



**KEEPING THE PROMISE** The Case for Reform in the Pittsburgh Public Schools

**Mayor's Commission  
on Public Education**

September 2003

## About the Commission

By the summer of 2002, it had become painfully clear that the Pittsburgh Public Schools—once among the finest school districts in America, urban or otherwise—were struggling terribly. Most troubling were the undeniable signs that a majority of its students were under-achieving in the classroom, casting dark clouds over their futures. Community concern ran so deep that the Pittsburgh philanthropic community, long-time supporters of public education, took the extraordinary step of withholding funding from the district until an agenda for reform could be developed.

In response to mounting concerns, Mayor Tom Murphy established a Commission on Public Education to open a community dialogue around the conditions of the city's public schools and what is necessary to improve them. The 38 citizens recruited to serve on the Commission brought the diversity, skills, and expertise that an in-depth examination of a large urban public school system demanded. They represented a cross-section of the city: major employers and small business people, educators, legal experts, clergy, and parents from more than a dozen neighborhoods.

Their work began in September 2002. Each Commission member was assigned to one of three committees that examined specific areas of concern within the schools: student performance, finance, and governance. They were assisted by an administrative staff, the RAND Corporation, and the Pennsylvania Economy League. For nearly nine months, the Commission, its staff, and consultants reviewed research and best practices related to schools and learning; studied the experiences of other urban districts that have embarked on reform; and interviewed Pittsburgh Board of Education members, administrators, and teachers. To take the pulse of the community, the Commission held a series of meetings throughout the city and listened to the ideas and concerns of parents, senior citizens, neighborhood advocates, business owners, religious organizations, and others.

The Commission's findings and recommendations are summarized in this report. Their recommendations, unanimously approved, are offered as a blueprint for reform in the hope that the city, its citizens and government, will rally to the cause of achieving excellence, equity, and efficiency in the Pittsburgh Public Schools.

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## Introduction

The Pittsburgh Public Schools are beset by poor student performance, high costs, high taxes, and a very public record of failed leadership and governance, and community indifference—problems that dim the prospects of more than 35,000 children, tarnish a reputation for excellence that once attracted families to the city, and threaten efforts to ready Pittsburgh for a new century of progress and prosperity.

These problems demand immediate action. Fifty-four percent of all students in the Pittsburgh Public Schools cannot read at grade level. Even greater numbers are not proficient in math. One-fourth of ninth-graders do not graduate. Significant learning gaps separate African-American students from white students, and students whose families are poor from those more affluent. Half-a-dozen elementary, middle, and high schools are in such critical condition that more than eight out of 10 of their students are unable to read at grade level. Although pockets of excellence can be found and district-wide test scores have shown some improvement, overall achievement levels remain alarmingly low.

Meanwhile, few districts in the nation are as costly to operate as the Pittsburgh Public Schools. Our schools do not reflect the considerable investment the public has made in them.

- The district shoulders expensive policies based more on politics than on merit or efficient use of tax dollars, such as spending more than \$10 million a year to keep open many more school buildings than are justified by shrinking enrollments and declining birth rates.

- Its fund balance is so unnecessarily large that freeing only a portion of it could immediately pay for a two-mill property tax reduction and seed a fund to improve student performance in the classroom.
- District payrolls carry one staff position for every seven students—one of the most expensive ratios in Pennsylvania.
- City teachers are the highest paid in the nation—when salaries are adjusted for cost of living—but there is no connection between pay and performance. This well-trained staff would be even more valuable if the most successful and experienced teachers were assigned to low-performing schools, where they are needed most.

For years, the community looked to the Pittsburgh Board of Education for the strong, united leadership these conditions demand. **Sadly, the elected school board is part of the problem, rather than the solution.** Its ability to effectively govern is eroded by mistrust of one another and of the administration, narrow local interests, and the distractions of politics and race. Exceptionally low turnout for school board elections leaves the door open to special interest candidates to win seats with relatively few votes, then shape policy to suit their narrow constituencies rather than the best interests of the district as a whole.

### **Pittsburgh Deserves Better Schools Today, Not Tomorrow**

**Pittsburgh's children deserve much better.** They deserve improved schools now, not tomorrow when it will be too late for many. **The 21st-century economy requires a higher level of education, not lower.** Decent-paying, unskilled jobs are no longer abundant. Students who are not proficient in reading and math today enter the workforce at a serious disadvantage. Even more difficult futures await those who fail to graduate.

The quality of the schools affects not just the children enrolled, but everyone who lives or works in the city. Good schools provide smart employees for our businesses, increase the value of our homes, steer youth toward productive activities and away from crime, and create an educated citizenry. High-cost schools with a track record of failure succeed only in driving away families, businesses, and jobs.

All of us deserve better from the public schools—and all of us must demand better. This is a citywide issue of the utmost urgency. The quality of a city's public schools reflects a city's commitment to the well-being of its children and to its own future. Excellence will be achieved in the schools only if excellence is demanded by the community. High levels of student achievement will require a concerted city-wide effort with intensive parent and community involvement. From neighborhood celebrations of student achievement

to coalitions of engaged and committed parents, this community can and must demand excellence so that all of our schools become high performers and all of our children become high achievers.

**Other Cities Find the Courage to Reform their Schools**

Pittsburgh does not suffer these troubles alone. Low achievement and inequities among students and schools are concerns common among urban districts. So are school boards crippled by mistrust, stubborn feuding, and political division.

