



School Administration in an Era of Accountability: Facts About the Profession

Introduction

Public education, both in Pennsylvania and across the United States, operates today in a period of unprecedented accountability. This accountability has implications for school and district leaders – in terms of their preparation, the skills needed for success, and the resources required to help all students achieve academically.

As the general public – parents, taxpayers, think tanks, and editorial writers alike – has focused more and more in recent years on student achievement, the calls to cut spending on school administration have increased as well. Are these calls based upon facts or occasional anecdotes or common fictions? This study¹ reviews some of the context of school and district leadership today and examines several interrelated questions about public school administration in Pennsylvania.

- Are there too many administrators in the state's school districts?
- Has there been significant growth in the number of administrators in recent years?
- Do school district expenditures for administration account for too large a share of overall spending, and has the share of spending for administration increased significantly in recent years?
- Are school administrators paid too much?

The study updates three earlier reports that examined similar issues for school years 1986-87, 1991-92, 1996-97, and 2001-02.²

Context for the Study

School administrators have always been accountable. Superintendents and assistant superintendents are hired by elected school boards, and board members answer to the public at the end of their four-year terms. In fact, every two years, the voters have an opportunity to turn over either four or

five members of their nine-member school boards. Superintendents are also commissioned by the Secretary of Education and have an independent obligation to administer the schools in their districts in compliance with the school laws. In recent years, the scope and degree of accountability have increased substantially. At the same time, researchers have added to our knowledge of what constitutes effective school and district leaders. The Standards of School Leadership, as adopted by the Pennsylvania General Assembly in 2007, reflect this research. The standards both describe the work of school administrators and strengthen their pre-service and continuing professional development obligations.

An extensive 2001 national study of school and district leaders concludes: “superintendents and principals describe the frustration they feel as they attempt to focus on educational matters while being nibbled to death daily by the demands of cumbersome local, state and federal mandates; threats of litigation brought by parents or teachers; attacks from unions and other special interests; and a mind-boggling array of political tangles and bureaucratic encumbrances.”³ And this was before the current focus on accountability for the achievement of all students was kicked off by the adoption of the federal No Child Left Behind Act, which was signed into law in January 2002. Furthermore, during the Special Session of 2006, the Pennsylvania General Assembly enacted Act 1, which requires superintendents and school boards to share their budget and taxing authority with the Department of Education, the courts, and the voters. It is not surprising that school districts are finding it increasingly difficult to attract large numbers of well qualified and experienced candidates for school and district leadership positions.⁴

Some have suggested that school leadership is like any other kind of leadership and that the characteristics of good leadership are fungible across categories of institutions. But recent research notes that there is

a particular type of leadership especially visible in high-performing schools and school districts. . . . The touchstones for this strand of leadership include the ability of leaders (a) to stay consistently focused on the right stuff – the core technology of schooling, or learning, teaching, curriculum, and assessment – and (b) to make all the other dimensions of schooling (e.g., administration, organization, finance), work in the service of a more robust core technology and improved student learning.⁵

A recent meta-analysis by Mid-continent Research for Education and Learning (McREL)⁶ analyzed the role of the superintendent in creating effective school districts. It looked at 27 studies with rigorous methodology conducted since 1970 that included 2,817 districts and the test scores of 3.4 million students and found a statistically significant relationship between school district leaders and student achievement. In addition to establishing that district leadership matters, it identified five responsibilities of leaders that correlate with student achievement:

- Including all stakeholders in setting goals for the district.
- Ensuring that non-negotiable goals address student achievement and classroom instruction.
- Keeping the board focused on, and supportive of, the goals.
- Monitoring district progress toward the goals.
- Providing sufficient financial and human resources to accomplish the goals.

It is vital that Pennsylvania school districts attract and retain high quality leaders. This study looks at several variables related to that task – the number employed, their span of control, their compensation, the overall cost of administration – and compares it with other states and with other enterprises.

How Was the Study Conducted?

Several data files from the Pennsylvania Department of Education (PDE) for school years 1991-92, 1996-97, 2001-02, and 2006-07 provided the principal sources of information for this report, allowing for comparisons at five-year intervals.⁷ The study includes data from the state's 500 operating school districts (excluding Bryn Athyn, which operates no schools and pays tuition to send its students to other districts). It does not include data on charter schools, intermediate units, and career technology centers (CTCs) because their financial and management structures are significantly different from those of school districts. Since many of PDE's state-level data reports include charter schools, intermediate units, and CTCs, there are some differences between those reports and this study.

In the discussion that follows, there are references to both "central office professional personnel" and "all management and supervisory personnel."

The former category includes administrative and supervisory staff functioning at the district level (*e.g.*, superintendents, assistant superintendents, business administrators, and curriculum directors); the latter category additionally includes administrative and supervisory staff responsible for the operation of individual schools (*e.g.*, principals and assistant principals). References to “other professional personnel” include guidance counselors, librarians, school health staff, and the like. Finally, in reviewing school district budgets, this study assigns costs of principals’ offices to the “instructional support” category, since this reflects the basic functions of those offices and adds costs for “business support” and “central support” to the costs of administration.⁸

Are There Too Many Administrators?

