



Special Report

Pittsburgh Public Schools Procurement Practices:
Case Study

**Rachael Heisler, Office of the City Controller &
School Controller**

Report by Eli Half

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Introduction

In October 2025, the Pittsburgh School Controller's office released a report highlighting suggestions to Pittsburgh Public Schools (PPS) for how to improve the procurement practices of the school district. The report discussed increasing RFP opportunities and timelines, more transparency in bids, and working with local vendors. These suggestions were made with the intention of guiding the school district to practices that would lead to future cost savings and a more transparent procurement process.

The report from October provided a comprehensive overview of the last two years of contracts. This case study is intended to highlight one specific contract that is emblematic of the systemic issue with the school district's procurement practices. The School Controller's Office compiled this report using emails and documents shared directly with the office. This case study will review the procurement and contracting timeline for a current agreement the school district has for copiers. The final contract not only lacked a proper request for proposals but involved the active dismissal of over \$1 million in cost savings.

Contract Details and Timeline

On June 22, 2016, the PPS Board approved a five-year contract with The Wilson Group at a monthly rate of \$102,999 to “manage the District’s document output environment of copy machines, printers, and scanners.” This contract totaled \$6,179,940.00 over the duration of the contract. When this contract was executed in 2016, there was no documentation of any RFP process or any other solicited bids for the contract.

As this five-year contract was set to expire in 2021, PPS went to renew for another five years at \$101,999 a month, totaling \$6,119,940.00 for the duration of the contract. The contract was set to be approved by the Board on April 28, 2021.

On March 25, 2021, a competing vendor (“Vendor”) emailed PPS Chief Technology Officer Mark Stuckey and PPS Chief Financial Officer Ron Joseph with a request for a meeting with them to discuss the possibility of providing the same services as the current Wilson Group contract at a lower price. After not receiving any response, Vendor followed up with Mr. Stuckey and Mr. Joseph on March 30, 2021, asking if there would be an RFP before renewing the contract. Vendor also mentioned that their organization could provide at least 30% savings per month on the current contract. Our office reviewed the proposals from both The Wilson Group and Vendor and were able to corroborate statements made about contract costs. Vendor is a trusted industry organization that services over 40 school districts and other major organizations in Allegheny County for the same services.

After the unsuccessful follow-up email to Mr. Stuckey and Mr. Joseph, Vendor shifted communications to board members. They emailed school board members, including the Business/Finance Chairs and the Board President on March 26, 2021, and April 1, 2021. They explained in their email that the current contract was no-bid the first time and that they believed there should be an RFP before a renewal. They explained that they did not know if they would win an RFP or Bid, but that they would be able to offer 30%-40% savings on the monthly expenditures.

After waiting another week and still not hearing a response, Vendor emailed Mr. Stuckey and Mr. Joseph again on April 8, 2021, asking for a meeting, given that they heard a renewal of the contract might be imminent. After failing to receive any response from PPS leadership about a possible RFP or further consideration of alternate vendors, Vendor emailed School Board members again on April 20, 2021, along with another email to Mr. Stuckey and Mr. Joseph. In these emails, they explained that the contract on the table to spend over \$100,000 a month is

an overspend of at least \$35,000 per month, which equates to over \$2 million over the whole five-year term.

Vendor received response from a Board member on April 20, 2021:

From: Carter, Kevin L <kcarter1@pghschools.org>
Sent: Tuesday, April 20, 2021 2:26 PM
To: ██████████ Kennedy, Terry <tkennedy1@pghschools.org>
Subject: Re: PPS Cost Savings Opportunity- No-Bid or RFP on Agenda Item

CAUTION
This message originated from an external source. Verify the legitimacy before clicking links or opening attachments.

Thank you for your email. There is much that is not true about what you are saying. I'm quite aware of the contracts we have to vote on and I find it in poor taste you think this is the most appropriate way to connect with us. If you have a product you want the district to purchase, please contact our Chief Financial Officer.

Regards,

Kevin

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The response showcases the lack of procurement processes in the district to handle situations where an organization presents a cost saving opportunity. Vendor responded to Board members with the following email:

From: ██████████
Sent: Tuesday, April 20, 2021 2:48:39 PM
To: Carter, Kevin L <kcarter1@pghschools.org>; Kennedy, Terry <tkennedy1@pghschools.org>
Subject: RE: PPS Cost Savings Opportunity- No-Bid or RFP on Agenda Item

[External] This email originated from outside of the Pittsburgh Public Schools. Even if you are familiar with the sender, do not click links or open attachments unless you expected to receive them.

Kevin,

Thanks for the response. You both donate much time and efforts to PPS and thank you for all you give. I truly apologize if I'm being inappropriate, but I have been reaching out to the district via email and phone with no response. I didn't see another way to bring this to the attention of the board without reaching out to the board directly.

