
**The Mayor as Superintendent in Pittsburgh:
The Impossible Dream or
Every Taxpayer and School Child's Nightmare?**

Robert P. Strauss¹

Wednesday, June 01, 2005
10:00 am - 11:30 am
Falk Auditorium - First Floor
The Brookings Institution
1775 Massachusetts Avenue, NW
Washington, DC 20036

¹ Professor of Economics and Public Policy, The H. John Heinz III. School of Public Policy and Management, Carnegie-Mellon University, Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, 15213-3890. Email: RPStrauss@Att.Net ; Webpage: www.Andrew.CMU.Edu/user/rs9f. The views expressed are solely those of the author, and do not represent those of Carnegie-Mellon University, the Heinz School, or their trustees.

“To do what’s right is easy, to know what’s right to do is another matter.” LBJ

1. Introduction and Outline of Comments

- **Diane’s paper highlights the importance of structuring school governance so that authority to change is informed and limited to insure change serves the public interest.**
- **Providing Mayor Bloomberg unbridled authority ran the risk of going to the wrong goal line, and it looks like much has been lost so far during this experiment.**
- **The Mayor of Pittsburgh, with the support of various elites, has been trying to take over the Pittsburgh Public Schools.**

So far, it has been resisted because the Mayor’s 12 year record of municipal management has been a financial disaster, and his economic development strategies an admitted, abject failure.

- **My comments are designed to describe briefly the Pittsburgh process, and then to return with an idea about reforming the school governance structure so that the public interest can be more likely served.**
- **Think about what the public interest should be while I describe failed attempts at takeover.**

---Outline of Comments

- **Similarities and differences Pittsburgh vs. NYC (Sec 2)**
- **Pittsburgh shenanigans and school follies (Sec 3)**
- **Summary of lessons learned and a governance suggestion
(Sec 4)**

2.0 Similarities and Differences: Pittsburgh vs. NYC

---Similarities

- **Both were the focus of progressive movement reforms in early 20th century resulting from the Russell Sage Foundation studies**
- **Both have always had strong mayoral forms of government**
- **Pittsburgh went to judicial appointment of school boards in 1911; Since 1976 has had district elections; school desegregation plan approved in 1980; race an undertone in board elections and decisions**
- **NY has always had a dependent school district in the sense that City Council must vote the tax monies;**
- **Both strong 1 party towns**
 1. **PGH: 5:1 Democratic Registration**
 2. **NYC: 3:1 Preferred Kerry to Bush**
- **Both AFT School Districts**
- **Both School Districts now have white minority**
 1. **PGH: 59% African American**
 2. **NYC: Hispanic 38% + African American 35%**
- **Both districts loved their kids in 2002-3**
 1. **PGH: \$11,000/ADM**
 2. **NYC: \$12,500/ADM**

- **Both have scholastic performance issues for large numbers of students**
- **Both cities in and out of financial distress**
 1. **PGH: Debt Service 23% of Budget in 2004**
 2. **NYC: “Moratorium” on Debt Service in 1975**

---Differences

- **Financial Stability**
 1. **City of Pittsburgh is in financial receivership**
 2. **NYC seems solvent from afar**
- **School Enrollment**
 1. **Pittsburgh is small and declining: 33,400 students**
 2. **NYC is huge and growing 1,091,000 students**
- **Population**
 1. **Pittsburgh is small and declining:**
 - 1950: 676,800
 - 2003: 325,337 **52% decline**
 2. **NYC is large and stable**
 - 1950: 7,891,957
 - 2003: 8,085,742 **2.5% increase**

3. City Shenanigans and School Follies

Pittsburgh Public Schools have been financial responsible while City of Pittsburgh has been financially irresponsible.

---- Pittsburgh City Shenanigans

- **Murphy took office in 1994 and “solved” the pension under-funding problem in 1996 by borrowing \$250 million in non-callable, insured bonds at 7%**
- **Mayor Murphy supported diversion of 1993 regional sales tax monies for \$1 billion in new stadiums, and new convention center;**
- **Mayor Murphy and the City Firefighter’s Contract**

Facing a very tight re-election, Murphy signed an August 2001, 5 year, no-layoff, contract with the elimination of co-pays and with generous cost-of-living clauses that added \$12 million/year in labor costs to Firefighter’s contract.

Joe King, President of the union bragged on TV in 2001 that that fire fighters re-elected Murphy in return for lush contract.

A federal grand jury has been investigating the deal since early 2004.

Independent evaluations of Pittsburgh’s fire department conclude that budget could be reduced by 2/3, and still meet national response time standards.