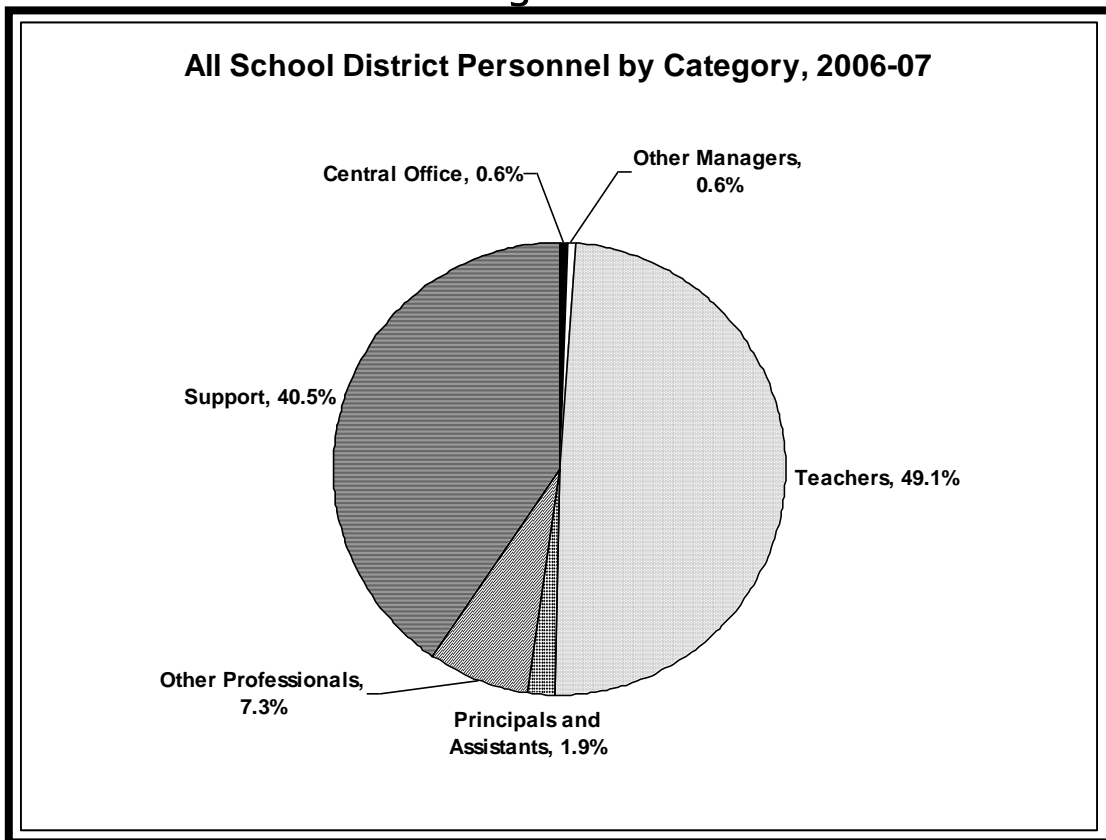
There is no precise way to determine how many administrators are necessary to operate schools and districts effectively and efficiently, so there is no precise way to determine if Pennsylvania districts employ too many administrators. But it is possible to compare Pennsylvania districts with districts across the United States and to compare the number of school administrators with the number of administrative personnel in other sectors of the economy.

In 2006-07, the latest year for which complete data are available, Pennsylvania’s school districts employed 230,817 people, of whom 137,448 were classified as professional employees. Of these professional employees, only 1,451 worked in school district central office positions. This equates to 2.9 central office professionals per district. All management and supervisory personnel totaled 7,245, and the vast majority of these were building level administrators – 4,446 principals and assistant principals (61.4 percent of all supervisory staff or 76.7 percent of non-central office managers).

Central office professional staff comprised 0.6 percent of all school district employees in 2006-07, while all management and supervisory personnel accounted for 3.0 percent of total staff.

Figure 1 shows the distribution of all school district personnel by category for school year 2006-07.

