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## Charter school competition prods Pittsburgh school district to become leaner, more effective

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PITTSBURGH – Conventional wisdom says that allowing charter schools to compete with traditional schools for students and resources will result in the destruction of public education.

Those assumptions are being proven wrong by the renaissance underway in **Pittsburgh Public Schools**, caused – in part – by the district’s 31 area charter school competitors. Instead of being the bane of PPS’s existence, the charter schools are spurring the district into becoming leaner, more efficient and, ultimately, more effective for students.

**Pittsburgh** school officials understand that the “landscape has changed and that we need to be more competitive in the new world,” **Lisa Fischetti**, chief of staff and external affairs for Pittsburgh Public Schools, wrote in an email to **EAG**.

“... [T]he increasing array of other educational options (e.g. charter schools, cyber charter schools, and potentially vouchers) did help to move the needle in terms of our culture shift,” wrote Fischetti.

Part of PPS’ “culture shift” involves cutting over \$40 million from its annual budget, a process that started last summer when the district cut 217 office positions and furloughed 54 teachers and paraprofessionals. In March, the district expects to announce that 398 teachers will not be returning for the 2012-13 school year.

Normally, when a school district announces mass layoffs, it is followed by charges that lawmakers are not “investing” enough in public education and that the apocalypse is at hand. Instead, Pittsburgh school officials admit the district had gotten flabby and careless with its spending, leading to, in the words of **Superintendent Linda Lane**, “a relatively expensive infrastructure and way of conducting business.”

**Eric Montarti**, senior policy analyst with the **Allegheny Institute for Public Policy**, has studied PPS’ spending, and agrees with Lane’s assessment.

“It’s an incredibly expensive school district,” Montarti told EAG. “The school budget is larger than the budget for the entire city of Pittsburgh.”



According to Montarti's 2010 analysis, half of PPS's budget "is related to employee salaries and benefits." Those expenses soared over the previous decade, when the district doubled the number of clerical and non-professional staff, even while enrollment declined.

Montarti said the district spends more than \$20,000 per student, well above the average of other school districts in the state.

"The budget axe had to fall, and it has," he said.

Lane acknowledges district officials must "invest our resources intelligently."

"We are making adjustments to classroom sizes, school locations, curriculum, special needs programs and transportation in order to deliver services more efficiently," Lane writes in a recent letter to school board members.

Upon completion, all schools "will have core content teachers, special education teachers and teachers for the related arts," Lane writes. "All secondary schools will have access to career and technical education courses."

### ***Changes lead to increased student achievement***

In her letter, Lane writes, "The competition for educating children has raised the bar for academic standards, but has dismantled the traditional system of education in an urban setting."

There may have been some "dismantling," but it seems to be a case of creative destruction.

#### **FOCUS FACTS**

- ***Pittsburgh Public Schools spends more than \$20,000 per student, well above the average of other school districts in PA.***
- ***Competing with 31 area charter schools has forced PPS into trimming millions of dollars from its budget.***
- ***Despite cuts, students have made gains in math and reading test scores, thanks to PPS' focus on teacher effectiveness.***

Pittsburgh's students have made significant gains in math and reading proficiency rates over the past several years, as measured by **Pennsylvania's** standardized testing. In 2004, only 49 percent of students were reading at proficient or advanced levels; that increased to 60.7 percent in 2011.

In math, 66.2 percent of students rated as proficient or advanced, up from 39.2 percent in 2004.

The district has also achieved "**Adequate Yearly Progress**," as defined by the federal government's **No Child Left Behind** law, for two of the last three years.

Some credit must be given to the district's new focus on effective teaching.

"Pittsburgh implemented a new teacher evaluation system in all its schools (in 2010) with state approval," reports **PittsburghLive.com**. "The system eventually will incorporate student achievement into evaluations."

PPS has received over \$77 million in grants from the **Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation** and the **U.S. Department of Education** to help implement its "**Empowering Effective Teachers**" program.

The focus on teacher quality means the district is willing to increase class sizes, which currently feature a student-to-teacher ratio of 14 to 1. The district is bucking public education orthodoxy that says small class sizes are always better. PPS officials say that having quality, effective teachers in every classroom is what really matters.

The local teachers union, the **Pittsburgh Federation of Teachers**, recently ratified a five-year contract that includes key aspects of the district's teacher effectiveness plan, Fischetti wrote in the email.

## ***Much work remains***

For all of its positive changes, Pittsburgh schools must still resolve some serious problems. The district still determines layoffs based on teacher seniority, which means it stands to lose some very talented young teachers.

The district will run a \$21.7 million deficit next year, and is on track to spend its fund balance (or savings account) by 2015. Pension and health insurance costs are projected to grow by \$31 million over the next four years.

Pittsburgh residents have recently been hit with higher city and county taxes, which makes it unlikely they'll agree to tax hikes anytime soon. That means the district's budget problems will require pay and benefit concessions from the school employee unions, which are always difficult to secure.

But instead of blaming charters schools for their problems, Pittsburgh school officials are embracing the competition.

As steel sharpens steel, charter schools are forcing Pittsburgh Public Schools into becoming more efficient and effective. And that bodes well for Pittsburgh's children and taxpayers.

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