

A comparative overview of recent Pittsburgh Schools' PSSA scores

Introduction: The Pennsylvania System of School Assessment (PSSA) exams are administered to grades 3 through 8 to measure progress in language arts (reading and grammar) and math. This *Policy Brief* examines PSSA scores for Pittsburgh Public School District's (PSD) 3rd- and 8th-grade students in two ways.

First it compares 3rd- and 8th-grade performance in Pittsburgh PSD schools in 2023 to the state averages and several other Allegheny County school districts for 2023 and Philadelphia City public schools. Second, it contrasts 2019's 8th-grade performance in Pittsburgh PSD to 2023. Finally, the *Brief* will highlight the best and poorest performing Pittsburgh PSD schools with 8th-grade students.

Comparison to the state and other districts

Note that PSSA results are graded as advanced, proficient, basic and below basic. Proficient means having a grasp and adequate grade-level understanding of the subject matter, the obvious educational target. Basic indicates some understanding but not high enough to be considered grade-level proficient. Below basic denotes major inadequacy in the subject. Finally, advanced scores reflect an understanding and facility with the subject well beyond proficient. Obviously, schools want all their students to be proficient or advanced in language arts and math. Sadly, as the following data taken from the Department of Education website for 2023 shows, the state and many districts fall well short of the presumed goals of the educational system.

The table below illustrates the wide range of education quality in Allegheny County. Included in the center column are the districts' statewide rank based on 2023 academic achievement results contained in SchoolDigger tabulations (schooldigger.com/go/PA). The ranking includes all 500 school districts plus charters and other non-traditional schools, bringing the total number ranked to 600.

District	3 rd Grade				2023 State Rank	8 th Grade			
	Language Arts		Math			Language Arts		Math	
	Prof./ Adv.	Basic/ Below	Prof./ Adv.	Basic/ Below		Prof./ Adv.	Basic/ Below	Prof./ Adv.	Basic/ Below
Statewide	54.0	46.0	51.7	48.3	--	52.7	47.3	26.1	73.9
Pittsburgh	48.2	51.8	39.9	60.1	461	42.1	57.8	17.7	82.3
Philadelphia	31.2	68.8	26.4	73.6	494	37	63	15.7	84.3
Penn Hills	36.7	63.3	22.0	77.1	534	23.5	76.5	3.4	96.6
Woodland Hills	28.7	71.3	26.8	73.2	516	17.0	83.0	5.3	94.7
Upper St. Clair	91.8	8.2	85.5	14.5	3	89.6	10.4	68.1	31.9
Mt. Lebanon	79.0	21.1	79.1	20.9	18	88.1	11.9	60.8	39.2

It is notable that five Allegheny County districts rank in the top 10 in the state while seven are in the top 20. At the same time, nine county districts rank below 460th with Duquesne near the bottom at 593rd. Interestingly, most of the charter schools in the county score very low in the ranking with many in the bottom 10 percent of the 600 ranked educational entities. Pittsburgh PSD ranked 461st while Philadelphia ranked 494th.

Comparison of 2019 and 2023 PSSA results for Pittsburgh PSD 8th graders

There were 23 Pittsburgh PSD schools with 8th graders in 2019 and 2023. Unfortunately, the Department of Education does not post district-wide 2019 PSSA results data for 8th grade test takers. However, there are posted results by school for 2019. Of the 23 schools with 8th graders, seven showed some degree of improvement in language arts from 2019 to 2023 with Arsenal 6-8 posting the largest gain in proficient and advanced. The six others with improved scores showed only small percentage point gains. Moreover, most of these were already among the better performing schools with 8th-grade students.

Unfortunately, 12 schools saw scores fall in both math and language arts from 2019 to 2023 with margins sufficient to lower the district's overall 8th-grade results from the 2019 score. Even more disturbing is that in 2023 11 schools had fewer than 10 percent proficient or advanced. Six schools had fewer than 5 percent with three schools having no students reaching the proficient level.

While the Department of Education website no longer provides the 2019 PSSA results by district, it is possible to estimate the change in the district's testing performance by comparing the sum of proficient and advanced scores for the 23 schools in 2019 to 2023. The change estimates use an unweighted average of school scores for the two years (i.e., not factoring enrollment by school). This procedure is justifiable because the state-reported 2023 district scores for language arts and math is very close to the unweighted average of the 23 school scores.

The results of this analysis show a 3.2 percent decline in the 23-school average math proficient and advanced score from 2019 to 2023 and a 3.8 percent drop in the 23-school average language arts proficiency and advanced scores. The results are not surprising

owing to the fact that more schools showed declines in scores than improved scores in both testing categories.

In short, Pittsburgh PSD's overall 8th grade PSSA results are below the state averages for math and language arts with 17 schools below, or far below, the 26.1 percent of statewide test takers scoring proficient or advanced on math and 16 schools below the 52.7 percent state average scoring proficient or advanced on the language arts test.

Best and poorest performing 8th grade schools

The highest 2023 language arts scores were posted by CAPA 6-12, Colfax k-8, Greenfield k-8 and the Science and Technology Academy each with proficient and advanced scores of over 70 percent. They also had the highest scores in 2019 and improved further in 2023. The best math scores were also turned in by students in these same four schools, each scoring significantly higher than the state average. However, none reached the average of 8th-grade schools in Mt. Lebanon or Upper St. Clair as shown in the table above.

On the other hand, as noted earlier, 17 schools fell below the state average proficient and advanced score of 26.1 percent in math. The Academy at Westinghouse, Allegheny 6-8, Classical 6-8, King k-8, Langley k-8, Manchester k-8, Mifflin k-8, Milliones 6-12, Morrow k-8, and Sterrett k-8 had under 10 percent proficient or advanced in math. Three of these schools had zero proficient or advanced.

All the schools except Schiller 6-8 with extremely poor math scores (i.e., lower than the state average on proficient and advanced) were also lower than the state average on the language arts tests.

Overall, Pittsburgh PSD's 3rd- and 8th-grade students are trailing state proficient and advanced scoring percentages. A few schools are performing better than the state as a whole and some much worse. The Pittsburgh PSD in general trails well behind better performing districts in the county but at the same time are faring much better than other Allegheny County districts such as Penn Hills, Woodland Hills, Duquesne and Clairton to mention several extraordinarily weak academically performing districts.

Conclusion

It is important to note that Pittsburgh's relatively low ranking statewide and the extremely poor performance of many of its 8th-grade schools cannot be blamed on inadequate spending. As previous *Policy Briefs* have reported, current per student (ADM, average daily membership) spending in the district is very high. Indeed, in the school year 2022-23—the latest available official figures—the Pittsburgh PSD current spending per ADM was \$29,375. This was the 6th-highest spending per ADM in the state with some very small districts having higher expenditures per student. Lower Merion at \$31,913 was the only large district with higher spending per student.

The statewide average spending was \$19,141, nearly the same as Philadelphia's \$19,432. The comparison Allegheny County districts had per ADM spending as follows; Mt. Lebanon (\$18,335), Upper St. Clair (\$21,769), Penn Hills (\$20,768) and Woodland Hills (\$24,239) —all considerably lower than Pittsburgh.

As has been demonstrated many times, spending per student does not correlate well with academic achievement.

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