



How are Pittsburgh Public Schools measuring up with new attendance gauge?

Summary: A previous *Policy Brief* (Vol.19, No. 30) reviewed the changes in attendance rates for Pittsburgh Public Schools over five years from school years 2012-13 to 2017-18 and looked at state achievement test scores for the schools. This study examines the new *regular* attendance measure being used by the state’s Department of Education to see how it correlates with state test scores.

The Pennsylvania Department of Education (PDE) has constructed a new format for presenting school performance data called “Future Ready.” The new format contains most of the academic achievement information that was presented in the previous “School Profiles” database as well as attendance data. However, the attendance figures are not the familiar attendance rate statistics. Instead, they are shown as a percentage of *regular* attendance. As defined by PDE, this indicator is the percentage of students enrolled in a school for 60 or more school days and present 90 percent or more of these school days. This is a lagging indicator indicating data is from the year prior to the reporting year.”

Bear in mind that a student attending school 90 percent of the time will miss 18 days of school during the 180-day school year. Thus, those that are not *regular* attendees are missing 19 or more days. Unfortunately, the data does not indicate how many days are actually being missed by students who are not *regular* attendees. It could be much greater than 19. Nor do we know how many days are being missed by *regular* attendees. It could be only a few of these students are absent 18 days or it could be that most students are missing 18 days and yet are still counted as *regular* attendees.

In its future efforts to measure student absenteeism, PDE should change the *regular* attendance rate to 94 percent which would include those missing just 10 days or fewer each year. There should be a separate measure of excessive absences for students missing 25 or more days.

By grade-grouping in Pittsburgh Public Schools (PPS) there are 21 k-5 schools, 13 k-8, seven 6-8, five 6-12 and four 9-12. Each grouping is reviewed. PDE data for *regular* attendance is lagged one year so that for the 2017-18 “Future Ready” profiles the percentages are from 2016-17. Note that PSSA scores in the “Future Ready” profiles are from 2017-18.

In the k-5 group, the percentage of *regular* attendance (students missing 18 or fewer days) averaged 81 percent for the 21 schools. Ten schools had a *regular* attendance percentage below

80 percent with four below 75 percent. To remind, 80 percent *regular* attendance means 20 percent of students missed 19 or more days.

Also bear in mind for comparison purposes that the statewide average of *regular* attendance of all schools was 85.4 percent. The state goal is 94 percent. And as examples of low absenteeism, Mt. Lebanon's seven k-5 schools had an average of 96.4 percent *regular* attendance meaning fewer than 4 percent missed 19 or more days.

Among PPS' k-5 schools, those with 80 percent or higher *regular* attendance tend to have better achievement scores. Arsenal was an exception; its PSSA scores were quite low even though it had *regular* attendance of 85 percent. Whittier was also an exception in that its *regular* attendance was 67 percent. But it posted some of the best test results in the k-5 group—suggesting that it may be possible PDE had a data posting error for Whittier.

The average percentages of PPS' k-5 students scoring proficient or advanced in English Language Arts (English) and math were 47.9 and 34.9 percent, respectively. Statewide averages for all schools were 63 percent English and 45.5 percent math. The best overall PPS k-5 schools, i.e. those having at or above state averages—60 percent proficient in English and 50 percent or higher in math—were Montessori, Dilworth, West Liberty, Allegheny, Beechwood and Fulton. These six schools averaged 90 percent *regular* attendance with three over 93 percent and Beechwood (83 percent) the only one lower than 87 percent. Meanwhile, schools with lower than 30 percent scoring proficient in English and 20 percent in math included Arsenal, Miller, Faison and Grandview. Miller (69.5) and Grandview (71.7) also had two of the three lowest *regular* attendance rates. These two schools had roughly 30 percent of students absent 19 or more days.

The 13 k-8 schools had average *regular* attendance of 78.5 percent with the all-school unweighted average percentage scoring proficient or advanced in English at 44.7 percent and 27.8 percent in math. The best test scores (60 percent or higher in English and 45 percent or higher in math) were posted by Colfax (90 percent *regular* attendance), Greenfield (90 percent *regular*) and Brookline (84 percent *regular*). The lowest proficient scores (30 percent or lower in English and 15 percent or lower in math) were registered by Morrow, King, Langley and Arlington, each well below 70 percent *regular* attendance with a four-school average of 34 percent of students absent 19 days or more a year.

