

The Plan's the Thing—Or is It?

Summary: So many plans and so little to show for them. That has been the sad and long running story of Pittsburgh Public Schools (PPS) over the last several decades. Overall student academic performance languishes in a sorry state, and the academic achievement gap persists. And of late, graduation rates for African American students have plummeted. Now, newly installed Superintendent Hamlet offers yet another plan. It has serious flaws.

Superintendents have come and gone about every five years since 2000. Each one has offered new ideas and strategies to combat the long standing problems. In 2006, under a newly installed superintendent there was the “Excellence for All” plan. The next superintendent was quoted in the *Hive Pittsburgh* website (February 25, 2012), “*the District’s overarching goal is to get students Promise-Ready and prepared for success after graduation. We know that significant progress doesn’t happen overnight. While the PSSA results offer evidence that our efforts to improve academic performance are taking hold, we also know that the only way more of our students will become Promise-Ready is if we remain committed to our work to ensure that an effective teacher is in every classroom, every day.*” Too bad she had to be quoted again in August as being shocked at the sharp drop in 2011-2012 PSSA scores, blaming it (or making excuses for it?) in part on having to focus on budget issues and the state’s requirement of tighter security measures at the test sites (*Remake Learning.org* website, August 20, 2012).

And now comes yet another new superintendent who just released a strategic plan that will attempt to address many of the recommendations in the latest Council of the Great City Schools Report (Council) as well critical basic objectives. A January 2017 *Policy Brief (Volume 17, Number 4)* discussed the findings of the Council. That report was a scathing indictment of almost every aspect of school management and especially the failure to improve academic performance, noting with strong disapproval that there had been no progress in academic achievement since their report of ten years earlier.

The latest plan covers years 2017-22 and focuses on four broad long-term objectives:

1. Increase proficiency in literacy for all students
2. Increase proficiency in math for all students
3. Ensure all students are equipped with skills to succeed in college, career and life
4. Eliminate racial disparity in achievement levels of African American students.

The strategic plan states that the progress toward these goals will be monitored frequently by the superintendent and the board of school directors and that the District community at large will be updated on the progress. The specific performance measures that will be monitored are listed as follows.

1. Percent of students proficient/advanced on English Language Arts (ELA) PSSA
2. Percent of students proficient/advanced on Math PSSA/Pennsylvania Alternate State Assessment/Keystone Algebra 1 by subgroups
3. Graduation rates, professional certifications, AP/Gifted enrollment, enrollment in college after completion of high school
4. Gaps in the measures listed under number 3.

The plan also mentions monitoring out-of-school time, attendance, and proficiency in grades not tested by PSSA.

The new plan uses many pages to describe “steps and initiatives” but is remiss in spelling out in detail the scope of the problems it faces. Further it fails to spell out annual or periodic mile posts the initiatives will be required to meet. Then too, with the goal of eliminating the racial achievement gap there is a brutal reality that creates enormous, and almost certainly insurmountable, obstacles to overcome. With only a few exceptions, primarily in magnet schools, the current achievement gap between African American and white students is very large.

For example, the 2015-16 school year performance gap between all sixth through eighth grade African American test takers and white test takers stood at 32 percent in math and 30 percent in ELA. That is to say 32 percent more white students scored proficient or advanced than African American students. The lowest gaps occurred at Creative and Performing Arts (CAPA) where 6th through 8th grade African American students actually outperformed the school district average for white students in both math (2 points) and reading (12 points) although they trailed the white students at CAPA by 15 points in math and 20 points in the ELA test. Similarly, African American students at the Science and Technology Academy also scored very close to white students district wide in math and ELA but trailed well behind the percentage of proficient or advanced scores posted by white students at the Academy.

Unfortunately, the good results at CAPA and the Science and Technology Academy are more than offset by very wide gaps at Westinghouse (35 math, 49 ELA), Milliones (36 math, 47 ELA) and several others including Obama, King, Langley, Arlington, and Morrow each with gaps in the high 20s or 30s. Bear in mind that these gaps are with district averages for white students. For all the schools with white student scores available, the gaps of African American results with their fellow classmates are even wider.

The picture for 2016 testing is no better for students at the four traditional 9th through 12th grade high schools. Taken as a whole, the gaps between all African American high schoolers and white high school students stood at 29 percent in math and 34 percent in literature. The percentage of African American students scoring at the proficient level in math ranged from a low of 15 percent at Perry to a high of only 37 percent at Allderdice. In literature the low score was also Perry at 33 percent with Carrick and Allderdice tied at 60 percent for the best scoring for African American students.

Further, test scores of African American high school students at Milliones and Westinghouse (6th-12th grade schools) trail disastrously behind white students in the district and the overall state average score on the Keystone exams. Achievement gaps with state average results at these

predominantly (over 90 percent) African American schools show a range of 45 to 50 percent fewer students scoring proficient in math and literature.

