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The Ongoing Abandonment of Pittsburgh Public Schools

Like Pittsburgh's population, the enrollment in City schools continues to slide dramatically. Census figures show the City losing 3,480 people from July 2005 to July 2006 to stand at 312,819. That represents a total drop of 21,700 (6.5 percent) since the 2000 census. Among comparably sized or larger cities only four had bigger percentage declines since 2005 and one of those is New Orleans whose loss was propelled by Katrina.

Meanwhile, the Pittsburgh school district (which includes Mt. Oliver) has seen enrollment fall from 38,560 in 2000 to 29,445 last year and is projected by the district to slide another 1,521 to 27,924 for the school year about to get underway. Thus, the total enrollment falloff has reached 10,636, marking a 27.6 percent plunge since the decade began. Some of the enrollment decrease can be attributed to the shifting of students to non-public schools. However, much of it reflects the departure from the City by families with school age children.

2000 Census data indicate that 33 percent of white students and 7 percent of African-American students were being educated in private schools. In view of the big drop in enrollment since 2000 it appears likely the percentage of students attending private schools has risen somewhat. On the other hand, the public school problems that are driving students to private schools will also drive families out of the City. For many middle class families the burden of paying hefty school taxes and tuition for private education is more than they are willing or able to bear. Leaving the City becomes their only real option.

The collapse of the white student population is stunning. Consider that Pittsburgh's overall population is about two-thirds white and about 27 percent African-American yet only 37 of the district's enrollment is white and about 61 percent is African-American—with about 2.3 percent in other ethnic groups. Based on recent trends and the projected overall enrollment for this coming school year, white enrollment is estimated to barely exceed 10,000 even though there are over 200,000 white people living in the City. Bear in mind that Mt. Lebanon, which has a white population of 29,600 (96 percent of total), has 5,200 white students in the public schools—another 450 or so attend private schools. At the same population to public school student ratio as Mt. Lebanon, Pittsburgh schools would have 36,790 white students.

Clearly, all this points to the inevitable conclusion that population losses in Pittsburgh over the years are disproportionately accounted for by the out-migration of families with school age children. Moreover, even though the share of Pittsburgh public school enrollment accounted for by African-American students has risen somewhat over the years, it is obvious, based on the significant overall drop in their enrollment count, that many African-American school age children have left the City as well.

And the really awful part? Pittsburgh has experienced this outflow of white and African-American pupils despite per student spending that dwarfs that of virtually every district in Pennsylvania and despite trying uncountable numbers of special programs, magnet schools, special schools and various student assignment plans. It is undoubtedly true that the same lack of financial discipline that has created the outsized spending has been accompanied by a failure to maintain discipline and decorum. The mindset and philosophy that has permeated decades of administration and educators has led to today's morass. Many cities suffer this affliction, although on the spending side Pittsburgh is a class unto itself.

When added together, Pittsburgh's municipal taxes and school taxes on a per resident basis are 80 percent higher than the average for comparably sized benchmark cities around the country. Throw in the school district's poor academic record and it is little wonder the population and school enrollment continue to wither.

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