



June 12, 2019

Policy Brief: Volume 19, Number 22

Pittsburgh region school enrollment losses and cost increases since 2000

Summary: The Pittsburgh Metropolitan Statistical Area (MSA) has lost a significant percentage of its public school student count since 2000. At the same time the spending per student has risen twice as fast as the rate of inflation during the period.

Recent *Policy Briefs* (Vol. 19, Nos. 18 & 20) have examined and discussed population changes in the Pittsburgh MSA (Allegheny, Armstrong, Beaver, Butler, Fayette, Washington and Westmoreland counties) and the impacts on the labor force in the region. One of the key findings was that the labor force has become older with declines in the youngest age groups. This *Brief* reviews the effects the population losses have had on the number of public school students in the MSA and in the counties over the period 2000 to 2017. It also reviews two districts in Allegheny County.

Nationally, the population rose from 282.2 million in 2000 to 325.1 million in 2017, a gain of 15 percent. During that period, U.S. public school students climbed from 47.2 million to 50.6 million, a 7.2 percent increase and about half the growth rate of the overall population with a preponderance of the student growth occurring before 2012. Indeed, the population of school-age students (5-18 years—not a precise measure since school years are not the same as calendar years and some students enter when they are almost 6 and many graduate when they are 17) has been essentially flat since 2010 at around 62 million.

Over the same period the population in the Pittsburgh MSA fell very slightly from 2,358,000 to 2,357,000. And during those 17 years, public school students (Average Daily Membership) in the seven-county region slid from 348,368 to 296,692, a drop of 51,676 or 14.8 percent, obviously reflecting a major decline in school-age children. Over the period 2010 to 2016, for example, school-age population in the metro area fell by just under 36,000. Note that the public school count includes students enrolled in district schools as well as those in the district who attend charter schools or other institutions for which the district is financially responsible. This number is referred to as Average Daily Member or ADM for short.

By county the largest ADM decline was in Allegheny County with a drop of 24,784. That's not surprising since the county is by far the largest in terms of population. Westmoreland had the second-biggest loss at 9,096. No county had an increase. The other county losses were Beaver (5,436), Fayette (4,377), Washington (2,980), Butler (2,830) and Armstrong (2,133). In percentage terms the county losses rank quite differently. Fayette suffered the largest decline at 20.4 percent, followed by Beaver at 19.4 percent and Armstrong at 18.2 percent. Westmoreland followed at 16 percent and Allegheny at 14.4. The smallest percentage losses were posted by Butler at 10.2 and Washington at 9.7 percent.

More typically, discussion focuses on enrollment rather than ADM as it is the number of students actually attending the district schools as opposed to charter schools or other district paid for education. Starting in 2000, enrollment in metro area school districts stood at 353,323 (just about the same as the ADM count) but by the 2016-17 school year enrollment was down to 274,533. (All school related statistics are taken from the Pennsylvania Education Department website. School district statistics are summed by county and then for the seven counties in the area.) The decline of 78,720 enrolled represents a loss of 22 percent. Most of the 27,004 gap between the enrollment decline and the drop of 51,676 in ADM is attributed to the rise in charter school enrollment.

The enrollment losses are significantly worse than the ADM declines. That is to say, in addition to the drop in the numbers of K-12-aged students school districts are financially responsible for, the growth in charter-enrolled and other students have further lowered attendees at district schools. Again, the fall in the number enrolled was largest in Allegheny County which saw a drop of 42,902, followed by Westmoreland (11,673), Beaver (7,616), Fayette (5,237), Washington (4,638), Butler (4,430) and Armstrong (2,224).

Ranking enrollment loss by percentage decrease puts Beaver with the biggest decline at 26.4 percent. The second highest loss was posted by Allegheny at 24.9 percent followed in order by Fayette (24.2), Westmoreland (20), Armstrong (19), Butler (15.4) and Washington (14.7).

Moreover, the sad enrollment and ADM decline picture in the Pittsburgh MSA since 2000 is compounded by massive increases in per ADM spending over the period. Current expenditures per ADM will be used for comparison of the 2000-01 school year to the 2016-17 school year rather than spending per enrollee since districts have financial obligations for charter schools as well.

School districts in the seven-county MSA spent on average \$7,897 per ADM in 2000-01. Allegheny County had the highest average spending for all districts at \$8,572 with the lowest in Butler at \$6,708. The other counties' spending per ADM ranged from \$7,000 in Westmoreland to \$7,966 in Armstrong.

In school year 2016-17 the metro area average per ADM spending was \$15,662, a rise of 98.3 percent. Actual total dollars spent on K-12 public education in the region climbed 69

percent but the drop in ADM caused per ADM spending to rise much more rapidly. In 2016-17 Allegheny still had the highest per ADM spending at \$16,932, with Armstrong second highest at \$15,464 and Butler was still the lowest at \$13,477. All counties other than Butler and Fayette had 2016-17 per ADM spending between \$14,000 and \$15,000.

In terms of percentage increase, Westmoreland was highest at 107 percent followed by Butler at 100, Beaver (99), Allegheny (97.5), Armstrong and Washington (94). The lowest increase was in Fayette at 87 percent.

It is important to bear in mind that the Consumer Price Index (CPI) from 2000 to 2017 rose by 42.3 percent. 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 increase. This was well over twice as fast as the rise in consumer prices.

As noted in an earlier *Policy Brief (Vol. 19 No. 12)*, the state's hold harmless provision has historically required the state not to reduce district basic education funding from year to year. Thus, the never-reduced funding going to school districts has been a major factor in the rise in per ADM spending in counties that were losing large numbers of students. The question that should be asked is: "Where is all the increase in per ADM spending going and where are the improved academic performance results from the big jumps in per ADM spending?"

The distortions can be dramatic as a couple of examples from Allegheny County demonstrate. Pittsburgh Public Schools per ADM spending rose by 103 percent to \$22,282 over the period while its ADM was falling by 31 percent (12,015 students) and enrollment by 41 percent (38,560 to 22,384). Academic performance other than at magnet schools is dreadful and has shown little if any improvement in many Pittsburgh schools.

Meanwhile, Wilkesburg saw ADM plunge by 43 percent and enrollment by 69 percent between the 2000-01 and 2016-17 school years. Yet, per ADM spending spiked from \$9,739 to \$25,015, or 157 percent—four times the rate of inflation. What is all that money being used for? Both districts get very large per ADM funding from the state and it has not fallen even as ADM has plummeted.

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 that have failed students badly for decades. Loss of population is one thing. Throwing money wastefully at the problem is outrageous.

Jake Haulk, Ph.D., President Emeritus

*Policy Briefs 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*

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