



CITY OF PITTSBURGH
OFFICE OF THE CITY CONTROLLER
Controller Rachael Heisler

October 8, 2024

President and Members
City Council
City of Pittsburgh
Council Chambers
5th Floor
Pittsburgh, PA 15219

Dear Honorable Members of Council:

Attached, please find a report detailing our office's findings on the Pittsburgh Public Schools' Board of Directors. These findings highlight the pressures the district is under, including declining enrollment, growing academic achievement gaps, and a rapidly shrinking reserve fund.

Pittsburgh thrives when our young people thrive. High quality public schools attract and retain families, encourage home purchases, and strengthen our neighborhoods by improving our sense of community. A long-term economic growth plan for the City requires the success of PPS.

In 2022, City Council created an ordinance to form a joint City-School District Partnership. Our office found that there have been no meetings or discussions resulting from this ordinance. This report strongly recommends that both PPS and City Council designate representatives for the Partnership before the end of 2024. Additionally, the report calls for both parties to schedule quarterly meetings moving forward.

It is my privilege to serve as Controller for both the City and the District. In my position, I see every day how connected these entities are. I am grateful to all of you for your shared commitment to the future of our young people and our region.

Sincerely,

Rachael Heisler
City Controller



Office of the City Controller
Rachael Heisler

Special Report:

Pittsburgh Public Schools Board of Directors

Best Practices to Support Board
Effectiveness

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OCTOBER 2024

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Report Highlights

Executive Summary

The City Controller serves as the School Controller upon appointment by the PPS Board of Directors ("the Board"). The Board is comprised of nine members elected by district who, as a body, set and monitor district policies to support high levels of academic achievement.

In recent years, Pittsburgh Public Schools (PPS) has faced a growing number of challenges: declining enrollment, chronic student absences, alarmingly low levels of math and reading proficiency, and a growing budget deficit accompanying the expiration of federal pandemic-era funding while property tax appeals continue to mount.

Managing these problems in a transparent way that centers students and families will require strong cooperation between the board, administration, and community. Yet the board's members have continually voiced frustrations regarding their capacity to properly assess the impacts of their own policies and ability to work cohesively as a body. Similarly, PPS staff survey responses indicate a "toxic culture" where educators feel unsupported and unheard.

This report aims to serve as an informational resource for local policymakers, residents, and PPS stakeholders seeking to understand the school district's current challenges, and to present research-based solutions.

Based on conversations with local, state, and national education advocates, many of the issues faced by PPS are not uncommon among boards across the country, the majority of which are voluntary and unpaid positions. They noted that a school board's limited involvement in managing daily operations in the district is an intended feature of the model, since that authority is meant to be delegated to the superintendent they appoint.

Overcoming these hurdles requires close collaboration between the board and superintendent while also establishing appropriate boundaries in terms of communication and the resolution of problems. The concept of a *policy governance model* is one such framework that aims to resolve these tensions and has been embraced by prominent education advocacy organizations including the National School Boards Association (NSBA).

We first recommend that PPS seek a consulting partner specializing in the improvement of board governance and building a culture of shared trust. Addressing the scope of issues faced by the district will require a board whose members are in consensus and lead as a unified team with the superintendent they've appointed. As evidenced by the self-assessment disclosed by WESA, this is not currently the case, and those disagreements can weaken the board's ability to act cohesively on much larger issues. We identify four areas a consultant should ideally be able to address based on best practices found among effective school boards nationwide. Due to the district's current financial pressures, we stress that this option should only be pursued if it can be accomplished in a budget-neutral way, for example by finding grants and donations from local charitable partners.

Using DC's State Board System as a case study, we examine how structural changes to the district's governance have put its members in a better position to respond to problems while creating new entry points for students and parents to access help. Over time, PPS could benefit from finding similar strategies that link community engagement with the board's policy analysis

function – raising their awareness of the most common problems and allowing them to act accordingly. Investing in some of these structures, like Board staff and an Office of Ombuds, may be worthwhile endeavors, but only after the district has achieved long-term financial stability (or secures external financial support).

This report concludes by recommending that city officials and the school district recommit to the joint “City-School District Partnership” created via City Council ordinance in 2022. While the ordinance is a commendable framework for those discussions, the two bodies have not yet convened and there are no known plans to do as of the publishing of this report. We urge both City Council and the School Board to designate representatives before the end of 2024 to begin planning quarterly public meetings where matters of shared responsibility can be discussed and addressed. The Partnership’s establishing ordinance identifies five areas (school safety, emergency childcare, summer and afterschool programming, universal early childcare and education, and transportation) that could serve as starting points for collaboration.

While the city and school district are facing their own distinct financial challenges, they both ultimately share the same taxpayers and an obligation to make the city an attractive place for families to live and grow. Stagnant population growth (or a rapidly dropping student population, in PPS’s case) remains a pressing issue for both bodies and, to whatever extent they can find ways to maximize the reach of taxpayer dollars, they should. Other districts in distress, like Beaumont, Texas, have undertaken similar endeavors to positive effect, and we recommend that City Council and the PPS Board of Directors commit to biannual meetings in pursuit of those ends.

Policies regarding the district’s finances or student achievement are ultimately a matter for the board and superintendent to determine, and this report will not aim to identify remedies in those areas. Instead, the goal of this report and its accompanying recommendations is to empower the board to work more cohesively and build their capacity as effective policymakers.

Options for Policymakers

Option 1: Adopt a School Board Policy Governance Model

The PPS Board of Directors should seek proposals for school board consultants specializing in policy governance implementation. Given the district’s current financial constraints, this should only be funded in a budget-neutral manner – for example, through grants from local charitable partners. The scope of that work should be to make improvements in the following areas:

- Review and strengthen the Superintendent Evaluation to match the district’s goals.
- Review and streamline board policies.
- Improve communication and data sharing channels.
- Adopt and implement a student-centric policy governance model.

The Board and administration officials should include local education advocacy organizations in the selection process to determine which consultants would yield the most productive results.

Option 2 (Long-Term): Invest in Board Support Staff and Office of Ombuds

Over time, the school district would benefit from structures that: 1) support Board members' policymaking functions, and 2) help parents and students navigate the administration and resolve problems through a neutral party. Support staff for Board members and an Office of Ombuds are potential starting points, *but the district should only pursue them through external financial support or after achieving long-term financial stability.*

Option 3: Recommit to the Pittsburgh City-School District Partnership

While the City-School District Partnership was created by ordinance in 2022, the two bodies have not yet convened. City Council and the School Board should designate representatives before the end of 2024 to schedule quarterly meetings moving forward.

Initial agenda items could cover the five topics identified in the establishing ordinance as a starting point for discussions and public comment should be encouraged.

PPS Recent Challenges

District Financial Outlook

In September 2023, credit rating agency Moody's downgraded the school district's issuer and general obligation limited tax bond ratings from Aa3 to A1 while revising its outlook from stable to negative.¹ The analysis projected an outstanding debt of \$345.4 million for PPS. Positive attributes included the district's "growing and substantial tax base" and moderation of the current operating deficit. Still, declining enrollment driven by a shrinking population and significant competition from cyber and charter schools were named as the leading fiscal challenges in the coming years.

