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**Pittsburgh Schools: Preposterously Expensive But Still Unable to Hold Students**

Pittsburghers awakened Election Day to find sobering news about the City's school enrollment. Reports revealed that the student population fell by 1,703 from September 2005 to September 2006 lowering the total attendees to 29,445. It could be a larger decline of 3,084 depending on whether this year's figure includes pre-K and headstart membership, as did the official count reported in the 2006 budget.

More telling is the fact that over the eight years since 1998, enrollment has plummeted by more than 10,000 or 25 percent. Meanwhile, for the same period, City and Mt. Oliver (the combined school district) population has slipped by an estimated 8 percent. In recent years Census estimates put the annual decline in Pittsburgh's population at close to 4,000. It should not be a surprise that school enrollments would drop somewhat in tandem with population losses.

Still, the magnitude of the enrollment plunge since 1998 suggests that powerful forces are at work driving students out of the Pittsburgh public schools. Undoubtedly, other education alternatives are enticing parents to move children out of district schools. Moreover, it is very probable that many families are exiting the City to seek better education in the suburbs and lower taxes or perhaps both. Indeed, the data suggest that parents of school age children make up a disproportionately large share of the ongoing exodus from the City. It is a virtual certainty that the generally poor academic achievement and concerns about the environment in City schools are providing major impetus to the outflow of students.

But the most devastating indictment of the City's schools is the failure to perform well despite stratospheric per pupil spending. Preliminary budget expenditures for 2007 are placed at \$528 million. Assuming enrollment is unchanged, next year's general fund outlays per student will climb to \$17,930, up from last year's budgeted \$17,100 per student figure. Bear in mind that the increase in per pupil spending is occurring even after all the school closings this year.

Pittsburgh's public school enrollment amounts to one student for every 10.5 residents. A typical student to population would be one student to 6 to 7 people in the district. If Pittsburgh's population to student ratio were 7 to 1, at current spending per pupil levels, next year's budget would be \$800 million. Or conversely, if the spending were the same \$528 million at a ratio of 7 people to 1 student, operating expenditures per pupil would be a much more reasonable \$11,865 for the hypothetical 44,500 students. Either calculation demonstrates how far Pittsburgh's school spending deviates from numbers around the country.

To be sure, the new superintendent is trying hard to correct budgetary and performance deficiencies. One of the steps taken was to bring in a team from the Council of the Great City Schools to evaluate Pittsburgh's budget, finance and IT operations. Dutifully, the review was carried out and a report issued. Unfortunately, most of the big recommendations are too general

to be really useful, e.g., “contain health care costs, right size and maintain required fund balance.” There were many smaller step recommendations focused on process and procedures that might help save relatively minor amounts of money but would improve overall management accountability.

The Council team’s report contains a table comparing Pittsburgh’s spending and school population with the city school districts represented on the review team. Amazingly, the team neglected, either deliberately or out of carelessness, to do the simple calculation of dividing spending by number of students to get per pupil outlays. If they had they would have been dumbfounded at the preposterous gap between Pittsburgh and the other city school districts, including Chicago, Orlando, San Diego, Boston, and Guilford County, NC. Using the old figure of 32,000 students, Pittsburgh’s per student spending was \$16,719. The highest spending district among the review team group was Orlando at \$12,849. The average for the five city districts was \$10,509.

In short, if the review team had looked at the 59 percent gap in per pupil spending between Pittsburgh and the other cities, they could have written their report in one sentence. Something like, “Your spending is outrageously high: start making 10 percent per year reductions until total outlays drop to \$12,500 per student or around \$380 million, with appropriate adjustments for inflation and enrollment changes.”

And, if they wanted to embellish they could have advised the district to hold teachers and staff responsible and accountable for academic results or face termination. But of course that cannot happen because the unions will not allow it. So, on the district will plod, looking desperately for some program or a miracle to solve its spending and achievement problems. Meanwhile, more students and their parents will leave.

History just keeps repeating endlessly when experience teaches nothing and lessons go unlearned.

With perspicacity and candor, the Council team did observe that correcting the district’s problems would require the Board, staff, and community to recognize the urgency in agreeing on the future direction of the schools and have the willingness and ability to tighten their focus and energies around necessary actions. Unfortunately, the team noted that they did not observe these preconditions in the district. What an indictment for a group of outsiders to hand down. Pittsburgh’s school district has major financial problems and academic achievement deficiencies and the principal players in the drama do not see the need to work together quickly to repair the system. But why should they? Their version of history tells them that the state or city taxpayers can always be counted on to bail the district out of its crises.

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