

### **The Problem of School Absenteeism**

Many studies showing the negative effect of absenteeism on academic achievement have been carried out over the last 40 years. Ideas to reduce chronic absenteeism and truancy have also been offered in great abundance. Apparently none of those has been able to stem the tide of what appears to be an increasingly intractable conundrum.

High absenteeism is associated with high dropout rates, low scores on standardized tests, poor employment prospects, and greater usage of welfare programs. In short, not much good, and a great deal that is not good, comes from this education malady.

And the malady does afflict several western Pennsylvania school districts, especially high schools in Pittsburgh and surrounding communities. Recent newspaper articles have highlighted some of the more severe instances of enormous levels of chronic absenteeism and truancy. Rates of “chronic absenteeism”, which was defined as a student missing 18 days or more of school, were 30 percent or higher in Wilkinsburg and Duquesne, with Sto-Rox and Woodland Hills not far behind. Rates of “habitual truancy”, meaning six or more unexcused absences, were greater than 40 percent in McKeesport and Wilkinsburg. A more recent article examined the Pittsburgh Public Schools, which showed chronic absenteeism district-wide at 26 percent.

Indeed, there can be little doubt in the Pittsburgh schools that towering rates of chronic absenteeism in its high schools (three of the four 9<sup>th</sup>-12<sup>th</sup> grade high schools had chronic absenteeism rates of greater than 40 percent) are a key factor in the dreadful academic performance of students. Combined schools with 6<sup>th</sup> through 12<sup>th</sup> graders tend to have lower chronic absenteeism rates (except Westinghouse 6-12 at over 60 percent, and Milliones 6-12 at 45 percent) because 6<sup>th</sup> to 8<sup>th</sup> grade students tend to have much lower rates of absenteeism than high school students.

In suburban schools with strong academic achievement, as measured by PSSA scores or SAT results, attendance rates are quite high. For example, North Allegheny High had 96.5 percent attendance in 2013 and had 95 percent of students scoring proficient or advanced on the reading portion of the PSSA. By way of comparison, Perry High in Pittsburgh, with 82 percent attendance, had a mere 36 percent scoring at proficient or advanced in reading. Meanwhile, the combined math and verbal SAT score at Perry

averaged 772. At the same time, in Mt. Lebanon High with 96 percent attendance, the combined SAT score averaged 1132, well above the state and national average. And it's not money. Mt. Lebanon spends far less per pupil than does Pittsburgh on its schools.

In the case of Perry High, 60 percent of students are chronically absent, meaning they have missed 10 percent or more of school days—18 or more days per year. An 82 percent overall attendance rate at the school means the average student is absent 32 days during the 180 day school year. Using an estimate of 15 days missed by those who are not chronically absent, we can calculate the average days missed by the 60 percent who are chronically absent to be 44. (To be sure, the days absent number for this group could be higher than 44 if the days missed by those not chronically absent is actually well below 15.) And of course 44 is the average, which means a sizable percentage could be missing upwards of 60 days per year.

We don't know how the absences are distributed throughout the year. That is, do the chronically absent stay away a week or more at a time? Do they opt for Mondays and Fridays? Is absenteeism higher in spring than in the fall? In any case, a lot of class time is missed, assignments are not done and likely many tests are not taken, at least on time. Indeed, how can a school hope to educate these students?

But more to the point, why are parents not held accountable? Are there no truancy laws? Can they not be enforced? Obviously not enough to reduce absenteeism.

And this is not to single out Perry High. Many other schools in the Pittsburgh district and in surrounding communities have attendance problems.

The problems presented by such egregious attendance issues go to the heart of classroom order, discipline, and learning environment. Inevitably, large amounts of resources are expended trying to offset the missed days, attempting to get students back to school, etc. And most of all, the disruptions and the lowering of expectations for these students will have a negative effect on students who want to learn. Because many of the chronically absent will get through somehow to graduation, the entire academic enterprise suffers a loss of standards to the detriment of children who have a desire to be educated.

So what does the Pittsburgh school district, or other districts in the County facing the severe absenteeism problem, do to address the needs of students who want to learn? Create magnet schools that are hard to get into—often done by lottery—and involve substantial travel for many kids? What does having one's future determined by lottery do for a child's view of their place in the world when they are not lucky enough to be selected.

There is no easy answer to fixing the attendance problem but one thing can be done and fairly quickly. Leaders should stop kowtowing to educrads and teachers' unions and set up real choice programs for the kids and parents who want a shot at a quality education. We have recommended a scholarship program be set up and funded by private donors and foundations to provide tuition funds to children who want to opt out of the failed

public schools, especially the high schools. This would avoid legal challenges based on “diversion” of public funds arguments.

School board and political refusal to provide children who want desperately to have a chance at an alternative opportunity to learn is the height of arrogance and borders on immoral given the importance of a good education for a child’s future.

It is time to stop talking about and bemoaning the problems of absenteeism and poor quality education and do something substantive to help the students who want to learn. Perhaps helping those students will send a message to students who don’t care enough to show up for classes that other students can move on from the rut they are stuck in now.

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**Jake Haulk, Ph.D., President**

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<p>Allegheny Institute for Public Policy 305 Mt. Lebanon Blvd.* Suite 208* Pittsburgh PA 15234 Phone (412) 440-0079 * Fax (412) 440-0085 E-mail: <a href="mailto:aipp@alleghenyinstitute.org">aipp@alleghenyinstitute.org</a></p>
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