



Another greatly disappointing year for Pittsburgh Public Schools

Summary: Despite the upbeat slogans continuously trotted out by Pittsburgh Public Schools, the academic achievement of its students continues to disappoint. This *Brief* looks at the dismal performance of the district's 8th graders on the state's standardized test.

A couple of years ago, the newly installed superintendent presented a new five-year plan. The slogan for the new regime was “Expect Great Things”—not much of an improvement on the “Excellence for All” slogan previously touted. At that time the Institute argued that while the objectives in the plan were mostly laudable, the steps and programs to live up to expecting great things were not likely to produce great things for all students. And the plan avoided mentioning its most glaring problem—outrageously high levels of absenteeism.

The single best measure of how the schools are doing is the demonstrated academic achievement of the children in the district's charge. And for the majority of schools the achievement levels are woeful.

This *Brief* looks at 8th grade Pennsylvania System of School Assessment (PSSA) math exam results.

To be fair to the 8th graders in Pittsburgh, it should be pointed out that statewide, 8th grade scores are very weak. In 2018, only 31 percent of 8th graders across the state scored at the proficient or advanced level. That means only 31 percent are actually ready to take on high school level work. And what is more startling is the large decline in the percent scoring proficient or above as students move to higher grades. In third grade 54 percent were proficient or higher but by 8th grade that percentage had fallen to 31 percent. By 6th grade the percentage was already down to 39.6 percent. This could mean the tests get progressively harder or the concepts taught in each higher grade level rise in difficulty faster than the ability of kids to grasp them. Alternatively, it could mean that kids just become less enamored with learning and do not put in the necessary practice and study time.

In Pittsburgh 22 schools have 8th grade students although Pittsburgh Oliver has only 16 students and too few taking the math exam to warrant separate reporting. Overall, 1,389 8th grade students took the PSSA exam. Of that number 82, or 6 percent, scored at the advanced level and 192, or 14 percent, scored at the proficient level for a total of 20 percent proficient or better. This is 11 points lower than the state's 31 percent proficient (21 percent) or advanced (10 percent).

But the Pittsburgh average score hides a very wide range of scoring by schools. Three schools (Colfax, CAPA and Pittsburgh Science and Technology Academy) with a total enrollment of 240 of the 1,389 total 8th graders taking the test (17 percent) accounted for 55 of the 82 students (67 percent) at the advanced level and 85 of the 192 proficient scores. Fifteen schools had combined totals of fewer than 20 percent of students reaching combined advanced and proficient levels. Eleven schools had below 10 percent of their students reaching advanced or proficient.

Shockingly, four schools had no students at the proficient or advanced levels (King, Sunnyside, Pittsburgh Oliver and Milliones). Two more schools had only one at the proficient level and no advanced (Langley and Morrow). A total of 10 schools had five or fewer students scoring advanced or proficient. In addition to the six just mentioned, Academy at Westinghouse, Allegheny Traditional Academy, Arlington and Carmalt were in the five or fewer students in the proficient or advanced category. The 10 schools combined had 380 8th graders take the math exam and of that number only 14 students scored advanced or proficient with just three at the advanced level. These results are a scathing indictment of Pittsburgh schools.

The other way to look at the scores is to combine the basic and below basic scores. Basic means some grasp but not enough to be considered proficient in the subject at that grade level. Students scoring at the basic level will find the next grade subject matter very difficult. Students scoring below basic have totally inadequate mastery of the material and can look forward to a really hard time in the next grade—since they will not be held back. And as they move up the students who were barely proficient in 6th grade will almost certainly fall further behind in the 7th grade.

And so on through their elementary grades. These students will likely never catch up as they keep moving higher in grades having no mastery of the previous grade. Indeed, they are destined to fall further behind. Thus, much of the teachers' time is spent in remedial education for the basic and below basic levels.

This pathetic performance by such a large percentage of Pittsburgh's 8th graders is not the result of inadequate spending. The district's current expenditures per student stood at \$22,282 in school year 2016-17—the latest official state-reported statistics. No doubt spending was higher in the 2017-18 school year. By comparison statewide the spending is just over \$16,500.

For a stark comparison, consider Peters Township in Washington County where current expenditures per student were \$13,193. The 324 8th graders in Peters Township had 41

percent scoring at the advanced level and 41 percent at the proficient level for a total of 82 percent. Basic and below basic were 13 and 5 percent, respectively. Not a single school in Pittsburgh, even the best magnet schools, came close to matching the achievement by Peters Township 8th graders. And all for \$9,000 less per student than Pittsburgh spends.

There is little more to be said about the situation in Pittsburgh Public Schools. It is a disaster for far too many students. It is stuck, and has been stuck, in a politically driven management and education mentality that are not only failing students but constantly finding excuses for why they should not be blamed. They claim more money, more programs and more decades of experimentation will get the job done. But, as old timers used to say, “That dog won’t hunt.”

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