



535 words

Allegheny Co.'s law of diminishing educational returns

By Colin McNickle

If graduation criteria for Pennsylvania high school students set to begin with the class of 2022 were in effect today, a large percentage of students in a diverse group of 16 Allegheny County school districts would not meet the basic requirements, concludes an analysis by the Allegheny Institute for Public Policy.

(Pittsburgh's public schools were not included in this study.)

Though oft delayed, demonstrating proficiency on the Algebra I, Biology and Literature Keystone exams goes into effect for 2022 graduates.

That said, however, revised legislation also provides four alternative pathways for satisfying the requirement -- the use of a composite Keystone score; earning a passing grade in an exam-related course; satisfactory completion of substitute assessments; internship, apprenticeship or work experience or college acceptance.

Nonetheless, recent exam results point to three very important conclusions, say Hannah Bowser, a research assistant at the Pittsburgh think tank, and Jake Haulk, the president-emeritus there (in *Policy Brief Vol. 20, No. 24*).

“One, there is a very wide disparity in academic achievement among the 16 school districts on the Keystone exams,” they say.

“Two, the trend in scoring on Algebra I and Literature since 2015 shows academic performance is generally weakening rather than improving.

“Three, for many of these 16 high schools, the latest Keystone exam results would disqualify large percentages of students from graduating without access to alternative pathways.”

And there's another important consideration in this equation – per pupil spending, as measured by “average daily membership (ADM),” the latter being another word for attendance.

Of the 16 districts analyzed, 11 experienced overall declines in ADM from the 2014-15 academic year to 2018-19. On the other hand, 15 of the 16 districts expanded current expenditures per ADM in the same time frame.

“In short, spending per ADM continues to rise despite disappointing to dismal Keystone exam scores at many schools that have, in fact, worsened in math and literature since 2015,” say Bowser and Haulk.

That is, taxpayers are spending more for worse results.

“Given the spending levels and all the programs designed to improve learning, it is apparent that the ongoing poor or declining performance at many schools is the result of far more fundamental issues than the education experts are able or willing to understand or overcome,” add the researchers.

Allegheny Institute research long has shown a very clear correlation between attendance and academic performance, they remind.

“(B)ut there seems to be no real concerted effort to fix the problem,” Bowser and Haulk say.

Indeed, numerous factors contribute to one's success in learning. “But gaps in education are not going to be eliminated by simply throwing more money at the problem,” they say.

“Pennsylvania must adopt school choice measures that allow parents of children who are forced to attend failing schools to put their children in schools with proven track records of success,” Bowser and Haulk stress.

“Until that happens, there is no real pressure on school districts to push harder to improve student outcomes as long as the funding keeps coming.”

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