

POLICY BRIEF

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Sooner or Later Pittsburgh's Real Problems Must Be Addressed

In a recent Commonwealth Foundation-Lincoln Institute poll of registered voters in Pittsburgh, there were a number of interesting findings beyond the mayoral race results--which correctly predicted the race was too close to call.

For quite some time the Allegheny Institute has argued that the keys to stopping the outflow of residents from the City are 1) cutting taxes, and 2) improving the quality of education in the City's schools. Creating a few new low paying stadium related jobs will not be enough to get people to stay in the City, never mind enticing new residents to move in -- especially younger couples with school age children. The latest school closing plan points out all too well the failure of will in the City to do something positive about implementing a true neighborhood school concept with accountability for meeting high standards.

The Commonwealth-Lincoln poll asked the pertinent questions. Fully 55 percent of Pittsburgh's registered voters who were polled said they believe the low level of educational achievement in the City's schools is causing people to move out of Pittsburgh. Only a third said the schools are not a cause of out-migration. In other words, over half of the City's voters believe the schools, as currently constituted and operated, are a negative influence on the City's future.

Responding to another question, 73 percent of City voters in the survey said high taxes are causing people to leave Pittsburgh. That's three-quarters of the voters saying taxes are a strong negative in Pittsburgh's future. Meanwhile, over half of respondents think the RAD tax should be repealed despite the fact that organizations in the City receive a disproportionately large share of the RAD funds. City resident disgruntlement over RAD is almost certainly a reflection of the view that taxpayers are being overburdened.

If Pittsburgh is ever going to get serious about stopping the loss of population, the answers given to these two important poll questions must be the focus of policy over the next few years. To solve its problems the City's elected officials will need to look with an open mind at solutions that have been used successfully in other communities. Business as usual will not suffice.

First of all, it is simply irresponsible to tolerate the level of educational quality the City's children receive at such a high monetary cost per child. It is unfair to the children who are afflicted with sub-standard education and unfair to the parents who find it necessary to choose an expensive alternative to public schooling for their children while also being taxed heavily to pay for an unsatisfactory system. Surely what the City now has is a prescription for driving out middle class

parents who care about their children's future. Defenders of the status quo must not be allowed to dictate the terms of debate or choke off public exploration of new ideas.

Bringing in new businesses and good paying jobs for the City's young people will remain extraordinarily difficult when their preparation for the workplace by the current educational system is so inadequate. If taxes are a deterrent to new residents moving in, the same is also true for businesses unless they are granted huge tax breaks or given subsidies. In either case the payoff for taxpayers is mostly non-existent.

Shiny new ballparks and heavily subsidized retailing serve only to gloss over the deep-seated and hard-to-resolve problems. Eventually, real problems must be addressed.

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