



Broken Promises for Pittsburgh Students

Summary: The students in Pittsburgh's public schools have seen two promises broken. First, the promise of up to \$40,000 in scholarships for those who graduate from city high schools has been replaced with a promise of \$20,000. Second the promise of a quality education for all students continues to be empty words.

The Pittsburgh Promise program (TPP) has broken faith with the parents and students in Pittsburgh public schools. Ten years ago, TPP promised parents that if they would keep their children in the district from kindergarten through graduation, and if the students maintained a modest 2.5 grade point average and had attendance of 90 percent, they would be eligible for \$10,000 per year in financial aid each year for four years. Thousands of students have stayed in the district for the last 10 years with many having been there since kindergarten. The 12th grade students are now only months away from graduation.

And they just received the second installment of bad news concerning the promised and hoped-for scholarships. In 2015, TPP announced the maximum benefit would be reduced to \$7,500 per year for four years. On Jan. 29, TPP announced the maximum annual stipend would be reduced to \$5,000, effective for 2018 graduates. To rub salt in that wound for those who have stayed since kindergarten, the new plan will extend the maximum stipend to students who only attend 9th through 12th grades.

What's worse, TPP says with this latest reduction it has enough money to make it through 2028. Presumably, that means the fundraising is not going well lately. Indeed, TPP website shows that after 11 years it remains \$50 million short of its original goal even with the UPMC-promised \$100 million having been received. Where are the corporate and foundation benefactors that need to step up and guarantee the program will last in perpetuity? And what does the Pittsburgh school administration think about this massive cut in scholarship funds after years of prominently advertising the \$40,000 figure on its website? It cannot be happy.

What does this mean financially? Over the last 10 years the cost of tuition and room and board at public colleges on average has gone up 30 percent. Thus, the promised \$10,000 per year 10 years ago would have been worth only \$7,600 today in 2008 dollars. And with the cut to \$5,000 per year, the value of the expected scholarship in 2008 dollars would have been only \$3,800 today. One can only conjecture how many parents who were staying in order to

get a \$40,000 payoff and who now are looking at a real payoff of only \$14,000 or so would have made the same decision.

Then, too, if there is no guarantee the money for scholarships will be there after 2028, parents of children just starting school who might be contemplating staying in the city to take advantage of the \$5,000 per year stipend, which will almost certainly have considerably less purchasing power in 10 years, will have another reason not to stay. And given the wretched academic performance at the non-magnet schools, parents who care about education will be even more inclined to leave.

And that poor performance represents another broken promise that has been made by Pittsburgh Public Schools for years. It has promised excellent education with every five-year plan and it is always posted prominently on the website—in the latest plan, “Expect Great Things”.

It is useful to focus on the high schoolers and those close to graduation since they will be leaving soon to work or go on to higher education. How prepared are they after 12 or 13 years in Pittsburgh’s schools? In short, except for Allderdice, CAPA, Obama and the Science and Technology Academy (the last three listed are magnet schools), the quality of educational outcomes in Pittsburgh’s high schools leaves a lot to be desired.

Case in point, based on 2017 SAT scores, of 712 PA schools ranked—some of which are quite small in terms of test takers—the highest ranked Pittsburgh high school was Allderdice at 166th with an average combined math and language score of 1,101. CAPA was 204th at 1,090, 17 points higher than the commonwealth average of 1,073. The Science and Technology Academy with a score of 1,058 ranked 350th and Obama (1,038) ranked 422nd. Of course these are averages for the schools. No doubt there are some students with higher scores as well as some with lower.

Meanwhile, Milliones (798) ranked 666th, Perry (844) stood at 644th, Westinghouse (851) rated 639th, Brashear (911) ranked 596th, Carrick (978) ranked 543rd. To be fair, these schools are not alone; Philadelphia-area schools account for many of the very worst SAT results. But the problem is that Pittsburgh schools overall are nowhere near the level of performance of several Allegheny County schools such as Upper St. Clair, North Allegheny, South Fayette, Pine-Richland or Mt. Lebanon, all of which have significantly lower current expenditures per-pupil than the city schools.

What’s worse, no Pittsburgh school had an SAT score as high as Windber (Somerset County) high school’s (1,133) where the average per student spending is \$7,000 lower than Pittsburgh’s outlays per student. The same is true for Peters Township high school in Washington County with its SAT score of 1,192, well above any Pittsburgh school and with per student spending \$8,000 below Pittsburgh.

Then, too, the achievement level of far too many Pittsburgh 11th graders bodes poorly for getting a Promise scholarship—if they graduate. And even if they were to somehow manage to qualify for one, they simply are not academically ready to get into college or succeed if they were to be admitted. Using the basic math exam results from the 2017 Keystone Exams that are taken by 11th graders in Pennsylvania, it is clear that Pittsburgh students as a whole did not do well. Indeed, they lag well behind the state averages for the percentage of students

scoring at the advanced level and have much higher percentage of students scoring at the basic and below basic level. Basic is the level below proficient. Proficient is the targeted minimum score in evaluating whether education has been adequately successful.

There is an apparent and expected relation between Keystone math results and SAT scores. Schools with high percentages of students scoring at the advanced level and low percentages of students scoring basic or lower have the best SAT results. Conversely, low advanced and high below basic numbers are closely correlated with low SAT scores.

Thus, in Pittsburgh it is the case that the same schools with highest SAT scores (Allderdice and CAPA) also have the best Keystone math scores. Of the 1,300 11th graders who took the exam in 2017, 162 (12.5 percent) scored at the advanced level. Note, however, that 97 of those 162 students attend Allderdice (57) and CAPA (40), 60 percent of the total although the two schools account for only 35 percent (452) of the test takers. Meanwhile, the other schools with a combined total of 848 test takers produced only 65 advanced scores. Thus, Allderdice and CAPA had a combined 21.5 percent of students in the advanced group while the other schools had an advanced percentage of only 7.7 percent.

Sadly, the 1,300 test takers in Pittsburgh had 625 (48 percent) scoring basic or below on the math exam. By comparison, the state average was 33 percent. Pittsburgh's much higher percentage was led by Westinghouse (85.9 percent), Perry (73 percent), Millions (70 percent), Brashear (67.5 percent) and to a lesser degree by Carrick at 50.6 percent. Allderdice, CAPA, and the Science and Technology Academy had much better performances and kept the 48 percent overall figure from being much worse.

Again, all these poor results must be viewed in the context of how other schools that spend far less money see much better academic achievement. To highlight this in starkest terms consider Windber's 11th graders who had 37.9 percent scoring advanced, 44.5 percent proficient, 11.5 percent basic and, 5.7 percent below basic. And Windber spends \$7,000 per student less than Pittsburgh. No Pittsburgh school, not even the Science and Tech Academy, could match the nearly 38 percent advanced scores posted by Windber.

There is no happy face to put on these results especially compared to the Pennsylvania averages and Windber, a district that spends less than the state average per pupil.

Broken promises indeed.

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