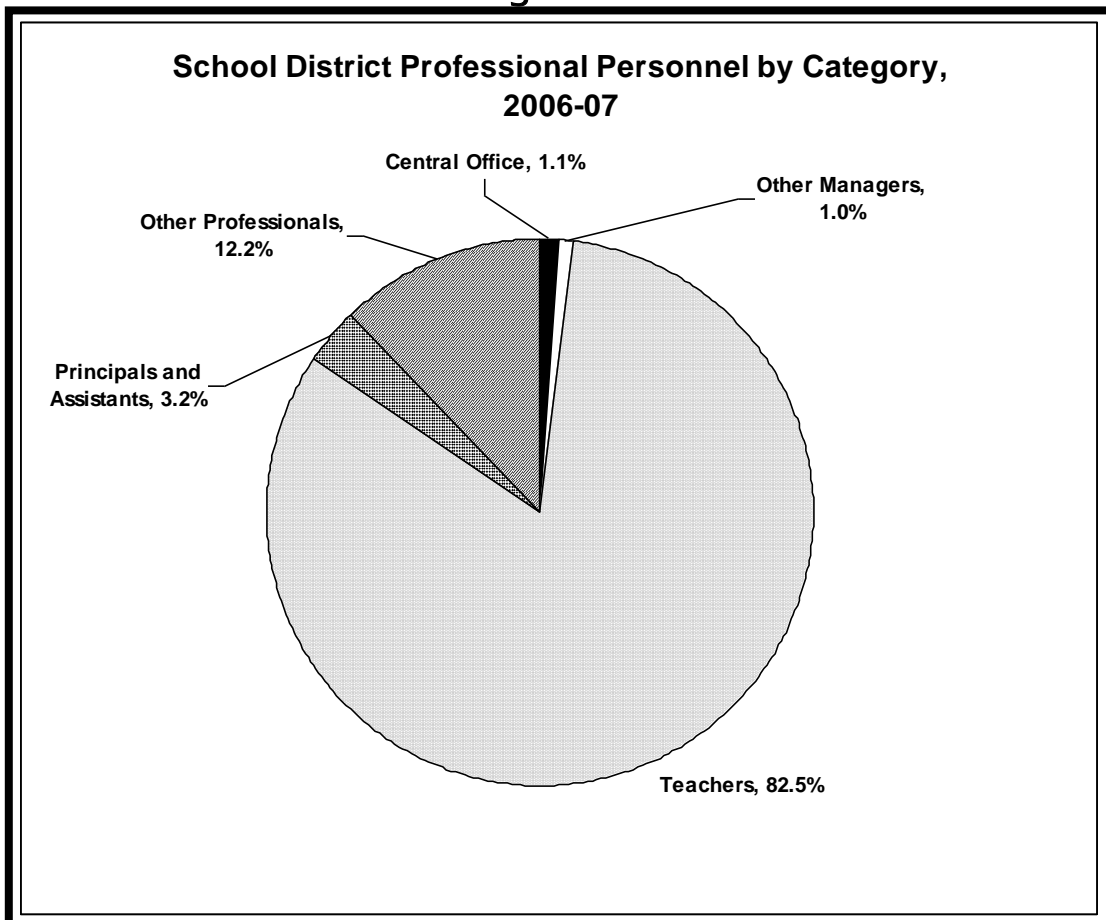
Figure 1



When support staff are excluded from the analysis, central office administrators accounted for 1.1 percent of all professional employees, and total management and supervisory personnel constituted 5.3 percent of all professionals employed by school districts in 2006-07.

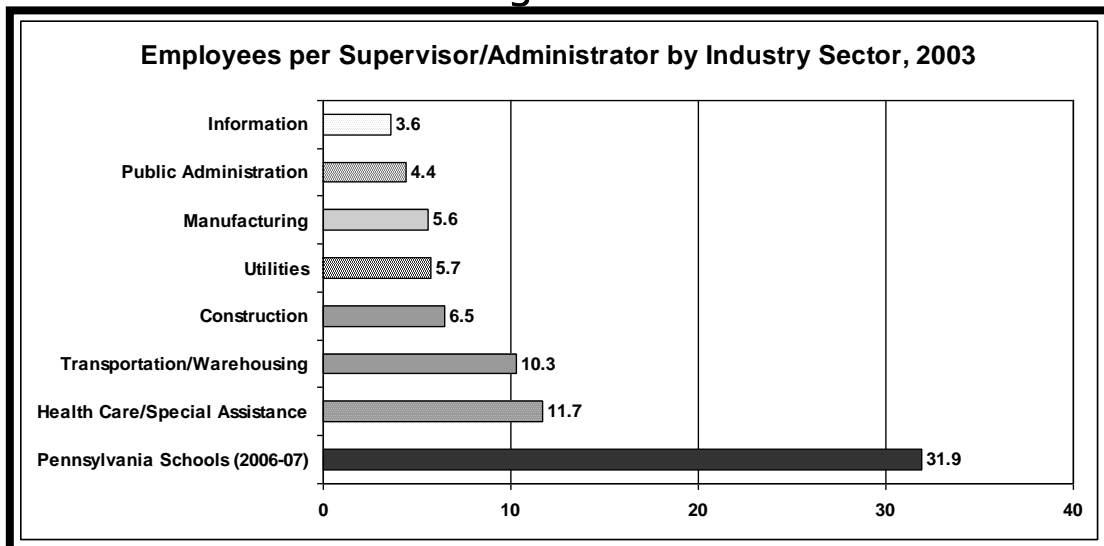
Figure 2 displays the distribution of school district professional personnel by category for school year 2006-07.

