High school graduation rates are rising. Standardized test scores are climbing, and the Pittsburgh school district met federal standards for adequate yearly progress in two of the past three years. After hemorrhaging more than a third of its enrollment over the previous two decades, the district seemed to stabilize, settling at around 25,000 students in September 2012.

Three cheers for urban public education?
The applause for the district’s demonstrable achievements has been faint at best, muffled by wailing over budget battles, standardized testing and equal opportunity. It also has been virtually ignored by the 85 percent of city households that don’t have a child in the system.

In fact, Pittsburgh’s not much different from most other American big-city school districts. And fights over schooling have been an American tradition since 1642, when the Massachusetts Bay colony made “proper” education compulsory. Since Pittsburgh opened its first public elementary school in 1834, the city has subscribed to the vision of educator Horace Mann, who proposed that all students are entitled to the same academic content.

Mann might not recognize his common school model today. The little red schoolhouse has been supersized to include services from school lunches to summer camps to immunizations, and the U.S. definition of a good education never stopped evolving. By 1918, states required children to complete elementary school. In 1954, desegregation opened the doors of white-only schools, leading to other civil rights victories. The No Child Left Behind Act signed in 2002 prompted communities to measure and improve school results. Seven years later, federal officials used the Race to the Top contest to spur education innovation and reform as states competed for additional funding. Over nearly two centuries, patient, consistent investment in universal education has made the United States a place where talent can rise. In the words of authors Claudia Goldin and Lawrence Katz, it became “the poor man’s best country.”

Economic opportunity may have been the force that drove immigrants to a new country and, indeed, to Pittsburgh itself. But once they arrived, public education was the force that helped them thrive. Schools introduced their children to American values and culture. They still do: Pittsburgh students today come from 57 nations and speak 46 languages. The public school system continues to be the great shared experience that unites communities, a bedrock that endures even as other affiliations like churches and military service dwindle.

“If you are interested in strengthening the region, the Pittsburgh Public Schools is a big part of [doing that],” says Jerry Longo, director of the Western Pennsylvania Forum for School Superintendents at the University of Pittsburgh. The Forum has convened discussions among superintendents and members of the Allegheny Conference on Community Development, a nonprofit leadership organization that promotes economic development in the region. “It’s easy to talk about science and math. But when you dig deeper, it’s more than that. It’s about developing good citizens.”

In their 2007 book, “The Race Between Education and Technology,” Goldin and Katz argue that that from the 1850s to the 1970s, public education—essentially, investment in human capital—improved this country’s economic might. It also made the United States the world’s strongest democracy, withstanding civil and world wars and major depressions in the 19th and 20th centuries. The authors point out, however, that progress has slowed. The number of students who graduate from U.S. high schools has peaked near 70 percent. In study after study, subject after subject, other nations’ academic results are ahead—though there is debate about how to interpret the numbers.

In their January report, “What Do International Tests Really Show About U.S. Student Performance?,” Richard Rothstein of the Economic Policy Institute and Martin Carnoy of EPI and Stanford University’s Graduate School of Education noted differences among countries in testing procedures. If one recent exam’s rankings had taken into account the larger number of students from low-income families that are tested in this country compared to other nations, they contended, the United States would be sixth in reading and 13th in math rather than 14th in reading and 25th in math as reported. Other experts dispute the EPI findings, though all sides believe that student performance in this country needs to improve.

And, some 90 percent of U.S. children still attend public schools. As the gulf between the American rich and poor grows greater, public education may be one of the few institutions able to offer common ground.
If schools are to bridge the gap, however, they must be strong enough to bear the weight. Taxpayer investment and demand for quality must be a shared priority. That means making the case for good schools to everyone—any individual who’s ever gone to school—as well as welcoming their contributions to the effort. Widespread advocacy may be the most important innovation in 21st-century education.

The Pennsylvania Interfaith Impact Network is working to build neighborhood coalitions that encourage all residents to support city schools. Last year, the group identified a goal of educational equity, including eight specific services that every child and school should have access to—a 21st-century effort that Horace Mann would have championed. Cities like Memphis have galvanized a business consensus on the importance of effective teaching.

And students in Philadelphia, San Jose and Denver are successfully pushing for curricular reforms. Pittsburgh is poised to follow suit through local youth organizing efforts, with help from the Endowments. “We heard overwhelming support in Pittsburgh. People say, ‘The time is right. Let’s make this happen,’” observes Melanie Brown, the foundation’s Education Program officer.

In describing the symbiotic relationship between education and America, scholar John Dewey proposed a variation of the Golden Rule: “What the best and wisest parent wants for his own child, that must the community want for all of its children,” he wrote in 1907. “Any other ideal for our schools is narrow and unlovely; acted upon, it destroys our democracy.”

Big thinkers and small families would agree that the common school was never meant to be average. As Pittsburgh continues its impassioned argument on how to make its public schools outstanding, Pitt’s Longo uses one of the region’s three signature rivers to illustrate both the challenge and the hope for a brighter education future.

“The hurdle is not as high as it is in cities with far greater obstacles,” he says cheerfully. “It’s not like swimming the Atlantic—just the Mon. It’s not easy, but it’s doable.”

Chris O’Toole is a Pittsburgh-based freelance writer. Her last story for this looked at how Pittsburgh foundations are supporting media initiatives that provide in-depth local news coverage for the region.

“Students most need a voice because we’ve been shunned out of the debate. We’ve been left on the sidelines. I like to say in education reform, there’s two different tables: the kids’ table and the adults’ table, and we need to combine those two together to really have a rich conversation with all the stakeholders present.”

Nikhil Goyal, senior at Syosset High School, Long Island, N.Y., from NPR interview with Michel Martin, Oct. 10, 2012

“… In the developing world, people who are born poor will die poor, and that is because of the lack of opportunities—opportunities that come from education. So, education can actually save lives.”

Shakira, Colombian pop star, from NPR interview with Robert Siegel on April 22, 2008