Additionally, a 2022 ruling by a Court of Common Pleas judge found that Allegheny County's calculation of the Common Level Ratio (CLR) was improper and ordered officials to revert to a lower rate. In the absence of regular baseline assessments, the CLR attempts to adjust a property owner's tax liability in relation to market conditions.

Real estate tax revenues account for approximately one-fourth of PPS's total revenues, and the court's decision resulted in a tranche of retroactive refunds for property owners now considered to have overpaid. When combined with a decline in Downtown property values, the result has been a significant drop in revenue for both the City and School District.

PPS Board Policy #721 sets an operating reserve target (represented by the "unassigned fund balance") of at least 5% of General Fund expenditures. As of June 2024, PPS's Chief Financial Officer reported that the district was projected to end the fiscal year with a \$2.2 million operating deficit and \$65.4 reserve (representing 9.42% of expenditures). This was significantly lower than an earlier projection of a \$29.9 million deficit in its 2024 final budget; however, the CFO noted that some of those savings were achieved through subsidizing the salaries of certain eligible positions from remaining federal pandemic-era Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief (ESSER) Act funds and another state-level program, as well as keeping existing vacancies unfilled.² That deficit is projected to grow to \$16.7 million in 2025 and \$17.9 million in 2026, while the reserve fund is projected to fall to \$47.5 million and \$28.6 million, respectively. By 2026, the reserve is expected to once again fall below the 5% threshold. This leaves very little room for future deficit spending and will likely require expenditure and/or revenue changes to some degree in order to maintain the district's solvency.

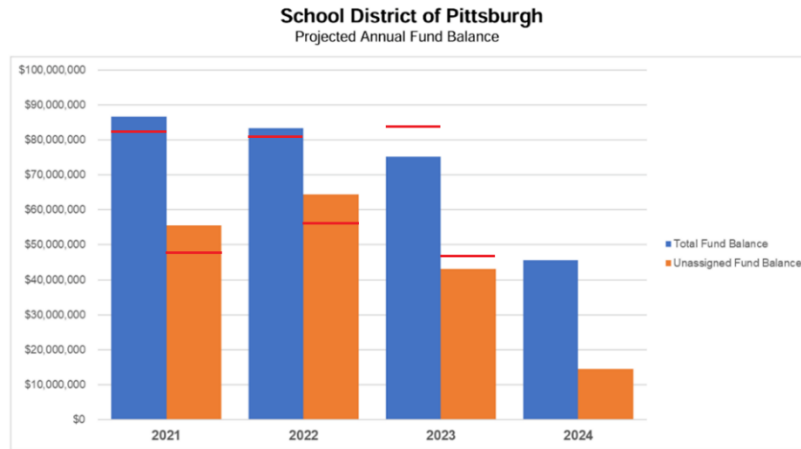
While federal pandemic relief provided temporary funds to stabilize district staff and expand student programs, the expiration of those funds in 2024, potential future reductions in state funding, and a drop in future property tax revenues are all likely to put significant strain on district finances in the coming years.

As shown in the figure below, PPS has a rapidly shrinking fund balance. The reserve, or unassigned fund balance, has dropped at an even faster rate. Actual fund balances, which are denoted by red lines, often end up lower than projections, though the district outperformed projections in 2023.

¹ Chip Barnett, "Moody's cuts Pittsburgh School District's GO, issuer rating to A1," The Bond Buyer. September 27, 2023. <https://www.bondbuyer.com/news/moodys-cuts-pittsburgh-pennsylvania-school-district-to-a1>

² PPS Budget Workshop. June 10, 2024. <https://vimeo.com/showcase/4425491/video/956486112>

Figure 1



Source: PPS 2024 Budget (projections), PPS Annual Comprehensive Financial Reports (actuals)

Per-Student Spending

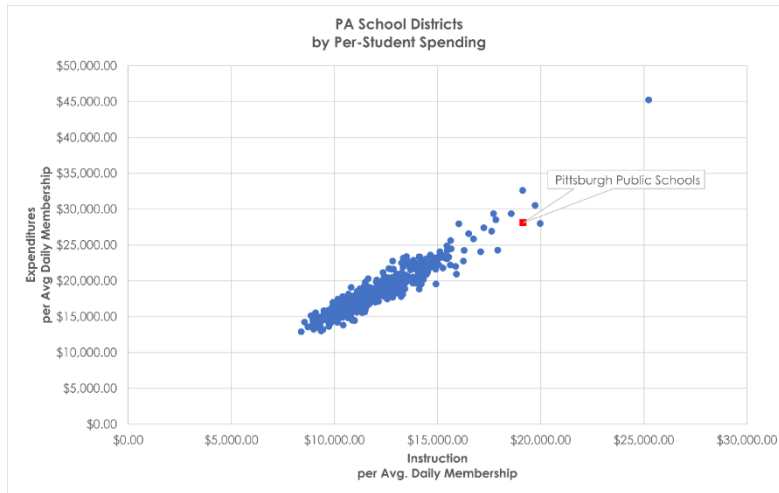
Compared to other school districts in the state, Pittsburgh Public Schools stands out among the rest for its unusually high per-student expenditures.

Using expenditure data from the Pennsylvania Department of Education, we plotted two separate measurements: *Instruction per Average Daily Membership* (which accounts only for instructional expenses) and *Expenditures per Daily Average Membership* (which accounts for all district spending).

As illustrated by **Figure 2**, PPS has among the highest per-student spending of districts statewide on both measurements.

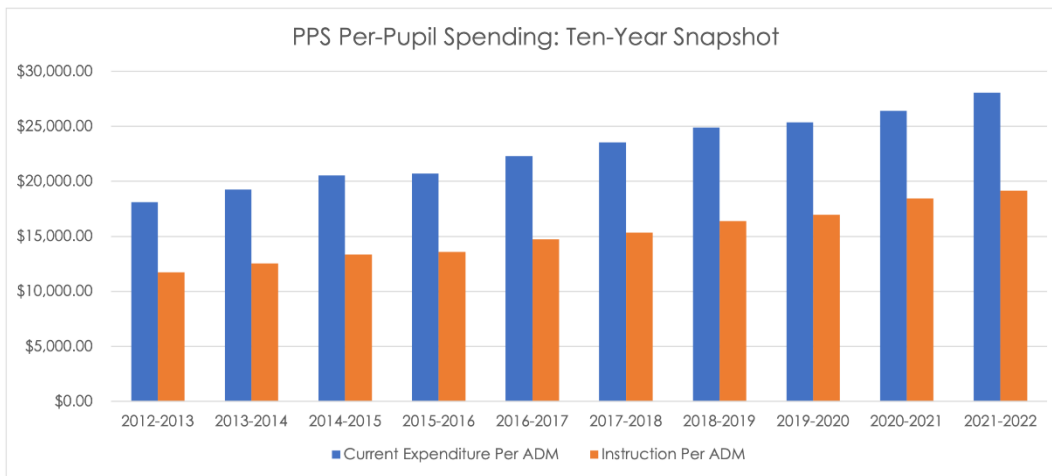
PPS's Instruction per Average Daily Membership was \$19,152 in the 2021-2022 academic year, compared to the statewide average of \$12,383; PPS's Expenditure per Average Daily Membership was \$28,071, compared to the statewide average of \$18,383. These values have steadily risen for PPS over the past decade, shown in **Figure 3**.