Figure 2



The preceding data give some indication of the distribution of personnel among Pennsylvania's school districts, but they need further elaboration to determine the degree of responsibility of Pennsylvania school administrators. One common measure is the span of control, or the number of employees for whom each manager is responsible. Table 1 displays the ratios of professional personnel, all district employees, and students to both central office professionals and all management and supervisory personnel for every fifth year, dating back to 1991-92.

Figure 3



In thinking about administrators' responsibilities, it is also important to consider the number of students for whom they are responsible. In 2006-07, each manager or supervisor was responsible on average for 240 students, and each central office administrator was responsible for nearly 1,200 students.

How do Pennsylvania school administrators' responsibilities stack up compared with their peers in other states? This is difficult to answer for all administrative personnel, since school districts vary in the size and structure of their administrations, but virtually all have one thing in common – one district superintendent.

Table 2 summarizes the responsibilities of the average Pennsylvania superintendent with those of superintendents nationwide.¹⁰

Table 2

Jurisdiction	Expenditures ¹¹	Employees	Students
United States	\$32,753,209	435	3,424
Pennsylvania	\$38,524,740	462	3,478

Compared with their colleagues in other states, Pennsylvania superintendents are responsible on average for 18 percent larger budgets, 6 percent more staff, and 2 percent more students.

Has There Been Significant Growth in Administrative Staff?

In the 15 years between 1991-92 and 2006-07, public school enrollment in the state's 500 operating districts (not including charter schools), has increased by almost 5 percent (or about 76,000 students – more than twice the size of the state's second largest district, Pittsburgh). During the same period, the number of school district personnel has increased considerably faster, reflecting increased accountability pressures, increased diversity of students, and a shift in many special education and career-technology programs from intermediate units and CTCs to school districts. The increased accountability also has spawned a significant increase in both federal and state categorical programs, each of which requires additional specialized staff and supervision.

Table 3 shows changes in the numbers of students and staff by category for Pennsylvania's public school districts.

Table 3

Number of Students and Staff by Category in Pennsylvania School Districts, 1991-92 through 2006-07					
Students/ Staff Categories	1991-92	1996-97	2001-02	2006-07	% Change from 1991- 92
Students	1,663,204	1,781,383	1,766,513	1,739,195	4.6%
All Personnel	185,846	198,070	223,323	230,817	24.2%
Professional Personnel	112,462	119,566	133,167	137,448	22.2%
Classroom Teachers	78,432	82,713	110,786	113,369	44.5%
Principals & Assistants	3,889	3,053	4,212	4,446	14.3%
Central Office Professionals	1,259	1,356	1,391	1,451	15.3%
All Management and Supervisory Staff	5,601	4,874	6,657	7,245	29.4%

The greatest increase has been in the number of classroom teachers. This reflects federal and state efforts to fund class size reduction initiatives, along

with increased efforts to help all students achieve state academic standards, in keeping with both state policy and the federal No Child Left Behind Act. It also reflects the fact that school districts now educate a much larger percentage of students with disabilities than they did in 1991-92, as well as the rapid rise in English language learning students.

The smallest growth has been in principals and assistant principals, followed by central office professional staff. While the latter has increased 15 percent in the past 15 years, this represents an average of about one-third of a central office administrator in each district.

Because of the much larger increases in the numbers of classroom teachers and total personnel, however, the average central office professional was responsible for more employees in 2006-07 than in 1991-92, and the average responsibility of all management and supervisory personnel was essentially unchanged (see Table 1 on page 7).

