

POLICY BRIEF

An electronic publication of
The Allegheny Institute for Public Policy

March 18, 2004

Volume 4, Number 9

Another Lame Education Study Group

Two years ago the Pittsburgh Public Schools lost \$3 million in foundation money due to what those foundations viewed as excessive bickering on the part of the school board. Since that time, a Mayoral Commission on the schools was convened and issued a report; board members viewed as obstructionist were voted out of office; and the foundations decided to reinstate their contributions. Now comes word that another group called A+ Schools--comprised of foundation officers, elected officials, parents and taxpayers--will be formed to improve the district.

While we see no problem with an independent "watchdog" over the schools, their initial policy proclamations seem like more of the same education-speak that has caused the District to drift into its current sorry position. To wit, the new group will develop progress reports, assist with the District's decision to close schools, aid with professional development, support before- and after-school programs, and emphasize good governance.

Sounds like another typical Pittsburgh pseudo-reform effort.

How refreshing it would be for this group to take a critical look at the District's finances and push for substantial changes. To date no serious effort has been made to slow the growth of spending which has reached outrageous levels. Pittsburgh Schools' general fund spending is \$525 million this year, more than \$15,000 per student and a sharp increase over spending from just 4 years ago. Meanwhile, academic performance languishes and student enrollment continues to plummet, pushing per pupil spending ever higher since expenditures never stop rising.

Instead of taking that issue head on, the District--and now the independent group--will go forward with a plan for school realignment to achieve savings. The District currently has 93 schools with space for 50,149 students. With declining enrollment over the past few years, 2003-04 enrollment stands at just over 34,000. This means that there is excess capacity of over 15,000 spaces. In early March, the board and the superintendent announced that some schools would close, combine, or expand in order to better match the District's capacity with its enrollment now and in the future.

While it is a big decision, it is more symbolic than substantive. If all goes according to plan, the realignment is expected to save \$8 million annually. In a district that is spending \$525 million this year, that amounts to a savings of only 1.5 percent. Moreover, there is a very real possibility those savings could be washed out by next year's budget.

The planned staff reductions--included in the \$8 million figure--reduces the number of teachers by 41 (1.3% of the total number of teachers). The problem is that the District will be educating roughly the same number of students regardless of which building they are assigned to. Does this mean that class sizes will increase? More important, if the 41 teachers are leaving simply due to

retirement or attrition, it is inappropriate to include them as part of the cost savings the school closings will achieve. Additionally, there will probably be a significant rise in costs to transport students to school further from home. Finally, parental consternation over the closings will do nothing to enhance Pittsburgh's chances of slowing the decline in enrollment.

One of the changes that will not be on the A+ Schools' agenda is a switch from an elected to an appointed school board as recommended by the Mayor's Commission. At the group's press conference, the proposal to form an appointed board was pronounced "politically dead". Good decision, but merely recognizes the obvious.

If the Pittsburgh Public Schools are going to play a role in keeping and attracting residents to the City, they need to embrace truly bold reforms. These include an emphasis on competition and meaningful choice for the parents who care about the education of their children, performance pay for teachers, and attention to cost-cutting, performance improvement methods that are constantly beaten back by the teachers' union. Instead, the A+ Schools group will focus on before- and after-school programs. Why not evaluate vouchers that would allow parents to choose which schools their children attend? Other cities are doing it with very positive results.

In addition, the foundations in this group could fund a scholarship program that would allow children to attend schools organized on the "No Excuses" philosophy. This philosophy emphasizes discipline in the classroom, gives principals the latitude to hire and fire teachers, and stresses the fact that children will master the material taught. In a No Excuses school, each child is expected to learn and progress educationally. No excuses from students, teachers or principals are acceptable. Frequent testing to provide feedback is mandatory.

More of the "business as usual" approach to the Pittsburgh schools will make no real difference to parents, taxpayers, or the children who need to be educated. We have seen too many education-speak, politically correct, rock-no-boats approaches to have any confidence that this effort will result in any measurable improvement. In the meantime, folks can pat themselves on the back for their well-intentioned effort. Then in a couple of years, another group can be formed to waste more time.

Jake Haulk, Ph.D. President

Eric Montarti, Policy Analyst

Policy Briefs may be reprinted as long as proper attribution is given.

For more information about this and other topics, please visit our website:

www.alleghenyinstitute.org

| |
|---|
| <p>Allegheny Institute for Public Policy 305 Mt. Lebanon Blvd.* Suite 208* Pittsburgh PA 15234 Phone (412) 440-0079 * Fax (412) 440-0085 E-mail: aipp@alleghenyinstitute.org</p> |
|---|