As far as being untruthful, I am at a loss. We deal with accounts of similar size and scope that spend less than 65% of the proposal in front of the board. The current Managed Services contract was awarded without RFP and this one is on track to be done the same way. Without an RFP or Bid I don't understand how the spending can be justified.

Thank you!

The Board Member responded to Vendor dismissing concerns, even as they are also vetted through PA COSTARS:

From: Carter, Kevin L <kcarter1@pghschools.org>
Sent: Tuesday, April 20, 2021 2:58 PM
To: ██████████ Kennedy, Terry <tkennedy1@pghschools.org>
Subject: Re: PPS Cost Savings Opportunity- No-Bid or RFP on Agenda Item

CAUTION
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It is not appropriate- the board is well aware of the contract and the intricacies thereof. The product has been vetted through PA COSTARS. As a district, we are not required to bid or have an RFP for every contract, nor are we required to explain the reasons why we contract with one provider over another. We are being provided with comprehensive services that meet our need. Anything further on this topic, talk to the CFO...

That is our protocol. Do not contact us directly again, in some misguided attempt to negotiate a contract with us. All contract recommendations start with the CFO/admin and are submitted to us for final approval. The board does not directly talk to nor negotiate with vendors.

Thanks,

Mr. Kevin Carter
Chair- Business and Finance Committee

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While PPS is not required to have an RFP or bid for every contract, it is listed as a Board policy to 'obtain competitive bids and price quotations...where such bids or quotations may result in a cost savings to the School District.' Here PPS was clearly presented with an opportunity for cost savings and failed to do so, arguably violating their own policy.

Vendor then contacted the PPS Solicitor, Ira Weiss, on April 21, 2021, with their concerns. Shortly after talking with Mr. Weiss, the agenda item presenting the contract for Board approval was pulled before the meeting on April 28, 2021. Vendor was not given a reason or notice that it was going to be pulled. The meeting with Mr. Weiss had no new information that was different from any information received from Mr. Carter or Mr. Joseph prior to the call.

After the agenda item was pulled, Vendor finally received a response from Mr. Joseph on April 28th requesting a meeting. Vendor was able to present their contract to Mr. Joseph on April 29th, which was for the same services as the Wilson Group, but at \$69,000 a month instead of \$102,000 a month. The school district placed a placeholder board tab for an TBD amount for a new contract with The Wilson Group for November 1, 2021, while they negotiated a new contract.

As months went by, Vendor did not hear more from PPS about the contract they presented, so they emailed Mr. Joseph and Mr. Stuckey on July 21, 2021, inquiring about news. Mr. Stuckey responded, saying they would be making a decision soon and that there was another company that entered into the negotiations as well.

Eventually, PPS agreed to a new contract with The Wilson Group without an RFP or officially soliciting any bids. The new contract was for \$85,324 per month over a five-year term, equaling \$1 million of savings compared to the original contract proposed in April 2021, but still about \$1 million more than the contract proposed by Vendor.

Although the new contract is set out at \$85,324 a month, there have been 10% annual increases leading to the most recent payment for November 2025 being \$98,564. With continuing increases the contract will be close to the same amount in total as the old one. In addition, the new contract has a maximum amount of 6,000,000 B/W Impressions per month (overages at 0.005) and 400,000 Color Impressions per month (Overages at 0.05). The previous Wilson Group Contract, along with the proposal by Vendor, was for unlimited copies. The current contract is set to expire on October 31, 2026.

Opportunity for Improvement

This case study is an example of PPS losing out on cost savings because there are no proper procurement practices in place to save money on contracts. If PPS had practices established that gave an opportunity for bids from organizations like Vendor in this case study, PPS would be able to get the best deal for every contract it signs. While PPS does not have to bid out every contract they sign, a responsible practice would be to bid out larger contracts like The Wilson Group contract discussed in this report.

The hostility shown towards a potential bidder is a result of a broken organizational structure in the School District. In the initial email from Mr. Carter, he mentions how the CFO should handle the procurement practices. The competing vendor emailed the CFO multiple times without a response, which led to the email to Mr. Carter. In a functioning system, like one established in the School District of Philadelphia that is mentioned in the original report, the CFO would not have to be the person responsible for fielding bids and negotiating contracts. The system shouldn't be built for one individual to field email responses to vendors.

Ideally, PPS would employ multiple people who work in procurement services under the CFO, where it is their full-time job to run RFPs, stay in contact with potential bidders, and advertise future RFPs and Bid opportunities. Board members should not be communicating directly with vendors. However, here, Vendor had limited options in their attempt to demonstrate potential cost savings. There was no designated person to field such emails, and, of course, there was no RFP in place.