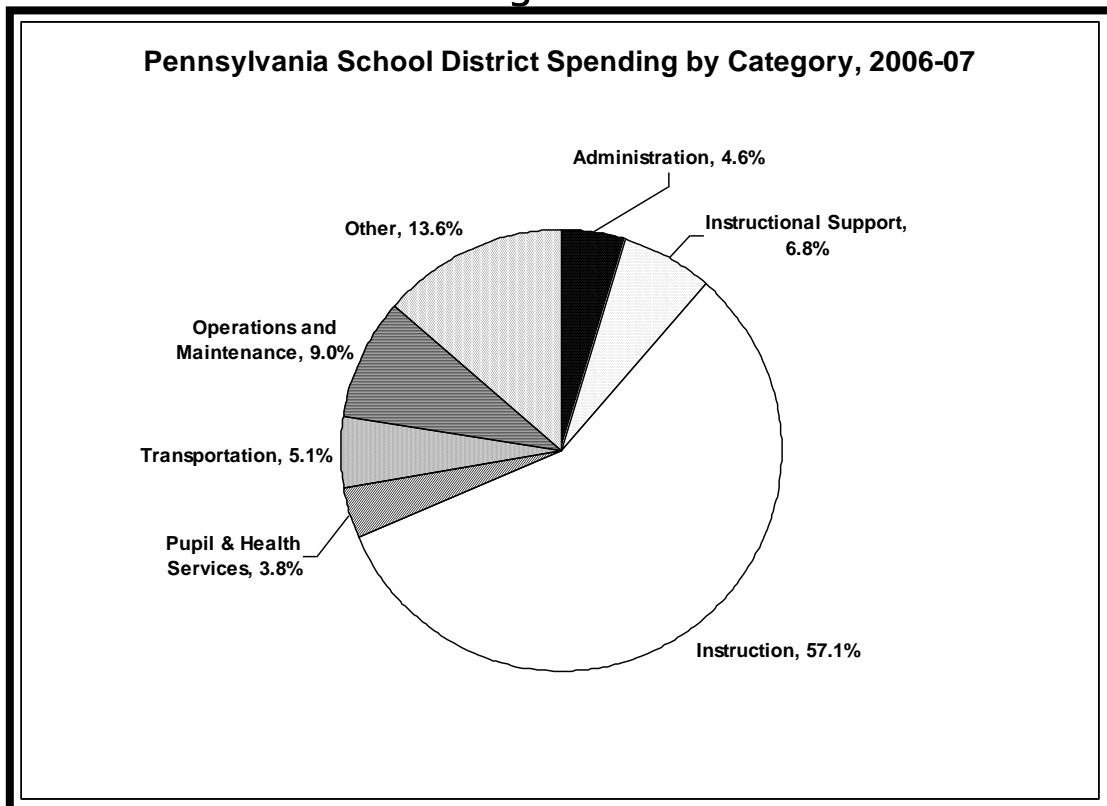
Do Districts Spend Too Much on Administration?

The preceding analysis makes clear that Pennsylvania school districts do not have too many administrators — compared with the responsibilities of managers in other economic sectors and with school administrators in other states. In fact, it appears that the increase in Pennsylvania school district administrators has essentially just kept pace with the increase in those responsibilities for budgets, personnel, students, and increased accountability pressures — and with respect to central office administrators, the growth in those duties has outpaced any increase in personnel.

But are the costs of administration too high? Are they increasing at a disproportionate rate? In order to answer those questions, this study reviews the general fund expenditures of the 500 operating school districts in the state for 1991-92, 1996-97, 2001-02, and 2006-07. As noted previously, this study assigns the costs of principals' offices to the "instructional support" category, since this reflects the basic functions of those offices and adds costs for "business support" and "central support" to the costs of administration.¹²

Figure 4 displays 2006-07 school district spending by category.

