



ALLEGHENY INSTITUTE

FOR PUBLIC POLICY

July 11, 2018

Policy Brief: Volume 18, Number 26

Allegheny County School Districts: Performance and Cost Comparisons

Summary: Allegheny County's 43 school districts run the gamut from having some of the state's top rankings in terms of academic achievement to having some of the lowest rankings. This *Policy Brief* identifies the best and the worst performers and compares the cost per pupil for each group. The findings show once again that arguments about inequitable and inadequate funding are largely a diversionary tactic to avoid discussing real solutions to address grossly deficient academic achievement.

There are 500 school districts in Pennsylvania. But counting charter schools and occupation training centers reporting adequate test score data, the count of rankable LEAs (local education agencies) was 593 in the 2016-2017 school year. A few of the state's traditionally designated public school districts failed to provide adequate timely data to be ranked for the 2016-2017 school year by the "School Digger" ranking service.

This analysis looks at the 43 regular school districts in Allegheny County in terms of scholastic achievement ranking and the per pupil cost as reported by the Pennsylvania Department of Education. The ranking of charter schools in the county will be the subject of a future analysis.

Allegheny County's 43 school district achievement rankings range from the very top to the very bottom of the 593 ranked LEAs. Two districts (Duquesne, 586th and Wilkinsburg, 563rd) were in the bottom 5 percent. Nine districts were in the lowest 20 percent with seven more in addition to Duquesne and Wilkinsburg: Clairton (555th) McKeesport (534th), Penn Hills (522nd), Pittsburgh (477th), Cornell (480th), Highlands (478th) and Steel Valley (474th). Note that Sto-Rox, West Mifflin, Woodland Hills, Shaler and East Allegheny were not ranked among the 593 LEAs because of insufficient data. However, based on its high school ranking, Sto-Rox would likely be in the lowest 20 percent of districts as well. Eighteen districts including three of those that were not-ranked but had poor high school rankings were in the bottom 50 percent of schools. That means 24 districts are in the top 50 percent. There is no ranking information available for East Allegheny although the test scores that are available suggest it would be near the 50 percent cut off.

At the other end of the performance the county is in very good shape in terms of districts ranking very high. Two districts were in the top one percent, South Fayette (3rd) and Mt. Lebanon (4th). Mt. Lebanon's Markham K-5 was the number one ranked elementary school, Jefferson Middle was the 3rd-ranked middle school and the high school was ranked 7th. With the addition of five more districts to Mt. Lebanon and South Fayette there were a total of seven in the top five percent. These five include: Pine Richland (6th), Upper St. Clair (8th), Fox Chapel (12th)

Hampton (14th) and North Allegheny (17th). Bear in mind that in the top five percent the averaged total scores are very closely bunched together.

Just as impressive, 17 Allegheny County districts are in the top 20 percent of the 593 ranked LEAs in Pennsylvania. The 17 districts include, in addition to the seven districts in the highest five percent, Moon (37th), West Jefferson (45th), North Hills (46th) and Quaker Valley (51st)—putting these four in the top 10 percent—plus Avonworth (62nd), Montour (66th), Bethel Park (70th), Plum Boro (76th), West Allegheny (80th) and Riverview (112th).

Thus, 16 percent of Allegheny County districts are in the state's top 5 percent and 40 percent of the 43 districts are in top 20 percent—meaning the county is extremely well represented in the share of districts performing at high levels academically.

At the same time, 5 percent of the county districts in the bottom five percent and 21 percent of its districts were in the bottom 20 percent. Thus, for the lowest ranking districts, the percentage in the county matches closely the shares of ranked LEAs.

The 17 school districts falling between the top 20 percent rank and the bottom 20 percent rank had rankings covering a very wide range from the highest of 128th at Chartiers Valley to the lowest at Steel Valley's with its 452nd ranking.

In light of all the concern expressed in some quarters about inequitable school funding, the question is: How much do the best and lowest Allegheny County ranked districts spend per pupil? Financial data, including spending and the ADM are available from the Department of Education. ADM is the average daily membership. This number includes charter school students from the district for whom the district is financially responsible.

The two top ranked Allegheny County districts, South Fayette and Mt. Lebanon, had per ADM current (not including capital outlays) spending in the 2016-2017 school year of \$13,511 and \$14,977, respectively. The state average for that year was \$16,447. Of the others Pine Richland's spending per pupil was \$14,916, Upper St. Clair spent \$16,148, Hampton spent \$14,970, North Allegheny spent \$15,950 with Fox Chapel the highest spender in the top five percent group at \$21,737. The average spending for the seven best scoring districts is just \$16,068—lower than the state average even with Fox Chapel's very high outlier figure. Excluding Fox Chapel the other districts averaged \$15,123, well below the state average and the two highest rank districts spent an average of only \$14,244.

Meanwhile, the other 10 districts, in addition to the seven in the top five percent, had average student spending of \$16,690. Riverview was highest at \$20,343 and West Jefferson lowest at \$14,089. These 10 districts had higher average spending than the seven districts in the top 5 percent of ranked LEAs and slightly above the state average per ADM expenditures.

On the other hand, the story for the districts with worst academic performance in the county is quite different. Spending for the two districts in the bottom five percent was \$19,982 at Duquesne and \$25,016 for Wilkesburg.

Continuing with the other seven that ranked in the bottom 20 percent: Clairton spent \$16,722, McKeesport ranked spent \$13,602, Penn Hills spent \$17,280, Cornell spent \$19,876, Highlands spent \$15,689, Pittsburgh spent \$22,282 and Steel Valley spent \$18,107. The seven districts ranked in the bottom 20 percent of LEAs spent an average of \$18,728, with two districts over

\$20,000 and two more over \$19,000. Only McKeesport and Highlands were below state average spending.

It should be clear by this point that the very worst-performing districts are not being shortchanged for resources. And it is also clear that all but one of the seven very best performing and top-ranked districts spent less than the state average and far less than the average for the weakest performing and lowest ranked districts.

It is time for some honesty from those who continually claim in most vociferous terms that school funding is unfair and that more money is needed. The problems with poor quality education among school districts in Allegheny County are not caused by a lack of funding. People worried about poor performing schools should look for other causes. That is if they are truly concerned about educational achievement and not just diverting attention away from the utter failures to correct massive problems that have nothing to do with school funding.

Jake Haulk, Ph.D., President

*Policy Briefs may be reprinted as long as proper attribution is given.
For more information about this and other topics, please visit our website:*

www.alleghenyinstitute.org

<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>