**The good news is that such problems are not impossible to solve.** Education reform is spreading across the nation. Urban districts such as Boston, Cleveland, Chicago, and Seattle have found the courage to confront their shortcomings and the resolve to travel the hard road of reform, and have arrested decline and reversed downward trends.

With such goals in mind, the Mayor's Commission on Public Education in September 2002 began an exhaustive examination of student performance, governance, and finance in the Pittsburgh Public Schools.

**Fundamental Change Will Work; Quick Fixes Will Not**

The Commission's nine-month investigation led to one indisputable conclusion: **Bold solutions and fundamental change are necessary to achieve excellence** in the Pittsburgh Public Schools, offer all students the opportunity of an

enriching education, and brighten the city's future. Staying the current course, making short-term financial fixes, or making only changes that can be undone in the next election simply will not do. The problems are systemic.

We know what high-performing school districts look like. Attention is riveted on improving student performance. Staff and finances are used only in ways that best achieve that objective. Administrators and teachers are charged with providing effective instruction and are given full support. A high level of student performance is expected, and the school board and administration are held accountable for achieving it. Family involvement and investment in their children's education is directly associated with high achievement. A community's expectation of excellence is critical to supporting schools, teachers, and student efforts that bring about greater levels of accomplishment. In short, a community that demands excellence is a prerequisite for change.

**An Appointed School Board is the Key to Success**

After careful study, the Commission concluded that **Pittsburgh will not have a high-performance school district without fundamental, structural change in the way the public schools are governed.**

The current elected-board governance structure contributes to high costs, high taxes, and the neglect of poor student performance and widespread inequity. An upset at the polls does not guarantee such conditions will change for long.

The board majority, for example, has changed three times over the last seven years. As long as board members are elected by geographic areas—and by small numbers of voters concerned mostly about narrow issues—a leadership crisis will likely resurface and, again, undermine the schools.

Pittsburgh and its children deserve a Board of Education steeped in expertise and committed to a high standard of academic performance and sound management of finances and facilities—a board that reflects the city’s racial, geographic, and economic diversity, and places the need to improve the performance of all students above all else.

**The Commission is convinced that improving student performance and lowering taxes is possible—but only with the unified sense of purpose, discipline, and consistency over many years that a carefully appointed Board of Education can provide.**

The Commission recommends that such a board be appointed by the Mayor—the one official who is elected citywide and who is responsible for the welfare of the city as a whole. To ensure balance and quality, members of the new board will be chosen from a pool of candidates selected by a diverse nominating committee. Mayor-appointed school boards have proven successful in other large cities where citizens have fought to overcome failed leadership that stood in the way of turning declining schools around.

**Tax Reductions Today and Tomorrow are Possible**

**Taxes should be reduced even before a mayor-appointed board is seated.** Funds are available to do so. Making long-overdue fiscal changes will provide additional opportunities to reduce taxes, as well as opportunities to fund initiatives to improve academic achievement.

**The Commission recommends reducing property taxes by two mills immediately and creating a fund for improving student performance.** Lowering the district’s unnecessarily large fund balance to a reasonable level will allow the Pittsburgh Public Schools to do both.

In the coming years, **a mayor-appointed Board of Education with the expertise and the will to close unneeded schools could save the district more than \$10 million a year**, which could be used to reduce taxes and fund additional educational initiatives. To ensure such savings, it is recommended that an **independent Schools Consolidation Commission** be created with the expertise to assess district properties and the will to trim excess capacity. The Mayor’s Commission estimates that, in light of an expected decline in enrollment, the board could cut the property tax levy nearly in half over the next decade, while maintaining current pupil–teacher ratios and investing \$8.5 million a year in new instructional initiatives.

The Mayor's Commission offers two additional recommendations it considers essential to improving the schools now and in years to come:

- District leadership should send a clear, unified message of their dedication to improving student performance — one that sets high expectations for all students, promises a new era of openness, welcomes parent and community participation, and holds the board and administration accountable for achieving the goals set.
- An independent alliance for school improvement should be recruited to monitor the progress of reform, regularly report back to the public, and engage a range of community partners in efforts to improve the educational outcomes of students.

Summaries of all of the Mayor's Commission's findings and recommendations follow. They are the product of thorough research and are offered as a **blueprint for the fundamental reform** which the Commission is convinced is necessary to move the Pittsburgh Public Schools forward, united and dedicated to the mission of becoming not just a good urban school district, but a model of excellence and equity in public education.

## **Findings**

A news report on the latest conflict to divide the Board of Education. Another round of bleak standardized test scores. A tax bill that is high by any measure. The symptoms of dysfunction within the Pittsburgh Public Schools are increasingly apparent.

For nine months, the Mayor's Commission on Public Education investigated the school district, its governance structure and current leadership, financial condition, and performance of its students. Serious shortcomings were found at every turn — complex, troubling problems deeply rooted within the school system. Some have been matters of public debate. Others are less known. Most are related in some way to the failings of a school district leadership and governance that has lacked the unity, expertise, vision, and political will necessary to solve them, and a community that has been disengaged and has not held that structure accountable.

The findings of the Commission are reported in the following section. While many document problems found in the classroom and board room, not all of the news is bad. Perhaps the most hopeful is that other communities with similarly dysfunctional public school systems have rallied around a flag of reform, demanded improvement, worked hard, and achieved it.

54% of our students  
cannot read at  
grade level.