Figure 2



Source: PA Department of Education Annual Financial Report Expenditure Data, 2021-2022

Figure 3

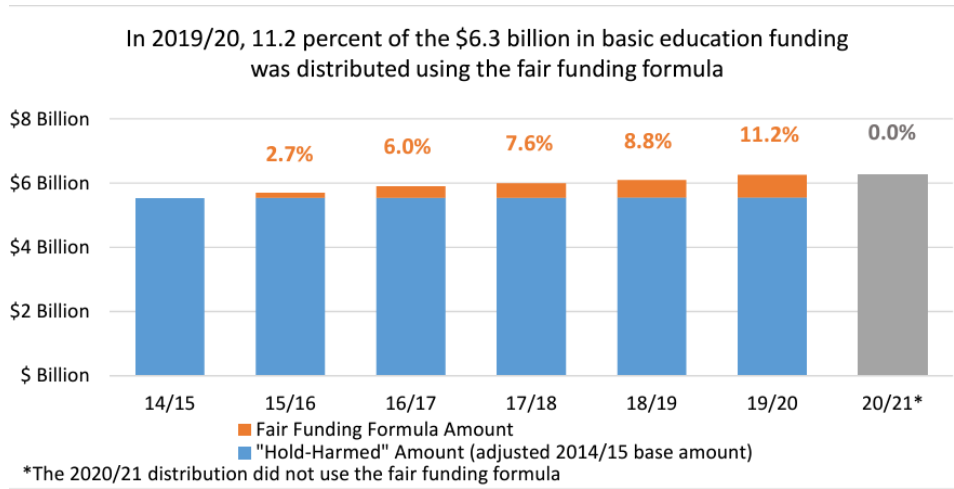


Source: PA Department of Education Expenditure Datasets

A high level of student spending is not necessarily a negative indicator if the spending is intentional and resulting in improved outcomes. In PPS's case, it has been the unintentional byproduct of several factors.

For one, Pennsylvania's basic education funding has included a "hold harmless" provision since 1992, meaning all school districts receive at least as much funding as the prior year, plus yearly adjustments for inflation. In 2016, the state legislature reset the hold harmless base period to the 2014-2015 academic year. This accompanied the passage of a Fair Funding Formula based on each district's current enrollment, but its equity-based weights are only applied to new funding over 2014-2015 levels. In the 2015-2016 school year, the Fair Funding Formula only applied to 2.7% of all state education funding, though this has generally risen each year (**Figure 4**).

Figure 4



Source: House Appropriations Committee, Fair Funding Formula Budget Briefing (2020)

Adding to this urgency is a February 2023 ruling by a Commonwealth Court judge finding that the state's status quo for education funding violates students' constitutional rights, pointing to inequities between high-income and low-income districts. While state lawmakers have not yet proposed any changes to the hold harmless provision, PPS leadership cannot rely on its preservation indefinitely to meet the district's operational needs.

Since the new formula's adoption in 2015, PPS enrollment has declined significantly, but a large portion of its state funding remains inflated by the hold harmless provision. In 1997, PPS's total student body exceeded 40,000; this was down to just over 20,000 students by the 2022-2023 school year.

The end result is a smaller student body receiving the same amount of funding as a past, larger class and a higher per-student value. Without that provision, PPS would stand to lose around \$83 million of its \$178 in annual funding, according to the district's Chief Financial Officer.³ This is consistent with a 2018 analysis conducted by the Pennsylvania House Appropriations Committee, which estimated that state allocations for PPS in the 2018-2019 academic year would have been \$85.6 million if the Fair Funding Formula was applied to all basic education appropriations (in effect, eliminating the hold harmless provision), as opposed to the \$161.3 million it actually received.⁴

In addition, the number of schools has remained the same since the district's last facilities realignment in the 2012-2013 academic year, which resulted in the closure of seven schools. A utilization report obtained by WESA in 2024 showed that nearly half of the district's 61 school buildings are less than 50% full.⁵ Schools that fill more seats tend to have lower per-student costs

³ Lajja Mistry, "Public weighs in on PPS deficit budget: Some feel frozen out, others fear closures," PublicSource. December 4, 2023. <https://www.publicsource.org/pps-budget-esser-school-closures-transparency-public-hearing>

⁴ Pennsylvania House Democratic Caucus, "Hold-Harmless Analysis," PA House. July 19, 2018. <https://www.pahouse.com/Files/Documents/Appropriations/series/3056/Hold-Harmless%20Analysis%202018-19.pdf>

⁵ Jillian Forstadt, "Nearly 50% of Pittsburgh school buildings are only half full. See how your school lines up," WESA. January 24, 2024. <https://www.wesa.fm/education/2024-01-24/pittsburgh-school-buildings-vacant>

since expenses and programs are pooled between students. With PPS projected to lose another 4,300 students by 2030, this is likely to worsen without intervention.

As the next section shows, high per-student spending has not translated into improved academic outcomes for the district.

A+ Schools Community Reports

Each year, local education advocacy organization A+ Schools Pittsburgh releases a *Report to the Community* to analyze academic progress among the district's students.

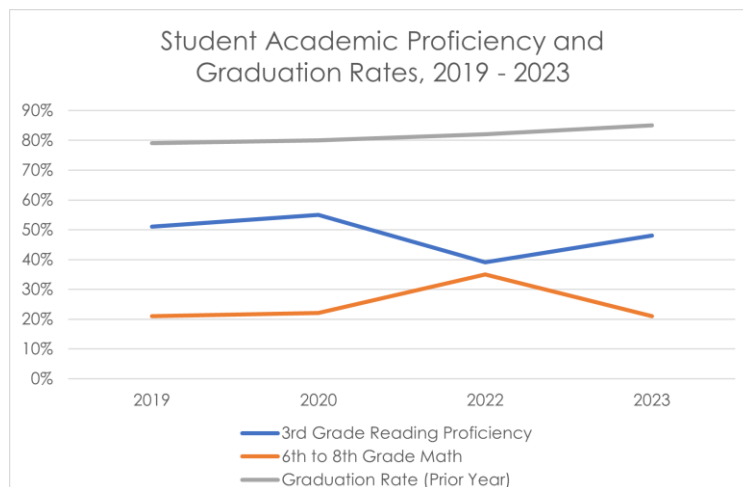
As shown in **Table 1** and **Figure 5**, PPS has struggled to maintain consistent growth in academic proficiency. Exam results for the 2021-2022 academic year revealed sharp drops in early reading and middle school math achievement. Math scores returned to pre-pandemic levels the following year but reading scores have yet to recover. Fortunately, the district's graduation rate has continued to make gradual but steady improvements.

Table 1

Academic Year Ending In:	3 rd Grade Reading Proficiency	6 th to 8 th Grade Math Proficiency	Graduation Rate (Prior Year)
2019	51%	21%	79%
2020	55%	22%	80%
2022	39%	17%	82%
2023	48%	21%	85%

Source: A+ Schools Community Reports 2019-2023; correction to 2022 6th to 8th grade math scores was provided by A+ Schools. (Note: PA did not administer the PSSA or Keystone exams in 2020 due to the ongoing pandemic, which is why there are no results for the year ending in 2021.)