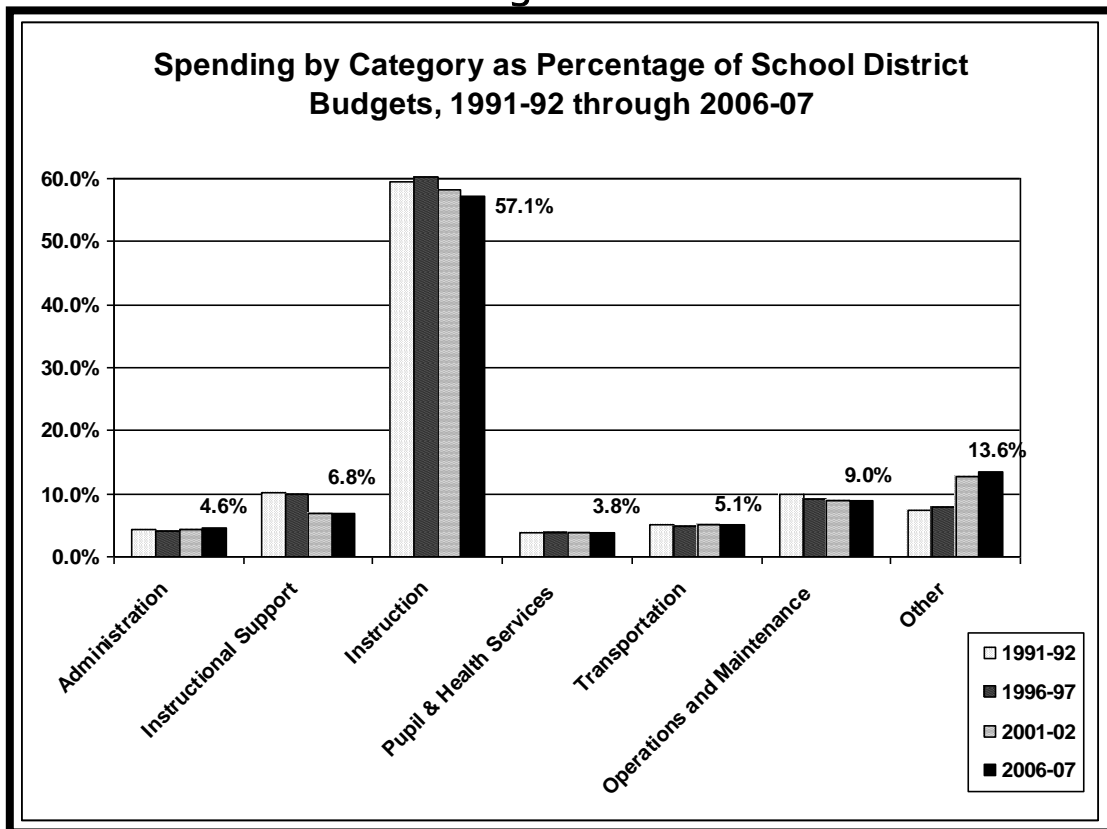
Figure 4



The 4.6 percent of spending devoted to administration represents less than a one-half of one percentage point increase over the past 15 years. Most other categories of spending declined as shares of school district budgets during that time period. The only significant increase was in “other” expenditures, which includes support services other than administration, instructional support, pupil and health services, transportation, and operations and maintenance; non-instructional expenses; facilities acquisition; and debt service.

The budget shares by expenditure category for 1991-92, 1995-96, 2001-02, and 2006-07 are displayed in Figure 5.

Figure 5



Examining budget shares is one way of trying to determine if school districts spend too much on administration. Another is to look at expenditures on a per pupil basis.

Table 4 displays per pupil spending by budget category for school years 1991-92, 1996-97, 2001-02, and 2006-07. It also shows the degree to which the increase in each category of expenditure contributed to the overall increase in per pupil spending.

Table 4

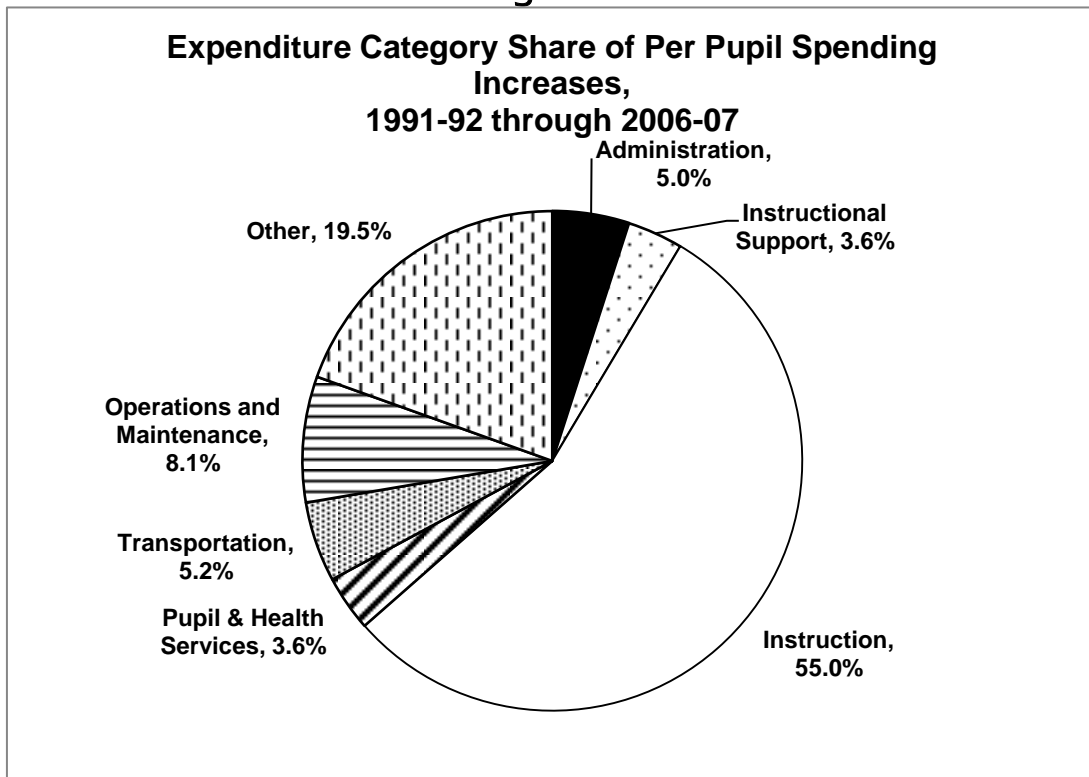
Per Pupil Spending by Category Pennsylvania School Districts, 1991-92 through 2006-07					
Expenditure Category	1991-92	1996-97	2001-02	2006-07	% of Total Increase from 1991-92
Instruction	\$3,680	\$4,529	\$5,439	\$7,161	55.0%
Instructional Support	625	751	649	853	3.6%
Pupil and Health Services	243	289	358	471	3.6%
Transportation	314	362	476	643	5.2%
Operations and Maintenance	614	692	845	1,130	8.1%
Administration	261	303	413	576	5.0%
Other	465	593	1,180	1,702	19.5%
Total Expenditures	\$6,201	\$7,519	\$9,360	\$12,535	100.0%

Total per pupil spending increased by more than \$6,300 during the past 15 years, and administrative costs accounted for a little over \$300 of that amount, while nearly 60 percent of the increase was due to instruction and instructional support expenditures.

