

Westinghouse Academy and Wilkinsburg High Schoolers Together: Not a Good Solution

The latest talk from the Pittsburgh and Wilkinsburg school districts indicates a tentative agreement has been reached that would send students in grades 7 to 12 from Wilkinsburg to Westinghouse Academy (6th-12th grades) starting in the next school year. Pittsburgh needs the money and the enrollment as it has watched its own enrollment slide for many years. Wilkinsburg would pay the Pittsburgh School District for taking the students. Whether the teachers unions will balk and try to block the move has not been determined. Nothing has been said as to whether Wilkinsburg students would be eligible for Pittsburgh Promise Scholarships.

Wilkinsburg wants to offload its high schoolers and middle schoolers because flight from the schools has pushed high school enrollment down to 169 enrollees according to Department of Education (DOE) data for school year 2014-2015. This comes in the wake of a disastrous couple of decades that has seen the municipality's population plunge and school enrollment drop along with the population slide. From 2000 to 2014, population fell from just under 19,000 to 15,800, a drop of 15 percent. And since school year 2007-2008, K-12 enrollment in Wilkinsburg schools fell from 1,428 to 1,178 in the 2014-2015 school year with 343 of those in charter schools and 835 in District schools (as reported by a May 2015 news story). The news account of the number of enrollees in District run schools matches closely the 841 figure shown in the DOE database.

Population statistics from the Census Bureau indicate there were 2,100 children of school age (5-17) living in Wilkinsburg in 2014. That means just over half the school age population are enrolled in public education, including the charter schools. Or viewed another way, the ratio of public school students to population is only 7.4 percent. In Mt. Lebanon, that ratio is 16 percent and in tiny Windber PA with only 4,100 residents the ratio is 28 percent.

There can be little doubt that many school aged children are not in the public school system. The same sort of numbers are found in Pittsburgh where only eight percent of the population is in public education and only half of the school age children are in public education.

The conclusions are inevitable. Poor public schools push people who are concerned about their children's future out of an area. At the same time poor schools drive many students who live in a district into alternatives to traditional public education. Population loss and steep enrollment declines are what happens when public schools are allowed to slide into the awful level of academic performance seen in many urban areas. With heavy population loss there is usually an accompanying loss of tax base that erodes the ability to fund adequately public services and schools.

Which prompts the question: Why shouldn't Wilkinsburg ship its middle and high schoolers to another district if they can get a better education at no increase in cost to taxpayers? There are the obvious objections such as the concerns surrounding the need to transport kids away from their homes into an unfamiliar area. Then too, there could well be long standing animosities between the students from different school districts that will result in security and safety issues.

But assuming these types of objections can be overcome or ameliorated sufficiently to warrant proceeding with the plan, there remains the biggest objection to sending Wilkinsburg kids to Westinghouse. And that is the fact that the education taking place at Westinghouse is worse than Wilkinsburg, as bad as Wilkinsburg is.

Focusing on 11th and 12th grade academic performances, it is learned that Wilkinsburg's recent average SAT scores are slightly higher than those at Westinghouse. In math 398 in Wilkinsburg, 340 at Westinghouse and in reading 370 in Wilkinsburg compared to 364 at Westinghouse. Obviously, scores at both schools are horrendously poor and point to a dreadfully low level of academic attainment.

On the Keystone exams for math and reading taken by 11th graders in 2014, the picture is even worse. At Westinghouse, according to Pittsburgh Public Schools data, only 2.6 percent of students scored proficient or advanced on math while a mere 7.9 percent reached proficient or advanced levels in reading (now called literature). Wilkinsburg scores were better although still deplorably low with only eight percent reaching proficient or advanced in math and a mere 13 percent in reading.

Is it the teachers that account for the achievement differences—minimal as they are? According to state education profile data for the schools, 93 percent of courses in each school are taught by highly qualified teachers with a decade or so of experience. Is it a difference in absenteeism, that great killer of educational attainment? No. In both schools, about 20 percent of the students are absent on average each school day. Of course, this assumes that attendance records are accurate in both schools and are not in fact understating the actual level of absenteeism. Twenty percent absenteeism means the average student misses 36 days during the school year. Is it any wonder test scores are such a disgrace?

So, can it be possible that both Pittsburgh and Wilkinsburg school officials are simply burying their heads in the sand and hoping for the best in the face of what experience and

reality tells them about the likely outcomes from sending Wilkinsburg students to Westinghouse?

Wilkinsburg would do far better to encourage charter schools, parochial schools and private schools to open in the district and provide the scholarship funds needed to educate the students. With revenues and expenditures at \$24,000 per pupil, they can surely attract a lot of programs to the district if they will give up insisting on the public school model as the only way to go. The students and their parents need and should have a far better option than Westinghouse. School officials should be embarrassed to even proffer the Westinghouse plan to taxpayers and parents.

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: aipp@alleghenyinstitute.org</p>
