

# ***POLICY BRIEF***

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## **Pittsburgh Enrollment Decline Forecast to Continue**

An independent consultant hired by Pittsburgh Public Schools to study facility usage recommended closing 16 buildings and reconfiguring another 19 of the District's 70 facilities. The recommendations are based on a projected further 4,500 drop in enrollment by school year 2018-2019.

The superintendent agreed with the findings and said, "excess building capacity is consuming taxpayer dollars that otherwise could be used to improve educational opportunities for students..." But the underlying issue is why Pittsburgh families have abandoned the Pittsburgh Public Schools by leaving the City or finding alternative education opportunities for their children. The heavy enrollment losses have occurred despite enormous efforts and expenditures by the District and civic supporters.

Enrollment in the District has been falling for many years. In the 2000-2001 school year enrollment was 38,500. For the 2009-2010 school year enrollment has dropped more than 32 percent to roughly 26,123—a loss of more than 12,400 students since 2000-2001. The consultant's estimate of a decline 4,500 students over the next nine years would represent a 16 percent drop—half the percentage decline of the previous nine years. Whether the forecast is optimistic remains to be seen.

The expected future enrollment slide was the principal reason for the creation of the Pittsburgh Promise college scholarship program. Hoping to reverse the slide, the District, along with the Mayor and corporate leaders, promised all graduating students from the City a college scholarship if they met certain academic requirements. This program was modeled after one in Kalamazoo, Michigan where enrollment after three years climbed by 15 percent. It's been four years since the inception of Pittsburgh's Promise and enrollment has continued to fall, dropping 16 percent—the exact opposite of the Michigan experience.

While the Superintendent has suggested the decline in enrollment is a result of the decline in City population, the facts don't support that contention. The City's enrollment has been dropping at a significantly faster rate than population. Since the last census, Pittsburgh has lost 7.3 percent of its population while District enrollment fell at four times that rate. There are explanations for this. First, families with children are moving out at a disproportionately faster rate than families without school age children or individuals with no children. Second, increasing numbers of parents are choosing non-public schools or home schooling.

How will the abandonment of Pittsburgh Public Schools affect academic performance? SAT results for Pittsburgh students shows there has been virtually no improvement in scores. The average combined reading and math scores stood at 873 in 2001 before edging up to 895 in 2006.

However, in 2009 scores had fallen back to 879—so much for progress as school press releases and news conferences have attempted to portray. In some of the District’s high schools, scores are still well below 800. Bear in mind that the average national scores during this time were over 1,000 and average scores for Pennsylvania students were around 1,000.

Pennsylvania System of School Assessment (PSSA) test scores show similar results. For 2009, 50 percent of the District’s eleventh graders scored below proficient level in reading while 57 percent did so in math. In 2006, those numbers were 49.1 percent and 59.8 percent respectively in reading and math. It’s very clear that academic achievement is languishing, which may well account for a large share of the student exodus. Unfortunately, as parents who are very concerned about education remove their children from City schools, there is a strong likelihood that academic achievement in City schools will suffer even more as enrollment continues its long slide.

Of course, with students leaving the District, it would be reasonable to assume expenditures would be falling or at least not growing. Not in Pittsburgh. At the beginning of the decade the District reported operating expenditures of roughly \$415.5 million. The most recent report for 2007-2008 shows those expenditures have grown by 29 percent to about \$534.7 million. On a per pupil basis expenditures have grown from \$10,700 to more than \$17,800—a 66 percent rise. Undoubtedly, much of this increase stems from the reduction in enrollment, but it underscores the preposterously high cost of educating students in the District. Assuming spending grows by an average 3 percent per year for the next nine years (a conservative forecast considering past growth and the big jump in pension payments coming in 2012) expenditures per student will reach a jaw dropping \$31,000 per student.

The consultant’s report estimates that by closing some schools and consolidating others, the District can achieve savings of over \$300 million in maintenance costs over the next ten years. Whether that will ever happen remains to be seen. In the meantime, the District continues to short change students and taxpayers. Recommendations of meaningful reforms such as school choice are squelched by the District and its apologists practically before they are uttered. One must wonder: How bad does it have to get before parents and taxpayers become fed up enough to do something about the long running fiasco that is the Pittsburgh Public School District other than moving out of the City? Is it reasonable to expect Pittsburgh to ever achieve real stability and begin to grow as long as the school district is so corrosive of its economic underpinnings?

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