



Wilkinsburg Education—Looking for Answers

The worst ranked Pennsylvania school district that offers K-12 education is back in the news. Wilkinsburg School District made it known a few months ago that they are struggling to provide a quality education and would like to enter into a partnership arrangement and get help from other districts. Middle and high school enrollment has plunged as charter schools are taking students from the district schools. Population loss might be responsible for some of the decline as well.

School district officials constantly complain about inadequate resources despite the fact that in school year 2013-14 Wilkinsburg schools had revenue of just under \$24,000 per ADM (average daily membership, an estimate of student count). Moreover, they note the student count district-wide is a very low 1,260—making it one of the smallest districts in the state. Notwithstanding the fact that the Pennsylvania Department of Education reports that 93.5 percent of classes in the high school are taught by highly qualified teachers with an average 13 years of education experience, only 8.5 percent of 11th graders are proficient in math and 13.3 percent proficient in reading. The scores are only slightly better for middle school students.

With scores like these, is it any wonder that parents who can get their child into a charter school are doing so? The problem is not that charter schools are taking away resources; the problem is the academic performance of the Wilkinsburg public schools is simply atrocious and drives away students who want to learn.

Consider the Windber School District in Somerset County. It has 1,200 students of whom 36 percent are economically disadvantaged. Windber had revenue of \$12,620 per ADM in 2013-14, about half of the Wilkinsburg revenue total. And yet despite the well below state average per pupil funding and having 36 percent of its students classified as economically disadvantaged, Windber ranks among the top 20 percent of school districts in Pennsylvania based on academic achievement. Perhaps a big difference with Wilkinsburg is that high school students in Windber miss an average of fewer than ten days per school year while in Wilkinsburg high schoolers miss an average of 32 days per year.

As we have written before (*Policy Briefs Volume 14, Number 17 and Volume 15, Number 30*), poor attendance is indicative of low interest in learning. And high absenteeism students are likely to be a negative influence in the classroom, making it harder for serious minded students to learn.

The problem is not money; the problems are far deeper and cannot be solved by throwing more money at them. Failure to address adequately these problems long ago has allowed them to grow into education killing obstacles. It might well be that absent a sea change of reform such as instituting vouchers or scholarships for all students to get them into completely different

environments than the ones that dominate today's failing schools, there is little or no hope of righting the education ship or ending the depriving of young people a decent chance at a good job or higher education.

Now Wilkesburg is talking to Pittsburgh about some arrangement whereby middle and high school students can attend Pittsburgh schools. Setting aside cultural and possibly territorial issues that might arise, which schools would these students attend? The best Pittsburgh schools are the magnet schools, and they are full. It is unlikely Pittsburgh school officials would put Wilkesburg students ahead of Pittsburgh students waiting to get into those schools. That would be a political nightmare for the District. And what would be the point of transporting students several miles to attend Westinghouse Academy or Milliones for example. The academic performance at those schools is almost as bad as Wilkesburg—and this despite district spending of over \$22,000 per pupil. If Pittsburgh officials decide to place Wilkesburg students in better performing non-magnet schools, the question immediately arises: If the district can put transported Wilkesburg students in the better Pittsburgh schools, why can't Pittsburgh students, stuck in bad situations, be shifted to a better school?

Given the dreadful overall academic performance in most of Pittsburgh's non-magnet high schools, it remains an open question as to what exactly Pittsburgh has to offer Wilkesburg other than taking their children off their hands.

Indeed, the Wilkesburg School District is an ideal candidate to be taken over by the Department of Education and forced to enter into contracts with private, for profit or non-profit, education providers that would be supervised by the state. These organizations could hire or not, as they see fit, from the pool of existing teachers. A separate school for perpetual malcontents who refuse to attend classes or to learn would be established. Something Wilkesburg should have done long ago on its own.

For Pittsburgh schools to take on more ill-prepared students when it has far too many of its own already will not be of lasting benefit to either district. Would Pittsburgh have to take Wilkesburg teachers along with their students? What will the teachers' union in Wilkesburg have to say about the contemplated move of students to Pittsburgh? This idea needs a lot of study and some hard headed realism applied. Big problems should not be papered over with unrealistically optimistic statements and wishful thinking.

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