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Attendance matters

By Colin McNickle

The nexus between school attendance and academic performance is well established. In general, the better a student's attendance is, the better that student's academic results. And, of course, the better the respective school's attendance rate and academic results.

But an updated analysis of Pittsburgh Public Schools by a scholar at the Allegheny Institute for Public Policy shows the district lost ground on these metrics between the 2012-13 and 2017-18 school years.

"Overall, during the five-year period there was attendance improvement in a small fraction of schools – nine of 50 – but 28 of 50 posted attendance rate declines while 13 held fairly close to the 2012-13 level," says Jake Haulk, president-emeritus and a senior advisor at the Pittsburgh think tank (in *Policy Brief Vol. 19, No. 30*).

The attendance rate essentially is the percentage of days attended out of total school days if no days were missed. As an example, if a school has 100 students, there are 18,000 possible student days, based on a 180-day school calendar.

If the students at the school missed a combined 1,000 days (10 days average per student), the attendance rate is 17,000 divided by 18,000 or 94.4 percent.

Haulk examined 50 Pittsburgh Public Schools (k-12, with five not included because of special factors and one that had no 2012-13 data).

Broken down by group, among the 21 k-5 schools, 12 saw attendance declines over the five years, one saw an increase and eight were relatively static for an average attendance rate of 93.5 percent or 12 absences per student per year.

At the same time, the average number k-5 student scoring proficient or higher in English in 2017-18 was 47 percent (based on PSSA scores) with six schools scoring slightly above the state average of 63 percent. Pittsburgh's public schools averaged 34.9 percent proficiency in math with six above the state average of 45 percent. Six were under 20 percent while four were under 15.5 percent. (Do note the averages were held down because of exceptionally poor scores in the very large Philadelphia public schools.)

In the k-8 group, nine schools recorded lower attendance rates, four remained close to 2012-13 while no school posted an improved rate. The average for the 13 schools fell from 93.9 percent to 92.6 percent.

But only 44.7 percent and 27.7 percent scored proficient or advanced in English and math, respectively. Only three k-8 schools were at or above the state average for those subjects. Six k-8 schools had math and English scores far below statewide averages.

While seven schools in the grades 6-8 grouping fared best in attendance rate changes from 2012-13 to 2017-18 – four improved and three fell – test results were very weak. No school reached the state average in math or English.

“Five of the schools had proficient scorers of fewer than 20 percent with the highest of the seven schools reaching only 31.4 percent,” Haulk says.

Of the five schools making up the 6-12 group, two schools showed attendance improvement, two experienced declines and one held steady. And what a study in contrasts.

CAPA and the Science and Technology Academy averaged a 94.2 percent attendance rate in 2017-18 and posted PSSA average scores well above the state averages in math and English.

But Millions and Westinghouse, with attendance rates of 83.7 percent and 87.6 percent, respectively – for an average of 32 and 25 absent days per student – posted abysmal academic results:

For Millions the math score averaged 13 and 23.7 for English. At Westinghouse, the scores were 5.8 and 20.4, respectively.

In the final grouping – encompassing four traditional 9-12 high schools – attendance was split with the average 2017-18 attendance rising to 86.3 from the 2012-13 average of 85.6. But that still means average per-student absences of 26 days.

Carrick, which bettered attendance markedly (by 5.8 percent, thus pacing the grouping’s overall improvement) and Allerdice (where attendance dropped 1.6 points) had scoring proficiencies above state average.

Brashear’s attendance rose 1.5 points while Perry fell to 79.4 percent with PSSA scores well under the state averages of 63 percent proficient in English and 45 percent in math.

“It is clear that the attendance rate at many schools that are 93 percent or below is still a significant problem,” Haulk concludes.

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