



ALLEGHENY INSTITUTE

FOR PUBLIC POLICY

June 12, 2019

Allegheny Institute Op-Ed

650 words

A statistical analysis: School enrollment & spending

By Colin McNickle

“Statistics is a science which ought to be honorable, the basis of many most important sciences,” reminded Thomas Carlyle in 1839’s “Chartism.”

“But it is not to be carried on by steam, this science, any more than others are; a wise head is requisite for carrying it on,” he cautioned. “Conclusive facts are inseparable from inconclusive except by a head that already understands and knows.”

Which brings us to the Allegheny Institute for Public Policy’s analysis of the effects that population losses have had on not only the number of public-school students in the Pittsburgh Metropolitan Statistical Area (MSA) but the cost to educate them.

And the conclusion does much to cut through the steam (i.e. the rhetoric) of the public education funding debate:

“The Pittsburgh metro area has lost a significant percentage of its public-school student count since 2000,” says Jake Haulk, president-emeritus of the Pittsburgh think tank.

That count includes students enrolled in district schools as well as those who attend charter schools or other institutions for which the district is financially responsible.

“At the same time the spending per student has risen twice as fast as the rate of inflation during the period,” the Ph.D. economist notes (in *Policy Brief Vol. 19, No. 22*).

To wit, school districts in the seven-county Pittsburgh MSA spent on average \$7,897 per “average daily member” (ADM) in 2000-01. Allegheny County had the highest average spending for all districts at \$8,572. Butler County had the lowest at \$6,708.

The other counties’ spending per ADM ranged from \$7,000 in Westmoreland County to \$7,966 in Armstrong.

But for the 2016-17 school year, the MSA average for ADM spending was \$15,661, a 98.3 percent increase. Allegheny continued to pace that spending at \$16,932, Armstrong still was No. 2 at \$15,464; Butler continued to have the lowest ADM spending at \$13,477.

All counties – other than Butler and Fayette – had 2016-17 per-ADM spending of between \$14,000 and \$15,000. In terms of percentage increase, Westmoreland was highest at 107 percent followed by Butler at 100 percent. Beaver County’s ADM spending rose by 99 percent with Allegheny’s increase at 97.5 percent.

Armstrong and Washington counties’ per-ADM spending rose 94 percent from 2000-01 to 2016-17 while Fayette’s increased 87 percent.

“It is important to bear in mind that the Consumer Price Index (CPI) from 2000 to 2017 rose by 42.3 percent,” Haulk says. “The region’s total spending on k-12 education was up by 69 percent during the same period or 63 percent faster than inflation.

“On a per-ADM basis the region’s spending was up 98.3 percent or 132 percent faster than the CPI increases,” the think tank scholar says. “This was well over twice as fast as the rise in consumer prices.” The commonwealth’s “hold harmless” provision – which, perversely, maintains the state’s respective subsidies to districts even as the student census drops -- certainly has played a major role in the rise in per-ADM spending.

And that raises a few fundamental questions, such as where the increase in per-ADM spending is going and why it has not produced improved academic results, the latter promoted as an article of faith among the educratic establishment.

Nowhere is the dichotomy of the perversion more apparent than in Pittsburgh Public Schools where academic performance other than at magnet schools remains dreadful and in Wilkesburg, where per-ADM spending rose four times the rate of inflation from 2000-01 to 2016-17.

“These examples point to the crying need for the state to rethink its obligation to students as opposed to school boards and the staffs of the school districts who have failed students badly for decades,” Haulk says. “Loss of population is one thing. Throwing money wastefully at the problem is outrageous.”

Colin McNickle is communications and marketing director at the Allegheny Institute for Public Policy (cmcnickle@alleghenyinstitute.org).

*Op-Eds may be reprinted as long as proper attribution is given.
For more information about this and other topics, please visit our website:
www.alleghenyinstitute.org*

<p>Allegheny Institute for Public Policy 305 Mt. Lebanon Blvd.* Suite 208* Pittsburgh PA 15234 Phone (412) 440-0079 * Fax (412) 440-0085 E-mail: aipp@alleghenyinstitute.org</p>
