



Attendance and academic performance in Pennsylvania high and middle schools

Background

In 2014 and 2015, Institute *Policy Briefs* (Vol.14, No.17, and Vol.15, No.30) described the strong correlation between school attendance and achievement test scores in Pennsylvania, with special attention to Pittsburgh Public Schools (PPS). The findings of very poor scores and high rates of absenteeism at many schools were not surprising. Years of academic studies have found the same results.

What is disturbing is that many of PPS' schools have shown little or no improvement in rates of absenteeism since 2014. And as the recent *Policy Brief* (Vol. 21, No. 37) demonstrated, the weakest performing schools have made no appreciable progress toward higher academic achievement levels.

To further study the issue of academic performance and attendance, this *Policy Brief* looks at the achievement rankings of schools across the state and their attendance rates. The *Brief* first examines 10 highly academically ranked high schools (all in the top 5 percent (four in the top 2 percent) of the 690 Pennsylvania high schools including charters and specialty academies) alongside 10 schools ranked in the weakest performing 20 percent of all high schools. A second comparison is made for middle schools, 10 high-ranking and 10 low-ranking. *All academic ranking and attendance data are for 2019, the latest available.*

All rankings are found in *SchoolDigger's* latest assessment that uses Pennsylvania System of School Assessment (PSSA) test scores to evaluate each school and district in the commonwealth. Attendance for each school is found in the Department of Education web site in the Future Ready PA section. Attendance is measured by the new federal definition that focuses on "regular attendees" as opposed to percent average daily attendance used in the past.

Regular attendance is defined as the percentage of students who were present at least 90 percent of the 180 days in the school year. That means all the students who were absent 18 or fewer days. So, regular attendance of 80 percent means 20 percent of students missed 19 or more days. The obvious problem with this definition is there is no publicly available data to show how many days the chronically absent missed beyond 18 days. Nor are there any data available for the days missed by those who were regular attendees. All that is known is the percentage who missed 18 or fewer days and the percentage that missed 19 or more.

It is reasonable to assume that schools with very low rates of regular attendance will also have more absentees in the regular attendance category than the schools with very high rates of regular

attendance. Similarly, it is reasonable to assume that the number of days absent among students who miss more than “19 or more days” will be greater in low regular attendance schools than high attendance schools. In short, the regular attendance rate for very low attendance schools is not capturing the true level of absenteeism. To know that would require a daily count for the 180-day school year. Why that is not provided as well is unknown.

High schools

The following “best” high schools were selected. The table shows school, state academic rank and percent regular attendance.

High-ranking schools

School/District	State Rank	Top %	Regular Attendance (%)
Central H.S./Philadelphia	4	1	95.5
Peters/Peters	6	1	91.4
Unionville-Chadds Ford/Unionville Chadds-Ford	9	2	96.6
Lower Merion/Lower Merion	10	2	91.6
Upper St Clair/Upper St. Clair	12	2	93.7
Great Valley/Great Valley	13	2	92.7
Penn-Trafford/Penn Trafford	14	2	88.8
Mt Lebanon/Mt. Lebanon	18	3	93.5
Hampton/Hampton	21	4	88.6
Palmyra/Palmyra Area	23	4	85.6
10-school average	13		91.8

With only two exceptions all 10 schools had regular attendance of 90 percent or higher with two over 95 percent. Note that Central High in Philadelphia, the fourth-highest ranked school, had 99.4 percent of 11th graders scoring advanced or proficient in math and 99.5 percent advanced or proficient in English Language Arts (11th graders take the Keystone Exam). A standard of excellence that should be the goal of schools all over the state. The regular attendance was 95.5 percent and that should also be the goal of every school.

Among the 10 schools the lowest percentage attendance was 85.6 and it was the lowest ranked academically, although at 23rd Palmyra was still a very high-ranking school. Note that the state’s desired goal is 94 percent and the recent state all-school average was 85.7 percent. The highest-tier schools all had over 90 percent regular attendance.

Low-ranking schools

School/District	State Rank	Bottom %	Regular Attendance (%)
Brashear/Pittsburgh	607	20	57.4
Perry/Pittsburgh	635	10	22.4
Milliones/Pittsburgh	639	10	43.2
Westinghouse/Pittsburgh	642	10	42.9
Harrisburg/Harrisburg	665	5	30.1
Strawberry Mansion/ Philadelphia	669	5	46.1
Kensington/Philadelphia	671	5	44.9
Chester/Chester-Upland	677	5	21.3

Overbrook/Philadelphia	682	2	31.6
M.L. King/Philadelphia	683	2	51.6
10-school average	657		39.2

Schools in this table range in rank from Brashear at 607, placing it in the bottom 20 percent of high schools, to Philadelphia’s M.L. King at 683 and Overbrook at 682.

These 10 schools had regular attendance ranging from 21.3 at Chester High to 57.4 at Brashear. Note that Brashear had 67.5 percent of 11th graders at basic or below basic in math and 60 percent at basic or below in literature. Overbrook in Philadelphia had 94.8 percent scoring basic or below basic in math and 91.5 percent basic or below in English Language Arts. Its regular attendance was 31.6 percent, meaning an abysmally high 68.4 percent of students missed 19 or more days during the year.