# Student Performance

in the Pittsburgh Public Schools

**Measured against the absolute standard of proficiency—  
Do students have the reading and math skills they need to  
succeed?—achievement levels in Pittsburgh are alarmingly low.**

Pittsburgh's elementary and middle schools perform somewhat better than those of other urban districts with high proportions of low-income and minority students. But the city's public schools are far from good enough when measured on a broader scale.

The Pittsburgh Public Schools score well below statewide reading and math averages in the Pennsylvania System of School Assessment (PSSA). The majority of the city's public school students cannot read and do math at their grade level. PSSA scores for 2003 tests taken by students in grades 5, 8, and 11 paint a disturbing picture:

- Only 46% of Pittsburgh public school students can read at grade level.
- Only 39% of Pittsburgh public school students can do math at grade level.

**Wide achievement gaps exist between students of different races,  
income levels, and schools.**

- Only 34% of low-income students in Pittsburgh can read at grade level and only 29% are proficient in math. Low-income students include those whose family incomes fall below poverty levels, as well as students whose family incomes are above poverty level, but low enough to qualify them for the federal free and reduced-price lunch program. About 60% of Pittsburgh public school students were from low-income families in 2001–2002.
- The learning gap among races is even wider. Only 31% of African-American students can read at grade level and only 25% are proficient in math.

The district's data confirm that race matters in Pittsburgh: African-American students have lower scores than white students even after accounting for the effects of poverty and single parenting.

An enormous variation in student achievement is also found among schools. Among individual schools, the proportion of students who can read at grade level ranges from a commendable 91% to a deplorable 3%. The proportion of students achieving proficiency in math is similarly varied, from 78% on the high end to *zero* on the low end. This level of inequality threatens the viability of the entire system.

**Low student performance could result in diminished local control  
over school matters and the imposition of other sanctions.**

Proficiency in reading and mathematics is required by law, and districts and schools whose students fail to meet prescribed standards risk serious sanctions. The federal No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) requires all

61%

of our students  
cannot do math  
at grade level.

## Race matters

African-American students have lower scores than their white classmates.

## Achievement gaps

Educational quality varies wildly from school to school—in some schools, 91% of students read at grade level; other schools have as few as 3%.

**1/4 of our  
ninth-graders  
fail to graduate.  
Graduation rates  
are even lower  
among African-  
American students.**

students in all states, districts, and schools to be proficient in reading and math within 12 years. In response to the federal law, Pennsylvania enacted Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) standards for all schools.

AYP standards set low thresholds for 2003: at least 35% of students in all schools and districts must be proficient in math and 45% in reading. Yet, Pittsburgh's public schools have reason for concern. According to the initial assessment by the state, only a third of Pittsburgh's schools met all AYP targets in Spring 2003.

In one-third of the district's schools, the failure to meet AYP targets in 2003 has put them on a state warning list. Another third of the district's schools failed to meet AYP targets in both 2002 and 2003. As a result, they are targeted for "school improvement," and all of their students must be given options to transfer to higher-achieving schools, at the district's expense. Schools that continue to fail to meet AYP targets in future years face more serious sanctions, including possible replacement of staff and state takeover. The problem is especially acute at the high-school level. Only one high school in the district—the High School for Creative and Performing Arts—avoided the state warning list. While the district is appealing over half of the AYP findings, the fact remains that two-thirds of city schools failed to meet the state's initial assessment of adequate yearly progress.

**Graduation rates are low, particularly among African-American students, and attendance levels throughout the district are disappointing.**

As many as one-fourth of all ninth-graders in the Pittsburgh Public Schools do not graduate. Current enrollment figures suggest that the graduation rate among African-American students is substantially lower.

Given such a high dropout rate, it is not surprising that attendance is low throughout the district. Every day in the high schools, 15% of the students are missing class.

**Although scores are still low, recent trends in Pittsburgh Public Schools test scores provide reason for hope.**

Not all of the academic indicators in the Pittsburgh Public Schools are grim. Student proficiency levels remain low, but PSSA scores in reading and math show gradual improvement. In fact, gains in the Pittsburgh Public Schools over the last five years have outpaced those of the state.

Reading and math scores on district-mandated assessments in early elementary grades have also improved in the past one to two years. Such results raise hope of improved fifth-grade PSSA test scores in the near future.

## If we fail?

Failure to meet state standards for math and reading proficiency will result in serious and costly sanctions.

Too few students,  
too many buildings:  
under-used  
facilities cost an  
unnecessary  
\$10 million a year.

# The Financial Condition

of the Pittsburgh Public Schools

**The Pittsburgh Public Schools are very expensive to operate—  
a high-cost school district by any reasonable measure.**

The cost per pupil in the Pittsburgh Public Schools is \$11,651—a sum that is 39% greater than the median per pupil cost throughout Pennsylvania and 19% higher than schools in Allegheny County, according to 2000–2001 data.

**Too many school buildings and too few pupils to fill them saddle  
the district with excess capacity and higher than necessary  
operating costs.**

Pittsburgh keeps open far more public school facilities than it needs—a fact widely accepted by both administrators and elected officials, but one the Board of Education has been unable to effectively address. In 2002–2003, the district’s 35,147 students attended classes in school buildings that have the capacity to accommodate 50,851 students. The excess capacity—now more than 30%—is expected to grow unless steps are taken to manage it more prudently. Less building space will be needed over the next 10 years, when falling birth rates and fewer school-age children are expected to shrink enrollment by more than 10,000 students. The district will need to close as many as three schools a year to eliminate excess capacity and stay in step with declining enrollment.