There are no downsides to running proper RFP practices, other than it takes a concerted effort to run an RFP and pick the best bid. Even if PPS were to pick The Wilson Group at the end of a potential RFP, bids from companies like the competing vendor featured here could have lowered the price even more. In just the emails and informal bid by Vendor for this contract, the amount of the contract was lowered by \$17,000 a month, which equates to savings of over \$1 million over the five-year term. In a proper RFP process, they could have saved even more money if they had gone with a contract similar to Vendor's which would have saved the district \$2.7 million over the whole term compared to the original contract.

The Controller's Office interprets the dismissal of cost savings during an ongoing budget crisis and a potential tax increase as a dereliction of fiduciary duty.

Of note: the City of Pittsburgh has a contract with The Wilson Group for their copiers but went through an extensive RFP process that included bids from 6 other companies for the contract. They eventually settled on a contract not to exceed \$1.6 million for 3 years paying per copy with an option of a fourth year.

Procurement and Contracting Alignment

While this matter falls outside the scope of the current case study, it is important to note that the referenced agreement did not come to the Controller's Office for certification, because the payment mechanism was structured as a financing agreement, despite being approved by the Board as a contract.

District management should evaluate and formally align procurement and contracting processes to ensure that all Board-approved contracts, regardless of payment method (purchase order, financing agreement, or others) are subject to the School Controller certification required under PPS Policy Code 006. This review will help ensure that the chosen payment mechanism does not circumvent legal, financial, or certification obligations.

Next Steps

In addition to the suggestions presented in the October 2025 report, we have additional suggestions to improve the procurement practices of PPS. The case study involving The Wilson Group is ample evidence that the system is broken. It is time that we address the problems and find solutions to allow for future cost savings for a district in desperate need of money.

1. Open an RFP for the district's contract for copiers.

With the current contract up for renewal in 2026, it is time to implement new procurement practices for the same contract discussed in this report. As seen above, there are clear cost-saving opportunities. It is important that the district picks the lowest responsible bid meeting the District's RFP. An RFP process that is widely advertised will allow the district to save millions of dollars and go back to an unlimited copies contract that provides for PPS members.

2. Overhaul the PPS Organizational Structure by adding a Procurement Department.

A cause of this case study is the lack of a PPS Procurement Department that handles all bids and RFPs. With a dedicated team designed to establish, run, advertise, and execute RFPs and Bids, the CFO would not be burdened with all procurement decisions. With a well-run and staffed department, there could be a more transparent way for the public to see the details of the RFPs and Contracts. The district needs an overhaul of the district offices, and this starts with establishing a procurement office.

3. Facilitation of more RFPs and Bid opportunities for existing contracts.

After establishing a procurement office, PPS would be able to have more RFPs and more opportunities for organizations to bid on contracts. By adding only a few people to the payroll, the district would be able to save millions of dollars every year by running more RFPs and soliciting more bids. As explained in this case study and in the October 2025 report, a simple solicitation of bids could save the district an average of 30% on contracts. There are millions of dollars in contracts given out every year, and by adding in more RFPs and more bids, millions more can be saved.

February 12, 2026

**RESPONSE OF THE SCHOOL DISTRICT OF PITTSBURGH
TO THE CASE STUDY OF THE SCHOOL CONTROLLER**

While a formal Request for Proposals (RFP) was not conducted, the School District of Pittsburgh (District) obtained proposals from three (3) vendors for copier and printer equipment. The proposal selected was based on overall cost and value. Initial proposals ranged from \$69,000.42 to \$85,324 per month. However, not all proposals included costs such as freight and the PaperCut document-management software. After accounting for these items, the proposal costs ranged from \$75,970.92 to \$85,324 per month.

Two (2) of the proposals also included the option to reduce the total equipment fleet by up to ten (10%) percent after month 12, which was factored into the evaluation. The District also considered the cost for the remaining months on the current copier and printer lease. After this full evaluation, the estimated total cost of the proposals ranged from \$4,980,676.20 to \$5,161,437.

Based on this analysis, the District selected The Wilson Group.

The lease agreement included a maintenance escalator clause that the vendor had the option to activate. The vendor did not notify the District of its intent to exercise this clause in its proposal; as a result, the associated cost increases were not considered during the evaluation process. As noted in the case study, activation of the clause resulted in higher monthly payments. Had the District been aware of this provision during the proposal review, a different vendor would likely have been selected.

The District fully intends to issue a formal Request for Proposals for the upcoming copier and printer lease expiration. The RFP will require vendors to fully disclose all costs and any potential escalator clauses to ensure an accurate and transparent evaluation of all proposals.