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Pittsburgh's weakest performing schools show scant progress from 2016 to 2019

Background

From PPS website September 2021:

“The Pittsburgh Public Schools will be one of America’s premier school districts, student-focused, well-managed and innovative.”

From Strategic Plan 2017-2022:

“We have much work to do. ... Our graduation rate has dropped, enrollment continues to decline. ... Yet there is reason to expect good things because of the strategies outlined herein.”

A review of the highly touted strategic plan’s performance

In 2016, the Pittsburgh Public Schools (PPS) hired Anthony Hamlet as superintendent with great fanfare about new beginnings to turn around the district’s long slide in enrollment and academic performance. Would Hamlet be able to do what a long line of predecessors were unable to achieve?

Now that Superintendent Hamlet has abruptly resigned shortly into a second term, it is a good time to see if there has been any academic improvement in PPS schools, especially those that were posting dreadful results when Hamlet took the reins.

Because 2020 and 2021 state achievement tests—the Pennsylvania System of School Assessment (PSSA) and the Keystone Exam—are not available at this time, we only have three years of test scores with which to evaluate fairly the superintendent’s impact. It could be argued that two more years would have been necessary to make a fair assessment. However, since the lives of students are enormously affected by the education, or lack of education, they are getting every year, it is justified to see if all the hype about all the changes and programs that were put in place had an impact from 2016 test scores to 2019 scores.

All data are taken from the Pennsylvania Department of Education website data and reporting section.

Enrollment and spending 2016 and 2019

To begin, it is useful to show PPS' enrollment and expenditures to illustrate the fact that students are not being shortchanged because of inadequate finances. In the 2016-17 school year there were 23,286 enrolled students and the average daily membership (ADM) was 26,583. ADM includes all students in the district PPS is financially responsible for. Current expenditure per ADM was \$22,282. By the 2019-20 school year, ADM had fallen 3 percent to 25,744 and per ADM current expenditure had climbed 13.8 percent to \$25,354.

By comparison, Peters Township had the sixth-highest academically rated high school and middle school in Pennsylvania with per ADM expenditures of \$14,814 in the 2019-20 school year.

Choosing schools for evaluation

To evaluate the degree of progress in PPS schools, the focus of this *Brief* will be on the schools that were the poorest performing and where the opportunities for quick and meaningful improvement in test results were most needed and easily measured. The measurement used is the change in PSSA math scores from 2016 to 2019 for grades 5, and 8 and the Keystone exam for grade 11. A group of poorest performing schools with 11th graders, 8th graders and 5th graders were selected to see if there was meaningful improvement.

PSSA is the commonwealth's test that assesses the scholastic achievement of students. Test results are grouped into four levels—advanced, proficient, basic and below basic. The key measure is the percent scoring proficient. Students who are not proficient at grade level are clearly going to have trouble with the subject matter at the next higher grade. The basic category recognizes some but inadequate mastery of the subject. Below basic points to both a failure to grasp the subject content and the strong likelihood of failure to catch up in later grades.

Math is chosen for the annual test score comparisons because it has been the subject with the most trouble in recent years, although reading and language arts test results typically parallel math in most schools.

11th grade achievement results

The analysis looked at four PPS high schools with the lowest statewide academic ranking—Brashear, Milliones, Perry and Westinghouse. Of 690 high schools, standard, charter and specialty schools in Pennsylvania ranked by *SchoolDigger* based on 2019 PSSA results, Pittsburgh Science and Technology Academy was PPS's highest ranked at 117, placing it in the top 20 percent. CAPA was second at 152, just outside the top 20 percent. Six schools were ranked below 500th with Brashear at 607, Perry at 635, Milliones at 639 and Westinghouse at 642. The last three are in the bottom 10 percent of Pennsylvania high schools. There are several high schools in Philadelphia and Allentown that perform worse academically than the Pittsburgh schools. On the other hand, they spend \$7,000-\$9,000 less per student.

Results for the four schools are shown as averages for combined advanced and proficient and basic and below basic for 2016 and 2019.

