personal income (PI) per student ratio, the market value (MV) of real estate per student ratio and the ratio of the two ratios. Because of the way the ratios are calculated, the higher the value of the income and market value ratios, the less able a district is to fund education locally. These numbers correlate strongly with the amount of state aid per student (*Policy Brief Volume 14, Number 50*).

Wilkesburg has a PI ratio of 0.5684 based on 2011-12 data. Windber's PI ratio was 0.6662, 17 percent higher than Wilkesburg's and thus shows Windber to be less able to fund education based on income. On the MV ratio, Wilkesburg stood at 0.7518 while Windber was slightly lower at 0.7492. The overall ratio, using a combination of the two funding ability indicators puts Wilkesburg at 0.6783 versus 0.7159 for Windber, suggesting Windber is actually less able financially to fund its schools than Wilkesburg and thus needs more state help.

And that is what happens. In 2012-2013, Windber received \$ 8,606 per student from the state while Wilkesburg received \$8,049 in state funding. Bear in mind that the average state funding for all districts in 2012-13 was \$5,200 per pupil with many wealthier districts receiving less than \$3,000. But state funding is only part of the picture. In that same year, Wilkesburg had total revenue of \$21,002 per pupil and Windber \$11,369. In addition to state funds, Wilkesburg generated over \$8,600 per student in local taxes and received another \$3,500 per pupil from Federal and "other" sources. Windber, on the other hand, raised only \$2,464 locally and got a mere \$300 per pupil from Federal funding to get to the total of \$11,369.

Thus, Wilkinsburg schools are receiving \$11,549 per pupil from non-local sources, \$3,000 more than Windber gets from non-local sources and Wilkinsburg is tapping local taxpayers for \$6,200 per student more than Windber collects.

Given the large difference in spending, the superintendent's argument would point to a better educational outcome in Wilkinsburg than Windber achieves—or at least that Windber lacks sufficient resources to do well. But that would be as wrong as wrong gets.

Here is a comparison of the high schools for school year 2013-14. Windber's School Performance Profile score is 80.1 with 81 percent of 11<sup>th</sup> graders proficient or advanced on the reading test and 74 percent proficient or advanced in math. The average SAT combined result for math and verbal is 1009. The graduation rate is 96 percent and attendance is 94.2 percent. Not top tier among Pennsylvania high schools but test results are better than the state average. Indeed, in 2013, Windber High school ranked in the top 20 percent of all high schools in the state.

Meanwhile, the School Performance Profile for Wilkinsburg high is placed at 34.6. Only eight percent of 11<sup>th</sup> graders scored proficient or advanced in math and only 13 percent in reading. The average combined reading and math SAT score for the school is a woeful 768. Attendance last year was a stunningly low 82 percent, which means the average student missed 32 days of school.

Thus, despite spending far more money than Windber, Wilkinsburg's academic results in the high school do not rise to the level of dreadful. The 34.6 score on the School Performance Profile reflects 1.6 points actually earned for academic results. The remainder is basically a gift from the scoring system adopted by the state and is essentially a reward for the school being open.

Is the academic picture better for the middle and elementary schools? In a word, no. Because the School Performance Profile methodology is a joke in that it gives so many points for merely being open, the comparisons will be based on academic achievement. At Windber Middle School, 92 percent scored proficient or advanced in math and 80 percent scored proficient or advanced in reading, both well above the state average. Attendance was a very high 96 percent.

At Wilkinsburg Middle School, 24 percent of students scored proficient or advanced in math and 33 percent proficient or advanced in reading. Attendance was 88 percent. That is not a good number for middle schoolers.

Finally, for elementary schools, Kelly School in Wilkinsburg had 39 percent proficient or advanced in math, 29 percent in reading. Surprisingly, only 35 percent of 3<sup>rd</sup> graders score proficient or better in reading. That is a closely watched result. Meanwhile, at Windber Elementary 84 percent of students were proficient or better in math and 77 percent in reading. 85 percent of 3<sup>rd</sup> graders were proficient pointing to good results in later grades.

In short, Wilkinsburg is getting state, Federal, and other aid in generous amounts. To which it is adding considerably by hitting its local tax base pretty hard as well. And it is spending far more per pupil than Windber, almost twice as much in fact. But for all its spending, it fails miserably at educating its children and cannot compare academically with a district even poorer than itself.

It is time to quit complaining about lack of resources and get to work figuring how to get kids to go to school and learn. The endless complaints of unfairness are starting to fall on deaf ears. Once the public begins to understand the real facts, perhaps the education establishment in the poorly

performing districts will be held accountable. Wilkinsburg is a strong argument for vouchers for parents of children who truly want to learn.

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

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