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Chimera of ‘progress’ at PPS’ weakest-performing schools.

Just-departed Pittsburgh Public Schools (PPS) Superintendent Anthony Hamlet promised “good things” when he was hired as head of the outlandishly expensive and academically struggling city school district in 2016.

You might recall the prose from the 2017-2022 strategic plan in which problems such as a falling graduation rate and declining enrollment, though recognized, were metaphorically waved off because of “coming new strategies.”

Or you might remember this past September’s statement from the district’s website: “The Pittsburgh Public Schools will be one of America’s premier school districts, student-focused, well-managed and innovative.”

Would that it were.

An analysis of test scores by the Allegheny Institute for Public Policy shows achievement at the district’s weakest-performing schools showed little or no improvement during Hamlet’s troubled and truncated tenure. Hamlet resigned effective Oct. 1 in an ethics scandal in the first year of a new contract.

“With only two exceptions there was no meaningful improvement in test scores for students in any school or any grades,” says Jake Haulk, president-emeritus of the Pittsburgh think tank (in *Policy Brief Vol. 21, No. 37*).

The analysis examined the change in test score performance at the four weakest performing high schools (11th graders at Brashear, Milliones, Perry and Westinghouse), the six weakest performing middle schools (8th graders at Langley; M.L. King; Mifflin; Milliones; Academy at Westinghouse and South Hills) and five elementary schools (5th graders at M.L. King; Arlington; Faison; Langley and Miller).

There was overlap in the schools because some schools have both 5th and 8th grades; one has all three grades.

Only Perry High, Martin Luther King 8th grade and Langley 5th grade saw a modest gain in “advanced” and “proficient” performance. That said, those improvements still left a very high percentage of test takers at the “basic” and “below basic” proficiency levels.

All data were taken from the Pennsylvania Department of Education

“Because 2020 and 2021 state achievement test results—the Pennsylvania System of School Assessment (PSSA) – are not available at this time, we only have three years of test scores with which to evaluate fairly the superintendent’s impact,” Haulk notes.

It could be argued that two more years would have been necessary to make a fair assessment. But since the lives of students are enormously affected by the education, or a lack thereof, they are getting every year, “it is justified to see if all the hype about all the changes and programs that were put in place had an impact from 2016 test scores to 2019 scores,” he says.

Clearly, they did not.

Additionally, Haulk slays the shibboleth that PPS’ weakest-performing schools were somehow plagued with inadequate finances.

In the 2016-17 school year there were 23,286 enrolled students and the average daily membership (ADM) was 26,583. ADM includes all students in the district for which PPS is financially responsible.

Current expenditure per ADM was \$22,282 that school year. By the 2019-20 school year, ADM had fallen 3 percent to 25,744 and per ADM current expenditure had climbed 13.8 percent to \$25,354.

“By comparison, Peters Township had the sixth-highest academically rated high school and middle school in Pennsylvania with per ADM expenditures of \$14,814 in the 2019-20 school year,” Haulk says.

Based on the Haulk analysis of Pittsburgh Public Schools’ weakest-performing schools, “progress” clearly is a chimera, the product of “coming new strategies” that clearly remain a mirage.

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