



---

January 15, 2025

Policy Brief: Volume 25, Number 2

---

### Pittsburgh Public Schools' absenteeism problems continue

**Introduction:** According to an A+ Schools' Dec. 3, 2024, report, chronic absenteeism in Pittsburgh Public Schools (PPS) had improved from a year earlier but remains at an all-school rate of well over 30 percent and 45 percent for the 9-12<sup>th</sup> grade schools.

---

#### *Background*

Ten years ago, an Allegheny Institute [Policy Brief](#) pointed out that the problem of poor attendance and high chronic absenteeism in PPS was at extremely problematic levels. A chronically absent student is defined as missing more than 10 percent of the school year's 180 days or 19 or more days.

Clearly, when 40 percent of students are chronically absent there is an inevitable substantial negative impact on learning. Missing class presentations, missing tests, failure to complete and turn in assignments and possibly disrupting classes are all detrimental to learning. And with 40 percent chronically absent the problems are made much worse.

Meanwhile, the overall *attendance rate* is the percentage of students attending classes and is calculated as an annual average. Thus, 90 percent attendance means the average student misses 10 percent or 18 days during the school year. The chronic absentees' report counts those who miss at least 19 days but it does not provide information on the number of days the chronically absent are not in school. Some chronically absent could be missing 30 or more days. For example, the *Brief* mentioned above noted that Perry High had an attendance rate of 82 percent. That means on average students missed 32 days and no doubt many students missed far more than the average.

A follow up [Policy Brief](#) from 2019 discussed the Pennsylvania Department of Education's study of attendance and educational performance as measured by statewide testing. That study used a measure of attendance called regular attendance (absent 18 days or fewer—90 percent or better attendance) to correlate academic achievement of schools according to whether they were below regular or above regular attendance. Not surprisingly, schools with lower absenteeism performed better on Pennsylvania's standardized tests.

#### *Review of latest state test scores*

This *Policy Brief* examines the 2024 Pennsylvania System of School Assessment (PSSA) and Keystone English and Math scores for PPS along with expenditures per student. For comparative purposes, other Allegheny County school districts are also examined.

Note first that within PPS there are considerable academic performance differences as measured by PSSA testing among elementary grade schools (3<sup>rd</sup> through 8<sup>th</sup>) and the Keystone exam for high schools (11<sup>th</sup> grade). In general, the magnet schools perform better academically than non-magnet schools.

### *PSSA results*

The combined scores of all elementary schools are presented first with a mention of some of the best performers. Students scoring at the advanced or proficient level at all 47 schools with posted PSSA exam results and in all grades on the 2024 English exam was 40.6 percent. On the math exam, the all-grades and all-school average percentage scoring advanced and proficient was 26.8 percent. This weak performance is even worse because scores fell from 3<sup>rd</sup> to 8<sup>th</sup> grade where it reached 18.1 percent with only 6 percent of black students scoring proficient or advanced. On the English exam black students performed better as 28 percent scored at the proficient and advanced level.

On the positive side there were some relatively strong performing schools in the group of 47 schools with k-8 students. Colfax k-8, Montessori k-5, CAPA 6-8, Allegheny k-5, and Greenfield k-8 posted good or very good scores on math and English. These schools ranked among the better schools in a statewide ranking. On the other hand, dozens of schools had simply dreadful test performances, dragging down the average scores and ranked low statewide. Black student scores were well below the district average at many poorly performing schools.

Bear in mind that PPS had current operating expenditures of about \$30,000 per pupil, which far exceeds the state average of \$19,141, as well as Mt. Lebanon's \$18,335, which had an elementary school advanced and proficient math score of 72.3 percent. PPS spending also far exceeds Upper St. Clair's \$21,769 per pupil with its 81 percent scoring proficient or advanced in math. Several other Allegheny County districts also posted very strong scores on the PSSA exams with much lower spending per pupil than PPS.

Notwithstanding a few bright spots, PPS is getting a very poor return on its k-8 elementary school spending.

### *Keystone exams*

Initially, the Keystone exams were to be used as a high school graduation requirement. Because of very poor scoring in the first few years after the test was launched, its use as a graduation requirement has yet to be imposed and not all students elect to take them. Exams are given on three subjects: Algebra I, Biology and Literature. As with PSSA exam scores, they are scaled as advanced, proficient, basic and below basic.

This analysis focuses on the district totals, although there are dramatic differences among the nine schools with 11<sup>th</sup> grade students. The strongest and weakest schools will be identified according to exam scores on math, by far the hardest Keystone test to score at the proficient level. Given the very poor PSSA math scores, which go back many years, it is not surprising that the Keystone math exam is so difficult for many PPS test takers. Biology results were a little better and Literature scores were generally the highest of the three subjects.

The nine-high school district average score on math was 26.4 percent advanced or proficient. Bear in mind that means 73.6 percent scored at the basic or below basic level. Note that Somerset County's Windber District's 11<sup>th</sup> graders scored 49.3 percent advanced or proficient with per-student expenditures of \$14,516. Obviously, huge amounts of spending are not required to get better than PPS level scores.

PPS white students scored 51.7 percent proficient or advanced on math while only 9.3 percent of black students scored proficient or advanced. For Biology the all-student average score of advanced or proficient was 35.1 percent—59.6 percent white and 15.8 percent black. Finally, the Literature test scores are by far the best. The percent proficient level for all PPS district test takers' average was 56.8. White students scored 77.5 percent proficient or advanced with 39.5 percent of black students scoring proficient or advanced.

*Absenteeism and test scores: Time to fix the problem*

PPS does not report attendance by school. However, the state did several years ago and those test scores track fairly close to recent outcomes. High rates of absenteeism were associated with poor academic results just a few years ago and doubtless that pattern still persists.

The duty of PPS administrators is to put an end to the extraordinarily high levels of chronic absenteeism at the schools where it perennially occurs. Excuses are not enough. Taxpayers, locally and at the state level, are providing huge amounts of funding to get Pittsburgh's children educated. The PPS' board and administrators have failed and are failing a huge percentage of their students.

And the result is falling enrollment that currently stands at 6 percent of the city's population and is an embarrassment. Taxpaying citizens should demand far more for their tax dollars and parents should demand more of their students who are chronically absent and perform very poorly on state tests.

The teachers' union should be embarrassed as well. Where is its outcry over high rates of absenteeism and the resulting classroom and learning disruption. Are there not truancy laws that could be enforced? The time for excuses ended years ago.

---

**Jake Haulk, Ph.D., President-emeritus**

---

*Policy Briefs may be reprinted as long as proper attribution is given.*

Allegheny Institute for Public Policy  
305 Mt. Lebanon Blvd.\* Suite 208\* Pittsburgh PA 15234  
Phone (412) 440-0079  
E-mail: [aipp@alleghenyinstitute.org](mailto:aipp@alleghenyinstitute.org)  
Website: [www.alleghenyinstitute.org](http://www.alleghenyinstitute.org)  
X (Twitter): [AlleghenyInsti1](https://twitter.com/AlleghenyInsti1)