



Pittsburgh Public Schools starts year in Catch-22

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Classes opened in Pittsburgh Public Schools this week without yellow-vested firefighters or security guards having to escort children across gang boundaries, as they did in Chicago.

And they opened without Mayor Luke Ravenstahl having to promise to ante up \$50 million for schools, as his counterpart in Philadelphia did.

Still, school officials in Pittsburgh have problems: How do they eliminate a deficit estimated to rise to \$46 million by 2016, yet keep residents happy, schools running and students learning?

In the past five years, the district has closed 11 schools, but consultants have suggested more, although no specifics have been floated. Two years ago, the district furloughed 243 employees, including 131 teachers.

Between 2000 and 2010, the number of school-aged children in the city declined from 52,417 to 37,431, even as competition from private, parochial and charter schools grew more fierce.

"I know nobody wants to hear about school closures, but we do have to look at schools that are dramatically under-enrolled," said Superintendent Linda Lane, pledging that she had no specific schools in mind. "It's a part of the picture, but it's not all of the picture."

Another part, she said, might be reducing the size of the central office, although the extent is uncertain.

The district got into financial trouble because of the loss of federal and state money, soaring payments to charter schools and mushrooming pension and health costs, officials say.

Lane said increasing enrollment by attracting families from outside the district is important, but not as important as keeping ones in the district happy. She said she came to that conclusion when the district found that the proportion of students in the city going to private, parochial and charter schools has remained flat at 30 percent.

The district finds itself in a Catch-22 situation. Failing to make steep cuts burdens taxpayers, but making those cuts upsets parents. The district last raised property taxes in 2001.

Four new school board members take office in December, and immediately, they will wrestle with how to close the district's deficit.

"There's very little they can do ... that people aren't going to get upset about," said Carey Harris, executive director of the watchdog group A+ Schools. "The first three months of their watch, they will have some very difficult decisions to make. It's politically dangerous to close schools, and it's financially dangerous to do nothing."

Michael Casserly, executive director of the Council of the Great City Schools, said its 66 urban members, including Pittsburgh, face common problems: tight budgets, struggling schools and the start of the Common Core State Standards, among others. The Common Core aims to better prepare graduates for college or employment.

"I would say that Pittsburgh has far more assets and competencies that it can bring to the table for children than most other cities," said Casserly, citing the district's leadership and work to improve teachers' performance. His organization has studied the district's finances, special education and instruction.

Jessie Ramey did not buy back-to-school bookbags for her two sons this year. Instead, she bought gift cards for their teachers because they buy supplies out of their pockets.

She joined Great Public Schools Pittsburgh, a coalition of parents, teachers and community members that rallied last week to promote more state aid for schools and to oppose more school closings until the district studies their potential impact.

"I don't think we're regressing, but we need to come together to fight to make sure we don't slip back," Ramey said. "We have things we must address in our schools, but our public education system is not a failure."

Ramey said her son, Caldwell Zimmerman, 12, sat in a math class last year with 39 students. This year, his school, Colfax in Squirrel Hill, will not have a librarian.

Enrollment dropped district-wide 6.8 percent in 2012-13. But school board President Sharene Shealey said, "If we don't get our finances in line, we could cause our enrollment to decline faster because people may not be willing to accept the tax burden that comes with a \$46 million hole in the district's budget."