Finally, to point out just how far Pittsburgh schools have to go to improve overall can be seen in a state ranking of high schools, traditional brick and mortar as well as charters. Of 674 diploma granting public schools, only one from Pittsburgh makes it into the top 100—the Science and Technology Academy ranks 83. Obama comes in at 233 and CAPA at 292. The next best is Allderdice at 467. However, Carrick ranks 506, Brashear at 593, Perry at 634, Milliones at 635 and Westinghouse 643. In short, for all the money being spent by the PPS—about \$22,000 per student—the academic performance of these schools must be viewed as pathetic. (School Digger.com rankings for 2015-2016 school year are based on PSSA and Keystone exam results provided by the PA Dept. of Education).

The prospect of substantially improving overall student performance while also closing the wide racial achievement gap is daunting at best. But before the board and superintendent do anything, they should look at all the failed programs and previous strategies that have been announced with so much fanfare and at a cost of untold millions of dollars and tens of thousands of hours of employees' time. Time to stop looking for answers in jargon filled, pretentious sounding planning.

If the superintendent and the school board are really serious, there are two important steps PPS must undertake to have any hope of reaching the goals enumerated in the strategic plan.

First, set specific annual targets for the goals of increasing overall student performance at each school and specific, separate goals for African American students, where the gains will have to be much larger than for white students if the gap is to ever be closed. Indeed, if white student scores are moving higher, that will make closing the gap harder. Maybe eliminating the gap as a goal in five years should be replaced with reducing the gap by some percentage, say 50 percent. And the gap reduction goals need to apply to each school for math, ELA and literature using each school's scores for black students to compare to district scores for white students.

Second, the administration must recognize the massive attendance problem at many schools and place enormous emphasis on reducing absenteeism. High levels of absences track very closely with the poor academic performance. Previous Institute *Policy Briefs* have addressed this problem on several occasions (see *Volume 14, Number 17* and *Volume 15, Number 30*).

Data from the A plus Schools 2016 Report show that at Milliones, 67 percent of students were chronically absent in school year 2015-2016, which means they missed 10 or more days each school year. At Westinghouse 63 percent of students were chronically absent. Contrast those figures with the state's 83rd ranked high school, The Science and Technology Academy, where only 11 percent were chronically absent and daily attendance averaged 94 percent. The absenteeism problem is particularly bad in the high schools. In the last school year Perry had 65 percent chronic absences and a daily attendance average of only 80 percent—that means the average student missed 36 days of class. Meanwhile, Brashear's chronically absent students stood at 43 percent, Carrick 41 percent and Allderdice 29 percent. None of these three ranked academically in the top two thirds of Pennsylvania high schools.

But poor attendance is not limited to high schools. For example, at Arlington K-8 chronically absent students was reported at 37 percent. Percentages of African American students in 3rd through 8th grades at Arlington scoring at the proficient level averaged under 10 in math and under 20 for reading. Only 25 percent of third graders reached proficiency in reading. Other K-8

schools with poor African American test results include King with 29 percent chronically absent, Langley at 32 percent chronic absentees and Morrow at 35 percent. Meanwhile at other K-8 schools, Carmalt with 12 percent chronic absentees, Colfax at 10 percent and Greenfield at 13 percent all have substantially higher African American test scores than the high chronically absent schools. Obviously, many students are becoming truant or near truant at an early age.

The absenteeism issue is too important to keep receiving lip service from administrators and the board. Students who are not in class a large number of days a year cannot be expected to keep up with class work and will perform poorly on tests.

This is undoubtedly a complex issue that will require firmness to address. But it cannot be allowed to continue. If this problem cannot be fixed or improved substantially, efforts and initiatives to increase overall academic performance and close the achievement gap at the schools where poor attendance is a severe obstacle to learning will be for naught—as other efforts have been in the past.

In November 2006 (see *Policy Brief Volume 6, Number 61*) we commented on the first Council of the Great City Schools report, concluding with the following:

With perspicacity and candor, the Council team did observe that correcting the district's problems would require the Board, staff, and community to recognize the urgency in agreeing on the future direction of the schools and have the willingness and ability to tighten their focus and energies around necessary actions. Unfortunately, the team noted that they did not observe these preconditions in the district. What an indictment for a group of outsiders to hand down. Pittsburgh's school district has major financial problems and academic achievement deficiencies and the principal players in the drama do not see the need to work together quickly to repair the system. But why should they? Their version of history tells them that the state or city taxpayers can always be counted on to bail the district out of its crises.

Sadly, from all appearances nothing has changed. The board and superintendent offer platitudes and lip service. But the reality is the discussion about what to do to improve academic performance or the achievement gap never gets to the heart of the problems. They cannot bring themselves to admit they have been unable to solve the problems because they are blinded and hamstrung by politics and special interests.

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