Figure 5



Source: A+ Schools Community Reports, 2019-2023

These results are a district-wide aggregate of all student performance, but trends vary widely when looking at individual schools or student demographic groups. Some PPS schools routinely exceed state targets, for example, while Black students overall continue to experience significant academic gaps with their white peers. Two schools (Banksville K-5 and Mifflin K-8) in the 2020-2021 academic year reported 0% math proficiency among their Black students.⁶

Black students are also disproportionately more likely to face disciplinary action. In the most recent Report to the Community, A+ Schools reported that 2,623 students were suspended at least once. Of those, 89% were economically disadvantaged and 73% were Black. Out-of-school suspensions for incidents of violence or weapons have also risen substantially, from 3,701 incidents in 2018-2019 to 4,409 incidents in 2022-2023.

Barriers to raising proficiency rates involve a complex combination of in-school and at-home factors. Overcoming those hurdles requires a well-informed school board that understands the root causes of these disadvantages and can craft policies or align resources that close those gaps.

A summary of some of the most notable findings in the 2023 Report to the Community are shown below.

Students:

Chronic Absences: 34% of K-12 students (6,161 students total) missed more than 10% of school days. This is down from a 44% in the 2021-2022 school year, but still alarmingly high.

- 45% of Black students and 43% of low-income students were chronically absent, both down from 51% in the prior school year.

Proficiency: 48% of third grade students scored proficient or better on state reading tests, while 21% of students in grades 6-8 were proficient in math.

- 14-point drop in English Language Arts proficiency (25% overall) for 2018's 3rd graders.
- 28-point drop in math proficiency (62% overall) for 2018's 3rd graders.

GPA: 63% of PPS seniors had earned at least a 2.8 GPA, a slight uptick from the previous year (62%).

Income: 64% of students were economically disadvantaged.

Higher Ed: By 2023, 30% of students who graduated from high school in 2017 had completed college or trade school.

Total Enrolled: 20,072 students were enrolled at PPS in 2023, down from 20,350 students in 2022.

- 5,250 students were enrolled in charter schools in November 2022, accounting for 28% of PPS enrollment decline since 2017.

Suspensions: 2,623 students were suspended in the 2022-2023 school year, up 2% from the prior year.

⁶ NextPittsburgh, "PA Department of Education test results confirm that PPS students fell behind during the pandemic." March 7, 2022. <https://nextpittsburgh.com/features/pa-department-of-education-test-results-confirm-that-pps-students-fell-behind-during-the-pandemic/#:~:text=As%20in%20past%20years%2C%20Pittsburgh,but%20a%20handful%20of%20schools.>

Teachers:

Morale: In 2023, 82% of all PPS teachers thought that the district was a good place to teach and learn, down from 91% in 2022.

Experience: Inexperienced teachers (having three years of experience or less) made up 8.6% of PPS instructional staff, compared to the statewide average of 11.5%. However, 20.8% of PPS teachers were teaching a subject outside of their certification area, higher than the statewide average of 11.6%.

- 78% of PPS inexperienced teachers and 76% of out-of-field are staffed in schools with higher concentrations of students of color.

Diversity: In 2023, 15% of the PPS instructional staff was made up of teachers of color, and 13% were Black – much better than statewide totals (7% were teachers of color and 4% were Black), but the number of schools without a single Black teacher increased by three from the previous year.

PPS Board and Staff Self-Assessments

In December 2023, local news outlet WESA revealed that it received the results of a self-assessment the PPS Board had been given by the Pennsylvania School Boards Association (PSBA) earlier in the year.⁷ While the full results have not been made public, WESA's reporting states that the board members were asked to rate themselves on 50 different skills. Using a 1 to 4 scale, where 1 was "ineffective" and a 4 was "effective", the average score was less than two points in six out of seven categories, including:

- Planning thoughtfully
- Governing effectively
- Leading responsibly
- Advocating earnestly
- Communicating clearly
- Evaluating continually

Based on anonymous comments from board members in the survey, there were key disagreements about the board's relationship with the superintendent, what members should be focused on, and whether requests for data by members are distracting the administration from its core responsibilities. While one member commented that the "Superintendent is often hampered [by] indecision and requests for data that isn't necessary", another asserted that "the administration finds pathways and excuses to circumvent the board on key decisions and evade questions" and that those requests "often come without answers or responses." Clearly, members are divided on the board's role in relation to the administration and how functions of oversight should be exercised.

On the topic of community engagement, "several" noted the lack of any formalized system. One member's response: "We don't have staff or structures in place to facilitate community engagement for anything more than public hearings. The district has student and

⁷ Oliver Morrison, "Self evaluation shows Pittsburgh Public Schools board gave itself a failing grade," WESA. December, 14, 2023. <https://www.wesa.fm/education/2023-12-14/pittsburgh-public-schools-evaluation-failing>

parent/guardian advisory committees, but the board is not involved. The feedback from these committees is rarely shared with the board."

It should be noted that three of the nine board members who took the survey did not seek reelection and have been replaced by new members as of 2024. Still, the results that are public highlight opportunities to improve long-term board effectiveness and support their work as educational policymakers.

In June of 2024, WESA again reported on the results of an internal survey, this time given to PPS staff.⁸ Around half of all PPS employees responded, predominantly teachers. The results were as alarming as the board's responses:

- While 85% reported being "very proud" of their work and 71% were "very committed to Pittsburgh Public Schools", less than a third said the district's mission was reflected in its day-to-day activities.
- When asked to rate (on a scale of 1 to 10) how likely they are to recommend PPS to a friend or family member as a great place to work, over 60% responded with a score of 6 or less.
- Just 17% said the district takes action to support mental health and safety, a top concern for staff.
- Only 76% of respondents said they expect to still work at PPS in a year, indicating that around a quarter are expecting to leave.

McLean & Company, the human resources consulting firm that partnered with PPS to administer the survey, said the results indicate "a toxic culture within the organization" where "staff members feel unheard and unsupported, leading to low morale and a decline in trust between administrators and teachers."

Teachers interviewed by WESA provided additional context. One English teacher from Allderdice High School noted that his colleagues continue to leave the district in the prime of their careers, at least partially attributable to staff feedback that goes unheeded by both the central administration and school board. Another teacher described her experience as the only Black educator most of her students ever had despite a majority Black student population at PPS. Stepping into the role of a trusted figure gave her a strong sense of purpose, but the emotional toll – made worse by a lack of mental health supports – led her to eventually transfer schools: "I became everybody's school mom, aunt, it was just very overwhelming."

Both the board and staff surveys indicate a significant disconnect between district-level goals and implementation. Strategies to bridge these gaps with supportive governance structures are described in the next section.

