

POLICY BRIEF

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Bad Schools are Government's Failure to Keep Faith

Isn't government wonderful? It compels parents to ensure that children (ages 8 to 17 in Pennsylvania) are attending school. If the parents fail in this requirement they can be fined or jailed. The government also forces most income earners and virtually all real property owners to pay taxes to finance schools. At the same time, despite its obvious willingness to use its power, the state seems reluctant or unable to require that poorly performing schools improve. With rare, desperate exceptions (Philadelphia for example) the state has chosen not to interfere. Thus, over time schools with mediocre academic achievement slip first to poor and then to unconscionably bad performances.

The government's failure to insist on accountability is not only morally repugnant; it is a violation of the Pennsylvania constitution. Article III, section 14 of the state's constitution says, "The General Assembly shall provide for the maintenance and support of a thorough and efficient system of public education to serve the needs of the Commonwealth." That is a clear and unambiguous statement of purpose and obligation for the legislature. So how does it come to pass that Pennsylvania schools cost considerably more per student than the national average yet have significantly lower academic achievement? How is it that the Pittsburgh School District spends more than double the national average per pupil and still has high schools where only 15 percent (or less) of 11th grade students are able to demonstrate proficiency in math and reading?

The problems in Pittsburgh, Philadelphia and other school district did not develop over night. It has taken years of neglect, excuses and irresponsibility to get to this point. The argument that schools are under local control and the state is not responsible is neither a reasonable nor an adequate answer. Local control is a good concept, but with control must come accountability. School districts are creatures of the state that have been granted governmental powers including the ability to levy taxes. Creatures of the state with such enormous power must be held accountable by the state.

Unfortunately, the most vocal and powerful political force relating to this issue is made up of those who have the greatest interest in maintaining the status quo. Teacher unions, teacher colleges, and career education bureaucrats and their friends in the legislature have long and successfully fought efforts aimed at increasing school accountability.

It is important to remember the context of the powerful opposition to meaningful change. Compulsory school attendance is a very serious and heavy-handed use of governmental power. Indeed, it is arguable that compulsory school attendance violates our fundamental freedoms as citizens of the United States. Such an erosion of our freedom can only be warranted by producing an overwhelming and necessary public good. The putative justification for mandatory schooling is that uneducated, ignorant people do not become good, self-reliant citizens and that in the absence of compulsory education our Republic and our liberty would be in doubt. Whether that is a valid or reasonable justification will continue to be debatable. What is not debatable is that we have now reached the heights of irony with a very expensive compulsory education system that allows many of its school districts to graduate large numbers of functionally illiterate, innumerate students.

There is no way to sugar coat it. Failure of the legislature to hold schools accountable for academic performance is a dereliction of their duty to the students, taxpayers and the Pennsylvania constitution. No matter how well intentioned the defenders of failing public schools might be or how entrenched their power, the current situation is the antithesis of good government. It would be better to drop the compulsory requirement and provide financial support for those who wish to learn rather than to maintain the pretense that failing schools are not failing.

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