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Education Task Force Gets A “D-”

The Mayor’s task force on Pittsburgh’s schools has spent a lot of time, energy and money to produce a report that largely tells us what we have known for some time and offers recommendations devoid of imagination or containing any meaningful reform in the way education is delivered in Pittsburgh schools. The report gets little credit from us for recognizing things that are very obvious, such as the reality that good teachers, strong principals and classroom order are important.

The task force reports that Pittsburgh schools perform very poorly academically and are extremely expensive with an operating budget of nearly \$14,000 per pupil. The Allegheny Institute has been relentlessly making that point for many years. Again, there can be little credit for reporting the obvious. The facts have been widely known for some time. However, the school board and the teachers’ union would have us believe everything is fine and spend enormous amounts of energy trying to obfuscate the true picture.

When it comes to recommendations, the task force does get credit for calling for a tax reduction and for recognizing the inability of the fractious school board to address the real problems facing the district. But the recommendation to move to an appointed school board, while a seemingly bold suggestion, is really a temporizing step. It should be remembered that Pittsburgh went to an elected school board because of unhappiness with an appointed board. And, notwithstanding the report’s praise for the accomplishments of appointed boards, it is important to note that Cleveland, Detroit, Philadelphia and Harrisburg all have appointed boards. None of those districts would ever be held up as examples of schools that should be emulated.

The report claims that the state is only funding 36 percent of Pittsburgh’s education bill and that pressure should be brought to get that raised to 50 percent. However, the decline in the state’s share reflects the district’s failure to rein in expenses and is not due to any decline in the state’s allocation. The only reasonable way to increase the state’s percentage to 50 percent would be to slow the growth in total spending. And, for all of the task force rhetoric about the need to reduce costs, they advocate new educational programs such as full day kindergarten and early childhood programs that will only increase costs with no proven ability to produce lasting academic success.

However, the real failure of the task force is that there are many meaningful reforms that could have been recommended, but because of political correctness and fear of the teachers’ union, those recommendations never had a chance of making it into the final report. As it is, what we get is a lot of platitudinous statements about the need for accountability and excellence. The task force purposely stayed well away from recommending school choice as an option for empowering parents in their child’s education. Undoubtedly, the best way to empower parents whose children are trapped in the miserably performing Pittsburgh School system is to offer

parents the ability to choose where their children go to school—including charters and private schools.

If the task force membership had been broad enough to include some free market types and some people who are not afraid to challenge the oppressive conventional wisdom that pervades the City's political and civic leadership, there might have been at least a modicum of attention paid to some serious, innovative reforms that could make a real difference in the City's schools. Instead, we get admonitions to try to do better.

Here is a short list of recommendations that should have been in the task force report.

I. The school district will set up 10 new charter schools to be operated as “no excuses” schools wherein the principal is responsible and accountable for results and has authority to hire and fire all staff including teachers. The district would establish a scholarship fund of \$30 million to create 5,000 scholarships of \$6,000 each to be used at the charters or non-public schools in the City. If demand exceeds the available classroom seats, expand the program to accommodate the demand.

The school system should recognize the enormous power of competition to produce excellence. Clearly, the union will fight such a program with every resource at its disposal. However, on this there should be no compromise. Schools are for educating children and are paid for by taxpayers. They do not exist for the comfort of the teachers and administration. We have for too long put up with excuses and avoidance of responsibility.

II. Fire incompetent teachers and principals whose schools continually fall short of academic standards. The school board would refuse to sign any union contract that does not permit firing for incompetence or failure to perform.

III. Establish a compensation system that recognizes performance. The board would refuse to sign any contract that does not allow for pay levels that reflect success in the classroom or market demand and supply for the various disciplines. Again the teachers' union will fight fiercely, but it is absolutely essential that control over quality be in the hands of the school board whether it is appointed or elected.

IV. If after three years the school board has failed to implement the recommendations and achieve real progress, the state should assume responsibility for managing the district under the distressed schools provision and the “no child left behind” program. Ideally, the state would impose these recommendations to start the district toward real progress.

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