⁸ Jillian Forstadt, "'A toxic culture': Staff engagement survey reveals low morale at Pittsburgh Public Schools," WESA. June 18, 2014. <https://www.wesa.fm/education/2024-06-18/a-toxic-culture-staff-engagement-survey-reveals-low-morale-at-pittsburgh-public-schools>

Best Practices to Support Board Effectiveness

Characteristics of Effective School Boards

The body of research covering school board operations makes clear that there are several distinctions between legislative bodies and the boards that govern school districts. First, board members, despite often being elected, have no individual legal authority outside of their meetings. They are only empowered by the state to exercise authority as a body, a statement also reflected in PPS’s Local Board Procedures.

A school board director’s primary role should be that of a policymaker. Their primary goal should be to assess the results of those policies and continually make improvements. They should not be involved in the day-to-day operations of schools, since implementation is a responsibility delegated to the superintendent. Ideally, a strong superintendent evaluation created by the board and consistent with the district’s goals determines whether the superintendent is succeeding and should be retained, or failing and may need to be replaced. Those evaluations should be limited to a few predetermined and measurable goals and conducted on a regular basis.

Those our researchers spoke to, including professional board consultants, former board members, and superintendents, all reiterated the same message: successful school governance starts with an honest and trusting relationship between the board and superintendent, with their united vision for the district guiding every decision they make. As stressed by the PSBA, the board and superintendent collectively form a “team of ten” and that by law, the superintendent represents the tenth (albeit non-voting) member of the board. Respecting this relationship and the appropriate chain-of-command when addressing problems is key to avoiding conflict among district leadership and improving student outcomes.

Shown in the figure below is the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education’s *Annual Five-Step Cycle for Superintendent Evaluations*, which is required (with some degree of flexibility) for all school districts in the state. Maintaining a regular schedule for the evaluation process, like Massachusetts, sets clear and predictable expectations for all parties involved.

Figure 6



Source: Hanover Research, Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education

Our researchers requested a copy of the board's superintendent evaluation to analyze its contents. That request was declined by PPS officials on the basis of confidentiality.

According to Hanover Research's 2014 report *Effective School Board and Superintendent Collaboration*, the role of a school board member should be that of a *trustee*, where they remain as objective as possible to serve broad public interests, as opposed to a *delegate*, where they prioritize personal interests and the interests of groups supporting them. "Role confusion," as stated in the report, occurs when the school board and superintendent begin to "encroach on each other's responsibilities, reducing district efficiency, inhibiting necessary strategic planning, and causing tension." The cause of this confusion is sometimes found in the board's own policies, where operational responsibilities are taken up alongside matters of governance.

Establishing proper boundaries and committing to shared goals requires adoption of a *policy governance model*, which is discussed further in the section ahead.

A 2019 research brief by the National School Boards Association's Center for Education identified *Eight Characteristics of Effective School Boards* after reviewing the existing body of research.⁹ For their purposes, effective school boards were those "operating in high-achieving districts, particularly those that are making significant strides despite serving large numbers of disadvantaged students."

⁹ Chuck Dervarics and Eileen O'Brien, "Eight Characteristics of Effective School Boards", NSBA. 2019. <https://www.nsba.org/-/media/NSBA/File/cpe-eight-characteristics-of-effective-school-boards-report-december-2019.pdf>

The Danger Signs of Ineffective Boards

While not its primary focus, the NSBA identified common patterns found among ineffective school boards:

- Only vaguely aware of school improvement initiatives.
- Blames external pressures for lack of student success.
- Negative comments about students and teachers.
- Micromanages daily operations.
- Disregards agenda process and chain of command.
- Lack of communication between the board and superintendent.
- Quick to describe a lack of parental interest in student success.
- Looks at data from a “blaming” perspective.
- Little understanding of or coordination on staff development.
- Slow to define a vision.
- Did not hire a superintendent who agrees with their vision.
- Little shared professional development as a board.

8 Characteristics of Effective School Boards

1. Commits to a **clear vision of high expectations** for student achievement and quality instruction.
2. **Strong shared beliefs and values** about what is possible for students and the system's ability to teach children at high levels.
3. Accountability driven; spends less time on operational issues and **focuses attention on policies** that improve student achievement.
4. Has a **collaborative relationship with the staff and the community**; establishes a strong communication structure to inform and engage stakeholders.
5. **Embraces data**, even when the results are negative, to drive continuous improvement.
6. **Aligns and sustains resources** (like professional development) to meet goals.
7. Leads as a **united team with the superintendent** through strong collaboration and mutual trust.
8. Takes part in **team development and training**, sometimes with the superintendent, to build shared knowledge, values, and commitments.

School Board Governance Models and Board Consulting

As mentioned earlier in this report, PPS board members were given a self-assessment by the PSBA in 2023. While only a limited number of responses were made public by WESA, those that were mirror many of the problems cited by the NSBA among ineffective boards. The following questions received some of the lowest average scores from the board as a whole, with 1 representing “ineffective” and 4 representing “effective:”

- “The board assesses the effectiveness of district plans to narrow and close achievement and opportunity gaps for every student.” (**Score: 1.4**)
- “The board allocates finances and resources based on the district’s vision, goals and priorities for student learning.” (**Score: 1.4**)
- “The board developed a facilities plan that provides for the safe, efficient, and effective housing of the programs and services offered by the district.” (**Score: 1.1**)

First developed by Dr. John Carver in the 1970s, the policy governance model is one widely adopted strategy for establishing appropriate boundaries between school boards and superintendents, though many variations also exist. At its core, a governance model aims to reorient boards from focusing on individual priorities toward shared goals and long-term planning, ideally “on timelines that often outlast the terms served on school boards.”¹⁰

Key features of governance models:

- Clearly delineates the board’s responsibilities and identifies the “ends”, or outcomes, it expects. The superintendent and their staff are responsible for managing the “means”, or operations, to achieve those outcomes.
- Continual evaluations by both the board and superintendent, including self-assessments and formal evaluations.
- Adopting a mindset of governance as opposed to a mindset of politics.

The importance of training board members in the area of *governance* is widely cited as having an effect on board members’ cohesion and focus as a unit. Results of the groundbreaking Lighthouse Inquiry, a multi-phase study by the Iowa Association of School Boards, were first published in 2001 and have been used as the basis for best practices recommended by organizations like the NSBA.

In the second phase of the study, five pilot districts in Iowa received governance-focused technical assistance for the board, superintendent, and other leadership teams. After five years, researchers found that in three of the five districts, the amount of time spent on policy and student achievement increased from 16% to 37%, four of the five districts saw significant increases in the number of staff and board members who could identify the district’s school improvement goals, and all five districts regularly scheduled extra time to focus on student achievement.¹¹

Hanover’s 2014 research paper highlighted Aldine Independent School District in Texas as a success story in institutionalizing these guidelines and improving communication between their

¹⁰ Hanover Research, “Effective Board and Superintendent Collaboration.” January 2014.

