

What's Driving the Ballooning Support Staff in Public Schools?

In the animated graphic below, University of Michigan economics professor Mark Perry charts the ballooning nature of public school staff, students, and spending since 1970.

As Perry [explains](#), the student population has increased by 10 percent in the last 50 years. The number of teachers has increased by nearly 60 percent in that same period.

One of the most amazing increases, however, is in the area of non-teaching staff. This category, Perry notes, includes “administrators, principals, assistant principals, support staff, librarians, guidance counselors and instructional aides,” and it has increased by almost 150 percent.

This increase in staff likely explains the similar percentage increase in cost per pupil. Unfortunately, this increase in spending hasn't improved education, a fact Perry demonstrates via stagnant reading and math scores on the National Assessment of Educational Progress.

But leaving aside increased spending and stagnant scores, what explains the huge increase in non-teaching staff? Several things come to mind.

The increase in special education students is a good place to start. With the passage of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act in 1975, many students with special needs became a regular part of the public school system. Special needs students require special staff, and with 14 percent of students enrolled in special education, it's no surprise that

school staff would swell.

Yet, it seems unreasonable to say that the 150 percent increase in non-teaching staff is solely the responsibility of special education students. What else could be driving the increase?

How about red tape? The infamous No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 made its entrance during the time period shown on the above graph. The accountability demanded by this program [increased spending per pupil](#), including further increases in funding for support services. Little wonder. Someone must do the reporting which enables accountability.

But there's another reason that shouldn't be overlooked: behavior in the schools.

Recent years have brought [horror stories to light](#). No longer are teachers adults who must be revered. Instead, they are objects of disrespect to be cussed out and pushed around, not obeyed. Teachers who escape rough treatment often deal with chaotic classrooms, forcing them to spend their precious time on crowd control rather than teaching. Given this volatile climate, it's not surprising that more hands may be needed to maintain some semblance of order.

In the past, children have learned the earliest lessons of right behavior in their homes, or from their neighbors and churches. Today, however, church attendance is in decline. Neighbors – at least known ones – are non-existent, and families are often broken or in disarray because of divorce, remarriage, and cohabitation. If the structures which teach the earliest lessons of good behavior are disintegrating, then the schools are the only institution left to pick up the pieces. To do such a big task, schools need those extra hands.

If we want schools to be surrogate parents, then perhaps we must accept the increased expenditures which come with more staff. If we don't want to go that route, then perhaps it's

instead time to turn our hearts toward home and re-instill a culture of respect in our children.

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[Image Credit: U.S. Air Force photo by Airman 1st Class Carissa Wolff]