Keeping excess facilities open is expensive. The average annual operating cost for each building is about \$171,000. Scheduled capital renovations and repairs range from \$100,000 to \$500,000 a year. Administrative staff and shared teachers in special subjects, such as music and art, add to the overhead.

Excess building capacity also contributes to the costly pupil-to-staff ratios that have fallen to 7 to 1, compared to the statewide average of 10 to 1. Only half of the Pittsburgh Public Schools’ staff of 5,640 are classroom teachers. The state median is 59%.

Closing excess facilities will save the district more than \$10 million a year over the next several years.

**Public school teacher salaries in the Pittsburgh Public Schools  
are the highest in the nation, and classes are characterized by  
relatively low pupil-to-teacher ratios.**

Teachers in the Pittsburgh Public Schools enjoy the highest maximum salary—when adjusted for cost of living—of any of the 100 largest school districts in the nation, according to the American Federation of Teachers.

## High-cost education

At \$11,651, our cost per student is 39% greater than the state median.

## Teachers are well-paid

Pittsburgh teachers are the highest paid in the nation.

And they reach the highest step on the pay scale in only 10 years — the fourth shortest path to the top in the country.

Offering high salaries provides the district with an effective tool for recruiting and retaining the best teachers. Teachers should be paid well, but the district lacks a system to ensure that it recruits, retains, and rewards the best.

Pittsburgh's pupil-to-teacher ratio of 14 to 1 is low compared to the state average of 16 to 1. Keeping open too many buildings when there are too few students to fill them contributes to this low ratio, which is expected to continue to drop as enrollments decline.

**Unlike most urban school districts, the Pittsburgh Public Schools are currently fiscally sound. In fact, the potential for significant cost savings exists, based on the district's excess building and staff capacity and likely enrollment decline.**

Several factors suggest the district will be able to maintain good fiscal health for the near future and should be able to reduce taxes and still have funds available to invest in targeted, proven initiatives to improve student performance. For example:

- The district has accumulated an unnecessarily large fund balance of more than \$82 million — a sum twice as high as what some lawmakers believe is appropriate. The fund balance — simply assets minus liabilities — represents undesignated money available to the district. In Pittsburgh, the balance represents about 17% of the district's current budget. A proposed state law would limit such reserves to 8%.
- Funds set aside by the district for property tax assessment reductions are greater than what will likely be needed for refunds.
- The Governor's current budget proposal provides additional funding for local tax reductions, as well as money for early childhood education, full-day kindergarten, reducing class sizes, tutoring, and staff development.

The Board of Education could improve the district's financial health even more by making prudent decisions to reduce excess building capacity, staff, and other costs as student enrollment continues to decline.

The district has accumulated a fund balance of more than \$82 million — more than twice as much as experts believe is necessary.

Successful school districts make decisions with one question in mind: Does this improve the education of our children?

# Leadership and Governance

in the Pittsburgh Public Schools

**The ability of the Pittsburgh Board of Education to effectively lead efforts to improve the performance of all students in all city public schools is seriously compromised by mistrust, a failure to focus on the needs of the entire system, and a lack of vision.**

The sharp divisions among members of the Board of Education and a mistrust of the administration have been well publicized in recent years and continue, unabated, despite low student achievement, wide achievement gaps, rising costs, and high taxes.

Successful districts are governed by board members who are willing to work with one another and with administrators toward a common vision. Decisions are made with one question in mind: Does this improve the education of our children?

Several characteristics of school governance in Pittsburgh compromise the ability of the Board of Education to effectively address critical education issues.

- The board lacks a common vision and sense of mission.
- Bitter dissension robs the board of focus and any hope of mustering the kind of unified commitment needed to tackle difficult issues.
- The board, in its course of business, too often fails to substantively address the learning needs of the district's children.
- Board members hold themselves accountable only to the constituencies that elected them and lack a broader perspective.
- The board lacks a mechanism that holds them accountable for their actions.

**Long-simmering tensions among members of the Board of Education and between several board members and the administration have diminished the abilities of both to serve the interests of the district's schoolchildren.**

Several factors contribute to the difficult relationship between the board and administration.

- Sharp policy differences divide several board members and the superintendent.

## Discord

between members cripples the school board's ability to effectively address education issues.

## Who's in charge?

The role of the board and the role of the superintendent are muddled, causing conflicts and duplication of effort.

## Voter apathy

Low voter turnouts enable candidates focused on narrow interests to win school board seats.

- Conflict over the appropriate roles of board members and superintendent arises from a lack of understanding of the difference between management and governance.
- Mistrust of the administration and the fact that few board members have the professional skills necessary to address all of the issues inherent in governing an organization as large and complex as the Pittsburgh Public Schools has led to the hiring of consultants who second-guess the work of the administration, heightening tensions and further blurring lines of authority, appropriate roles, and communication.
- The state's school code has not been modified for over 50 years. As written, the school code can be read to give the board full control of every aspect of operations.

**Voter turnout in Pittsburgh's school board elections has been disappointingly low and has opened the door to special interest candidates to assume control over district-wide policy and practices.**

In the 2001 primary election, when five Board of Education seats were at stake, 32% of the city's registered voters went to the polls, but only 22% cast ballots for school board candidates. Such a low turnout is not unusual. School board elections in Pittsburgh have historically drawn disappointing numbers. In recent elections, school board seats have been decided by turnouts as small as 7% of the registered voters in a particular district.

