



Disappointing PSSA results for 2018

Summary: Pennsylvania has its third through eighth graders take Pennsylvania System of School Assessment (PSSA) tests annually. These tests are designed to assess academic achievement in three areas—math and language arts, as well as science, in fourth and eighth grades. Eleventh graders for the last few years have taken the *Keystone* exams in math, literature, and science rather than PSSA tests. This *Brief* focuses on the PSSA scores.

2018 scores for the state have been posted. Student achievement is assigned to one of four levels: below basic, basic, proficient and advanced. Of course, the desired level is proficient or advanced. Advanced recognizes the student's achievement to be above, or well above, the level necessary to move up to the next grade. A proficient rating means the student has a grade-level mastery of the subject adequate to move on to the next grade. Basic means the student has some understanding but not sufficient to move on without remedial help. Below basic means the student has little or no grasp of the subject matter taught in that grade.

Suffice to say, the 2018 results are not encouraging. First of all, the percentage of students scoring advanced or proficient in math fell slightly from the 2017 level in grades three, four, six and eight. The percentage advanced or proficient edged a bit higher in fifth and seventh grades. Only in third grade did more than half of students score proficient or higher, 54.5 percent in 2017 and 54.1 percent in 2018. That means that for every other grade the combined percentage of basic or below basic is above 50 percent.

The worst of the findings in the PSSA results is the sharp decline in scores with each higher grade in both 2017 and 2018. In 2018, the third grade combined basic and below basic percentage was 45.9. By sixth grade that combined percentage climbed to 60.5 percent and by eighth grade reached 69 percent.

English language arts scores tend to run higher than the math scores but remain well below levels the state should find acceptable. About 40 percent of students in each grade from third to eighth scored in the combined basic and below basic categories. And while better than the near 60 percent scoring basic or below basic in math in all grades but the

third, 40 percent falling behind in third through eighth grades is a huge problem, especially for the high percentages of eighth graders who will be entering high school unprepared for ninth grade in math and English language arts.

Moreover, with only 53 percent of eighth graders scoring proficient or higher in the science portion of the exam, the inadequacy of preparation for high school is even more pronounced.

A very interesting statistic is found in the Education Department's PSSA results report. 750,302 third through eighth grade students were tested in 2018. Of that number 414,495 are classified as historically underperforming. That means they are either economically disadvantaged, English learners or have an individualized education plan. A student falling into more than one of those categories is counted just once.

What an amazing statistic—55.2 percent of elementary school test takers are classified as historically underperforming (HU). It is stunning to contemplate that well over half of Pennsylvania elementary students are in the HU classification. One would assume that the bulk of these children are in the HU grouping because of economics. But that begs the question of how poor does a child's family have to be to qualify as disadvantaged. And given that school and transport, and in many cases breakfasts and lunches, are free, it must be that the category is trying to capture something else that is detrimental to learning.

And as it happens, the HU students as categorized by the Education Department do underperform the average of all students; indeed they bring down the all-student average. The underperformance occurs in all three subjects tested—math, English and science. For example, in math 47 percent of the HU students in third through eighth grades scored below basic while the all-student average was 31.9 percent. Likewise the HU students had a much lower percentage of advanced or proficient at 25.2 percent compared to 42 percent for the all-student average. Using the state's data for the average and HU student scores for the proficient or higher rating of third through eighth students, the scoring percentage for the non-HU students can be calculated. In math, those students would have had a combined proficient and advanced percentage of 62.7

And while the numbers for science and English are better, overall the pattern of HU students falling well short of the average scores is maintained.

How is it that “historically underperforming” seems to have a great impact on learning but not sports performance? In 2017 Aliquippa's 11th graders (59 test takers) performed poorly on math with 71 percent basic or below basic and only 27 percent proficient. And remember that the math test is on Algebra I which can be taken just before the exam. In science these students had 83 percent score basic or below basic. Note that of the 59 test takers, 58 are classified as historically underperforming. Yet despite the inability of the vast majority of students to show meaningful academic achievement, the football team just won its 17th WPIAL championship in its division and another state title. Does this

mean poor children cannot learn math or science but they can master a complex and demanding sport? Priorities appear to be misplaced.

Indeed, are there no academic requirements to play sports?

Pennsylvania needs to get over its excuse-making for poor academic performance, especially considering the sums spent on remedial education and other special programs aimed at improving quality of education.

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