

PUBLIC SCHOOL DAZE

OPENING ESSAY | **MARK KRAMER**

Not long after the beginning of the school year, I spoke with Alan Lesgold, dean of the School of Education at the University of Pittsburgh, to get his perspective on the challenges facing the Pittsburgh Public Schools. When he began to use a football analogy, I was put at ease at first because I'm a sports fan. Then, as the father of two children in the city schools, alarm bells went off as I heard him compare my kids' district to a football team hitting the field with no coaches.

Suddenly, I saw images of teammates running into one another or sprinting in the wrong direction.

A good team, he said, consistently employs proven strategies, and trains and supports its players and coaches over the long term. It doesn't send coaches packing every year, recruit a whole new staff and then expect the team to perform effectively.

"And yet," he insisted, "that's what we're doing in the most challenged schools in Pittsburgh."

High operating costs and declining enrollments have forced the Pittsburgh school district to close dozens of buildings. Principals have had to say good-bye to staff and programs, often those in low- or borderline-achieving schools. Meanwhile, Pennsylvania districts have received nearly \$1 billion less from the state budget in the last two years, which, along with reductions in federal aid, meant a loss in Pittsburgh of \$37.8 million in 2012 alone.

These cuts have come as the district struggles with a high school graduation rate of only 68.5 percent. Only about half a dozen of the district's 56 schools are meeting the state's adequate yearly progress goals. And African American students, as a whole, are scoring significantly lower than their white peers on state assessment tests.

Yet, the Pittsburgh Public Schools boasts a low teacher–student ratio, about one teacher per 13 students. In 2009, the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation awarded the district a \$40 million grant to fortify teacher effectiveness. The Pittsburgh Promise, which provides academically qualified city public school students with college scholarships, has received \$160 million in contributions in five years. In addition to these and other advantages, the district maintains a fairly healthy fund balance of \$85.9 million—for now.

I'm generally pleased with my children's elementary school education. But I wonder why the Pittsburgh school system, which educates 70 percent of the city's children, is not providing a high-quality education for all of its nearly 25,000 students—and I'm concerned about the district's future.

Unique attempts have been made in the past to put the district on the right track. In 2002, only one-half of all Pittsburgh Public Schools students could

read at grade level. Even fewer were proficient in math. As part of an effort to leverage their combined influence to provoke change, three local foundations, including The Heinz Endowments, withheld \$3.5 million in grant funding from the district. In a move unusual for philanthropies at that time, the foundations' leaders publicly announced the funding suspension, contending that the district had an ineffective superintendent, a dysfunctional board and a disengaged citizenry. These conditions, they argued, were preventing the district from being a system worth investing in, one that maintained accountability, met objectives and focused on student performance.

The approach worked—at least in terms of moving people to action. Mayor Tom Murphy assembled a task force of city luminaries in education, finance and management who gave recommendations for improving the district's performance. A more engaged public voted new school board members into office. New leaders were sought and held to performance-based contracts, including the next superintendent, Mark Roosevelt, who used a business-like approach to measure progress and shed liabilities.

Yet, problems continued. While some commended Roosevelt for tough measures such as shuttering 22 schools in 2006, others complained that several closings were made without sensitivity to communities or thorough consideration of other options. Budgetary concerns mounted because of state and federal funding cuts and the fact that the district hadn't had a tax increase in 12 years. The district has put 19 closed buildings up for sale because they are no longer needed at its current size. In fact, the number and age of buildings, programs for the large number of disadvantaged or special education students, and staff expenses have contributed to the district's historically high per-pupil cost, which averaged around \$18,400 last school year, among the highest in the state.

School officials have responded to the financial conditions by eliminating teachers and staff positions, refinancing debt, and closing more schools. But budget deficits are projected to increase significantly, threatening to deplete the district's fund balance.

"Timing's everything," says Roosevelt's successor Linda Lane. "We are in kind of the perfect storm because, during a period when state revenues have declined, we are in the spot of trying to adjust our spending."

These budgetary and operational constraints have helped to make significant academic improvement an elusive goal for the district. State test scores had risen in recent years only to drop

significantly last year. Many staff blamed budget cuts that eliminated positions and programs. A state advisory committee countered that tighter security measures had prevented cheating, which it claimed skewed previous years' results. But that reasoning was roundly criticized by administrators, teachers and parents.

Regardless of the causes, the low scores bring the district's racial achievement gap even more into focus. An annual report by the advocacy group A+ Schools describes a gap of about 30 percent between black and white students' test results. Poverty is a likely factor, yet, some schools with the same racial and socioeconomic demographics are closer to eliminating their gaps. Principals at those schools "run their buildings with intentionality," says A+ Schools Executive Director Carey Harris, and make sure they are offering courses that students find rigorous and relevant. "Schools without a gap are doing things a bit differently—sometimes a lot differently."

Compounding the problems of high per-pupil costs and low academic achievement is the impact of families moving to suburban districts or choosing charter schools, says Carnegie Mellon University economics professor Dennis Epple. State public education funding is supposed to "follow the child," but the reality is more complicated. The departure of children to charters means less money for districts, which already have to pay higher employee and other operational costs. As enrollment declines in traditional schools, says Epple, per-pupil expenditures rise. Sometimes this also means that disadvantaged students are left behind "in a milieu of low student academic achievement and low parental involvement."

Other observers note, however, that districts generally pay charter schools only a portion of the calculated per-pupil expenditure, resulting in those students receiving less state funding for their education than their peers in traditional schools. Also, some charters struggle with the same academic achievement and parental engagement obstacles as other public schools.

To overcome these challenges, says Stanley Thompson, the Endowments' Education Program director, Pittsburgh's school district must engage students more, excite them more and collaborate with them more, so they recognize that they are part of a larger community.

"That's true proficiency," says Thompson. "That's true learning."

And that's the type of school district I want my children to experience before they graduate. *h*