

POLICY BRIEF

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Things Are Not Great in Pittsburgh Promise Land

In late December the Pittsburgh Promise Program secured a corporate grant from BNY Mellon. The \$500,000 gift is the Program's second largest corporate donation, trailing only UPMC's pledge of \$100 million. While corporations are certainly allowed to donate money as they see fit, we question whether they are doing a lot of good with the Pittsburgh Promise contribution—especially when compared to other worthy education grant opportunities.

They should be asking tough questions. Has the promise of college scholarship money led to academic improvement among students moving through the Pittsburgh public high schools? And has the Promise resulted in an increase in the number of juniors and seniors enrolled in Pittsburgh's public schools eager to take advantage of the program?

The Pittsburgh Promise was announced in December 2006 and made its first scholarships available to the class of 2008. The criteria to receive Promise funds are that the student: (1) attends one of the school district's high schools since at least the ninth grade, (2) has an attendance record of at least 90 percent and (3) maintains a 2.5 grade point average. Accomplish these modest goals and the student is eligible for up to \$5,000 per year for four years to apply toward the college expenses at any number of Pennsylvania public and private institutions of higher learning. This of course means the student will have to be accepted into either a two or four year program. Many Pennsylvania colleges and universities require the student take the SAT exam.

Academic Performance Slips

In 2005, the beginning of Superintendent Roosevelt's tenure, the average SAT score for all high schools was 900 (combined math and reading score), lower than the national score of 1028. For 2009 the combined score had dropped to 879—the national score was 1016. Surely, the creators of the Promise Program had assumed the guarantee of scholarship money would cause SAT scores to rise. But a look across the ten high schools shows that since 2005, eight high schools have seen their total SAT scores fall—only Westinghouse and CAPA (Creative and Performing Arts) posted increases.

Some of the schools' combined test score declines were rather substantial, including Allderdice, Langley and Oliver. In a further disappointment, nine of ten schools lost ground on the verbal portion with only CAPA registering a gain. Even more distressing is that six of the schools actually had lower scores in 2008-09 than in 2001-02—simply amazing considering the extraordinary level of expenditures per student in the City. Consider too, that only four of the district's ten high schools posted average combined SAT scores greater than 900 with Allderdice

the highest at 1039, just above the national average, while three schools were below 800 and one was just above 800.

One would have expected the opportunity to qualify for scholarship money to spur a jump in the percentage of students taking the SAT test. However, the number of students taking the college entrance exam fell from nearly 1,100 in 2005 to just over 900 in 2009. This decline of 17 percent closely approximates the 16 percent decline in the District's total number of eleventh and twelfth graders. The SAT participation rate has not changed much District wide—25.9 percent (test takers divided by number of junior and seniors enrolled) took the exam in 2005 while 25.6 percent did so in 2009. Stunningly, four of the City's ten high schools have posted declines in their SAT participation rates since 2005.

Here's another question. Has the guarantee of a college subsidy had any measureable effect on PSSA (Pennsylvania System of School Assessment) scores for eleventh graders? After all, if college has been made more affordable by the Pittsburgh Promise, students who have been underperforming should have an extra incentive to perform better academically. Since 2005 the percentage of eleventh grade students scoring proficient or higher in reading has increased in only four of the ten Pittsburgh high schools. Moreover, only four schools in 2009 had more than fifty percent (and two of those just barely above 50 percent) of their eleventh graders score proficient or higher in reading—not an encouraging figure. Surprisingly, Allderdice, long a top performer in the City, recorded significantly large drops in the percentage of students scoring proficient or better on both reading and math.

From 2005 to 2009, just two of the District's high schools experienced a decline in the percentage of students scoring proficient or better on the math section of the PSSA test. While this may seem to be welcome news, it must be pointed out that only two schools have 50 percent or more of their eleventh graders scoring proficient or better in math. Meanwhile, three schools have only 20 percent or lower showing proficiency or better in math. A fourth is only at 34 percent with the remaining schools in the 40 to 50 percent range. And while Westinghouse math scoring improved, a still scandalously low 13 percent of students managed to reach proficient or higher.

Bear in mind these are the students who will be graduating in a year and either embarking on post-secondary education or entering the workforce. The academic showing at most of the high schools does not bode well for students' success in either pursuit.

This analysis raises another important question. Are we seeing some unintended consequences of the Promise Program? Has the guarantee of college money from the District removed some of the incentive to work hard to earn scholarships through normal merit based selection sources? After all, the main qualifications for the Promise Program are a 2.5 grade point average and a 90 percent attendance record. A 2.5 grade point average is hardly a bar set high. It is not unreasonable to argue that students who are safely above the minimal qualifying criteria but not expecting to apply to the top tier schools could well slack off a bit. It would have been far better to insist on hitting the national average SAT score for example. And even that could have negative unintended consequences for students who could reach an 1150 score with a little extra effort.

Enrollment Still Falling

Presumably, the goals of the Promise program are two-fold: to reverse the long-term trend of falling enrollment in Pittsburgh Public Schools and to improve the academic performance of its students. By all accounts, the early returns are not encouraging.

First, school enrollment has continued its decades' long downward slide. Since the Promise Program was unveiled in 2006, the District's overall student count has fallen from just under 30,000 to just above 26,000 with the eleventh and twelfth grade enrollment down by 500. And these are the students closest to benefitting from the Promise's largess incentive. The obvious question has to be: Why would a parent move in to the City in order to put, say, a third grade student in the Pittsburgh public schools so as to qualify for a scholarship nine years later—and by so doing force the child to endure a subpar educational experience for nine years compared to most suburban districts? Most parents recognize the need for education to take place throughout their school years if a child is to become ready for college or a decent career path.

And secondly, academic performance shows no sign of significant overall improvement and has actually slipped at several schools. Indeed, SAT scores at most of the District's high schools are lower now than they were in 2005 and for the majority of schools, the test scores were pathetically low.

Challenge to Promise Donors

For the third year, we issue our challenge to the Promise funders and the Pittsburgh school district. Create a scholarship fund that will provide \$10,000 per year for any student whose parents would like to choose a non-public K-12 school for their child's education. That's half what the City schools spend on average. Students using the scholarship funds would give up any claim to the Promise college scholarships. The level of interest in such a program would give the community a fair assessment of what parents really want to see in the way of education reform. What's to lose? It cannot be any worse than what exists now and we will likely see significant education gains for a change.

Why not give this a try? If UPMC, BNYMellon, and the foundation community who are so willing to pour millions into the Promise program really care about education of kids as opposed to just playing at being "good" corporate citizens, accepting our challenge should be a no brainer.

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