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Defenders of School Spending: Give It Up

A recent newspaper editorial on the spending levels of the Pittsburgh Public School District once again proved the first law of public debate: when you are in a hole, stop digging.

The two writers, who are employees of the District, were responding to a previous editorial that said the District is spending a lot more than the fiscally distressed City of Pittsburgh. Au contraire, say the editorial writers. They wrote that, in fact, it is "surprising that the City's budget is almost as large as the School District's budget."

They argue that the ratio of school spending to municipal spending in the City is much lower than the ratio in five suburban districts in the County--Mt. Lebanon, Hampton, Bethel Park, Upper St. Clair, and South Fayette. This argument is deceptive and totally fallacious.

The flaw in the editorial writers' argument is obvious. They fail to point out the most pertinent facts. To wit; both the City and the School District are extravagant spenders, especially relative to the communities the authors have cited. Apparently, the writers believe that so long as the ratio of school-to-City spending is close to 1, it does not matter how much money is spent.

As the table below shows, the City is spending nearly \$1,200 per resident to provide municipal services while the five suburban municipalities are spending half as much, \$579 on average.

Municipality and School Spending Statistics

Municipality /School District	2003 Population	04-05 School Enrollment	04 Municipal General Fund (in millions)	04 School General Fund (in millions)	Per-Capita Municipal Spending	Per-Pupil School Spending
<i>Pittsburgh</i>	325,337	34,619	\$388.8	\$525.7	\$1,196	\$15,462
Mt. Lebanon	32,187	5,616	\$26	\$66.4	\$813	\$11,823
Hampton	17,361	3,156	\$9.8	\$34.8	\$564	\$11,027
Bethel Park	32,915	5,152	\$14.7	\$59.2	\$447	\$11,491
South Fayette	12,899	1,900	\$5.4	\$24.3	\$419	\$12,789
USC	19,661	4,142	\$12.8	\$48.7	\$651	\$11,758
<i>Suburban Avg</i>	23,005	3,993	\$13.7	\$46.7	\$579	\$11,778

Meanwhile, the Pittsburgh School District's per-pupil spending stands at \$15,462 this year, while the other districts are spending \$11,778, on average. If they moved to the level of spending in these school districts, the School budget would fall to \$407 million, almost \$120 million less than they currently spend. We have detailed the egregious spending trends of the Pittsburgh Public Schools many times before: they have ratcheted up spending at a time when enrollment is falling sharply and academic achievement is very poor. Spending \$4,000 more per-pupil than the average of the suburban communities is simply not defensible despite the ongoing attempts by the administration and board members to justify their spendthrift ways.

Not content to mischaracterize the school district's spending data, the authors try to portray Pittsburgh school property tax rates as relatively low compared to the suburban districts. Again, they do not reveal all of the relevant facts. For one thing, it is important to note that the Commonwealth's share of funding coming into the Pittsburgh Public Schools is 40 percent, while the average share of state funding for the other five districts is just 22 percent. None of the five suburban districts came close to Pittsburgh.

It is also important to bear in mind that the other communities have far more public school pupils relative to the size of the population. In Pittsburgh, there are 11 students per 100 people, while the suburban districts have more than 17 pupils per 100 residents. Thus, each resident in Pittsburgh is supporting significantly fewer students than the residents in the suburban communities. If Pittsburgh had the same student-to-population ratio as these suburbs, or 55,000 pupils, and was spending \$15,462 per-pupil, the budget would be roughly \$828 million and far above the City's spending.

Bluntly stated, this latest effort to defend the spending of the school district falls flat on its face. There is simply no easy comparative ratio that can alter the fact that the atrocious spending of the Pittsburgh Public Schools has a real impact on the fortunes of the City of Pittsburgh and is a drain on the taxpayers of Pennsylvania who send \$200 million a year to fund City schools.

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