High costs, poor results: The troubling PPS story

By Colin McNickle

Despite per student annual expenditures of nearly $30,000 that rank among the state’s highest, Pittsburgh Public Schools (PPS) continued to be a major disappointment when it came to academic achievement in 2022, concludes a new analysis by the Allegheny Institute for Public Policy.

“Clearly, money is not the answer,” says Jake Haulk, president emeritus of the Pittsburgh think tank. “And it might well be counterproductive in that it prevents administrators and school boards from making hard decisions about the problems in classrooms that are detrimental to learning.

“But the bottom line is that taxpayer dollars are being horribly ill-used,” the Ph.D. economist says (in Policy Brief Vol. 23, No. 21).

So, let’s break this down a bit. Pennsylvania has 1,534 schools with k-5 students including traditional as well as special schools including charters. PPS has 34 traditional schools with k-5 students.

Of those only Colfax (234th) and Montessori (275th) ranked in the top 20 percent of Pennsylvania elementary schools academically. Only two other schools with k-5 students, Greenfield (443rd) and Allegheny (743rd) joined Colfax and Montessori in the top 50 percent of all Pennsylvania’s elementary schools.

The 34 schools had an average proficient or advanced combined math and English score on PSSA exams of 29 percent.

“Of the 30 schools in the bottom half of all the state’s elementary schools, 18 PPS schools ranked in the lowest 25 percent while nine fell in the lowest 6 percent of all schools,” Haulk notes.

Yet, “Those nine schools’ expenditure per student averaged over $29,000 in 2021-2022 with an average score of advanced or proficient of only 6.4 percent. The lowest school score was 4.4 percent proficient or advanced,” he adds.

But five Allegheny County elementary schools outside PPS ranked in the top 10 of the state’s 1,534 k-5 schools. Even more impressive, three of those schools were in the state’s top five.

“The five top Allegheny County schools had an average proficient or advanced score of 95.8,” Haulk says. “The three in the top five had 96.3 percent of students score at the advanced or proficient level.
“The average cost per student at the five high performing schools was $17,245—almost $12,000 lower than elementary schools in PPS,” he stresses.

And the results were no more flattering -- some were embarrassingly worse -- for PPS’ middle and high schools.

Pittsburgh Public Schools PPS ranked 454th among the 599 Pennsylvania traditional school districts along with the other non-traditional education groupings in 2022, the last year for which data are available.

PPS’ average current expenditure per student in 2021-2022 was $28,071. State average spending for all 599 traditional and non-traditional entities was $18,383, ranging from low of $13,022 to $32,614. The preponderance of districts spent between $16,000 and $19,000.

“There were seven other school districts with spending between $27,500 and $32,600,” Haulk notes. Of these, Wilkinsburg, whose high schoolers were sent to Pittsburgh’s Academy at Westinghouse, was not ranked on academic achievement because of inadequate data.

Of the other six, only two ranked in the top 10 school districts in Pennsylvania as measured by academic performance. The Farrell Area District in Mercer County at $28,500 per student was the lowest ranked of the six ranked districts at 519.

“On the other hand, there were 28 districts with spending under $15,000 per student, about half of PPS’ expenditures, that ranked higher academically than the Pittsburgh district,” Haulk says.

Six of these ranked in the top 100 districts with 12 in the top 200. Norwin in Westmoreland County at $13,739 per student was the 24th highest ranked district in the state.

“This data show conclusively that spending $20,000 or more per year per student on public education is not necessary to achieve good academic achievement,” the think tank scholar adds. “Indeed, it might be argued that huge sums of dollars are simply being wasted in many schools while lower spending at many schools is paying significant dividends.”

Which leads Haulk to this critical question:

“Why can’t governors and legislators try to get a handle on what is working and what is not and move to fix the Pennsylvania education system?

“The kind of gap in funding and spending [that exists in Pennsylvania], along with the clear evidence that massive spending is not necessary to achieve good results, is an indictment of state governance,” Haulk concludes.

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