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Pittsburgh schools not ready for prime time

By Colin McNickle

The academic performance of too many Pittsburgh Public Schools (PPS) students remains abysmal. And that should prompt the state to create a voucher program allowing parents in any failing school district to send their children to private or parochial schools, says the president-emeritus of the Allegheny Institute for Public Policy.

“The public schools as a whole are in woeful shape with far too many children not receiving the education necessary to be successful in today’s, or tomorrow’s, economy,” says Jake Haulk, also a senior advisor at the Pittsburgh think tank (in *Policy Brief Vol. 19, No. 40*).

“There is little hope of solving the city’s pressing social problems unless or until there is substantial improvement in the public schools’ performance,” he says.

Haulk’s entreaty follows a review of just-released PSSA assessment test statistics for the 2018-2019 school year.

“The news is not good,” he says bluntly.

To wit, results for third grade reading achievement, regarded by some educators as a key to future academic performance, show half the students are not ready for the fourth grade. In the 35 PPS schools with third-grade enrollment, 48 percent scored below the proficient level at the “basic” or “below-basic” level in English language arts (reading and writing).

In 16 of those schools, more than 50 percent were at basic or below; in 10 of those schools, 70 percent of the third graders were at basic or below. Math scores were even worse.

And the results were even more pathetic for Pittsburgh Public Schools' eighth graders last school term. Of the 22 schools with eighth-grade students (excluding Oliver and Online Academy), 56 percent of those taking the PSSA test scored at basic or below in English Language arts.

Seven schools had 70 percent or more in the basic or below group with three at 80 percent or higher. Math results for PPS eighth graders were even more appalling. Of the 1,362 PSSA test-takers, 80 percent scored basic or below, with 53 percent below basic. In 10 of the schools, 90 percent or more fell in the basic or below category.

Many in the educratic establishment are wont to wail that such poor results (and many more not detailed herein) are the result of a lack of adequate taxpayer funding.

But, "Consider Peters Township School District, which spends \$8,000 per student *less* than Pittsburgh and yet has 95 percent of 11th graders advanced or proficient in math with over 50 percent advanced," says Haulk.

"And consider the Windber School District in Somerset County where spending is \$10,000 below Pittsburgh and a high percentage of kids from poor families and yet it has 76 percent scoring advanced or proficient."

But one of Pittsburgh Public Schools' primary problems remains its extraordinarily high levels of absenteeism, "a virtually perfect indicator of all the social and attitude problems that afflict education and learning," Haulk reminds.

"A school system that tolerates such woeful attendance problems will be incapable of achieving better academic results," he says.

Given Pittsburgh Public Schools' chronic malaise, Haulk says Pittsburgh Mayor Bill Peduto should make dramatic improvement in school performance a top priority.

Granted, the school district is a creature of the state and has its own governing powers and funding sources and can claim independence from the mayor. Nonetheless, there are steps that should be taken.

First, "(Peduto) can go to the governor and Legislature and ask that the state create a voucher program that will allow any and all parents who want to remove their students from failing district schools the ability and funding to enroll them in private and parochial schools of their choice," Haulk says.

Given the district already has "magnet schools" for limited numbers of students, choice for all would make sense. "The cost per student of those using vouchers would almost certainly drop precipitously compared to the \$24,000 the district spends," he says.

Second, “(Peduto) can use his bully pulpit to call attention to the enormous negative impacts the poorly performing district has on the city’s ability to attract and keep people with school-age children,” Haulk notes. “And it could lead to lower a tax burden for property owners and resident paying the school earned-income tax.”

Of course, this would be multiple fields of tough rows to hoe, especially with the continuing oversized political clout of teachers’ unions, always pushing back against real and necessary change.

“That is a major reason nothing ever gets done other than throwing money at the problem,” Haulk says.

“Year after year, graduation after graduation, a huge percentage of students are going into the world with totally inadequate reading, writing and arithmetic skills thinking they are prepared,” he laments.

“This charade is a sham and immoral.”

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