**A permanent change in the structure of school governance—not merely a temporary fix at the polls—is necessary if the district is to avoid the kind of leadership crisis that has undermined the city's public schools in recent years.**

Electing school board members by geographic area invites a parochial view of issues brought before the board. Members too often feel obligated to consider the narrow interests of their constituents first, rather than what is in the best interests of the district as a whole. The current governance structure of the Pittsburgh Board of Education has contributed to a crisis in leadership that has aggravated the problems of poor student performance, high costs, high taxes, and gross inequities in the quality of education offered to all students.

Even if the next election delivers a more capable board, the incentives inherent in the structure of a geographically based elected board mean that the problems that render the current school board ineffective will inevitably resurface.

A fundamental, structural solution to the problems of school governance is necessary if the district is to see an agenda of fundamental reform through to its end.

**Several urban districts, when faced with a similar leadership crisis, successfully abandoned elected school boards in favor of boards appointed by mayors.**

Education reform is sweeping the nation's urban school districts. Several urban districts experiencing low student performance and dysfunctional leadership have abandoned their elected school boards. Some of these cities ask their mayors to appoint all school board members. In others, a mix of mayor-appointed and elected members sits on the school board. Citizen outrage over student performance and school conditions led to fundamental changes in school governance in cities such as Cleveland, Boston, and Chicago. In each, mayors are asked to help efforts to improve the public schools by appointing competent, disciplined, and dedicated school boards to govern them.

## Models for success

In many urban districts, citizen outrage over poor education drove the change from elected boards to appointed boards.

## Recommendations

A high-performance, fiscally responsible, more accountable school district is within the city's reach. But it will require an agenda of bold, fundamental reform, and a new openness to community involvement. The Mayor's Commission on Public Education developed such an agenda based on nine months of careful study. The agenda is summarized in the following pages as a series of principal and supporting recommendations.

The breadth of the problems that grip the Pittsburgh Public Schools today requires a comprehensive, long-term solution. The Commission is convinced that the following five principal recommendations, enacted as a complete package, represent such a solution—a blueprint for better school performance, higher expectations, greater fiscal responsibility, greater accountability, and excellence and equity in the city's public schools. Putting this blueprint in place will require the resolve of all sectors of the community and a citywide expectation of excellence for the schools.

# 1. Appoint the Board of Education from a pool of qualified candidates.

## Principal Recommendations

### 1. **The Pittsburgh Board of Education should be appointed by the Mayor from a pool of candidates provided by a nominating commission whose members reflect the racial, geographic, professional, and economic diversity of the city.**

In identifying candidates, the nominating commission will consider factors that include race, gender, economic, and geographic diversity; parent involvement; and professional expertise in areas such as education, administration, law, and finance. The Mayor's nominees will require confirmation by the City Council, and their four-year terms will be staggered. Other characteristics of the board include:

- The appointed Board of Education will continue to govern the district and approve its annual budget, but it will not levy taxes. The Pennsylvania constitution prohibits an appointed body from levying taxes.
- The city will assume taxing authority for the school district. Statutes will require the city to provide adequate funding to meet school district needs.
- As is common practice, the school administration will prepare a balanced budget, which is subject to revision and approval by the school board.
- The school board will ask City Council to continue or to revise the existing tax rate, depending on what is needed to balance the school budget. Raising or lowering taxes will require the city to enact legislation. No action is necessary if the tax rate remains the same.
- Council will not have a line item veto or any other power to amend the school budget.
- State legislation will be required to implement an appointed school board.

Fundamental school reform requires a unified board that is able to work in harmony with the school administration. It requires a board with an abiding commitment to improving the classroom performance of all students. It requires a board with the expertise to govern a \$486-million-a-year school system and the will to make tough decisions to trim millions in unnecessary spending that contributes to high costs and high taxes.

The current, elected Board of Education lacks these essential qualities. Moreover, the basic structure of the current governance model—a school board elected by geographic district—invites the deep divisions and narrow perspectives that undermine the schools and the system. No matter what the result of the next election, the leadership crisis seen today will inevitably resurface as long as board members are chosen by district in low-turnout elections, which enable small groups of voters with narrow agendas to gain considerable sway over policy affecting all students and taxpayers.

## Reflect the city

A nominating committee will ensure representation.

## More account- able

Vesting responsibility in the Mayor will ensure that the schools are accountable to the city as a whole.

## 2. Reduce taxes

Trim fund balance to reduce property taxes by two mills and seed a Student Performance Improvement Fund.

The Commission is convinced that a fundamental, structural solution to the problems of school governance is necessary to move an agenda of reform forward and that a Board of Education appointed by the Mayor is the best option. With the responsibility of selecting the board, the Mayor inherits a degree of accountability for how the schools perform. Vesting responsibility in the Mayor will ensure that the schools are accountable to the city as a whole, rather than to small, well-organized interest groups. The Commission believes that such circumstances provide the incentive to choose members on the basis of competence and commitment to improving the entire school system so that both students and taxpayers gain. Early evidence suggests that the recent move to a mayor-appointed school board in Boston and other U.S. cities has contributed to improvements in city school systems that face challenges similar to Pittsburgh's.

**2. The school district's unnecessarily large fund balance should be pared to allow for an immediate reduction in property taxes and the creation of a Student Performance Improvement Fund. In addition, further tax reductions and investments in student achievement should be considered with funds saved from trimming excess building capacity.**

The city's public schools keep more than \$82 million in reserve—about 17% of the district's total operating budget. It is an exorbitant amount for any school district to hold in reserve. It is particularly troubling in a district where taxpayers shoulder a heavy burden. Most school districts maintain an annual reserve, or fund balance, of about 8% of total operating funds.