<https://www.hanoverresearch.com/media/Effective-Board-and-Superintendent-Collaboration-Featured.pdf>

¹¹ Dervarics and O’Brien, “Eight Characteristics.”

board and superintendent. Those guidelines, published in their board procedure manual, require the following:

- **Communication before board meetings:** When asked by the board, superintendents are required to submit information packets detailing progress on board goals, answers to board questions, or administrative updates.
- **Requesting information not related to agenda items:** Board members are permitted to request additional information directly from the superintendent, but if that information is not readily available, the superintendent should be granted additional time to draft a report.
- **Attending school events and visiting schools:** Board members are encouraged to attend as many school events as their time permits.
- **Responding to community or employee complaints:** The board must inform the superintendent of all complaints from staff and the community but should not direct the superintendent to take any specific actions. The superintendent must notify the board upon resolving any such complaints.
- **Communication with the community:** Any non-anonymous letters addressed to the board must be forwarded to the board president or superintendent for inclusion in the board information packet.

While PPS's policy manual contains some guidelines for managing this relationship, it's unclear if a district-wide governance model has been adopted or utilized. In either case, the frustrations voiced by board members in their self-assessment indicate disagreements regarding how the board should interact with the superintendent or administration, a problem that a well-crafted governance model would aim to resolve.

Option 1: Adopt a School Board Policy Governance Model

The PPS Board of Directors should seek proposals for school board consultants specializing in policy governance implementation. Given the district's current financial constraints, this should only be funded in a budget-neutral manner – for example, through grants from local charitable partners. The scope of that work should be to make improvements in the following areas:

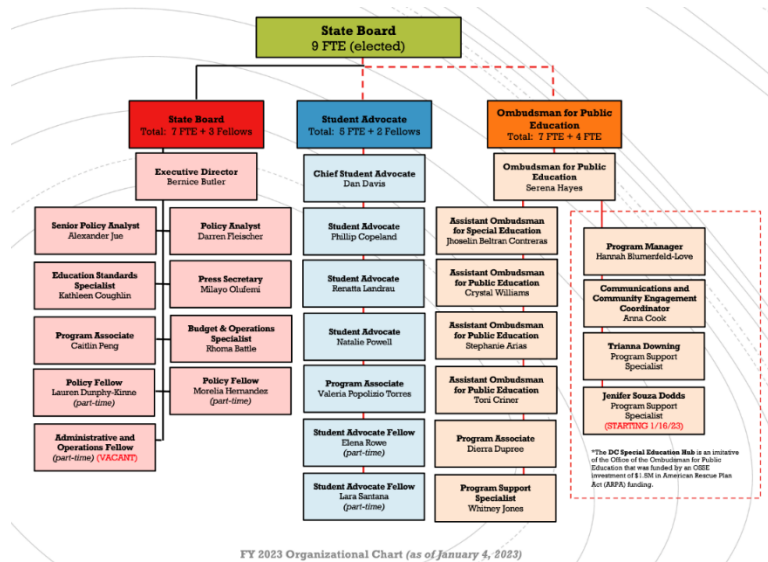
- Review and strengthen the Superintendent Evaluation to match the district's goals
- Review and streamline board policies
- Improve communication and data sharing channels
- Adopt and implement a student-centric policy governance model

The Board and administration officials should include local education advocacy organizations in the selection process to determine which consultants would yield the most productive results.

Using DC as a case study in the next section, we show the potential benefits of a model designed to support a school board with appropriate resources enabling quick responses to problems – without interfering in the superintendent's jurisdiction over daily school operations.

Case Study: How DC's State Board System Supports Board Responsiveness and Community Engagement

Figure 7



Source: SBOE.DC.gov

In 2007, the District of Columbia Public Schools (DCPS) system underwent a significant transformation following the passage of the Public Education Reform Amendment Act. Under the new system, DCPS was made a cabinet-level agency under “mayoral control”, meaning the mayor was given authority over “all curricula, operations, functions, budget, personnel, labor negotiations and collective bargaining agreements, facilities, and other education-related matters.”¹²

The DC State Board of Education's nine members remained directly elected by voters, but management of daily school operations was removed from their purview. Instead, the board was given a primarily policymaking and advisory role, with members subordinate to the mayor's appointed State Superintendent of Education.

¹² DC Office of the Student Advocate, “Understanding the DC Public Education Landscape,” DC.gov. https://sboe.dc.gov/sites/default/files/dc/sites/sboe/multimedia_content/public%20education%20governance%20%28web%29.pdf

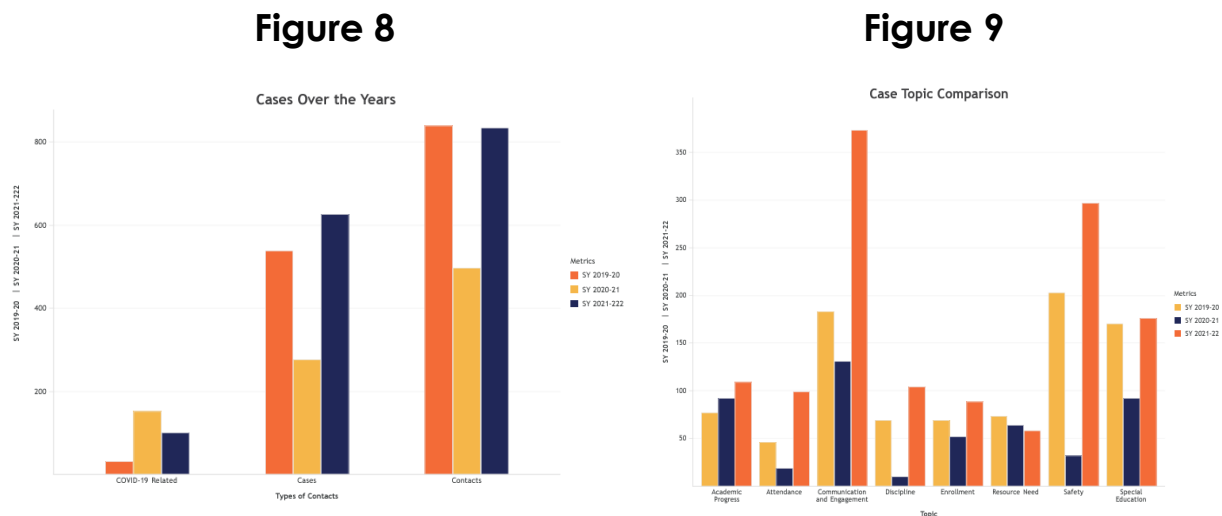
Despite a restricted role in district operations, these reforms also provided the board with new resources intended to improve their awareness of existing problems in the school system and capacity to assess existing policies.

For one, it created an Office of the Ombudsman for Public Education and an Office of the Student Advocate, both of which are overseen by the Board of Education (**Figure 7**).

The Office of Ombudsman serves as a neutral party to mediate and resolve school-related problems through complaints received by parents, students, or other parties. Its authorizing legislation states that its primary role is to “serve as a communication and problem-resolution mechanism for residents regarding issues related to public education.”¹³ Complaints are processed through screening, intake, and a formal investigation when necessary.

By tracking and analyzing trends in complaint-related data, the Ombudsman also presents an annual report to the Board of Education with recommendations that would reduce common or emerging problems in the school district. The most common case topics are shown in **Figure 9** below, with “communication and engagement” representing the most frequently reported complaint.

In its report for the 2021-2022 academic year, the Ombudsman noted that the office received 834 contacts and handled 626 cases (**Figure 8**).



