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**Common Sense for Mayoral Candidates: Education Policy**

A good public school system can be, and often is, an important factor in the overall economic success of a city. At the same time, one thing is certain; bad school systems chase people with school age children away. If Pittsburgh is to reverse the decades' long trend of population loss, the City's poorly performing grotesquely expensive school district must stop being a deterrent to the City's prosperity. However, unlike other City issues, education does not fall under the Mayor's purview and there is little the Mayor can do directly to control or affect the schools since the District is a creature of the Commonwealth and has an elected Board to govern it. Nonetheless, the Mayor can use the "bully pulpit" powers of his office to lead the charge for changes that can redound positively to the education of Pittsburgh's children.

We have described and analyzed the Pittsburgh Public School District and its problems on numerous occasions. The District is plagued by rising expenses, poor performance, and declining enrollment. On a per pupil basis the District's general fund expenditures are currently above \$20,000 a year, among the very highest levels in the state. Philadelphia spends less than Pittsburgh at \$15,000 per pupil while the state average is just over \$13,400. Pittsburgh's per pupil expenditures are even further out of line when compared to other cities around the country such as Charlotte (\$9,000), Houston (\$8,000), and Omaha (\$9,000).

Latest scores on the state achievement test (PSSA) revealed that only 53 percent of 11<sup>th</sup> grade students scored at the proficient level on state reading levels and only 44 percent scored at grade level in math. At several of the District's high schools the fraction of 11<sup>th</sup> grade students reaching proficiency falls below 20 percent. With scores this low, very few families with school-aged children will consider moving into the City unless they can afford private school tuition.

In an attempt to combat the problem of declining enrollment and to raise the academic achievement of students, the current administration in 2006 unveiled the Pittsburgh Promise, a college scholarship program for graduates of Pittsburgh Public Schools. Again, as we have documented, the Promise has not lived up to expectations for stopping the decline in enrollment or boosting lackluster academic performance.

In a situation this dire with all the negative effects the schools are having on the City, it is incumbent on Pittsburgh's Mayor to offer a dramatic departure for improving education

opportunities for the City's children. And make no mistake, that should be the priority—not the teachers' union, not the school board and not the superintendent.

**Common Sense Recommendation for Mayoral Candidates**

**#3: Work to bring choice to Pittsburgh's education system.**

The mayor could push the Board to adopt the No Excuses approach to education and push for more charter schools. No Excuses programs emphasize decision making latitude for principals in personnel decisions and accountability for performance; a belief that all students can and will learn; and an academic program that is constantly evaluated and rigorously tested. This approach has been successful in other urban school districts around the country.

The mayor can also learn from the Milwaukee model and begin a program to provide scholarships for students to attend private or parochial schools of their choice such as the Extra Mile schools run by the Catholic Diocese and the Extra Mile Foundation. The Mayor should go to the business and foundation community and raise financial and moral support for such a program. The Mayor should also invite other education organizations such as Knowledge is Power to bring their highly successful programs to Pittsburgh. The introduction of meaningful competition could be the step needed to spur significant and positive changes to public education in Pittsburgh.

All the spending, all the programs, all the efforts of many years have been unable to turn the Pittsburgh schools around. And, there is little indication that a major turn for the better is waiting around the corner. Action is needed now. The Mayor can lead the charge to bring real change to education in Pittsburgh. The parents who truly want their kids to have a shot at a good education deserve better than the current system can offer. The moral and the wise thing to do is to break the stranglehold of the public education establishment and focus on true educational reforms by providing real choices.

After all, the primary obligation of the Mayor is to the welfare of the citizens of the City, including its children. Kowtowing to the powerful special interests that waste money and cheat kids out of a chance to learn must end. The taxpayers will be grateful as will thousands of parents who currently have no choice but to put up with the status quo or move out of the City.

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