School revenue and performance in nine Pa. districts

Background: Several previous *Policy Briefs* have illustrated the fallacy that extraordinarily high levels of per student revenue and spending are correlated with high levels of student academic achievement. In most Pennsylvania districts very high levels of revenue per ADM ($30,000 or higher from local, state and federal sources) are associated with poor or relatively poor academic achievement. In a few exceptions, districts with over $30,000 per student revenue that post relatively strong achievement raise the bulk of their funding—over $20,000 from local sources— are wealthier districts with large tax bases.

Introduction

This *Brief* examines revenue and academic performance in the Pittsburgh Public Schools (Pittsburgh) with three other Allegheny County districts and five other districts across the state. Allegheny County districts include Bethel Park, North Allegheny and Mt. Lebanon. Other districts include Windber, Somerset County; Seneca Valley, Butler County; Abington, Montgomery County; Mid Valley, Lackawanna County and Wilkes-Barre, Luzerne County.

Comparisons of districts are based on average daily membership (ADM) student count. Bear in mind that ADM includes all students the district is financially responsible for and takes into account charter school students. For example, Pittsburgh's ADM in 2021-22 was 24,136 while enrollment in the district's schools was 20,112. In contrast, Mt. Lebanon had an ADM of 5,455 and enrollment of 5,402. Thus, Pittsburgh's charter student count was equal to 16.7 percent of its ADM. Meanwhile, Mt Lebanon's charter count was slightly less than one percent of both enrollment and ADM.

Revenue per ADM

The average total revenue per ADM for the group of nine districts in school year 2021-22 (latest officially available data) was $20,687, ranging from $15,733 in Windber to $31,803 in Pittsburgh—more than double Windber's per ADM revenue. Meanwhile, the statewide average total revenue per ADM was $21,263, 2.7 percent above the group of nine average.

Among the nine districts state funding averaged $6,588 per ADM, ranging from a low of $4,462 in North Allegheny to $12,325 in Pittsburgh. Local revenue per ADM averaged $12,823 ranging from $4,114 in Windber to $16,656 in Pittsburgh. Within the group, federal

revenue per ADM ranged from a low of $284 in North Allegheny to $2,807 in Pittsburgh. Next highest in the group was Wilkes-Barre at $2,405. The statewide average of all districts stood at $1,657. It is noteworthy that many districts across the state—that are not in this group—received well over $3,000 per ADM in federal revenue.

In sum, for this group of nine school districts, Pittsburgh ranks first in terms of revenue per ADM, from local, state and federal sources. Interestingly, while Pittsburgh ranks highest in local revenue per student its local tax burden, as measured by revenue per district resident is far lower than Mt. Lebanon, for example. Using 2020 populations and 2021-22 spending, Pittsburgh collected local revenue of $1,313 per resident while in Mt. Lebanon the local revenue collected per resident was almost double that figure at $2,544. And while Pittsburgh raised far less per resident, the district nonetheless collected $1,822 more per ADM than Mt. Lebanon. This is the result of the very low ratio of students to population in Pittsburgh, one per 12.7 residents, compared to Mt. Lebanon's ratio on one to 5.9 residents.

The second highest revenue per ADM district was Bethel Park at $23,029, or $8,773 less than Pittsburgh. North Allegheny was third highest at $21,534 or $10,628 under Pittsburgh. As mentioned earlier Windber had by far the lowest revenue at $15,733 per ADM, just under half of Pittsburgh's revenue per ADM.

Academic performance

So, what are taxpayers getting in the way of academic performance for their money? The poorest performing district in this sample was Wilkes-Barre where only 35.5 percent of 3rd through 8th graders scored at the advanced or proficient level on the PSSA English test and only 27 percent scored advanced or proficient on the math test. Moreover, only 14.3 percent of 11th graders scored advanced or proficient on the Keystone biology test. The Algebra test is now optional on the Keystone exams and many students do not take it, so comparisons of district performances would be problematic.

Bear in mind that Wilkes-Barre has considerably fewer dollars per student to spend ($17,768) than the state average of $21,263 as well as most of the study group districts with only Mid Valley ($16,680) and Windber ($15,733) having lower revenue.

In the group of nine districts, Pittsburgh had the second-lowest academic performance among 3rd through 8th graders. On the English PSSA test, 41.9 percent of students scored advanced or proficient but only 25.6 percent were advanced or proficient on math. Meanwhile, a meager 28.8 percent managed to reach advanced or proficient on the Keystone biology test. And this totally inadequate performance cost taxpayers $31,803 per ADM.

Windber was by far the lowest revenue per ADM district in the study group with $16,069 fewer dollars than Pittsburgh and $5,530 less than the state average. It ranks among the lowest revenue districts in the state although there are several districts with revenue even lower in the $14,000-to-$15,000-per-ADM range. Notwithstanding the comparatively low level of funding, especially relative to Pittsburgh, Windber had a relatively good performance with 65.2 percent of 3rd through 8th graders scoring advanced or proficient on the PSSA English exam and 50.9 percent advanced or proficient on the math test. Then too, 57.3 percent of 11th graders reached advanced or proficient on the Keystone biology test. Taken together these scores were far better than Pittsburgh for half the money.

Finally, note that North Allegheny ($21,534) and Mt. Lebanon ($20,141) posted far better scores on all the tests than the other study districts with revenue per ADM very close to the state average. North Allegheny 3rd to 8th graders posted scores of 84.7 percent and 73.4 percent advanced or proficient, respectively, on English and math tests while recording a score of 78.1 percent advanced or proficient on the Keystone biology test. Mt. Lebanon 3rd to 8th grade students scored 83.2 percent advanced or proficient on the PSSA English test and 71.6 percent in math. Meanwhile, the 11th graders reached 84.6 percent advanced or proficient on the Keystone biology exam.

The other districts, Bethel Park, Abington and Seneca Valley had scores generally above the Windber performance but considerably lower than the North Allegheny and Mt. Lebanon scores. However, Mid Valley elementary results fell between Pittsburgh and Windber.

Conclusion

 Several earlier *Policy Briefs* over the last 10 years (*Vol.14, No.58, Vol.18., No.46, Vol.19, No.3, Vol.21, No.37, and Vol.23, No.21*) have pointed to the high-spending, weak-academic performance in Pittsburgh schools that has yet to see meaningful improvement. Other than a few magnet schools where performance is respectable or good, most other Pittsburgh schools have academic achievement levels that are truly embarrassing compared to districts that spend far less per student.

This *Policy Brief* confirms this finding once again. The only district in the group of nine with a worse record in the latest exam scores was Wilkes-Barre. But that district spends $14,000 per ADM less than Pittsburgh. In short, the Pittsburgh school district is overly expensive and poor academically.

Jake Haulk, Ph.D., President-emeritus