

# ***POLICY BRIEF***

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## **Undeserved Award for Pittsburgh Teachers' Union**

“The reason we’re giving an award to the Pittsburgh Federation of Teachers is because we’re afraid not to give an award to Al Fondy,” said Herb Magidson, a vice president of the American Federation of Teachers, presumably tongue-in-cheek. The real reason for the award, however, seems even less plausible. The award was presented to Mr. Fondy, president of the Pittsburgh Federation of Teachers, for embodying one of four goals the national union outlined in its Futures II report—“Strengthening the institutions where members work.” Recognizing the Pittsburgh union’s role in strengthening schools would be funny if the actual consequences of the union’s obstinate positions were not so bad for students.

With regard to the state of the Pittsburgh Public Schools, the standardized test results speak for themselves. The Pennsylvania System of School Assessment (PSSA) exams are given in reading and math in 5<sup>th</sup>, 8<sup>th</sup>, and 11<sup>th</sup> grades. For the six different tests—three grades and two subjects—an average of 63.9 percent of scores failed to reach the Proficient level, which is described as “satisfactory academic performance.”

For five of the six tests, more students scored at the lowest level-- Below Basic--than at any of the three higher levels. Below Basic is described by the PA Department of Education as, “Inadequate academic performance that indicates little understanding and minimal display of...skills.” The district’s mean composite SAT score in 2000 dropped to 904, 83 points below the state average, ranking Pittsburgh in the 6<sup>th</sup> percentile for school districts statewide. A Standard and Poors report, which was done at the behest of the state Department of Education, finds that “the Pittsburgh School District generates well below-average student results with spending that is among the highest in the state.”

Such performance is indefensible, but of course, that doesn’t prevent school district officials and union leaders from trying. They argue that standardized tests do not give a complete picture of the education provided by a school or the progress of an individual student. Maybe not, but the results do provide a clear indication that far too many students are simply not learning the material they should have mastered.

Defenders claim that too much effort is spent “teaching to the test” in order to get better scores. But isn’t that what virtually all instruction in the basics is aimed at achieving? If tests are well designed to ascertain whether students have mastered material such as multiplication and division, then preparing students for the tests makes perfect sense.

Indeed, the instructor's own tests should be at least as rigorous as the state's assessment exams.

The people with the most complete knowledge of the Pittsburgh schools and the greatest interest in its educational product are parents who reside in Pittsburgh and Mt. Oliver. Test results may not be the sole measure of the whole education of a student, but parents can judge whether a child is being properly educated. Parents are able to express their dissatisfaction with a school, either by sending their child to another school or by moving out of the district entirely. Such decisions are reflected in the district's enrollment numbers.

A review of enrollment figures for the Pittsburgh School District shows that from 1990 to 2000, enrollment declined about a half percent per year. However, from 1997 to 2000, the decline accelerated and enrollment fell sharply by 2.5 percent in 2001. For the past few years, the Pittsburgh School District has been losing students at a rate well above the pace of the City's population loss over that period. Whether this is because Pittsburgh families with school-aged children are sending their children to non-public schools or are moving away from the City in disproportionate numbers, the recent decline in enrollment suggests very strongly that the Pittsburgh School District is rapidly losing the confidence of parents.

More evidence of parental dissatisfaction is provided by Standard and Poors who found that an unusually high percentage of school age children in Pittsburgh do not attend the local public schools. For the 1999-2000 school year, S&P reports that only 80.3 percent of school-aged residents attended the Pittsburgh Public Schools. Compare this to a statewide average of 88.2 percent and an Allegheny County average of 92.3 percent (including Pittsburgh). Clearly, many parents have chosen to incur the cost of paying for alternative education even though they are being taxed heavily to fund public schools.

In light of the fact that quality of teaching is the single most important indicator of a student's academic achievement, there is little reason to believe that the Pittsburgh teacher's union deserves any commendation for helping to strengthen the schools as academic institutions. Indeed, there is far more evidence to the contrary.

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