For Pittsburgh, a school system more complex than many, the Commission recommends that the district maintain a fund balance of 10%—about \$50 million. Paring the fund balance to this level will result in an immediate savings of at least \$30 million. The Commission recommends investing the windfall in the following manner:

- Immediately reduce property taxes by two mills.
- Seed a new Student Performance Improvement Fund with \$8.5 million that will be used to fuel the drive toward marked improvement in academic achievement throughout the district.

Such a plan represents a measured approach to shrinking the fund balance over a reasonable period of time.

School district leadership should also work to “right-size” the system. For far too long, prudent management of the district's cost structure has been neglected. If this neglect continues, failure to trim excess funds and facilities, and to otherwise adapt to shrinking student enrollment, will continue

to waste public funds that could be invested in academic improvement initiatives and be used to reduce taxes further. A lean, efficient, yet highly effective school district requires sound fiscal management—a practice the current, elected Board of Education has neglected for too many years.

The Commission is confident that right-sizing through prudent management of district finances and resources will provide the opportunity to invest as much as \$8.5 million a year in the Student Performance Improvement Fund and reduce property taxes by an additional four mills over the next decade.

**3. An independent Schools Consolidation Commission should be appointed to efficiently, professionally, and objectively manage school district facilities as a real estate portfolio.**

To curb unnecessary spending, close unneeded facilities, and professionally manage district resources, the Commission recommends creating an independent Schools Consolidation Commission with the expertise to assess district properties and the will to trim excess capacity. The Schools Consolidation Commission will present to the school board a “package” of facilities to open and close that the board will vote to approve or reject.

- Its recommendations will be based on projected enrollments and other objective criteria, including geographic balance and student diversity, to make sure the district maintains the appropriate number of buildings.
- The work of the Consolidation Commission will be based on a plan of grade configurations, such as K–5 or K–8, and academic programs, such as magnet schools, that the administration and school board decide best promote student achievement. The Consolidation Commission will carefully consider how its decisions about specific schools will affect student achievement.
- The Board of Education will be required to approve or reject the recommended package without modification or substitution.

The elected school board has long lacked the political will to reduce the number of unnecessary facilities, particularly those within their respective districts. The price of preserving neighborhood schools is high. Based on state standards, the buildings open today can accommodate 30% more students than are currently enrolled. Even considering recent recommendations for small class sizes, 25% of the district's building capacity is unused. Under-used buildings are expensive, adding unnecessary operating, maintenance, staff, teacher, and administrative costs to the budget. Excess capacity contributes to the district's 7-to-1 pupil-to-staff ratio—one of the most expensive in the state. Costs are expected to climb higher

## 3. Consolidate facilities wisely

via an independent Schools Consolidation Commission with the expertise to assess need, and the will to close underused facilities.

## 4. Pursue excellence together

Community expectation and district leadership provide the energy for change.

as enrollment continues to decline. The district also has vacant buildings it can sell now, and is expected to have more in the future. Trimming excess capacity could save more than \$10 million a year.

Consolidation should be done carefully, with improving school performance in mind. The district should take advantage of the academic and social advantages of small schools in assessing its facilities decisions. One option is to move to district-wide K–8 schools, which could reduce disruptive transitions. Another is to make every school a school of distinction. Each school would include a special program—intensive science or foreign language, for example—to enhance the core academic achievement of students. Research suggests that what truly matters for children is to be in a school where they are known and where curriculum can be personalized, is coherent throughout the school and clearly progresses from grade to grade, and where staff take responsibility for each child.

**4. The school board and the administration (district leadership) should send a clear and unified message to the public of their commitment to improving student performance—one that sets high expectations for all students, invites the participation of parents and the community, and holds district leadership accountable for achieving the goals it sets.**

More specifically, district leadership should:

- Establish measurable and specific goals for achievement, including increasing proficiency levels in reading and math, reducing the achievement gap between races and between low-income students and more affluent students, improving graduation and attendance rates, increasing the number of students enrolled in advanced courses, and improving post-graduation outcomes.
- Agree on a clear strategy for achieving those goals, aggressively publicize the strategy, and pursue it in a coherent, consistent, sustained manner.
- Actively seek new ways to intensively involve parents, businesses, religious institutions, and other community organizations in the education of the city’s children.
- Report to the public each year on the district’s progress toward meeting its goals.

The people of Pittsburgh have not heard a clear message about school district goals and plans. They have not heard a clear message describing the district’s progress. District leadership has not been able to achieve the

kind of consensus necessary to produce a clear message or strategy for improving education in the city’s public schools. One of the school board’s primary responsibilities should be to rally parents and the community behind a drive for academic excellence, but there is little evidence that the current elected board takes this responsibility seriously. Too often, the board neglects the fundamental issue of student achievement. When the board does address educational issues, it does so in contentious ways that undermine the district’s own initiatives.

Improving the performance of all students in the Pittsburgh Public Schools demands from district leadership a clarity of purpose, a strategy for achieving desired results, the willingness to cultivate and make use of the resources of family and community, and the courage to be held accountable for school outcomes.

**5. An independent alliance for school improvement should be recruited to monitor the progress of reform, regularly report back to the public, and engage a range of community partners in the effort to improve the educational outcomes of public school students.**

The bold agenda of reform recommended by the Commission will not be accomplished overnight or without controversy. The Commission concludes that an independent alliance of community members is needed to watch over the process, keep the public focused on improving the schools, ensure accountability, and link the schools with diverse resources within the community.

