

Time for the State to Terminate the Duquesne School District

Almost a decade ago, the Allegheny Institute reported on the dreadful SAT scores recorded by Duquesne High School students. In 2003, we noted that Duquesne's average combined 2001 SAT score—math and reading—was 693, one of the only schools in Pennsylvania showing a score below 700. And by the way, the dismal performance did not reflect a lack of resources. Duquesne schools in 2001 had operating expenses of over \$10,000 per student, among the very highest of any district in Allegheny County and well above strong academic performers such as the Mt. Lebanon and North Allegheny school districts.

The academic performance of Duquesne High School students was so bad the state devised a scheme to have secondary students transferred to other schools in the region (West Mifflin and East Allegheny) and closed the high school. Apparently, after three years the move has had little positive effect in light of the recent Pennsylvania academic assessment exam scores. Results for 2010-2011 testing show only 24 percent of 11th graders from Duquesne scoring at the proficient or higher level in math and just 25 percent in reading.

But the story gets worse. As reported on the Department of Education web site, only 25 percent of 8th graders scored proficient in reading, down from 36 percent in 2009-2010, while the math proficient level dropped from 23 to 20 percent. Thus, not only are the rising ninth graders who are entering high school woefully unprepared, they are less prepared than last year's group of ninth graders. More concerning still, the performance of the latest group of third graders points to serious problems in coming years. After posting a 48 percent proficient or better score in math in 2009-2010, the 3rd graders of 2010-2011 scored only 26 percent proficient. In reading, the percent proficient fell from 35 percent of 3rd graders in 2009-2010 to 20 percent this year.

And while the boost in last year's third grade test performance could lead to somewhat improved performance in the 5th and 6th grades over the next two years, the lack of sustainable progress in the eighth grade suggests academic readiness for high school will remain grossly inadequate. And as noted earlier, there appears to be minimal, or no, elevation of academic achievement by high schoolers from Duquesne even though they are attending high schools in other, presumably better districts.

Lest it be argued that Duquesne is poor and cannot afford the money needed for its schools, bear in mind that in the 2009-2010 school year, according to state data, the Duquesne district spent \$17,490 per student for operating costs and \$19,453 per student when finance outlays are included. The district had 810 total students with over 400 in the Duquesne elementary school. The remainder of the 810 are in high school or registered in charter schools. For the coming school year, the school board is budgeting roughly \$11 million for operating expense, of which almost 85 percent will come from state and Federal sources. Only \$1.6 million of the school district funds are derived from the local tax base.

Here's the problem. The state has already deemed the Duquesne High School incapable of providing adequate education for students. And based on the scores on PSSA tests by 8th graders and 3rd graders it is unfortunately the case that the elementary school is also failing to deliver satisfactory academic achievement. Given the years of struggling to improve, the thousands of students who have been shortchanged in their preparation for life after school and the tens of millions of dollars of state and Federal tax dollars that have been spent trying to make a difference, it is time to end the educational sham and try something different. If ever there was an opportunity for the state to intervene with a strong remedy this is it. Sadly, there are several similar situations around the state.

The state and local money could be divided into scholarships worth about \$10,000 per student per year. Parents would then be free to find a school where their children could learn and be guided to learn.

There is an old British sitcom called "Are You Being Served"? Applying this question to the situation in Duquesne is apt although there is nothing humorous about an expensive, failing school system. Public education has two critical customer groups that should be served—the students and the taxpayers who fund the schools. It is clear the Duquesne School District is serving neither constituency in a manner remotely approaching acceptable. One would hope the board, the administration and the staff would care enough about their obligation to the kids and taxpayers to support drastic remedial steps, including closing the school. However, if the past is any guide, the status quo, regardless of how dismal, will be maintained.

Jake Haulk, Ph.D., President

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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: aipp@alleghenyinstitute.org</p>