The \$315 increase in per pupil administrative spending over the past 15 years equates to \$21 per pupil per year.

The percentage contribution of each expenditure category to the total increase in per pupil spending between 1991-92 and 2006-07 is displayed graphically in Figure 6.

Figure 6



Are School Administrators Paid Too Much?

Pennsylvania school district superintendents and principals have more years of experience and more advanced training than classroom teachers. Even if they did not have greater responsibilities, this would justify their higher salaries. These facts are displayed in Table 5.

What that table does not indicate is that most teachers have 185-195-day contracts, while almost all administrators are 12-month employees. Nor does it account for the broader range of responsibilities assigned to district and building administrators.

Table 5

Average Experience, Education, and Salaries Pennsylvania School District Employees, 2006-07			
Employee Category	Average Years Experience	Average Level of Education ¹³	Average Salary
Classroom Teachers	14.4	4.5	\$55,121
Elementary Principals	22.3	5.1	\$88,376
Middle School Principals	21.6	5.1	\$91,275
Secondary Principals	22.2	5.1	\$91,551
Assistant Superintendents	27.2	5.6	\$111,598
Superintendents	30.1	5.6	\$117,259

In 2006-07, the average classroom teacher had about 14 years experience (a 13 percent decline over the preceding five years), and 40 percent had master's degrees or higher (a significant decline from five years earlier).

The average principal had 7.8 more years experience than the average teacher, and 97 percent had at least a master's degree. The salary differential was about 63 percent. This is an improvement over five years earlier, when the salary differential was only 53 percent.

Assistant superintendents had almost 13 more years experience than teachers, and 60 percent had doctorates. Their salary differential was about 102 percent, also an improvement over 88 percent five years earlier.

Superintendents had more than twice as much experience as teachers (an additional 16.3 years on average), and 60 percent had doctorates. The salary differential between superintendents and classroom teachers was 113 percent, compared with 98 percent five years earlier.

Table 6 compares salaries of Pennsylvania school administrators with their counterparts across the United States.¹⁴

Table 6

Pennsylvania and United States School District Salaries By Category of Employees, 2006-07			
Employee Category	Pennsylvania	United States	PA:US Ratio
Classroom Teachers	\$55,121	\$49,294	1.118
Elementary Principals	\$88,376	\$82,414	1.072
Middle School Principals	\$91,275	\$87,866	1.039
Secondary Principals	\$91,551	\$92,965	0.985
Assistant Superintendents	\$111,598	\$111,963	0.997
Superintendents	\$117,259	\$141,191	0.831

While Pennsylvania classroom, teachers are paid considerably more (12 percent on average) than those in other states, the same cannot be said for Pennsylvania school and district administrators. Pennsylvania elementary and middle school principals are paid slightly more than national averages (seven and four percent, respectively), but high school principals and district administrators are paid less than national averages. This is especially pronounced for Pennsylvania school district superintendents, who make only 83 percent of the national average salary. But as noted in Table 2, the average Pennsylvania superintendent is responsible for more students, more personnel, and larger budgets than his or her peers in other states.

In recent years, Pennsylvania school districts have had increasing difficulty filling both school and district leadership positions. This has led some districts to raise salaries – either to keep the leaders they have or to attract candidates when their administrators retire or take positions in other districts.¹⁵

In 2006-07, the average superintendent’s salary accounted for 0.2 percent of his or her district’s budget (a reduction from 0.3 percent five years earlier). In only 24 of the 500 districts did superintendent salaries account for more than one percent of the district budget. All of these are very small districts (ranging from 232 to 902 students), so the seemingly high salaries are really reflections of diseconomies of scale in the smallest districts. In fact, only one of these 24 superintendents was paid more than the statewide average in 2006-07.

Even if every Pennsylvania school superintendent’s salary were reduced to that of the average teacher, the savings in the average district would be about \$62,000 or \$18 per student.

Conclusion

So what can we conclude about whether there are too many administrators in Pennsylvania school districts and whether they are too highly paid?

- There are not “too many” administrators.
 - Central office administrators comprise only 0.6 percent of school district employees, and all management and supervisory personnel comprise only 3.1 percent.
 - This amounts to 2.9 central office administrators per district and 14.5 total management and supervisory personnel (including the 2.9 central office staff and 8.9 principals and assistant principals).
 - The average supervisor is responsible for 32 staff; the average central office administrator is responsible for 159. In manufacturing, there are only .6 employees per supervisor; in construction only 7; in hospitals only 12.
 - The average Pennsylvania superintendent is responsible for larger budgets, more staff, and more students than his or her counterpart across the nation.