Source: DC Office of the Ombudsman for Public Education, 2022 Annual Report

Similarly, the Office of the Student Advocate “provides guidance and resource support to assist families in navigating the complex public education system in the District of Columbia” through Requests for Assistance (RFAs) and operation of a hotline comparable to a 311 system.¹⁴ In their

¹³ DC Office of the Ombudsman for Public Education, “2022 Annual Report,” DC.gov. <https://educationombudsman.dc.gov/sites/default/files/dc/sites/educationombudsman/DCO%202022%20Annual%20Report%20%282%29.pdf>

¹⁴ DC Office of the Student Advocate, “2023 Annual Report,” DC.gov. <https://studentadvocate.dc.gov/sites/default/files/dc/sites/studentadvocate.dc.gov/Annual%20Report%202023%20Non-Public%20Copy.pdf>

2023 annual report, the office noted that it received 702 RFAs in the 2022-2023 academic year, the highest on record, which it attributes to the development of more pathways for families to access support, including an online portal and in-person events (**Figure 10**). Of those requests, the largest shares concerned special education or students with disabilities (28.0%), student safety (16.8%), and enrollment/access (14.6%) (**Figure 11**).

Figure 10

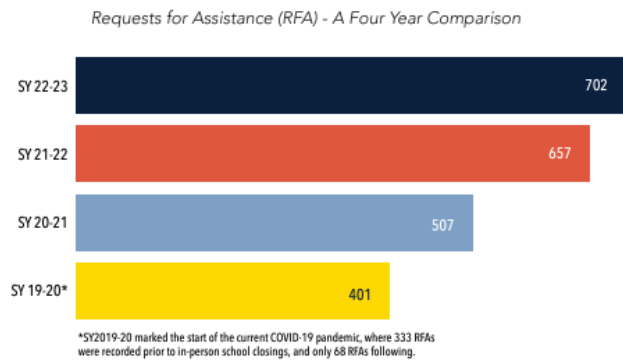
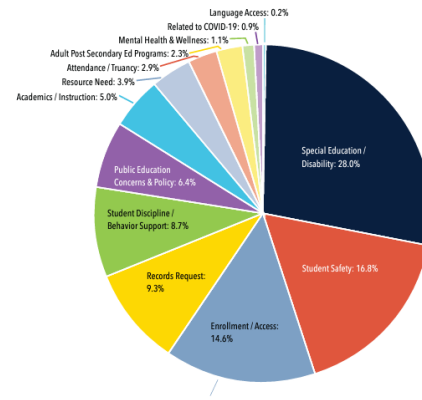


Figure 11



Source: DC Office of the Student Advocate, 2023 Annual Report

Additionally, the Board of Education was provided with full support staff, which as of 2024 included seven full-time employees and three part-time fellows. A full list of these positions is shown in the table below.

Table 2

DC Public Schools Support Staff for Board Members
Executive Director
Budget & Operations Specialist
Program Associate
Press Secretary
Senior Policy Analyst
Policy Analyst
Education Standards Specialist
Part-Time: Policy Fellow
Part-Time: Policy Fellow
Part-Time: Administrative & Operations Fellow

Source: DC State Board of Education 2023 Organization Chart

Collectively, these reforms have built a support structure around the Board of Education to empower it as a strictly policymaking body while leaving operational duties to the superintendent. By creating clear entryways for constituents to access help and advocate for

their students, DC’s system succeeds in establishing a positive feedback loop where the board is equipped with the tools needed to respond to problems quickly.

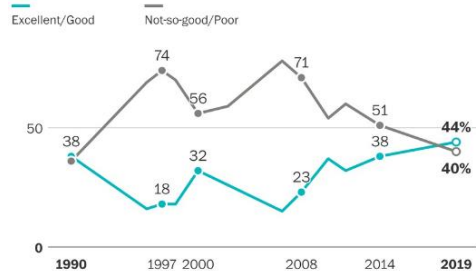
There is some evidence that these reforms have had a positive impact on community perceptions of DC school quality and academic performance, though it is important to note that the 2007 school system reform included many other changes and should not be attributed solely to the few mentioned here.

A 2019 *Washington Post* poll asking DC voters to assess the performance of the public school system showed a significant drop in dissatisfaction from earlier decades and a notable rise in positive assessments. When asking only those with a child attending a traditional public or charter school, 92% rated that school as “excellent” or “good.” By 2022, following a tumultuous period of covid-related school closures, 80% of parents continued to rate their child’s school positively, and 79% approved of their school’s handling of the pandemic.

Figure 12

A record share of Washingtonians rate District public schools positively

Q: How would you rate the job that District public schools are doing: excellent, good, not-so-good or poor?

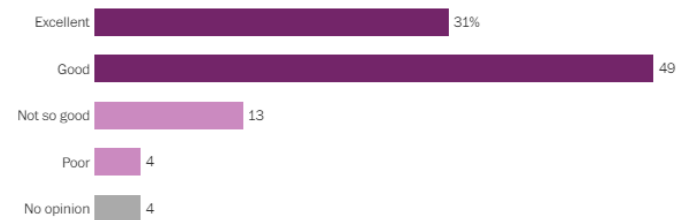


Note: No opinion not shown. 2006 results among registered voters.
Source: Nov. 12-17, 2019, Washington Post poll of 905 adult residents of the District with an error margin of +/- 3 percentage points

Figure 13

8 in 10 parents rate their children's public schools positively

Q: How would you rate the public schools your children attend? (Among parents whose children attend public or public charter schools)

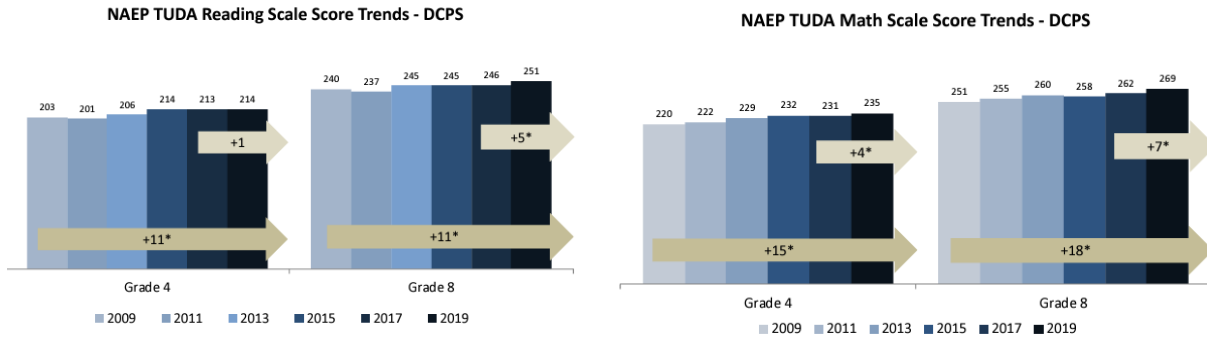


Note: Percentages do not add to 100 due to rounding.
Source: Washington Post polls. Feb. 2-14, 2022, Washington Post poll of 144 D.C. public school parents with an error margin of +/- 10.5 percentage points. EMILY GUSKIN / THE WASHINGTON POST

Source: Washington Post

DC Public Schools have also made gains academically. In 2019, DCPS reported increases in math and reading proficiency for the ninth straight year under the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP). The district was also identified as the fastest improving urban school district in the nation in three out of the four categories (4th grade reading, 4th grade math, and 8th grade math), with the second most growth in the fourth category (8th grade reading). The figure below shows DCPS academic progress during that time.

