

POLICY BRIEF

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State Support for Education and School District Performance

One of the most frequently repeated distortions about education is that the Commonwealth is inadequately funding poor and underachieving districts while better off districts are receiving unfair state subsidies. For some reason, people are allowed to go unchallenged when they make the claim. However, the assertion is not true and needs to be put to rest.

One relatively simple way to demonstrate the falsity of the notion that the state is inadequately funding the seriously underachieving districts is to compare what actually occurs at the state's ten worst academically performing districts with what happens at the Commonwealth's ten best performing districts.

The ten best performing districts were selected on the basis of the percentage of students scoring at proficient or higher on the state's PSSA tests for the school year 2005-2006. The ten worst schools were selected on the basis of the percentage of students scoring below basic. To score below basic reflects inadequate performance and indicates little understanding and minimal display of skills included in the Pennsylvania Academic Content Standards. Unfortunately, the below basic category can include scores indicating a complete lack of understanding.

Pennsylvania's ten best districts have around 90 percent of students scoring at the proficient or advanced level in both reading and math. This list includes Hampton, Mt. Lebanon, North Allegheny, South Fayette and Upper St. Clair from Allegheny County; Tredyffrin-Easton and Unionville-Chadds Ford in Chester County; Lower Moreland and Upper Dublin in Montgomery and Peters in Washington County.

The ten lowest ranking districts have over 30 percent of students scoring below basic. Two districts have more than 50 percent of students below basic with a third district over 40 percent. These districts, ranked by the very worst scores, are Chester-Upland (Delaware County), Harrisburg (Dauphin), Duquesne (Allegheny), Wilkesburg (Allegheny), Farrell (Mercer), York City (York), Philadelphia, William Penn (Delaware), Steelton-Highspire (Dauphin), and Clairton (Allegheny). Note that two other Allegheny County Districts, Sto-Rox and McKeesport, just missed making the worst performer list. And while the Pittsburgh District did not make the worst ten list, there are several schools within the Pittsburgh system performing poorly enough to rank among the state's worst.

What about the argument of underfunding at the poorly performing districts? The lowest performing ten districts had per student revenues averaging \$13,054 (unweighted by size of district) in the 2005-2006 school year. Meanwhile, average per student revenues at the ten top performing districts was \$12,866. Of the total funding for the poorly performing districts, the state provided \$7,037 per student to the poorly performing districts. Only the Wilksburg and William-Penn districts raised more funds locally than they received from the state. The ten lowest achieving districts on average provide only 36 percent of their revenue from local sources.

Meanwhile, the ten top achieving districts receive an average of only \$2,093 per student from the Commonwealth and raise the bulk of their funding locally with an average of 75 percent provided by district taxpayers.

Thus, the notion that the state is shortchanging the poorly performing districts is clearly wrong and the continued use of the argument is done to deliberately obfuscate the facts. A far greater proportionate share of state funding is going to the weakest achieving districts than goes to the better performing districts.

Finally, consider that in the 2005-2006 school year, the Harrisburg school district had \$15,126 per student in revenue and yet 54 percent of students scored below basic, that is, they demonstrate little understanding and minimal display of skills included in the Pennsylvania Academic Content Standards. In contrast, Peters Township schools with revenues of only \$9,744 per student still were able to achieve a top ten performing rank with over 90 percent scoring proficient or advanced. That is a revenue difference of over \$5,000 per pupil between these two school districts. The combined Federal and state contribution to Harrisburg totals \$9,500 per student.

How much more money would be required from the state to get Harrisburg schools up to the Peters level of performance? As long as the current failed monopoly school model is in place, it is highly unlikely that even a doubling of the present level of state dollars would get the job done. Just one more argument that meaningful publicly funded school choice ought to be a Commonwealth priority.

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