



ALLEGHENY INSTITUTE

FOR PUBLIC POLICY

January 11, 2023

Allegheny Institute Op-Ed

750 words

How to effect real change in Pa.'s failing high schools

Remedying the gross disparities in academic performance among Pennsylvania's 634 public high schools is not a matter of throwing more money at the problem but one of returning foundational precepts to the educational process, concludes a new analysis by the Allegheny Institute for Public Policy.

"What is needed is commitment to achieving high-quality results from school boards that put superintendents, principals and teachers in place to do what is necessary," says Jake Haulk, president-emeritus of the Pittsburgh think tank.

"And that's achieved through discipline in the classroom, attendance requirements and enforcement and teacher quality measured by results, not degrees and years of teaching," he says (in *Policy Brief Vol. 23, No. 2*).

Pennsylvania high schools were ranked academically by [SchoolDigger](#), based on average standard 2021-22 test scores reported by the Pennsylvania Department of Education. The highest ranked school in the state was Seneca High in Erie with a score of 97.2. The lowest ranked was The Workshop School in Philadelphia with a score of 1.2, a range spread of 96 points.

Using district averages for the schools, Seneca High's current expenditures per student were \$17,373 while The Workshop School spending was \$17,158 per student.

"Interestingly, the very best and the very worst performers had nearly the same spending levels," found Haulk, a Ph.D. economist.

But other high academically performing schools spent far less per pupil than some of the worse performing schools, Haulk reminds.

To wit, students at Windber High School in Somerset County scored 75.9 percent advanced or proficient, despite spending only \$13,476 per student in school year 2020-21.

That's about half of the amount spent per student in Pittsburgh and \$8,000 less than the average spent by the 11 very poorly performing Allegheny County schools and \$4,000 under the state average. Windber's test score puts it in the top 30 percent of the 634 schools.

Even more impressive is Loyalsock High School in Lycoming County. With expenditures per student of just \$13,593—half the Pittsburgh Public Schools spending and \$4,000 (21 percent) below the state

average of \$17,358—the high school posted an average score of 89.3, which ranked 31st highest of 634 schools.

“It is an amazing payoff per dollar spent compared to the 11 poorly performing Allegheny County schools,” Haulk says.

All the poorly ranked schools have wholly inadequate scores for the money being spent, the think tank scholar notes.

“Indeed, many of these schools are perennially among the lowest achieving schools in the county. This represents a massive failure of the state as well as local school officials,” Haulk says.

But the presence of so many strong performers in the county should be a strong impetus to do better. Long running, seemingly intractable failures to improve these schools should have long since led to personnel and policy changes led by the state’s governors and Legislatures.

“Very few graduates of these horrendously performing schools are likely to go to college and, if they do, they will need massive remedial education,” Haulk reminds. “Even technical schools require basic reading and math skills. What kind of job can one expect to get with so little math or language skills?”

“These failing high schools are exhausting enormous amounts of resources to no avail,” Haulk says. “It is so bad that this question must be asked by school officials: Why are we asking taxpayers to waste such enormous sums of money and effectively mislead young people that they are being educated?”

The Allegheny Institute’s bottom line:

“All this will require legislation in Harrisburg that puts punitive measures in place for districts or schools that do not meet minimum standards of accomplishment,” Haulk says. “Indeed, the state should have the power to place superintendents in failing districts that show no progress. School boards in failing districts have already shown they cannot fix the problems.”

Additionally, Haulk says real change will require pulling some power back from the all-powerful teachers unions.

“**There can be no** more strikes on penalty of huge fines,” he says. Superintendents have to be given authority to dismiss poor teachers and administrators. And it’s past time to quit kowtowing to disruptive students,” Haulk stresses.

“The need is now. The years of talk and promises and enormous waste of money must end.”

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