Figure 14



Source: DCPS 2019 NAEP Results

That progress was interrupted by the pandemic era of school closures when DCPS, like all schools nationwide, temporarily transitioned to remote learning. Drops in math and reading proficiency were the highest among students of color and those with disabilities. Results of the 2023 statewide assessment – the first taken since 2019 due to subsequent years of school closures – showed modest gains over the 2022 assessment. Still, proficiency rates remain lower than 2019 scores, signaling that learning loss remains a lingering challenge for most urban districts.

School governance reforms are not a cure-all for lagging academic performance. Still, aligning the interests of administrators, educators, and community stakeholders can close communication gaps so clear action plans and broad consensus can be reached whenever a problem arises.

Given PPS’s board and staff survey results, there is a clear misalignment of all three parties’ interests. The resulting environment ultimately harms students the most by narrowing their opportunities to learn at high levels. The experience of DC Public Schools illustrates the strength of governance model reforms and could inform future improvements within PPS.

Option 2 (Long-Term): Invest in Board Support Staff and Office of Ombuds

Over time, the school district would benefit from structures that: 1) support Board members’ policymaking functions, and 2) help parents and students navigate the administration and resolve problems through a neutral party. Support staff for Board members and an Office of Ombuds are potential starting points, *but the district should only pursue them through external financial support or after achieving long-term financial stability.*

City Council & School Board Collaboration

Municipal governments and school districts are uniquely linked by their overlapping infrastructure, constituencies, and taxing powers. While they have historically operated independently, a growing number of local governments are turning to collaboration with school districts as a way of finding mutually beneficial opportunities to support students and families.

The topic of municipal-school district collaboration in Pittsburgh has been a growing focus of local leaders as well. Mayor Peduto's Education Task Force released a report in February 2015 discussing the need for collaboration in areas like public safety and afterschool programming.¹⁵ The task force suggested that "the City and District may want to implement a more formal inter-governmental structure to support collaboration and dialogue," noting that "county, state, and federal governmental bodies regularly communicate to solve problems for constituents who generally do not distinguish between the bodies. The same should be true for the District and City."

In 2022, City Council passed a measure introduced by Councilman Burgess that formally established a "Pittsburgh City-School District Partnership."¹⁶ On the city's side, the Partnership includes the Mayor, the City Controller, the President of City Council, and three councilmembers appointed by the Council President. On the school district's side, it includes the Superintendent, the Board President, and three board members appointed by the Board President. Meetings are co-convened by the council and board presidents.

The bill identified five areas of overlapping responsibilities where the two bodies might find collaboration useful:

1. School Safety
2. Emergency Childcare
3. Summer and Afterschool
4. Universal Early Childcare and Education
5. Transportation

Our researchers confirmed with members of City Council that these discussions did not progress beyond the ordinance's passage.

In Councilman Burgess's remarks during the discussion of the bill, he noted that California encouraged these types of partnerships through a statewide funding program, likely in reference to the California Community Schools Partnership Program. That program, established in 2021, provides grants to schools that partner with local governments and community agencies to "align resources that would improve student outcomes," including wraparound services like wellness centers or social workers on staff.¹⁷

Though generous state support is useful, local governments facing scarcity have also taken the initiative to engage in these types of formal meetings on their own, to great effect. Beaumont,

¹⁵ City of Pittsburgh Office of the Mayor, "Mayor Peduto's Education Task Force Report," February 10, 2015. Pittsburghpa.gov. https://apps.pittsburghpa.gov/mayorpeduto/2-10-15_Mayors_Education_Task_Force_Report_FINAL.pdf

¹⁶ "Resolution Establishing a Pittsburgh City-School District Partnership," Resolution 2022-0240. <https://pittsburgh.legistar.com/LegislationDetail.aspx?ID=5544247&GUID=C9C8D6F5-A9C0-4850-9148-F7CAA3E03FB5&Options=Text%7CAAttachments%7COther%7C&Search=public%2bschool&FullText=1>

¹⁷ John Fensterwald, "California set to launch hundreds of community schools with \$635 million in grants," EdSource. May 12, 2022. <https://edsources.org/2022/california-set-to-launch-hundreds-of-community-schools-with-635-million-in-grants/672246>

Texas, for example, is a small city with a population just over 100,000 and a school district representing over 16,000 students, over 60% of whom are eligible for free or reduced lunch. District enrollment has been trending down, losing around 500 students each year since 2018, while the city itself has struggled with a stagnant population for decades.

Beaumont's school board and city council have been holding semi-regular joint meetings for the last several years to address "items of mutual concern and benefit."¹⁸ A November 2023 meeting was attended by the mayor, city manager, city attorney, council members, school district superintendent, school board members, and the district counsel. As reported, the meetings have been highly productive and wide in scope:

"For more than an hour during the meeting, the two bodies spent time developing goals that they'd like to see the city and district reach within the next four or five years, which included numerous team activities facilitated by Texas-based consulting firm The Elim Group... The group then moved on to discussion items including media relations, safety and violence in the city and schools, Wi-Fi at parks near Beaumont ISD schools, safe routes for students to travel to school, service projects and a potential bond election, among other things."

During the meeting, one school board member asked city council members for advice on how to approach the topic of a new bond despite there being "no appetite" among his constituents. This willingness to raise difficult matters in a public forum and seek cooperation from local partners is a positive sign and a model of what a productive relationship between municipal bodies could look like in Pittsburgh.

While Pittsburgh's municipal government and school district have distinct areas of policy focus and state mandates, they share a common mission of making the city a hospitable, equitable, and safe place for families to live and grow. Excellent schools are a vital component of any strategy to broaden the tax base and city leaders ultimately have a stake in PPS's future success. The Pittsburgh City-School District Partnership offers a platform to launch those discussions, but to date has not progressed beyond a basic framework.

¹⁸ Olivia Malick, "Beaumont city council, school board discuss safety, potential bond," Beaumont Enterprise. November 8, 2022. <https://www.beaumontenterprise.com/news/article/Beaumont-city-council-school-board-safety-17566368.php>

By meeting on a regular basis, both bodies could work in conjunction to maximize the reach of school district funds. Many members of City Council and the PPS Board of Directors already maintain working relationships to address concerns raised in their respective jurisdictions; this proposal would provide a formal opportunity to address them collectively. Though not named in the ordinance, the City's Police Chief and Treasurer should also be invited to attend given their involvement in matters of public safety and city finances.

Option 3: Recommit to the Pittsburgh City-School District Partnership

While the City-School District Partnership was created by ordinance in 2022, the two bodies have not yet convened. City Council and the School Board should designate representatives before the end of 2024 to schedule quarterly meetings moving forward.

Initial agenda items could cover the five topics identified in the establishing ordinance as a starting point for discussions and public comment should be encouraged.

Acknowledgments

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