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Pittsburgh School Enrollment Slide Continues

Pittsburgh Public Schools have seen yet another enrollment decline continuing a trend dating back over a decade. The student count for the 2010-11 school year fell 3.1 percent (797) below the year earlier reading. Compared to 1997 when the District enrolled more than 40,000 students, the current figure of 25,326 represents a decrease of nearly 37 percent. And the bad news is projected to continue. According to a school district consultant enrollment will fall through 2018.

For the previous school year the enrollment drop was 526 or 2.1 percent. Commenting on these recent numbers, the superintendent called the latest drop a “continuing flattening out of the enrollment decline.” His conclusion seems to be that while losses continue, the pace has slowed and this development is viewed as a positive. But there is no getting around the reality that losing students is an indictment of a failing system.

The Pittsburgh Promise scholarship program, essentially a bribe to keep families in the system and encourage new ones to move into the city, has been unable to stem the tide of losses. More than half of this year’s enrollment decline is accounted for by high school students.

As we have noted on previous occasions (*Policy Briefs* Vol. 8, No.69 and Vol. 9, No 67), the Mayor summed up the Promise program by saying, “I’m confident that families, middle income families, and families that value education will move into the City of Pittsburgh when we have this thing up and running.” That was in 2006 when the program was unveiled. Four years later the ongoing drop in student count casts serious doubt on the ability of the Promise program to solve the overwhelming systemic problems facing the District.

Besides failing to stop the enrollment slide, the Promise Program has not had a positive effect on the academic performance of students, particularly those high schoolers getting ready to graduate and use Promise funds to attend college. In the 2006-07 school year when the Promise Program was introduced, fewer than 50 percent of 11th graders in seven of the District’s ten high schools scored proficient or better on the math portion of the Pennsylvania System of School Assessment (PSSA) exam. Even worse, in three schools the percentage at proficient or better was under 20 percent. On the reading portion of the exam, scores were just slightly better with only five out of ten high schools below 50 percent proficient or higher.

Fast forward to last year's scores. In the 2009-10 school year eight of ten high schools had fewer than 50 percent of eleventh graders scoring proficient or higher in math. Again, three schools were less than 20 percent. On the reading portion of the exam, seven schools had 50 percent or fewer of their 11th graders scoring proficient or advanced. In short, over the three year period, test results for 11th graders were going in the wrong direction.

While many school district defenders and apologists point to PSSA successes in the lower grades, the goal of the District, and the Promise Program, is not to prepare third graders for the fourth grade or eighth graders for the ninth grade, although that is important. However, the true measure of District success must be the performance of those about to graduate. So far the Promise had been a disappointment on that front as well.

Amazingly, the Promise Program set the qualification for the scholarship funds very low. Besides being a resident and enrolled in the system, a student needs only a 2.5 grade point average—slightly better than a “C” average to qualify for the funds. One would have thought that some minimum PSSA or SAT score (at least the shamefully low district wide average SAT should be required). Setting the academic qualification so low has undoubtedly undermined one of the desired impacts of the Promise Program, i.e., to encourage better academic performance. With requirements set at such a low level, there is reduced incentive for students to work or study hard.

As enrollment continues its downward slide, costs per student remain very high. For the current year, the District's 2010 general fund budget of \$525.4 million translates to \$20,745 per pupil for the 25,326 students who remain in the District's schools. That is a tremendous amount of taxpayer money for an underachieving system that is hemorrhaging students despite the promise of college funding.

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