There are seven traditional middle schools with grades 6-8. The average *regular* attendance at the seven schools stood at 80 percent ranging from a low of 70 at South Brook to Schiller's 94 percent. The average number of English test takers scoring proficient was 41.8 percent, ranging from 34 to 48 percent. This fairly narrow range means not much can be concluded about test scores and *regular* attendance percentages. The all-middle school average of the percentage scoring proficient or better on math was 18.4 with a range of 5.4 to 31 percent.

Pittsburgh has five schools with grades 6-12 including two magnet schools, CAPA and the Science and Technology Academy, which have entrance requirements. The group also includes Obama, the Academy at Westinghouse and Millions. *Regular* attendance for the five schools averaged 66.9 percent with a range of 37 (Westinghouse) to 90 percent (Science and Technology). Proficient scorers in English averaged 52.3 percent and ranged from 20 (Westinghouse) to 85 percent (CAPA) and in math, proficient scorers in the group averaged 35 percent ranging from 5.8 (Westinghouse) to 64 percent (CAPA).

Not surprising perhaps, the magnet schools had the highest *regular* attendance percentages and the highest percentages scoring proficient in both English and math. CAPA (81 percent *regular*

attendance) had 85 percent proficient in English and 64 percent in math while Science and Technology had 78 percent proficient in English and 62 percent in math—both far above the other schools in the group. Obama at 78 percent *regular* attendance had test scores much lower than the two magnets, but its scores, 54.4 percent (English) and 29.4 percent (math), were above the averages for the k-8 and 6-8 grade schools.

Milliones and Westinghouse posted dreadful *regular* attendance numbers at 47.7 percent and 37 percent, respectively. And the numbers of students scoring proficient reflect the woeful attendance. Milliones had 23 percent proficient in English and 13 percent proficient in math. Westinghouse had 20.4 percent proficient in English and 5.8 percent in math. Thirty-seven percent *regular* attendance means 63 percent of students are absent 19 or more days a year. In the 6-12 grade group the correlation of test scores and attendance is very clear.

There are four traditional high schools (grades 9-12), Allderdice, Brashear, Carrick and Perry. *Regular* attendance at the four schools averaged 57.4 percent. Perry was lowest at only 28 percent and Allderdice was the highest at 73.6 percent. Thus, even at Allderdice, over 25 percent of students are absent 19 days or more.

On the English exam, Carrick (72 percent) and Allderdice (76 percent) recorded the highest numbers scoring proficient or advanced. Perry (43 percent) and Brashear (47 percent) lagged well behind. On the math exam, Allderdice (66 percent) and Carrick (55 percent) led the way with Brashear (33 percent) and Perry (17 percent) well behind. It is notable that none of the four schools reached the state's goal of 81 percent in English and 71 percent in math.

Statewide scoring percentages are held down substantially by poor scores in the very large Philadelphia school district. For example, the 166 non-charter schools with students from k-8 average only 18 percent scoring proficient or advanced in math.

Meanwhile, of the 50 Pittsburgh Public Schools with available data, 20 (11 were k-5) had *regular* attendance above or very close to, the statewide average of 85.4 percent with the remainder under the state average, some substantially. At the same time, 37 of 50 schools had percentages scoring proficient or advanced in both English and math significantly below the state averages with 29 of those schools far below the 45 percent state average for math. Twelve schools posted test results that matched or were somewhat better than state averages in both English and math.

Overall, Pittsburgh Public Schools fall well short of the state average on the *regular* attendance measure and very far short on academic performance with a relatively small percentage of schools above the state test score averages (which are currently well below desirable levels) and none had scores at the level of excellence achieved in several schools in the region.

Jake Haulk, Ph.D., President Emeritus

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<p>Allegheny Institute for Public Policy 305 Mt. Lebanon Blvd.* Suite 208* Pittsburgh PA 15234 Phone (412) 440-0079 * Fax (412) 440-0085 E-mail: aipp@alleghenyinstitute.org</p>
