

POLICY BRIEF

An electronic publication of
The Allegheny Institute for Public Policy

June 3, 2003

Volume 3, Number 25

A Malpractice Suit We Won't See

Continuing a long trend of bad news, the latest academic achievement scores for Pittsburgh students show another dismal performance. The recently released scores for 2002 were so bad that the Superintendent was moved to say: "We want the community to be outraged so they can provide support for the Pittsburgh Public Schools." The Superintendent is correct about one thing: Pittsburghers as well as Pennsylvania taxpayers who pay for this overpriced school system should be outraged. How long will they have to wait for meaningful improvement?

Pittsburgh's general operating budget amounts to over \$13,000 per pupil, with many more millions spent on capital projects and other categories. For years, Pittsburgh schools have layered on special program after special program at great expense with no measurable improvement in academic achievement. When 81 percent of African-American 11th graders fail to achieve proficiency in math and 78 percent of 5th graders fail to demonstrate proficiency in math and reading, we are bound to conclude that the school system is a colossally expensive failure.

It is not enough to say that if we had more parental involvement students would perform better. That is certainly true. But the fact remains that the school system is charged with educating the students who are compelled by law to attend. The District receives enormous amounts of state, local and federal taxpayer dollars to carry out its mandated function. If teachers and the administration cannot provide an adequate education, they ought to quit fighting the real reforms that at least have a chance of making a difference. There are many alternatives that have been shown to work in other parts of the country. But they all require that the teachers' union monopoly and the monopolized public school system release (or be forced to release) their stranglehold on education.

There is no doubt that kids leaving high school who cannot effectively read, write or understand basic math will find it extremely difficult to get good jobs or have a career that offers meaningful rewards, either financial or in having a sense of accomplishment. They deserve far better from those who have accepted the task of preparing them for life after their school days.

Contrast Pittsburgh Schools to the situation doctors face. If doctors fail to achieve near perfect results for patients 100 percent of the time they have to worry about being sued.

Yet a school district with 80 percent of its students not reaching minimal proficiency standards faces no such sanction. Indeed, in the case of Pittsburgh, more task forces will be appointed to find what new programs are needed and how much more money will be required to turn the situation around. Of course, all that has happened before and things have not improved. But a lot of money has been wasted. These task forces can't grasp the real problems so they keep repeating the mistakes of the past.

Or looked at another way, if the Pittsburgh Schools were a hospital, they would be closed down immediately and the doctors would all face malpractice suits. One can only wonder how the District manages to continue its abominable performance year after year and still get increasing allocations of tax dollars to chase will-o-the-wisp non-solutions. The once proud school system has now become a major obstacle in the City's efforts to attract and retain residents and businesses.

Unless, or until, there are serious sanctions imposed on those responsible for Pittsburgh schools' dismal performance, it will not get better. Hand wringing and excuses won't answer. It is far too late for that. Where are the Governor and legislature? The Pennsylvania Constitution requires the General Assembly to provide an "efficient and thorough" system of public system. Pittsburgh's system is obviously neither efficient nor thorough.

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