Every major city that has embarked on fundamental school reform has had as its partner an empowered civic organization. These community alliances contribute in various ways. They help fund school improvement programs and provide student scholarships. They build partnerships with businesses, institutions of higher learning, and other organizations, linking them with schools that can use tutoring, mentoring, and technological and financial support. They help develop academic standards and conduct and publish research on important issues. They also help raise outside funds for the public schools.

## 5. Empower the community

An independent alliance of community members should monitor the reform process, keeping the public apprised of progress.

Amend school code to define responsibilities: the board *decides* policy, the superintendent *implements* policy.

# Supporting Recommendations

## Governance

The move to a mayor-appointed school board is not expected to be easy or quick. The problems facing the Pittsburgh Public Schools, however, demand immediate attention. The Commission recommends the following steps be taken immediately to enable district leadership to more effectively respond to the urgent needs of the public schools.

**School governance should follow modern management principles, entrusting the Board of Education with deciding issues of policy and the superintendent with implementing policy. These responsibilities should be clearly defined and included in the school code.**

The responsibilities of the board and the superintendent should be aligned in ways that best advance the work of the schools. The board should determine all questions of general policy. The focus of the board should be on the learning and achievement of the city's public school students. The superintendent should act as the district's Chief Executive Officer, whose role is to implement policy.

To eliminate confusion, these responsibilities should be clear and formalized. At present, the 50-year-old state code gives the Board of Education broad powers. In fact, the board can, if it chooses, micro-manage a district to the extent that the role of the superintendent becomes little more than that of a highly paid onlooker. However, effective school boards realize that for the schools to be successful, administrators must be given the latitude to apply their skills toward making the schools safe havens for learning where all students are afforded the opportunity to perform at the highest levels.

**The Board of Education should acknowledge and formalize the responsibilities of the Board President, which include cultivating a shared sense of mission, managing open communications, encouraging meaningful participation, and fostering civility and cooperation among board members.**

Any board member who assumes—or aspires to assume—the office of Board President should recognize and accept the special responsibilities of that position. No school board can function effectively without leadership from its president. The deep and persistent divisions in the current elected school board are strong indications that such leadership is lacking. A committed Board President must view a decision made by a closely divided vote as a failure of leadership. The school board and the community have the right and the responsibility to hold the Board President to this high standard. Legislative action is not required to implement this recommendation. However, a resolution incorporating the intent of the recommendation should be unanimously adopted by the board.

## Clarify roles

The board and the superintendent should cooperate, not compete.

## Strong leadership

The Board President must take personal responsibility for the smooth and efficient functioning of the board.

## Adjust staff levels

to maintain appropriate pupil-to-staff and pupil-to-teacher ratios.

### **An orientation program for new board members and continuing professional development for all board members should be required.**

School boards in high-performing districts assign themselves the task of continual self-assessment and continuous improvement. In its recent publication, *The Key Work of School Boards*, the National School Boards Association focuses on the importance of this activity. The district should institute both programs. In some states, such support is mandatory at the state level. Many state and national sources offer materials and other resources. Public policy and management and business school resources from the city's universities could be directed toward this effort. The board should hold regular workshops, at least four times a year, for focus and self-assessment.

### **Finance**

#### **The Pittsburgh Public Schools must develop staffing plans to adjust to declining enrollment, which is expected to continue long into the future.**

The Commission recommends that the district adjust its staffing levels so that the pupil-to-staff ratio rises to 8 to 1 and the pupil-to-teacher ratio remains at 14 to 1. Staff reductions, however, should not include "classroom-type" personnel, such as aides and classroom coaches who directly support the educational mission, but are counted as non-teaching personnel in budget documents.

The district has pupil-to-staff and pupil-to-teacher ratios that are among the most costly in Pennsylvania. Enrollment is shrinking and is expected to fall by more than 25% over the next ten years. Given such decline, the district will need to reduce staff by more than 1,300 over the next decade to meet recommended staffing levels.

#### **The local civic, business, and political community should lead the effort to increase state funding to the 50% level consistent with the national average.**

State aid as a percentage of total education funding has declined from a high of 54% in the mid 1970s to the current level of about 36%—well below the national average of 49%. The increase in state funding should be targeted with a special focus on funding early childhood education, increasing special education reimbursements, and paying for the costs of charter schools.

### **The district should adopt a budget process and calendar that matches the state's fiscal year and allows ample time to consider alternatives and accommodate school board and citizen response.**

The district should abandon its January through December fiscal year in favor of the July through June fiscal year used by the state and every other school district in western Pennsylvania.

The calendar should allow for the following to occur before final budget adoption:

- Review of program and facility plans and state appropriations.
- Review of school-by-school preliminary allocations by school staff to align budget requests with program and enrollment needs.
- Identification of potential savings and efficiencies.
- Earlier board involvement in all major budget preparation stages.
- Focus on outcomes and performance.
- An open, transparent process with sufficient public hearings and public testimony.

### **Student Performance**

#### **From the board room to the classroom, every decision should be based on data about how it affects student performance.**

Teachers and administrators need an assessment system aligned with the district's curricula and the state's learning standards that can provide them with timely feedback to improve instruction, hold teachers accountable, and track the progress of individual students. The district, with its new electronic data warehouse, should establish a system capable of providing measures of student achievement throughout the school year and of providing evidence of how effective programs, individual schools, and teachers are in raising student achievement. Reading and math curricula should remain consistent in all schools across the district, as directed by current district policy.