Summer 2003, Pittsburgh Police contract rated best in the country in terms of salary, retirement and health benefits, and overtime pay.

- **Pittsburgh was declared and remains financially distressed by Pennsylvania in early 2004. Mayor proposes and council agrees to increase parking tax to 50% in early 2004 to forestall layoffs.**
- **As of 2004, 10% of City property tax foregone for economic development incentives**
- **In early 2005, Mayor Murphy, with the approval of City Council, renewed the firefighter's contract for 5 years with a no-layoff clause.**

The state oversight board is now suing the City over the 2005 fire fighters contract.

- **A Democratic member of the Oversight Board, who voted in favor of the suit, was relieved of his position on the Board on May 27, 2005 by the ranking Democrat in the Pennsylvania Senate.**

---(Recent) Pittsburgh School Follies

- **3 Pittsburgh foundations fund superintendent search in 1999-2000, recommend, and the School Board hired Dr. John Thompson from Oklahoma who took office July, 2000.**
- **In August, 2000 Thompson names Paula Butterfield of Mercer Island, Washington as Deputy Superintendent; Butterfield was fired by the Mercer**

Island School Board in less than 1 year of her 5 year contract.

- **June, 2002 Mayor and 3 Pittsburgh foundations announce the Mayor's Commission on Public Education; Dave Matter, key supporter of Mayor is chair of Commission, Eloise Hirsch, former Murphy chief of staff is named executive director; RAND is hired to do "independent" study.**
- **In July, 2002, Pittsburgh School Board files suit against Butterfield for spending \$13,588 in district monies on her friend;**

July, 2002, Butterfield and friend are hired by Intermediate Unit in suburban Pittsburgh; both are fired by IU in early 2004 and escorted out of IU building by IU Security.

- **July, 2002: 3 Pittsburgh foundations follow Pew Foundation pattern in Philadelphia and withdraw \$3.5 million in approved grants for reading program in Pittsburgh to protest Board disharmony (and removal of Butterfield?).**
- **September 2003, RAND study issued, highly critical of Pittsburgh Public Schools;**

RAND concludes appointed school board by the Mayor is "... the key to success", and argues that \$82 million fund balance (17% of operating budget) is excessive and should be reduced.

- **January, 2004 Mayor's Commission winds down and is replaced by A+ Schools that is funded by 3 Pittsburgh foundations**
- **August, 2004 "Asked whether he was meeting public expectations that he would help close the district's racial achievement gap, Thompson said school board members had not told him it was a priority."**
- **November 3, 2004 Patrick Dowd is elected to Board, racial balance and politics changed.**
- **November 20, 2004 Pa. General Assembly passes Pittsburgh tax reform legislation that takes ¼ % of 3% school wage tax and gives it to City in 2005-6, and 2006-7.**
- **December 21, 2004 Mayor Murphy announces he will not run for new term; 84% of Pittsburgh residents agree that City is going in wrong direction.**
- **January 26, 2005 Board buys out last 6 months of Superintendent Thompson's contract;**
- **February 7, 2005, Andy King, Deputy Superintendent is named Acting Superintendent. On February 8, 2005, Thompson comes to his office, tries to direct his staff, is handed a check for the last 6 months of his contract, and is escorted out of the building by Board security.**

5.0 Summary of Lessons Learned and a Suggestion

---Mayoral takeover of schools, as a general reform proposition to improve schools, is no guarantee of progress.

- Bankrupt cities are quite happy to take money from schools and needy children to take care of municipal business: e.g. pave the streets and pay police and firemen.**
- Like the weather, everybody complains about the public schools, but few municipal leaders understand how to manage their cities, let alone schools.**
- Arguably, schools themselves are often poorly managed and poorly governed**
- Governance failure is caused by and reflected in very weak oaths of office. Governance reform can be achieved by focusing the oath of office.**

---Suggestion: A New Oath of Office

Neither Mayor Bloomberg nor Mayor Murphy are obligated by respective state laws to do much. School counterparts are also not obligated to do much by their oaths of office.

School board members are required to just uphold federal and state constitutions.

Suggestion: Create New Oath of Office for School Boards and Senior Education Officials:

“ I, a duly elected or appointed school board director or senior education leader, do solemnly swear:

to support the constitution of the United States and to support the constitution and laws of the this state,

to allocate school resources and effect educational policy solely for the purpose of ensuring that each student learns to his or her intellectual capacity, and

to discharge these duties loyally, honestly, impartially, and with diligence and care, so help me God.

Analysis: Both Mayor Bloomberg’s embrace of whole English and Superintendent Thompson’s lax management and indifference to the racial achievement gap could have been challenged by this oath being in place.