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What's in a Name? Pittsburgh Schools Will Find Out

Consistent with what it views as a top-to-bottom change in the way it is doing business, the Pittsburgh Public Schools is going to change its name. Coming this year, the word Public will be gone from the title (the legal name is the Pittsburgh School District and will not be changed). All schools in the system will carry Pittsburgh in its name, and the motto will be “excellence for all”. At the very least, we can commend the schools for not going the direction of the long-winded regional marketing initiative or opting for “we will...educate” as its motto.

But why the change, we ask. The schools are obviously still public. Could it be Pittsburgh is jumping on a trend in the education establishment to take the public or civic character out of public schools? A recent *Manhattan Institute* study noted that it is more likely that newly built schools will be named after a natural feature or an animal than after a U.S. president or a founder of the Republic. In neighboring Ohio, for example, 13 percent of the schools built before 1947 carried the name of a U.S. president or founder, while in the last twenty years, 7 percent of newly constructed schools were adorned with a name from this group. There does not seem to be any overt assault on civic pride in the case of Pittsburgh's decision to drop the word “public”.

It could be that the schools caught the re-branding bug from the Convention and Visitors' Bureau, now VisitPittsburgh, but that too seems unlikely. The superintendent and people in the administration have referenced UPMC as an organization that has gone through such a process, so if the schools are copying anyone, it is the health organization.

Whatever the motivation, the renaming ultimately looks like a misguided attempt to varnish a poor product. The trends are clear, as we have pointed out on many occasions. Enrollment is down sharply and now stands under 30,000. The school budget is over \$525 million, meaning the per pupil outlays amount to an outrageous \$18,000. Notwithstanding this incredible level of expenditure, performance is mediocre to poor at many of the district's high schools.

This is not to say the current administration is doing nothing. While there have been audits and reviews and painful school closings, the name change amounts to more sizzle than steak. An administrator noted many suburban districts don't carry the public in their title. A board member opined that maybe some of the negative connotation with public schools could be eliminated.

That's just spurious reasoning on both counts. Parents with school age children know Pittsburgh schools are public just as they know the schools in Mt. Lebanon, Fox Chapel, and North Hills are public schools. They might also be getting increasingly aware that charter schools are public schools, too. Hoping that, by some stretch of the imagination, eliminating the word public from the moniker will end negative opinions of the district is simply fatuous.

The name change gambit reeks of desperation. Who is the school district trying to deceive: itself or the community? If being a “public school” is something the district is ashamed of, then the real solution is to support the creation of vouchers, private schools and charters as well as assisting home-schoolers while phasing out the traditional public school. If one is proud of one’s organization, changing the name is the last thing someone would do.

If the district is trying to delude the community into believing something substantive has been done though this name change, what does that reveal about their opinion of the public’s intelligence? It’s obviously not very good. But, we already knew that after years of listening to one vapid explanation after another of why it costs so much to do such a poor job educating students while resisting any meaningful change.

With so much buzzword driven, reality-avoiding behavior in Pittsburgh’s education establishment, how about some real changes that would show that the district is really serious about improving performance for all? Two steps could be taken to move the district in a far better direction.

- Implement a “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. Excuses from students, teachers, or principals are unacceptable. Frequent testing to provide constant feedback is essential.
- The District should also encourage the creation of a wide range of Charter Schools that could provide a variety of educational options for parents to choose from while at the same time creating healthy competition for the non-charter schools.

But those changes won’t happen in Pittsburgh given the outright opposition to accountability and competition from too many special interest groups. Sure, the district will acknowledge that they are retooling their mission and identity to compete with suburban districts, but will resist any attempt to create an education system that could actually compete with suburban schools.

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