## Change fiscal calendar

Use the July through June fiscal year employed by every other school district in western Pennsylvania.

## Principals: the critical ingredient

Provide incentives to recruit and retain the best principals.

## Invest in excellence

Coaching and professional development can make a difference.

## Success for every student

Take aggressive action to raise proficiency of low-achieving students.

**The district should invest in excellence for all district staff to ensure that it employs the best teachers and principals available.**

High-quality teachers and principals are the critical ingredients for promoting student achievement. To ensure that Pittsburgh's children have access to the best teachers and principals, the board should:

- Provide financial incentives to recruit, retain, and reward principals and teachers who are effective at promoting student achievement. Principal salaries should be raised district-wide to more fairly reflect their responsibilities and to attract more applicants. Bonuses should be available to principals whose schools are effective at raising the achievement levels of their students. Every study on school reform points to the key role of principals in improving student achievement. In cooperation with the union, the district should design a career ladder and compensation system that rewards teachers for effective instruction and for achievement gains among their students.
- Increase coaching support in classrooms and mandatory professional development specifically related to instructional initiatives.
- Focus recruitment and retention policies for teachers and principals on excellence, recruiting the best available principals from within and from outside the district, and changing the point system for ranking teacher applicants to favor the most highly qualified, particularly those with National Board for Professional Teaching Standards certification.

**The district should ensure that low-achieving students have access to the financial, staff, and programmatic resources they need to reach proficiency.**

- The district should provide financial incentives for highly qualified teachers and principals to serve low-achieving students.
- The district should modify its site-based budgeting system to include teacher salaries so that its most challenged schools and students are not assigned less-qualified teachers.
- The district should move forward with plans to offer more extended-day and extended-year programs for students who are not proficient in reading and math. Programs offered in the schools by community organizations should be carefully integrated with the district's instructional programs.
- Programs should be initiated that support innovative parent and community development activities that emphasize educational excellence.

The district is taking steps in the right direction to raise the proficiency of low-achieving students. These include an extended-year program for K-3 children performing at basic or below basic levels of proficiency, and extended-day programs offered in many schools.

However, current staffing policies do not support low-achieving children. Low-income, minority, and under-achieving students are more likely to be taught by the district's lower-paid, less-experienced, and less-educated teachers.

**The district should ensure that all schools operate as safe, well-regulated environments for teaching and learning.**

Parents and teachers in many schools complain that behavior problems are interfering with teaching and learning. Discipline is managed effectively in some schools, but is a serious problem in others.

A comprehensive school discipline strategy should:

- Define a clear discipline policy that is well publicized and consistently enforced.
- Create additional alternative schools or placements so that difficult and disruptive students are given the structure and support they need.
- Include the climate of the school as an evaluation measure of the principal.

**The community should ensure the availability of high-quality early education programs for all preschool children, either operated by the district or in close partnership with the district.**

Outside providers of early care and education should work with the district to coordinate the educational content of their programs. In addition, the district should explore the possibility of expanding its state funding for early childhood.

Research provides substantial evidence that high-quality early education improves children's chances of succeeding in school and later in life. The district operates several preschool programs, including federal Head Start programs. Many other programs in the city do not fall under school district authority. Public funding for early childhood services has historically been very limited. Recently, however, the Governor proposed substantial new funding for preschool programs.

## Safety and civility

Principals must be held accountable for creating a safe, well-regulated environment for learning.

## Early start

Early childhood programs must be available to *all* our children, either through the district or in partnership with community groups.

Citizens of Pittsburgh have a choice and a voice. The Mayor's Commission on Public Education believes this community is ready to recommit itself to our public education system.

## In Conclusion

The Pittsburgh Public Schools reach deep into the pockets of city taxpayers. High costs and high taxes are easier to accept when they are the price of excellence. Unfortunately, that is not the case. Heavy taxpayer investment has not brought excellence to the Pittsburgh Public Schools. Instead, the city's public schools bring home an alarmingly poor report card. When 54% or more of the students cannot read or do math at grade level, no other conclusion is reasonable.

The Mayor's Commission on Public Education was convened one year ago in response to a crisis in school district leadership and governance. The Commission's findings—substandard student outcomes, high taxes, community indifference, and ineffective leadership and governance—can no longer be tolerated. The opportunity to steer the schools onto a course of reform, higher expectations, and better outcomes is at hand.

Other cities have grown weary of poorly performing schools and have acted decisively to reform them. An important lesson learned from their experiences is that **significant improvement is only realized when the community rallies behind a school reform agenda that is clear, well-understood, and widely supported. It takes everyone—schools, families, and community—to improve achievement in the classroom.**

Pittsburgh is no exception. Only broad, sustained community support for a bold agenda of reform will succeed in bringing fundamental change to the Pittsburgh Public Schools.

The Commission is confident that its recommendations represent the best course available to the city for promoting excellence in the classroom, responsibility in the board room, and equal opportunity for all students, regardless of race, family income, or the school they attend.

Excellence in the public schools is vital to the future of Pittsburgh. Excellent schools strengthen neighborhoods. Excellent schools attract families to the city and convince those already living here to stay. Excellent schools produce creative and responsible citizens, and a strong and nimble workforce.

Excellence can be achieved in Pittsburgh, but only with the political, financial, and moral support of the community. It is the hope of the Commission that its recommendations, and the civic energy it took to craft them, will inspire the sustained community support necessary to reform the Pittsburgh Public Schools in fundamental ways and, in doing so, brighten the prospects of the city's children and the city itself.

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