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Pittsburgh Public school absenteeism and state test scores

Summary: In 2014, a *Policy Brief* (Vol. 14, No. 17) reviewed the attendance problems in several school districts in Allegheny County with particular attention to Pittsburgh Public Schools (PPS) using data from the 2012-13 school year. In 2015, another *Brief* (Vol. 15, No. 30) analyzed the relationship between absenteeism (truancy) and academic performance in high schools. Not surprisingly, academic performance at high schools with very high rates of absenteeism was terrible.

So what happened to PPS attendance rates over the five years from school year 2012-13 to 2017-18? The Pennsylvania Department of Education (PDE) provides attendance data through the 2017-18 school year. In Part 1 of this study, the analysis reviews the changes and levels of attendance rates as well 2017-18 academic achievement in PPS by grade grouping and compares attendance with high-performance districts in the region. A follow up *Policy Brief*—Part 2—will look at the new attendance measure (called regular attendance) for schools being used by the state and examine the correlation with academic achievement.

The familiar and previously reported attendance rate for a year is essentially the percentage of days attended out of the total school days if no days were missed. For example, the state requires a minimum of 180 days in a school year. If a school has 100 students, there are 18,000 possible student class days. If the students at the school miss a combined 1,000 days (10 days average per student), the attendance rate is 17,000 divided by 18,000 or 94.4 percent.

The analysis examines 50 PPS k-12 schools. Five schools—Oliver, Pioneer, Online Academy and something called Pittsburgh SD by the PDE—were not included because of special factors associated with them. Conroy had no data for 2012-13.

For purposes of this analysis, a decline in attendance will be defined as a drop of 0.5 percentage points or greater in the attendance rate at a school and a rise in attendance will be an increase of 0.5 percentage points or greater. Among the 50 schools, 28 had a drop in the attendance rate, nine had an increase while 13 held fairly close to the 2012-13 school year attendance rate.

Attendance rates were reviewed for each school by grade groupings in PPS, i.e. k-5, k-8, 6-8, 6-12 and 9-12. There are 21 k-5 schools. Of these, 12 posted a drop in the attendance rate

over the five years, only one had an increase, and eight held close to the 2012-13 rate. For the 21 schools, the unweighted average rate fell from 94.5 to 93.5 percent (12 days average absent per student). Lincoln, Miller, Liberty and Minedao recorded significant declines—ranging from 2 percentage points at Linden to 5.5 points at Lincoln. Seven schools had attendance rates below 92 percent but none below 90 percent. Only three were at 95 percent or higher with Dilworth the highest at 96.3 percent. Meanwhile, in 2017-18, Mt. Lebanon's seven k-5 schools had average attendance of 95.9 percent while North Allegheny's k-5 schools averaged 96.5 percent. Thus, PPS's seven k-5 schools with below 92 percent attendance had an average of seven to 10 more absent days per student than the two suburban schools.

For school year 2017-18, PPS' 21 k-5 schools average number of students scoring proficient or higher in English was 47 percent with six schools scoring at or slightly above the state average of 63 percent. Montessori posted a score of 75.5 percent to lead all Pittsburgh k-5 schools. The PPS schools averaged 34.9 percent scoring proficient in math with six above the state average of 45 percent. Six were under 20 percent and four below 15.5 percent. Bear in mind that statewide scoring percentages are held down by exceptionally poor scores in schools located in the very large Philadelphia district. For example, the 166 non-charter schools with students from k-8 have an average of only 18 percent scoring proficient or advanced in math.

Of the 13 PPS schools in the k-8 group, nine registered a decline in their attendance rate, four remained close to the 2012-13 figure and no school posted an improved rate. The average for the 13 schools fell from a rate of 93.9 percent to 92.6 percent. Four schools—Arlington, King, Morrow and Carmalt—posted declines averaging 3 percent points. Keep in mind that each one percent drop in attendance rate increases missed days by an average of almost 2 days per student.

The all-school average scoring proficient or advanced in English was 44.7 percent and 27.8 percent for math. Three of the 13 schools were at, or above, state average scoring in both math and English. Colfax rated highest with 74.4 percent in English and 63.2 percent in math. Six schools had scoring percentages in math and English far below the statewide averages.

The seven schools in the 6-8 grouping fared best in attendance change with four improving rates while three fell. Overall, the group's average attendance rate rose from 92.5 percent to 93.2 percent, a 0.7 percentage point rise. Schiller's jump from 90.4 percent to 95.2 percent accounted for most of the group average. Other schools with improvement had modest increases.

Test results were very weak in the 6-8 group with no school reaching the state average in either math or English. Five of the schools had proficient scores of fewer than 20 percent with the highest of the seven schools reaching only 31.4 percent.

Five schools make up the 6-12 group including CAPA, Science and Technology Academy, Millions, Westinghouse and Obama. Two schools had attendance improvements, two were down and one held steady. Millions had the biggest change, falling almost 2 percentage points to 83.7 percent and largely accounts for the group's average slipping from 91.2 to 90.8

percent. Still, the 90.8 percent attendance rate means the average student in the five schools is missing 18 days of classes in these five schools.

This large number is mainly driven by Milliones at 83.7 percent attendance (32 average days absent per student) and Westinghouse at 87.6 percent (25 days average absent). CAPA, Obama and the Science and Technology Academy averaged 94.2 percent attendance and thus had 10 days average absenteeism per student. Keep in mind too that 6-8 grade absences at other PPS schools run much lower than rates of absenteeism at Milliones and Westinghouse suggesting that average days absent for 9-12 graders at these schools are far higher than the all school averages of 32 days and 25 days, respectively.

CAPA and the Science and Technology academy posted scoring percentages well above the state averages in both math and English. Milliones (23.7 English, 13 math) and Westinghouse (20.4 English and 5.8 math) held down the group average considerably. Obama's scores of 54.4 percent in English and 29 percent in math were not up to the state averages. There is no grade group comparison for Mt Lebanon or North Allegheny since they do not operate 6-12 schools.

Finally, among the four traditional 9-12 high schools, two posted higher levels of attendance and two showed declines. Average attendance rate for the four schools rose from 85.6 to 86.3 percent, thanks in most part to Carrick's 5.8 percentage point rise. The group averaged 25 days absent for 2017-18. Brashear's attendance was up 1.5 points while Allderdice slipped 1.6 points to 90.4 percent. Unfortunately, Perry's already low 82 percent figure tumbled another 2.6 points to 79.4 percent.

Carrick and Allderdice had scoring proficiency comfortably, but not well, above the state averages while Brashear and Perry scores were well under the state average of 63 percent in English and 45 in math. In comparison, both Mt. Lebanon and North Allegheny had an attendance rate of 95 percent and proficiency scores above 90 percent for both math and English.

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. It is clear that the attendance rate at many schools that are 93 percent or below is a still a significant problem. Note that the unweighted average for all 50 schools is 92.3 percent but for the 9 to 12 grades the attendance rate is well below 90 percent and constitutes a very serious problem.

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