

### **Pittsburgh Promise Goes for Broke**

The Pittsburgh Promise program was launched to great fanfare in 2006 as the panacea for what ails City schools. It was claimed that by offering scholarships to virtually all graduates of City high schools, the program would stop the District's hemorrhaging enrollment, persuade people with children to stay in Pittsburgh and entice people to move to the City and improve student achievement.

On every objective, the Promise has been a total flop. Enrollment continues to fall, population in key age groups continues to slide and PSSA scores took a sharp dive in this year's testing and it is very likely that scores from previous years were over stated. The Allegheny Institute predicted all of this failure when the program was announced on the basis of common sense analysis that was roundly derided by the in-the-know crowd who seem to believe all problems can be solved by tossing more money at them.

So, what does the program's brain trust decide they need to do now? If you said—as most thinking people would—they should help figure out what needs to be done to raise the City schools' abominable academic performance, you would be wrong. If you said they should need to figure out why their efforts to keep Pittsburghers from leaving and their efforts to get regional residents to move into the City have had no success, you would be wrong again.

Amazingly, the Promise management has opted for the fall back solution so prevalent among the cognoscenti—those who believe more money can solve all problems—and that is to cast a wider net. Remember the Regional Renaissance Initiative? Levy an add-on sales tax in 11 counties to pay for new stadiums and other projects to be directed from Pittsburgh. It was sent down in flames by the voters. One might recall the *Power of 32* project that seeks to create various policy agendas over 32 counties in four states. Where are the grand policy prescriptions covering 32 counties or even a large percentage of the 32 counties? The solution, according to those whose money throwing efforts don't work, is that more area needs to be brought into the mix. No amount of failure on either score is enough to disabuse people of their flawed thinking.

The Promise Director's version of the Regional Renaissance Initiative is to recruit Hispanics to the City by casting the recruitment net over the region lying within a 300 mile radius of Pittsburgh. The enticement? The \$40,000 scholarship that will be available to any Hispanic student who graduates from a City high school is predicted to be a powerful draw. According to the Director, Pittsburgh has jobs for those who come, cost of living is low and there is a decent housing stock.

Let's think about this. First of all, which Hispanic families would move 300 miles to take advantage of the Promise scholarship? And, what other enticements in the form of guaranteed employment, moving cost expenses, etc. will be required? Families with very young children are unlikely to move in order to take advantage of a program that they will not benefit from for twelve years or longer. Families with 8<sup>th</sup> or 9<sup>th</sup> graders would be the most likely to come since they will only have four years to wait for the scholarships—assuming their children get through and graduate.

Second, where are all the jobs? The City's unemployment rate is 8.2 percent. Low wage, menial, entry level jobs are probably available if the parents meet the legal migration criteria and maybe a few in other categories, especially health related. Hispanic medical professionals might be tempted if they have children in the age group that can benefit in four years, or there are other monetary enticements. Who will cover other monetary inducements?

Third, with a sizable increase in Hispanic students, will school costs rise? The school district might have to hire more dual language teachers and offer English as a Second Language programs. Answering these questions in advance of launching the recruitment would be prudent.

Fourth, why is a recruitment of Hispanics program necessary? If all the enticements the Director claims Pittsburgh has are not working to bring in Hispanics now, it would be great to first ascertain some reasonable explanations of why Hispanics are not already flocking to Pittsburgh to take advantage of all Pittsburgh offers.

Fifth, it looks like desperation time has arrived at the Promise Program—or will it soon be called the Promesa Programa? One would assume that some of the big donors to the Promise are getting a little nervous about the inability to fulfill any of the promised objectives. And that nervousness has management brainstorming to find any reasonable sounding solutions. However, the Promise appears to need a lot of rethinking.

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