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Pittsburgh Public Schools: exorbitantly expensive, educationally deficient

Overview: In 2022, the latest year of scholastic data availability, Pittsburgh Public Schools (PPS) continued to be a major disappointment in terms of academic achievement. And this despite per student expenditures close to \$30,000 that rank among the state's highest, including the very wealthy suburban Philadelphia school districts. This *Policy Brief* reviews scholastic achievement as measured by combined average scores on PSSA math and English exams for elementary, middle and high schools with comparisons to other Allegheny County schools and relatively poor, low-spending districts across the state.

Grades k through 5

This group includes students at traditional kindergarten through 5th grade as well as k-5 students attending schools with kindergarten through 8th grade but have achievement test scores reported separately for grades 3, 4 and 5. In sum, the test results, with rare exceptions, are very poor.

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. 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. 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.

Average cost per student for the 34 schools in 2021 (latest year available from Department of Education) was \$29,804. The average proficient or advanced score for English and math for the 34 schools was 29 percent. For the 30 in the bottom half of schools the combined PSSA score for math and English was 22 percent advanced or proficient. The lowest 10 schools' scores fell in the range of 4.4 to 10.2 percent advanced or proficient.

At the other end of the test result range, 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 5. The five top Allegheny County schools had an average

proficient or advanced score of 95.8 percent. 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.

Clearly, money is not the answer. 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.

Middle Schools: 6th through 8th grade

Pennsylvania has 883 schools, including charters, with students in grades 6 to 8 or middle school. PPS has 24 traditional schools—including the Online Academy. Of these, two were in the top 10 percent of the 883 schools, three were in the top 20 percent and a total of six PPS schools ranked in the top half of all 6-8 schools in the state. Thus, 18 of the 24 ranked in the bottom 50 percent of schools. The average rank of the 24 schools was 583 while the 18 schools in the bottom half of all schools had an average rank of 708. The worst five schools averaged a ranking of 833.

All 24 schools averaged 33 percent advanced or proficient for math and English combined. The 18 schools ranked in the bottom half of all middle schools averaged 19 percent scoring proficient or advanced. And the bottom five ranked schools averaged only 7.5 percent proficient or advanced. The lowest ranked Pittsburgh middle school ranked 878th of the state's 883 schools. That school had zero scoring proficient or advanced in math in 6th, 7th and 8th grades.

Lack of funding cannot be used as an excuse for this overall inexcusably poor level of achievement. The per student expenditures for the 24 middle schools was \$28,300 and slightly higher for the 18 schools ranked in the bottom half of Pennsylvania's middle schools.

By way of comparison, the state's top ten middle schools, including 3rd-highest-ranked Fort Couch Middle in the Upper St. Clair School District, averaged a combined math and English proficient or advanced score of 98 percent with an average per student expenditure of \$17,335 in 2021-2022. In total, 11 Allegheny County middle schools were in the top 50 in the state, placing them in the top 6 percent of the 883 middle schools in Pennsylvania.

High Schools: grade 11

PPS has nine schools with 11th grade students who are required to take the Keystone tests, including the Algebra 1 exam. One school did not have enough of its class take the math test and therefore was not ranked. Of the eight schools with reported exam results, CAPA (a magnet school) led the way with a state ranking of 26th placing it in the top 5 percent of 634 schools. CAPA's combined average score of advanced or proficient was 89.7 percent. One other school was in the top 20 percent and a total of only three made it into the top 50 percent while the other six were in the bottom half of the 634 schools. There were three schools in the bottom 10 percent with an average of only 5 percent scoring at the proficient or advanced level. The school not rated would likely have been in the bottom 5 percent of the state's high schools based on the extraordinarily poor record of its 8th grade math scores.

Average per student expenditure for the eight ranked schools was \$27,541. Note that seven high schools in Allegheny County (outside Pittsburgh) were ranked in the top 30 in the state placing them in the top 5 percent of the 634. The average Keystone score for these seven schools was 91

percent. Importantly, 2021-2022 expenditure per student averaged \$18,796 for six of the schools. Cost data were not available for one of these high-ranking schools.

District comparisons

PPS ranked 454th among the 599 Pennsylvania traditional school districts along with the other non-traditional education groupings. 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. However, 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. 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.

Conclusion

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. 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.

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 examined here, along with the clear evidence that massive spending is not necessary to achieve good results, is an indictment of state governance.

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