- There has not been significant growth in the number of administrators.
 - Between 1991-92 and 2006-07, the number of management and supervisory personnel increased by 1,644 (including an increase of 192 central office professionals).
 - But total staff increased by almost 45,000, resulting in central office managers having heavier supervisory loads in 2006-07 than they had 15 years earlier.
 - Over the same time period, school districts became responsible for more new programs (e.g., the federal No Child Left Behind Act and its extension of federal authority over all schools and students) with stricter regulations (e.g., No Child Left Behind and new federal special education regulations requiring more inclusive education practices) and experienced increased accountability (e.g., No Child Left Behind and its increased regimen of test-based accountability and the referendum requirements of Special Session Act 1 of 2006) and competition (e.g., charter schools and cyber schools) — all of which placed additional demands on school and district administrators.

- School districts do not spend inordinate amounts on administration, nor are administrative costs driving overall spending increases.
 - Spending on administration in 2006-07 accounted for 4.6 percent of total school district expenditures.
 - This represents an increase of less than half of one percentage point during the preceding 15 years.
 - School districts in 2006-07 spent \$576 per pupil on administration, an increase of \$315 over 1991-92, or about \$21 per student per year.
 - Administrative spending increases accounted for only 5 percent of total expenditure increases from 1991-92 to 2006-07.

- School administrators are not paid “too much.”
 - In 2006-07, school districts spent 2.9 percent of their budgets on administrative salaries, including 0.2 percent on the superintendent’s salary.
 - The share of the budget devoted to the superintendent’s salary actually decreased from 0.3 percent five years earlier.
 - In 2006-07, the average superintendent in Pennsylvania made 83 percent as much as his or her counterpart nationally. A decade earlier, Pennsylvania superintendents made 87 percent as much as their peers nationally.

Notes

¹ This paper was prepared for the Pennsylvania Association of School Administrators by Robert E. Feir. Dr. Feir is president of EdStrat21, an education strategies and project management consulting firm based in Harrisburg, Pennsylvania. He has served as a school administrator, a member of the Board of Control of the Harrisburg School District, executive director of the Pennsylvania State Board of Education and the Pennsylvania Senate Education Committee, and Director of Policy for the Pennsylvania Department of Education. He has provided consulting services to schools and districts in ten states.

² Pennsylvania Association of School Administrators, *White Paper on Pennsylvania’s School District Administrators, The Facts on Right Sizing*, 1992. Pennsylvania Association of School Administrators, *White Paper: Pennsylvania School District Administration, A Look at Some Facts*, 1999. Pennsylvania Association of School Administrators, *Administering Pennsylvania’s School Districts*, 2004.

³ Public Agenda, *Trying to Stay Ahead of the Game: Superintendents and Principals Talk about School Leadership*, 2001.

⁴ The Education Policy and Leadership Center, *Strengthening School Leadership: Preparing and Supporting Superintendents and Principals*, 2006.

⁵ Murphy, J., "Restructuring Through Learning-Focused Leadership" in Walberg, H. (Ed.), *Handbook on Restructuring and Substantial School Improvement*, 2007, p.72.

⁶ Waters, J. T. and Marzano, R., *School District Leadership that Works: The Effect of Superintendent Leadership on Student Achievement*, 2007.

⁷ Specific data sources included school district annual financial reports, elementary/secondary professional personnel reports, public school support personnel reports, and public school enrollment reports.

⁸ Administrative costs are thus calculated as the sum of accounts 2300 (administration support), 2500 (business support), and 2800 (central support) minus account 2380 (principal office support).

⁹ Protheroe, N., *Answering the Critics of School Administration: What Are the Facts?*, 2008.

¹⁰ National data from the U. S. Department of Education, National Center on Education Statistics, *Digest of Education Statistics 2007*; *Public Elementary and Secondary School Student Enrollment and Staff from the Common Core of Data: School Year 2006-07*; *Condition of Education 2008*; and the common core of data 2007.

¹¹ These are actual 2006-07 current expenditures of Pennsylvania school districts and projected 2006-07 current expenditures of districts nationwide. Data are not yet available on actual nationwide spending for 2006-07; nor is there an estimate of total expenditures at the national level. The national projection was determined by applying a 3.2 percent increase (based upon the "middle alternative projection" in the NCEES *Projections of Education Statistics to 2017* to the current expenditure amount reported in the NCEES *Revenues and Expenditures for Public Elementary and Secondary Education: School Year 2005-06 (Fiscal Year 2006)*. Elsewhere in this study, total Pennsylvania school district expenditures are used. The difference between current and total expenditures is that the former does not include facilities acquisition or debt service.

¹² See note 7, above.

¹³ PDE's coding for average level of education: 4 = bachelor's degree; 5 = master's degree; 6 = doctorate.

¹⁴ Pennsylvania data from Pennsylvania Department of Education's 2006-07 professional personnel reports and United States data from Educational Research Service, *Salaries and Wages Paid Professional and Support Personnel in Public Schools, 2006-2007*, 2007.

¹⁵ The Education Policy and Leadership Center, *Strengthening School Leadership: Preparing and Supporting Superintendents and Principals*, 2006.