



## Pittsburgh Public high schools: absenteeism & performance

**Overview:** In terms of academic performance as measured by state achievement tests, Pittsburgh Public Schools' (PPS) nine high schools, with a couple of exceptions, are very lackluster. Attendance is generally very poor, as measured by chronic absenteeism. And expenditure per pupil is extraordinarily high in comparison to the state average and other much less costly, and very academically strong, Allegheny County public high schools. This *Policy Brief* highlights the failing performances at PPS high schools and addresses the inadequacy of the concept of chronic absenteeism to gauge the true level of absences.

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### *Spending*

In school year 2023-24 (the latest statewide comparative data available), PPS spent \$20,443 per student on instruction and \$30,385 in current expenditures. Total spending, including financial costs, was \$33,524 per student. Note that more recent estimates for the calendar year 2025 put spending per pupil closer to \$38,000. State averages for all schools show instructional spending per student at \$13,473, total current at \$20,191 and total (including finance costs) at \$22,692 per student. Thus, PPS spent 51.7 percent more than the statewide average on instruction and 50.4 percent more per pupil for current outlays.

For comparison, PPS' spending on instruction per student was 58 percent higher than Mt. Lebanon (one of the best academically performing districts in Allegheny County) and 58 percent more on current outlays. Spending per-pupil comparisons with other better academically performing districts show PPS well above Pine-Richland as well as wealthier districts such as Fox Chapel and Upper St. Clair.

In the 2024-25 school year, PPS' spending was higher. But the official state data is not yet available to allow comparisons. Based on preliminary figures on enrollment and spending from the approved budget for full-year 2025 and the school year 2025-26, the per-student cost was likely close to \$35,000 or higher in the 2024-25 school year and trending higher for the upcoming year.

## *Attendance*

One possible, and very compelling, reason for the extraordinarily poor academic performance in most PPS high schools can be linked to the high rates of chronic absenteeism at those schools. Note that while chronic absenteeism is now the measure used by many states including Pennsylvania to gauge attendance, it is deeply flawed and is likely used to cover up the true degree of absenteeism.

Chronic absenteeism is defined as being absent for more than 10 percent of the 180 school days in a given school year. That means being absent from class for 19 or more days in a school year. Unfortunately, officially reported absenteeism data is limited to the percentage of students who are chronically absent rather than reporting the total number of school days missed by all students. Then, too, the number of days actually missed by the chronically absent is not presented, although it must be known to teachers, principals and other administrative officials in each school as well as in the district office.

Clearly, students who miss a large number of days per year are far more likely to score very poorly on the standardized tests. And it is very likely that schools with very high rates of chronic absenteeism will also have many students absent for more than 19 days.

This is borne out by test score results. For example, chronic absenteeism at the Academy at Westinghouse in 2023-24 school year was 69 percent and only 7 percent of 11th graders scored proficient or advanced on the Keystone math exam and only 23 percent on the literature exam. Unfortunately, chronic absenteeism at Westinghouse jumped to 75 percent in 2024-25.

Similarly, Perry High, with 70 percent chronic absenteeism, had only 3.8 percent of its test takers score advanced or proficient on the Keystone math exam in 2023-24. Perry also saw chronic absenteeism rise in 2024-25, edging up to 71.3 percent. Undoubtedly, these high rates will be reflected in the Keystone exams.

Note by comparison that with 13.7 percent chronic absenteeism 83.1 percent of Mt. Lebanon's Keystone math test takers scored at the proficient or advanced level.

Moreover, the number of days missed by students who are not chronically absent is not reported although that figure is known by the school officials. A significant percentage of students could be missing 17 or 18 days and that level of missed class attendance, although not reported as chronic absentee, will also have a major impact on the class's scoring on mandated achievement tests.

Thus, while the chronically absent number has some value in correlating academic performance with attendance, it is far from adequate in measuring the true magnitude of absences and thus is limited in its ability to correlate with true education costs and a school's academic achievement scores.

Nonetheless, note in school year 2023-24, the six highest-achieving high schools in Allegheny County, and among the best in the state, had an average attendance rate of 87.3 percent or only 12.7 percent chronically absent.

In comparison, PPS' nine schools with 11th grade students had fewer than 35 percent scoring at the proficient or higher level on the Keystone math exam in 2023-24, and the average chronic absenteeism averaged 59.2 percent with the Obama Academy's 71.2 percent attendance boosting the average. Without that outlier result, the other schools with 11th graders would show chronic absenteeism at 64 percent.

Note, too, that according to the PPS [website](#), absenteeism has worsened in school year 2024-25 from 2022-23 at Alderdice; CAPA; Carrick; Milliones; Obama; Perry and Westinghouse Academy. Brashear and the Science and Technology Academy showed some improvement. Only the Science and Technology magnet school had test results that compared favorably with the better high schools in the county. Oliver is not included because it only had 50 enrolled students across k through 12 and there is no reporting of achievement results because of insufficient numbers in each class.

### *Estimating the financial loss owing to absenteeism*

Calculating the financial impact of absenteeism is made difficult by the fact that the only measure of days absent by the student body at a school or in PPS is the percentage chronically absent. As noted earlier, while that gauge offers some indication of the degree of failure to attend, it does not provide a count of actual total days absent by all students. To get an estimate of the dollars wasted by the PPS because students are not in class, this analysis makes two assumptions about lack of attendance. One, it is assumed that chronically absent students on average miss 25 days; and two, that non-chronically absent students miss 10 days. That permits the calculation of total days absent and the percentage of total school days missed.

For the most recent school year, there were 19,581 students enrolled in all PPS schools. Although different sources offer different numbers, 19,581 will be used for calculations. Thus, for a 180-day school year, there were 3,524,580 student-days possible in the latest school year. For the district, 38.2 percent, or 7,479, of students were chronically absent. Multiplying 7,479 by 25 provides an estimate of total days missed by the chronically absent (186,975). The other 12,140 students would be absent an estimated 121,400 days.

In total these estimates add up to 308,375 missed days for all students. The high school performance, because of greater absenteeism, is undoubtedly worse than the all-school average.

The missed days amount to 8.7 percent of total annual all-grade student days. Obviously, this number could be larger if the chronically absent were, on average, missing more than 25 days. And that might well be the case for schools that have only 60 percent or more chronically absent students. In any event, missed school days results in wasted resources, teacher time, space utilization, and lost learning opportunities.

With a school budget of roughly \$752 million, each student-school day for 180 days with no absences would cost \$213.36. Spending per day taking into account absenteeism is calculated to be \$233.80. That means 8.7 percent of \$752 million in spending—a stunning \$65 million dollars—is essentially wasted. And that pales in comparison to the far greater waste of money created by the extraordinarily high percentage of students whose educational attainment is far below the proficient level.

And worse still, the students missing so many days are generally scoring very poorly on Keystone and Pennsylvania State System of Assessment exams. Graduating students who score well below acceptable achievement levels is a travesty at best.

In sum, PPS high schools (with two glaring exceptions) are not serving students or taxpayers well. Further, it must be borne in mind that nearly half of the PPS funding comes from state and federal taxpayers.

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