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**Education Funding Commission is a Distraction from Real Issues:
Part II-Absenteeism**

As was noted last week in Part I of this *Policy Brief*, absenteeism is a serious problem in many poorly performing Pennsylvania districts. Part II offers explanation and statistics to illustrate the importance of the issue.

Very high rates of absenteeism in failing high schools undoubtedly reflect a lack of concern about the need to get a good education on the part of a large percentage of the students. For example, an attendance rate of 80 percent at a school, a level that is not uncommon at many failing schools, means that, on average, students miss 36 days of school per year. And that cannot be explained by flu or other communicable disease outbreaks because it is not happening at the better performing schools in the same geographical areas or in elementary schools in the same neighborhoods.

High absenteeism is disruptive to class work. It is almost certainly correlated with class room discipline issues. Students who miss large numbers of days will not complete assignments; they will miss exams and be ill prepared for the Pennsylvania achievement tests, as scores so readily indicate. Worse still, consider the plight of the students who would like to learn but are hampered by the attitude and classroom behavior of those who show they do not care about school and likely don't care if others are prevented from learning because of lack of decorum and discipline in the classrooms. It must be asked. How can high rates of absenteeism be tolerated by the state inasmuch as it provides a large share of the school funding?

Notwithstanding all the bragging about an occasional uptick in third or fifth grade scores in some of the poorly performing districts, these districts are still abject failures as academic institutions when fewer than 30 percent of 11th grade students score at the proficient level on the state's math and reading assessment exams. Indeed, having fewer than 50 percent of students scoring at the proficient level should be considered an educational calamity. There can be no glossing over such pathetic, inexcusable numbers. Politically correct education speak will not suffice.

Let's look at highly ranked and bottom ranked high schools. Using PA Department of Education data for 2013-2014, we can examine correlations between attendance and achievement scores on state exams. The percentage of students scoring at the proficient level or higher on each of the three achievement tests (math, reading and science) is averaged for both the academically weak high schools and for the top tier schools. Attendance rates are the percentage of students who attended classes during the school year.

Several of the lowest rated schools based on academic performance from across the state are selected along with several top schools to show the attendance problem alluded to above.

Included among the six worst academic high schools is Wilkinsburg where the average fraction of students scoring proficient or higher on the three tests was only 7.4 percent. Bear in mind that this metric only tells us how many students reached the proficient level. For those who fail to reach proficiency there is no way of knowing exactly how far below competent they actually are.

Keep in mind also that Wilkinsburg's incredibly low score of 7.4 is out of a possible 100 percent. At the same time the attendance at Wilkinsburg High in 2013-2014 was 82 percent.

Unfortunately, it is well known that attendance gets worse in these school districts as the students move to higher grades. Undoubtedly, the attendance rate is much lower for 11th and 12th graders than it is for 9th and 10th graders. Therefore it is entirely reasonable to assert that for 11th graders the attendance rate is lower than 82 percent and for seniors even lower.

Assuming the attendance rate of 82 percent holds for 11th graders, the average student is absent 32 days during the school year. Little wonder the achievement scores are so atrocious. And this in a school district that had \$23,400 per student to spend.

The other very weak performers include Chester High (\$17,000 per student revenue) with an average proficiency score of just 6.4 percent on the three tests. Attendance was 81 percent and that means the average student was absent 34 days during the school year. Ben Franklin High in Philadelphia earns a spot on the weak list with an average of 11.2 percent of students scoring proficient or better on the three tests. Ben Franklin attendance stood at 82.6 percent, which means an average of 31 days missed per student.

There are a large number of poorly performing high schools in Philadelphia but we chose to use only two as illustrative of the long list of poorly performing schools in that district. West Philadelphia high school's average proficient score was 19 percent and attendance was 79 percent—38 days of absence per pupil. Harrisburg High comes in with an average 16.5 percent proficient and attendance at 84 percent, 29 days absent per student. Note that Harrisburg schools had revenue of \$18,093 per pupil.

Perry High from Pittsburgh makes the list with an average proficient score of 26.6 percent. That almost sounds impressive compared to the other schools, but it means that about three quarters of the 11th grade students are not at grade level academically. And that can only be classified as dreadful. Perry has an attendance rate of 80 percent—the average student misses 36 days per year. Other Pittsburgh high school students attending schools with grades 6 to 12 are not learning much either as indicated by their woeful SAT scores—11th grade state achievement test numbers are not reported separately on the Department of Education website. Awkward to say in light of the fact that Pittsburgh had revenue of over \$22,500 per pupil, with \$9,110 coming from the state.

All of these schools, other than the ones in Philadelphia, are in districts that receive \$9,000 per pupil or more in state funding.

Now we turn to the top high schools. The list and school statistics in brief are; (1) Mt. Lebanon, 91.5 percent average proficiency on tests, 95.3 percent attendance and revenue of \$15,800 per student; (2) South Fayette, 89.2 percentage average proficient score, 94.2 percent attendance and revenue of \$15,600, (3) Radnor, 89.3 percent average scoring proficient, 95.2 percent attendance and revenue of \$22,400; (4) Hampton, 92.5 percent scoring proficient, 95.6 percent attendance

and revenue of \$14,180; (5) Unionville, 91 percent scoring proficient, 97 percent attendance, and revenue of \$17,000; (6) Peters Township, 91.6 percent scoring proficient, 95 percent attendance, and revenue of \$12, 309.

Only two of these high schools were in districts with significantly greater revenue per pupil than the state average of \$15,000. Two, Peters and Hampton, were significantly below the state average spending thereby demonstrating that huge expenditures are not necessary to achieve tremendous results. Of these six top schools, the Hampton district received the most state money at \$3,700. The others were around \$3,000 or less and far below the amounts received by the poorly performing districts.

Thus, we find the biggest differences between the poorly performing and the top ranked schools are: first, the huge gap in attendance and second the amounts of money received from the state.

Question: Why are taxpayers being asked to provide so much money to educate kids who do not care enough to show up for classes thereby displaying compete disdain for the efforts being made financially and otherwise to provide them an education? This inexcusably bad situation must not be swept under the rug. The attitude and behavior of their high absenteeism classmates are a hindrance to kids who want to learn. This alone should warrant having the absenteeism problem being moved to the top of needed education correctives.

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