



625 words

## Pittsburgh's education dog won't hunt

By Colin McNickle

“Woeful.” “Shocking.” “A scathing indictment.” “Pathetic.”

Those are four ways the president-emeritus of the Allegheny Institute for Public Policy describes the academic non-performance of many Pittsburgh Public School (PPS) students, as measured by the latest Pennsylvania System of School Assessment (PSSA) test results.

“It is a disaster for far too many students,” says Jake Haulk, also a senior advisor at the Pittsburgh think tank (*in Policy Brief Vol. 19, No. 3*). “(F)or the majority of schools the achievement levels are woeful.”

The single best measure of how schools are doing is their students' academic achievement. In Pennsylvania, that measure is the PSSA test. To illustrate his point about Pittsburgh's schools, Haulk concentrated on 8<sup>th</sup> grade PSSA math results.

In 2018, 1,389 8<sup>th</sup> graders took the PSSA exam. A mere 6 percent scored at the advanced level while only 14 percent scored at the proficient level. And even though 8<sup>th</sup> grade scores are weak statewide, PPS' results are 11 points lower than the statewide 31 percent rate of proficiency.

Fifteen Pittsburgh schools had combined totals of fewer than 20 percent of students reaching combined advanced and proficient levels. Eleven schools had below 10 percent of their students reaching advanced and proficient levels in 8<sup>th</sup>-grade math.

“Shockingly, four schools (King, Sunnyside, Pittsburgh Oliver and Milliones) had no students at the proficient or advanced levels,” Haulk says. “Two more schools (Langley and Morrow) had only one at the proficient level and no advanced.”

Furthermore, 10 PPS schools had five or fewer 8<sup>th</sup> graders score advanced or proficient in math. Those schools combined had 380 students take the test. But only 14 scored advanced or proficient; only three tested at the advanced level.

“These results are a scathing indictment of Pittsburgh schools,” Haulk reminds.

Another way to look at the scores is to combine the basic and below basic scores.

Basic means some grasp but not enough to be considered proficient in the subject at that grade level. Students scoring at this level will find the next grade subject matter very difficult. Students scoring below basic have totally inadequate mastery of the material and can look forward to a very difficult time in the next grade – since they will not be held back.

Likely never catching up, these students are destined to fall further and further behind, which necessitates much of teachers' time being spent on remedial education.

“This pathetic performance by such a large percentage of Pittsburgh’s 8<sup>th</sup> graders is not the result of inadequate spending,” Haulk reminds, noting Pittsburgh Public Schools, in 2016-17 (the latest statistics available), spent \$22,282 per student, far and above the statewide average of \$16,500.

“For a stark comparison, consider Peters Township in Washington County where current expenditures per student were \$13,193,” Haulk says. “The 324 8<sup>th</sup> graders (there) had 41 percent scoring at the advanced level and 41 percent at the proficient level for a total of 82 percent.”

Those scoring at the basic and below basic level were 13 and 4.9 percent, respectively. Not a single school in Pittsburgh – even the best magnet schools – came close to matching Peters’ achievement. “And all for \$9,000 less per student,” the Ph.D. economist notes.

Pittsburgh Public Schools “is stuck, and has been stuck, in a politically driven management and education mentality that is not only failing students but constantly finding excuses for why (administrators and teachers) should not be blamed,” Haulk says.

“They claim more money, more programs and more decades of experimentation will get the job done. But, as old timers used to say, ‘That dog won’t hunt.’”

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