

Pittsburgh School Enrollment Decline Is Really No Surprise

In something of a surprise to school officials and the promoters of public schools in Pittsburgh, enrollment in the District fell for the school year just underway. They had forecast enrollment to rise after a decades' long slide had lowered it to just under 25,000 in the 2012-2013 school year. That's a far cry from the 37,000 enrolled in the 2000-2001 school year, which itself was already well below the decade earlier level.

Total enrollment was down by 324 students, the bulk of which (260) occurred in the high schools with a drop of 64 in K-8. The biggest drops occurred at Perry High with a 17 percent decline and Westinghouse down by 12.5 percent. A few elementary schools with well above average academic performance had a pickup in enrollment, likely due in large part to movement from other schools since K-8 attendance overall was lower.

There was a jump in charter school enrollment in the City as it climbed by 307 students. It is not clear which grades saw the biggest increases but there is limited high school space at the charter schools. Note that the City Charter High School, which has shown well above city school average academic results, has a waiting list for 9th grade and unless or until it expands capacity will, in all likelihood, not be able to absorb the numbers of students leaving Pittsburgh School District high schools. Moreover, one of the charter schools offering grades 9 through 12, Career Connections Charter High, has lost its charter. And even though it is appealing the loss, it is in no position to be admitting new students until the case is resolved. It is also doubtful that Northside Urban Pathways could take in large numbers of new high school enrollees. In short, it would appear that most of the lost high school enrollment has either left the district, signed on to a cyber-charter school or have unfortunately opted for dropout status, joining many others who have gone before in recent years.

But once again, the question must be asked: why is enrollment falling in the Pittsburgh School District? After all, total per pupil spending remains well above \$20,000, and there have been many consultants hired, innumerable studies funded with private and public sector grants aimed at improving teaching, math skills, and reading skills over the last couple of decades. Recently, a consultant hired by the district found that Pittsburgh schools are spending \$6,800 more per pupil than comparable schools in Pennsylvania. More grants are on the way to fund yet more studies on how to deliver better education. Surely the issue is not lack of money or study of the District's problems.

And it must be pointed out (again) that since 2007, the Pittsburgh Promise program has offered college scholarship funds of as much as \$10,000 per year for students who graduate with a 2.5 grade point average. The underlying intent of the program was to reverse the hemorrhaging

school enrollment and population losses in the City and to boost academic performance. As far as the high schools are concerned, neither has happened. The City has seen population in the 18 to 24 age group move higher. But in the age groups likely to have high school age students, the story is quite another matter (see *Policy Brief Volume 11, Number 32*).

Thus, despite the generous scholarships for graduates, the basic intent has not been met. Granted, the students who have received the funds have been helped and that is a good thing. But would it not be far better to offer students still in school scholarship aid to allow them to get out of the public schools that are performing so poorly?

For decades there has been a lot of handwringing about the pitiful academic and retention performance of Pittsburgh high schools—with a couple of notable exceptions. Indeed, there can be little doubt that the woeful performance is a hindrance to attracting families with school age children to the City—except for those who can afford private education. Long ago it was recommended that rather than pour vast sums into consultant studies, educational experimentation, and other wasteful efforts, the district should have taken the decision to do what is best for parents and students who want an opportunity for a much better education in a safe, disciplined environment. The charter school program has made some difference, but a full-fledged voucher system would be superior to the charter system.

Decades of kowtowing to union demands, political correctness and misguided notions about pedagogical issues and classroom management, new math, grade inflation and a lack of forceful push back from parents who care deeply about education, discipline etc., have turned some of the public high schools in the City into expensive day care facilities. One only need look at SAT scores and PSSA scores to see that very little in the way of learning is taking place. And the truly awful part is not just the waste of money but the damage done to the futures of students who have to live with the consequences of wasted high school years. We know that based on the academic performance in Pittsburgh's elementary grades, the kids can and ought to perform at a far higher level than the high schoolers actually do.

It is time to stop the dawdling and piecemeal ineffectual efforts to repair the schools as they exist and do something truly revolutionary. Provide scholarship funds equal to the annual per pupil charter school allocation and allow parents to send their children to the school of their choice be it private or parochial. Some will argue that the best students will leave and the public schools will get worse. That depends entirely on the response the public schools make. Do they make real efforts to improve or keep on with failed status quo? For goodness sakes, isn't it time to try something bold?

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