

# ***POLICY BRIEF***

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## **GreatSchools Ranking of Schools Flawed and Misleading**

*GreatSchools*, a San Francisco non-profit organization, recently ranked cities according to school performance and city affordability. According to *GreatSchools* the rankings were done to assist parents who might be looking for a new city for their kids' education. Among cities with more than 300,000 people Pittsburgh ranked seventh. As usual, a more in-depth look at the city school rankings shows Pittsburgh's high ranking reflects deep flaws in the *GreatSchools* methodology.

First of all, the rankings are misleading because they are purportedly about the city schools but in fact include many suburban schools with much better academic results than the core city. Second, part of the ranking is based on housing prices and unemployment rates. And third, of the top ten cities in the large city category, four scored 7 of 10 on the *GreatSchools* school evaluation scale while six scored only 6 out of 10. In other words, the large city ranking is a selection of the best of not very good school systems.

And what's worse, in the case of Pittsburgh, inclusion of non-Pittsburgh Public Schools severely distorts the *GreatSchools* Pittsburgh evaluation which is put at 6 out of 10. Any school district with a "Pittsburgh" mailing address—21 of the 43 school districts in Allegheny County—was counted as a Pittsburgh school.

The academic rating scale used by *GreatSchools* is based primarily on state standardized test scores and for students in Pennsylvania that means the Pennsylvania System for School Assessment (PSSA). As we have noted many times in our *Policy Briefs*, Pittsburgh Public School students on average have performed relatively poorly on the PSSA and for some of the District's high schools the results are nothing short of disgraceful. Only one Pittsburgh Public high school scored a perfect 10—the Creative and Performing Arts High School. The next highest scoring high school is Allderdice (5). Three District high schools scored a one (Oliver, Peabody, and Westinghouse) while two more managed a score of 2 (Langley and Perry). Overall, including elementary and middle schools, the Pittsburgh Public School District scored a seriously inadequate 4 out of 10.

The suburban school districts ranked much higher. Three suburban high schools scored a perfect ten (Fox Chapel, Mt. Lebanon, and Upper St. Clair) and North Hills came in with a nine. The lowest score was a 3 (Penn Hills and Woodland Hills). The study provided the overall scores for three suburban districts: North Allegheny (10), Mt. Lebanon (10) and North Hills (8).

The final educational score given to Pittsburgh (including all suburban districts that use the Pittsburgh mailing address) is 6 out of 10. Not exactly a strong score worthy of a national ranking and remember that Pittsburgh City schools had a *GreatSchools* an education score of only 4 out of 10. And this is supposed to induce people with school-aged children to move to the City?

Obviously, Pittsburgh's seventh best ranking depends heavily on other factors. The median home price in Pittsburgh, according to the study, is just under \$80,000. This is the lowest price for any city in ranked in the top ten. Only three others had median prices under \$200,000 (Colorado Springs (\$192,320), Mesa, AZ (\$174,810) and Tampa (\$151,340)). Clearly the low median home price helped Pittsburgh in the rankings of affordability. The other factors that went well for Pittsburgh included cost of living (88 percent of the national average) and the unemployment rate (7 percent vs. the national rate of 10 percent—numbers used by *GreatSchools*. Note here that the City of Pittsburgh's unemployment rate reached nearly 9 percent in the first quarter of 2010).

Purportedly, the city school rankings scheme is to provide families who might be contemplating a move to find good education for their children. Clearly, the premise of the study is a bit odd. How many families contemplate a move to another city, possibly across country, to look for educational opportunities for their children? People make long distance moves for many reasons, but merely to find better schools is not likely to rank high on that list. They would look first at other residential and school options within the area where they currently reside, including private and charter schools and possibly home schooling.

Families are far more likely to move for employment opportunities for a parent or parents or to be closer to relatives. Once a decision is made to move to a new city then the decision about where to live will be, for some families, heavily dependent on school quality. To be sure, a city or region with uniformly bad schools could cause parents to turn down job offers. Having good schools is a plus for a city trying to attract families but it is unlikely to be more important than having an abundance of high quality jobs available.

In sum, like so many other city rankings we have seen recently from organizations seeking press attention, the *GreatSchools* rankings are short on substance and usefulness and long on fluff.

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**Jake Haulk, Ph.D., President**

**Frank Gamrat, Ph.D., Sr. Research Assoc.**

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<p>Allegheny Institute for Public Policy 305 Mt. Lebanon Blvd.* Suite 208* Pittsburgh PA 15234 Phone (412) 440-0079 * Fax (412) 440-0085 E-mail: <a href="mailto:aipp@alleghenyinstitute.org">aipp@alleghenyinstitute.org</a></p>
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