Year	% Advanced and proficient	% Basic and below basic
2016	24.4	75.6
2019	24.1	75.9

By way of comparison statewide, 63.3 percent of 11th graders scored at the advanced or proficient level in 2019. Brashear at 32.6 percent was the highest scoring of the four schools but had a small decline from 2016. Perry and Millions posted marginal improvement in proficient but basic and below basic remain at double the state level. Westinghouse’s performance worsened slightly over the three years as the basic and below basic rose 5 percentage points to 82.1 percent in 2019.

Meanwhile, Peters Township High School offers a demonstration of the profound difference between really good school math performance and the PPS schools. In 2019, Peters Township high had 56.3 percent advanced, 38.8 percent proficient (95.1 percent total), 4.3 percent basic and 0.6 percent below basic. All while spending \$14,814 per ADM, nearly \$11,000 less than PPS.

8th grade achievement results

This section examines the improvement, or lack thereof, in 8th grade math scores for six schools with 8th grade students—at Langley; M.L. King; Mifflin; Millions; Academy at Westinghouse and South Hills. There were 22 PPS schools in the category in 2019 and 879 in schools in the state, including charters and other specialized schools. Eight are ranked in the lowest fifth statewide and five of those in the bottom 10 percent of Pennsylvania middle schools. Four of the five lowest are in this analysis group.

In the selected group of six schools, Mifflin was the highest rated statewide at 698. Note that the highest ranked PPS middle school is the Pittsburgh Science and Technology Academy at 189. Two other schools, Brookline and Greenfield, were in the top third with all other in the bottom half of schools.

Results for the middle schools are shown as the six school average percentages for combined advanced and proficient and combined basic and below basic for 2016 and 2019.

Year	% Advanced and proficient	% Basic and below basic
2016	7.4	92.6
2019	4.4	95.6

Taken together the performance on 8th grade math worsened between 2016 and 2019. Mifflin had a big drop in proficient while only M.L. King showed measurable gains. Every school except South Hills (89.4 percent) had over 90 percent basic or below basic. Westinghouse and Millions were at 100 percent basic or below and zero percent proficient.

5th grade achievement results

SchoolDigger ranks 1,536 Pennsylvania elementary schools, including charters and specialty schools. These schools are typically k-5 or k-8. PPS has 34 schools in these grade groups ranked by *SchoolDigger*. Changes in scores on 5th grade math will be used as the measure of whether there was any progress over the 2016 to 2019 period.

Note that Colfax k-8 ranked 225 in 2019, the highest of any PPS elementary schools, placing it in the top 15 percent of the state’s schools. Dilworth and Montessori ranked in the top third of schools. Two other schools were in the top 40 percent (Greenfield and Brookline), one between 40 and 50 percent and all others in the bottom half.

Five of the lowest ranked PPS schools with 5th grade students were chosen to gauge progress—M.L. King; Arlington; Faison; Langley and Miller. All the schools were in the lowest 10 percent with two in the lowest 5 percent.

As with the high schools and middle schools, the results are shown as the five-school average of advanced and proficient and basic and below basic for 2016 and 2019.

Year	% Advanced and proficient	% Basic and below basic
2016	3.3	97.7
2019	3.8	96.2

With no meaningful improvement in the advanced or proficient scores or the basic and below basic scores, the conclusion is clear: There has been *no* progress overall in the poorest scoring elementary schools. Langley did have a modest gain in advanced and proficient from 4.5 to 8.2 percent but still had well over 90 percent at the basic and below basic level. Miller remained mired at zero percent advanced or proficient. *All this while per ADM spending increased 13 percent to \$25,354 in 2019.*

Meanwhile, statewide 5th graders averaged 43.1 percent advanced and proficient and 56.9 percent basic and below. Clearly, both statewide and these PPS schools compare very poorly to very good schools. Mt Lebanon's Markham Elementary 5th graders scored 95.7 percent advanced or proficient and 4.3 percent basic, no below basic with district expenditures of \$16,474 in 2019.

Summary of findings

This analysis examined the change in test score performance at the four weakest performing high schools (11th graders), six weakest performing middle schools (8th graders) and six elementary schools (5th graders). There was overlap in the schools because some schools have both 5th and 8th and one has all three grades.

With only two exceptions there was no meaningful improvement in test scores for students in any school or any grades. Perry High, M.L. King 8th grade and Langley 5th grade saw a modest pickup in advanced and proficient, although these improvements still left very high percentages of test takers at the basic and below basic level.

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