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The continuing struggles of Pittsburgh Public Schools

By Colin McNickle

Pittsburgh Public Schools (PPS) yet again used fund reserves to balance its 2021 general fund budget, a practice it has employed since 2016. But the school district has a long way to go to address its high expenditures, concludes an analysis by the Allegheny Institute for Public Policy.

“PPS’ trends on costs, enrollment, building capacity and employee headcount, as contained in the 2019 Comprehensive Annual Financial Report (CAFR), the 2021 preliminary budget and Pennsylvania Department of Education data, are troubling and should provide the board and administration plenty of opportunity to reduce costs,” says Eric Montarti, research director at the Pittsburgh think tank (in *Policy Brief Vol. 21, No. 1*).

To wit, PPS’ cost per pupil—based on operating expenses (total expenditures less capital outlay and debt service) and enrollment (based on start of year census) was \$30,032.

Additionally, performance on the 2019 Pennsylvania System of School Assessment on English Language Arts and Math was below the statewide averages. Results were reported by 48 schools in the district with students in grades 3 through 8.

On English Language Arts, 19 schools had 60 percent or more of students score basic or below basic (reflecting marginal or inadequate academic performance requiring additional academic support, according to the state Department of Education, essentially meaning grade-level proficiency has not been met). Six were at 75 percent or greater.

On math, 37 schools had 60 percent or more of students score basic or below basic with 23 of those at 75 percent or greater.

The ratio of students in charter schools to those in Pittsburgh Public Schools has risen from 0.16 to 1 in 2016 to 0.23 to 1 this year.

Furthermore, PPS school buildings have functional capacity for 39,665 students but due to declining enrollment serve far fewer than that.

And the district’s total number of employees—general fund and all other supplemental funds—has grown by 155 positions since 2016 and is to stand at 3,972 this year.

“To date, PPS has not laid off or furloughed any employees. Based on 2019 data, PPS’ student-to-classroom teacher ratio was 10.8 to 1 and its student-to-administrator ratio was 127.9 to 1,” Montarti notes.

“It is astounding that employment grew during the last five years. PPS exceeds the average ratio for other districts in Allegheny County on students to classroom teachers (14.5 to 1) and students to administration (250.3 to 1).”

K-12 membership, measured on Oct. 1, 2020, was 20,438, down 837 students (3.9 percent) from Oct. 1, 2019. Projected K-12 enrollment in 2029-30 will be 16,762.

“Focusing on projected enrollment, a close to 18 percent drop over the next decade should have implications for PPS employees, building space, state basic education funding and PPS’ position statewide,” Montarti says, noting that the Oct. 1, 2020, membership and the total employee count for 2021 produces a ratio of 5.1 students per employee.

“Can PPS honestly expect that enrollment will continue to fall in the next decade and not begin to look at reducing employee headcount—whether through attrition, not filling vacant positions or furloughs or layoffs?” Montarti asks.

The bottom line is that if Pittsburgh Public Schools’ fiscal picture continues to decline, the possibility of it meeting the criteria to enter financial watch or financial recovery under Act 141 of 2012 could become real.

There are currently 12 districts in Act 141 status (including four in Allegheny County—Duquesne, Penn Hills, Sto-Rox and Wilkinsburg). Last year, when PPS proposed a 2.3 percent property tax increase and ending the wage tax sharing agreement with the city, the mayor suggested such an action should occur.

“How can PPS continue to see rising expenses, falling enrollment and produce lackluster results and not be in crisis mode?” Montarti asks. With years of failing to address the poor academic performance of many schools and PPS’ high costs, the administration and board have a lot of work to do.”

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