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Why So Many Non-Teaching Employees in Pittsburgh Schools?

A pop quiz as another school year gets underway: what is the student-to-teacher ratio in the Pittsburgh Public Schools (PPS)? According to the most recent audited data (2009) the District shows 27,922 students and 2,315 teachers giving a ratio of 12 to 1. That's only slightly changed from 2000 when the District had 38,560 students and 3,377 teachers for an 11.4 to 1 student ratio.

Now another question: how many students are there for each non-teaching employee—administrators and secretaries, principals and janitors, cafeteria workers and librarians? In 2009 there were 2,570 non-teacher personnel putting the ratio at 10.8 students per employee. Back in 2000 there were 20 students per non-teaching employee. What has happened to cut the ratio in half?

There are two principal factors driving the massive change in the student-to-non-teacher ratio. First, the administration category, which includes administrators and managers, legal services, and clerical and other non-professionals, grew 63 percent from 572 employees in 2000 to 934 in 2009. Most of this growth was attributable to the clerical and non-professional classification which doubled in size from 405 to 826. All told, the ratio of administrative employees to students more than doubled over the decade.

Employee Composition in the Pittsburgh Schools

Employee Category	Students per employee in 2000	Students per employee in 2009
Teachers	11.4	12.1
Non-Teachers	20	10.8
<i>Non-Teacher Components</i>		
<i>Administration</i>	<i>67.4</i>	<i>29.9</i>
<i>Instruction not counting Teachers</i>	<i>126</i>	<i>33</i>
<i>Pupil Affairs</i>	<i>187</i>	<i>138</i>
<i>Health Services</i>	<i>896</i>	<i>698</i>
<i>Operations and Maintenance</i>	<i>69.7</i>	<i>71.7</i>
<i>Food Service</i>	<i>157.3</i>	<i>174.5</i>

Second, the category of instruction not counting teachers (principals, supervisors and assistant principals, librarians and support staff) grew by 176 percent from 306 employees to 846 employees. Here's why: the category now has close to 700 professional and support staff that were not listed as a separate classification in 2000. The ratio of instruction employees to students has nearly quadrupled resulting in the decline of student-to-employee ratio from 126 to 33.

Doubling the ratio of all non-teacher employees to students over the past ten years while the teacher ratio stayed level and several schools were closed ought to raise some serious questions. It

certainly goes a long way toward explaining why the District's per student costs continue to spiral upward. Even the most strident defenders of the District must wonder what can possibly explain the enormous growth in non-teaching personnel. If the student-teacher ratio had fallen 50 percent over the period and each teacher had only five or six students a lot of eyebrows would certainly have been raised. But the startling rise in "hidden" back office and student support functions has gone virtually unnoticed.

How does Pittsburgh's non-teaching employee ratio compare to other school districts? Last year (*Policy Brief Volume 9, Number 48*) we looked at some other districts to see their non-teaching personnel count in light of the school district consolidation plans that were being discussed by the General Assembly at the time. We found that, on a student-to-employee basis, several districts were higher than PPS' student-to-non-teacher ratio including Allegheny Valley (13.4), North Allegheny (17.6), and Bethel Park (14.1).

While it might be claimed that all the changes brought about for the PPS in recent years—school closings and realignments, new academies, pay for performance for principals and some teachers—did not translate into more bureaucracy, bureaucratic growth appears to have been the order of the day. We know that there are a myriad of programs aimed at improving the fortunes of the District, many of them requiring employees to oversee them.

There are significant and long-lasting effects stemming from the growth in non-teaching personnel for taxpayers. Keep in mind that the PPS budget (\$527 million) is larger than the budget for the City of Pittsburgh and half of that amount is related to employee salaries and benefits. The District levies real estate taxes, takes the lion's share of the City's very high 3 percent earned income tax and receives over \$200 million from state and Federal sources. If the non-teacher ratio had stayed at its 2000 level (20 to 1), taxpayers of the City would currently be supporting close to 1,100 fewer employees, with perhaps as much as \$50 million less in personnel costs and painting quite a different picture for local and state taxes and for long-term costs associated with pensions and health benefits.

The board and the superintendent of the District should give taxpayers an adequate explanation for the massive increase in non-teaching personnel, the costs associated with the increase, and in particular define the benefits derived from all additional employees in terms of educational performance. In light of the ongoing academic fiasco in most of the City's high schools, these will not be easy tasks for the schools' managers.

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