Two schools with the best attendance were in the 50-to 60-percent range and two worst in the low 20 percent range. The average ranking for the 10 schools was 657 and age-regular attendance was 39.2 percent. Thus, the very best schools had at least three times better attendance than the nine lowest-ranked schools—excluding Brashear’s 57.4 percent. Indeed, as mentioned above the ratio is probably even higher given the likelihood that “regular attendance” does not capture the true level of missed days.

But the conclusion is obvious: High academic performance in Pennsylvania high schools is correlated strongly with good attendance. And conversely, high absenteeism is associated with very poor academic achievement.

Middle schools

Nine schools with 6th- to 8th-graders and one with 7th- and 8th- graders were chosen as the top performing schools. Five 6 to 8; two 5 to 8; one 4 to 8; one k to 8 and one 6 to 12 were selected for the low performing group. Ideally, all would be traditional 6-to-8 grade middle schools but there are not enough in the 6-to-8 group to get 10 schools. Keeping grade level ranges equal as possible is important because attendance tends to fall off in older students.

High-ranking middle schools

School/District	State Rank	Top %	Regular Attendance (%)
Jefferson/Mt. Lebanon	2	1	95.3
South Fayette/South Fayette	4	1	91.9
Fort Couch/Upper St. Clair	5	1	96.6
Peters/Peters	6	1	96.7
Bala Cynwyd/Lower Merion	9	2	95.6
Radnor/Radnor	12	2	99
Hampton/Hampton	19	3	95
Wendover/Hempfield	29	4	92.1
Ingomar/North Allegheny	33	4	94.5
DE Williams/Montour	41	5	92.1
10-school average	16	2.5	94.8

These 10 top 5 percent schools have an average academic rank of 16 and average attendance of 94.8 percent. At Jefferson Middle (Mt. Lebanon), the number 2-ranked middle school, 79.8 percent of 7th graders scored advanced or proficient with 20.2 percent at basic or below basic on the math test and 93.0 percent advanced or proficient on the English Language Arts test. Ingomar, the 33rd-ranked school had 7th grade math test scores of 64.3 percent advanced or proficient and 35.3 percent basic or below basic. The relative difficulty of the math test is illustrated by the 86.5 percent scoring advanced or proficient on the English Language Arts test. Jefferson had 95.3 percent regular attendance and Ingomar, 94.5 percent.

Clearly, ranking at or near the top of all middle schools academically is associated with very low levels of absenteeism.

Low ranking middle schools

School/District	State Rank	Bottom %	Regular Attendance (%)
Brownsville/Brownsville	704	20	73.9
Trexler M.S./Allentown	740	15	75.8
Francis Raub/Allentown	781	10	73.7
Langley/Pittsburgh	837	5	60.3
Erie M.S./Erie	841	5	63.3
Camp Curtin/Harrisburg	852	3	55.4
Wagner Gen. Louis/Philadelphia	859	3	80.8
Rowland Academy/Harrisburg	866	2	54.5
Toby Farms/Chester Upland	874	1	42.3
Phoenix Academy/Lancaster	879	1	11.1
10-school average	823	6.5	59.1

It is noteworthy that the poorest-performing middle schools have significantly better attendance on average than the low-ranking high schools. As was noted earlier, older students tend to have more absentee problems than the pre-teen students. However, except for the outlier school, Wagner Gen. Louis with 80.8 percent regular attendance, the other schools have attendance and rank that match up closely. At a rank of 874, Toby Farms Middle 7th graders scored 11.9 percent advanced or proficient in English Language Arts and 0 percent advanced and proficient on the math exam, or 100 percent below basic with attendance at 42.3 percent—which is quite low for a middle school.

Brownsville Area Middle, the best of the low-performing schools ranking in the bottom 20 percent cutoff, had 73.9 percent attendance. The school's 7th graders scored 30 percent proficient or advanced on the English test and 9.9 percent proficient or advanced on the math test and 90.1 percent basic or below basic on math.

Again, as with the high schools, low-ranking middle schools have much worse attendance numbers with five of the group at or below 60.3 percent. That means 40 percent of students are chronically absent.

Conclusion

As the Institute wrote in *Policy Brief (Vol. 15, No. 30)*, in 2015:

Very high rates of absenteeism in failing high schools undoubtedly reflect a lack of concern about the need to get a good education on the part of a large percentage of the students.

High absenteeism is disruptive to class work. It is almost certainly correlated with classroom discipline issues. Students who miss large numbers of days will not complete assignments; they will miss exams and be ill-prepared for the Pennsylvania achievement tests, as scores so readily indicate.

Worse still, consider the plight of the students who would like to learn but are hampered by the attitude and classroom behavior of those who show they do not care about school and likely don't care if others are prevented from learning because of lack of decorum and discipline in the classrooms.

It must be asked: How can high rates of absenteeism be tolerated by the state inasmuch as it provides a large share of the school funding?

This *Brief* demonstrates once again the very strong correlation between attendance and school academic performance. That is not to say that high absenteeism is the only cause of poor education. But it can be claimed that if students are not in school for large portions of the school year, they will be very hard pressed to keep up with class work or do well on tests.

Being in school does not necessarily mean attention is being paid or that the material is being learned. But it surely cannot happen if students are absent. And extraordinarily high absenteeism is almost certainly connected to discipline and order problems in classrooms with high rates of absenteeism.

When will legislators and the governor demand the high absentee problem be dealt with seriously? How can spending \$15,000 or \$20,000 per year per student be justified when, in many schools, half or more are chronically absent?

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