

# ***POLICY BRIEF***

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## **Pittsburgh Schools Still Not Making the Grade**

While waxing ecstatic last month about the Pittsburgh school district's improving achievement scores in the 2008-2009 school year, the Superintendent studiously avoided a thorough discussion of some troublesome results that should have been of great concern.

First, the percentage of third graders scoring at the advanced or proficient level fell in both math and reading. Generally speaking, because third graders are the earliest age group to be tested, they tend to have better scores. By and large, they are more malleable and teachable than older children. They are also less exposed to negative social influences that hurt or discourage learning. Thus, to have third graders slipping backward on test scores is never good, especially when the percentage of students at proficient or advanced levels already trails the less than sterling statewide average for 3<sup>rd</sup> graders by a substantial margin (15 percentage points in reading and 10 points in math).

The second and even more worrisome development was the big drop in the percentage of 11<sup>th</sup> graders scoring proficient or higher on the math exam. The number fell from 52.4 percent in 2007-2008 to 43.3 percent in the 2008-2009 school year. Moreover, the latest result is only marginally higher than the 2004-2005 percentage achieving proficiency status. And making matters worse, on the reading exam 11<sup>th</sup> graders had a slightly lower percentage scoring at the proficient level than four years earlier—50.7 percent compared to 51.1 percent in 2004-2005.

What's more, 11<sup>th</sup> graders in Pittsburgh compare unfavorably to statewide results in both math and reading. The 2008-2009 statewide percentages of 11<sup>th</sup> graders scoring proficient or better stood at 56 percent in math and 65.6 percent in reading putting the state as a whole 13 points higher in math and 15 points higher in reading. But it gets worse. Consider the scores in the North Allegheny district for 2007-2008 (2008-2009 data not yet released) compared to Pittsburgh's. North Allegheny's 11<sup>th</sup> grade had 90 percent of test takers score proficient or advanced in math compared to Pittsburgh's latest posting of just 43 percent. On the reading exam, 94.2 percent of North Allegheny 11<sup>th</sup> graders scored proficient or advanced in contrast to 50.7 percent in Pittsburgh. These gaps are nothing short of stunning, especially in light of the per student current operating expenditures in the two districts for the 2007-2008 school – just under \$18,000 in

Pittsburgh and just below \$12,000 in North Allegheny, making Pittsburgh expenditures \$6,000 per student or 50 percent higher.

A more meaningful comparison of the education taking place in the two districts can be obtained by contrasting the percentages of students who score at the advanced level as opposed to looking at the combined proficient and advanced percentage. On the reading exam, where 11<sup>th</sup> grade Pittsburgh students recorded virtually the same score in 2008-2009 as in 2007-2008, 24 percent of Pittsburgh 11<sup>th</sup> graders reached the advanced level in 2007-2008. At the same time, 70 percent of North Allegheny students scored at the advanced level—46 points above or almost triple the percentage in Pittsburgh.

For all grades tested, North Allegheny's advanced level average for reading was 61.9 percent compared to 21.4 percent in Pittsburgh. On the math exams, the average advanced level percentage for all grades in North Allegheny averaged 70.2 percent compared to Pittsburgh's 30.6 percent. In both cases, the disparity is 40 percentage points. Clearly, the districts are light years apart in educational achievement of their students.

There is another set of shocking achievement test findings that point to serious deficiencies in Pittsburgh's education of its children. In the 2007-2008 school year only 19.4 percent of Pittsburgh school district 11<sup>th</sup> graders scored at proficient or better on the science exam. And more appalling, only 5.6 percent of African-American students managed a proficient level score. Granted the science exam is the toughest PSSA exam the students take as indicated by the relatively low numbers attaining a proficient or advanced score across the state with 35.7 percent of 11<sup>th</sup> graders statewide scoring proficient or advanced. However, much better scoring is possible as demonstrated by 11<sup>th</sup> graders at Mt. Lebanon (71.8 percent) and Upper Saint Clair (72.2 percent) who scored twice as high as the statewide performance.

In sum, it is fair to say that after several years of spending nearly \$20,000 per pupil and launching new programs to assist high school students, the results for Pittsburgh's 11<sup>th</sup> graders are nothing short of pathetic. Last year's 11<sup>th</sup> graders —on average—are no better prepared to graduate and go into the work force or enroll in college than Pittsburgh's 11<sup>th</sup> graders five years ago. Certainly, the chances of pursuing science or engineering careers seem very bleak for the overwhelming majority of these students. What a disgrace and indictment of the school system, the City's residents and its elected officials for endlessly tolerating such an outrage. And what a masterstroke sleight of hand by the Superintendent to divert media and public attention away from this educational fiasco.

These latest results, when widely publicized and explained, will certainly not help the district convince parents to keep their kids in Pittsburgh's schools, especially its high schools. Undoubtedly, to prevent further abandonment of the City's schools, the bribe program called Pittsburgh Promise will have to be expanded in some manner to create more immediate benefits. Waiting to claim tuition benefits several years down the road might not be enough to hold people.

Perhaps some Federal program will provide grant money to create an expanded and immediate benefits scheme for students and parents who stay with the underperforming school system. After all, stopping enrollment decline and returning to growth appears to be the district's primary objective—that and expanding per pupil expenditures each year.

Another heretofore unmentioned concern is the possibility that the Promise Program, by essentially guaranteeing college scholarships for City School graduates, could actually be reducing the incentive for some students to work hard during their high school years. Knowing that they are eligible for college funding automatically upon graduation, means the need to achieve high scores to qualify for scholarships through normal channels is no longer an incentive to push themselves academically. Could the law of unintended consequences diminish the effectiveness of this program?

It seems little can or will be done until residents and businesses in the City demand a school choice program with publicly funded vouchers and scholarships. Otherwise ten more years will go by and the situation will be virtually the same if not worse.

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