



Wilkesburg: Poster Child for Failures of the PA Education System

Last November the superintendent of the Wilkesburg School District was complaining that poor education performance was closely tied to a lack of resources (see *Policy Brief, Volume 14, Number 56*). This argument has been made by so many defenders of poorly performing school districts that it has become a mantra despite the fact that in the case of Wilkesburg, as well as other underperforming districts, it is simply not true.

In a recent news report concerning the Wilkesburg superintendent's effort to get another school district to take his 7-12th grade students, it was revealed that the Wilkesburg District spends \$27 million per year. Of that, \$5.3 million goes to cover the 343 students who are attending charter schools and the rest to cover the 835 students in the District run schools. That means the charter students cost the district \$15,450 per pupil while the students in the District managed schools cost \$26,000 per pupil. Yet some still argue the charters are crippling the District financially. In either case, the cost per pupil should be more than enough to educate the children.

However, the School Performance Profile data reveal an unmitigated disaster is occurring as far as educational achievement is concerned. The latest scores for Wilkesburg high school students show only 8.6 percent to be proficient in math, 13.3 percent proficient in reading and *none* proficient in science. Notwithstanding these deplorable figures, 62 percent of the cohort who started 9th grade together will graduate.

Is the dreadful academic performance due to having poor quality teachers? Not according to the PA Education Department's evaluation procedure that shows 93.5 percent of classes are being taught by highly qualified teachers. Of course, this is the same Education Department that says 56 percent of the 11th grade students were making progress in science (in the Department's terminology, "meeting annual growth expectations").

In the Education Department's academic scoring scheme, the "meeting expectations" metric accounts for the bulk of the school's academic score points. Sadly, this is just one example of how the education establishment has tried to mislead the public about how bad things really are and, in so doing, has made itself an accomplice in the ongoing education debacle that characterizes far too many school districts across the state.

In the middle school achievement test scores were slightly above the high school results but with just 24 percent proficient in math, 34 percent proficient in reading and 15 percent in science, the middle school must also be considered a horrendous failure. This despite all the money that is being spent and having just under 99 percent of classes taught by highly qualified teachers—according to the standards used by the PA Education Department to measure qualifications. The two elementary schools fared somewhat better but fewer than 40 percent were proficient in reading in the third grade at either school. Regrettably, this disappointing statistic means the prospects for improved educational achievement in later grades are doubtful at best. This unpleasant truth is borne out quite clearly by what should be totally unacceptable middle and high school scores. The longer the kids are in these public schools the farther they fall behind academically.

The most recently published official data (2012-2013 school year) shows that 58 percent of Wilkinsburg funding came from other than local taxpayers. That means non-local tax base sources were providing \$15,073 per pupil enrolled in Wilkinsburg public schools, while municipal taxpayers were providing almost \$11,000. For those levels of funding, taxpayers ought to be able to expect a far better academic performance than they are getting.

Trying to get other school districts to take students who are so poorly prepared is not the answer. These other districts have enough problems of their own already. What the State and the District should be doing is offering all the students who truly want to get a good education and their parents a voucher worth up to \$15,000 per year to attend the school of their choice, whether it be private or parochial. The number of school options will expand to meet the demand, especially when the student can bring \$15,000 a year.

Interestingly, at the school meeting where the farming out of the students was being discussed, a young woman stood up and complained of having to pay for her son to attend a non-public school so he could receive a decent education. This is the exactly the person the State and the School District should be listening to when trying to figure out what to do to improve education. Parents with that much dedication to their children's future should be rewarded with real help in getting their child into a decent school where learning is actually taking place on a consistent and disciplined basis. Many such parents want a lot more from schools than experience tells them they can expect from the failing public schools. Unfortunately, they are not in a position to afford the better alternatives.

It is far past the time for the education establishment and the pro-public school lobby that defends even the most abject failures to recognize the damage that is being done to society and the lives of thousands of children who are being denied a respectable K-12 education. Granted, there are societal and cultural problems at play in the poor educational performance at many public schools. But that cannot be used as an excuse to deny children and parents, who value a good education as the best chance for success in life as well as personal accomplishment and self-worth, a real opportunity for an education.

It should be absolutely clear by now that the downward spiral of educational attainment, with its accompanying lack of skills and lowered self-esteem and motivation, are closely bound together with the other social pathologies that are truly crippling communities. It is not, as the apologists always cry, due to a lack of funding. If money was the answer, the problems would have been solved long ago.

How long will Pennsylvania taxpayers tolerate this inexcusable money wasting and life ruining education- in- name- only system that continues to become worse and more intractable before they demand legislative action? Sadly, the political dynamics do not favor any significant or meaningful reform. The education establishment, including the teachers unions (with all the retirees), the principals, the superintendents, many school boards and all the lobbyists who work for them have an enormous vested interest in perpetuating the status quo. And they also have sufficient clout and political influence with enough elected officials to forestall any of the real reforms so desperately needed. So the horror stories never get fixed, they just get worse and the taxpayers keep getting handed the bill for an intolerably poor product at the failing schools.

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