

# DATA BRIEF: ACHIEVE After-School Program

For the better part of two school years, dozens of 6th, 7th and 8th grade Pittsburgh Public Schools (PPS) students gathered two or three times a week for an after-school program built on the hope that classes ranging from pottery to crime scene investigation would inspire them to improve their performance in school to levels more in line with what standardized test scores suggested they were capable of achieving.

Students in the ACHIEVE after-school program shared more than grades and attendance rates that belied their potential. Each had experienced circumstances that had led them to become involved in human services such as child welfare and behavioral health (mental health or drug and alcohol services).

ACHIEVE itself stood as something more than another intervention for struggling students. It was also a research project that explored how integrating school and human services data might inform strategies for addressing the needs of students in both systems. As such, it was the first initiative to arise from a 2009 memorandum of understanding between PPS and the Allegheny County Department of Human Services (DHS) that provided exciting opportunities to share data about students involved in both systems.

The after-school program was discontinued following the 2012–2013 school year, providing lessons on the challenges of turning around school performance and attendance, and underscoring the important role that sharing human services and school data can play in addressing such challenges.

Looking at outcomes alone, ACHIEVE ended on a disappointing note, having fallen short of making wholesale improvements in the attendance and grades across the cohort of the 48 students who had participated in the program.

The after-school program did, however, demonstrate the potential of utilizing integrated school and human services data to inform strategies and decisions from program inception to the final analysis of student outcomes.

In fact, without the information made available through the data-sharing agreement, it is unlikely that analysts would have identified the more than 170 PPS students involved in human services who were doing poorly in school despite having scored well on state standardized achievement tests.

## **BEGINNINGS**

In early 2010, DHS began adding student data from Pittsburgh Public Schools to its Data Warehouse, which already held data gathered from 19 sources, internal and external to DHS, representing 29 different human services program areas. Early analyses of the integrated data identified more than 760 PPS students in grades six through eight who scored in the proficient range or higher on Pennsylvania System of State Assessment (PSSA) math and reading tests, but had a grade-point average (GPA) below 2.5 and spotty school attendance. Those measures are particularly important to Pittsburgh Public Schools students, who are eligible for up to \$40,000 in Pittsburgh Promise scholarships if they graduate with at least a 2.5 GPA and a 90 percent rate of attendance.

More than one in five of these under-performing students had circumstances outside of school that led them to become involved in one or more human services, such as child welfare, behavioral health, and/or homeless and housing supports. PPS and DHS officials decided that the first collaborative project under the data-sharing agreement would focus on exploring ways to improve the school performance of those students.

The ACHIEVE after-school program evolved as a strategy through a collaborative process that included discussions among DHS staff, educators and a panel of community stakeholders who served as advisors to the data-sharing initiative. Focus groups with middle school students, former DHS clients and community engagement experts were also conducted to glean ideas on what the intervention might look like. ACHIEVE was supported by the RK Mellon Foundation, The Heinz Endowments and the Grable Foundation.

Enrollment would be voluntary. The selection criteria were simple. All students were either involved in — or had recently received — human services. They had to have scored in the proficient range or higher on the PSSA math and reading tests. And their GPA had to fall below the Pittsburgh Promise scholarship threshold of 2.5.

## **ACHIEVE**

ACHIEVE's first semester began in November 2011 with 29 students. The program enrolled another 25 students during the 2012–2013 school year. Six students participated both years.

Some 64 percent of the 48 students who participated in the program had prior involvement in child welfare, and 60 percent were in out-of-home placement while attending ACHIEVE. Also, 71 percent of the students were receiving mental health services at the time they were

attending the program, and families of 73 percent of the children were receiving income-related public assistance, such as food stamps and income supports. About seven percent were receiving homeless and housing support services.

The students were picked up at their home school and driven free of charge to the district's Greenway Gifted Center, where the after-school program was held twice a week during the 2011–2012 school year and three days a week during the 2012–2013 school year.

The program was designed to offer time for socializing with peers from across the city who had demonstrated similar academic potential and to provide the students with an opportunity to take classes not offered at their home school. The classes, which were taught by gifted center faculty, were intended to be fun as well as enriching; they included aviation, fashion design, ceramics, pottery, animation, crime scene investigation and computer game design.

Most students demonstrated a level of engagement that they too often failed to show at their home schools. “For some students, it was exactly what they needed. They really enjoyed it and got a lot out of it,” said Lindsay Legé, the director of ACHIEVE who is now a DHS peer coach specialist.

Examples include one student whose behavior issues subsided once he settled into a routine of attending the ACHIEVE program. “I thought there would be nothing that would get him to calm down,” Legé said. “But he found something he really liked — game design — and focused. He’d always be at the computer. We had to pull him away.”

A survey of the students suggested similar engagement. “I like actually having a place to go besides home after school and showing off what I did in my classes,” said one student. “I showed my mom, dad and sister my animation videos.” Another responded: “I really like both of my classes. I get to be creative, which I don’t really get to do at school.”

Such engagement in the ACHIEVE classes, however, did not necessarily result in better outcomes at their home schools.

## OVERALL OUTCOMES

Students enrolled in ACHIEVE attended, on average, 39 percent of the days the program was offered. During the first year, two-thirds of the enrolled students attended at least 20 percent of the time. Slightly more than half of the students enrolled during the 2012–2013 school year attended at least 20 percent of the program days.

The outcomes of students who attended the after-school program at least 20 percent of the time were examined. On average, 47 percent of students who participated in ACHIEVE in school year 2011–2012 and 46 percent of those who participated the following year showed improvement in their grades at school. Among the students whose GPA rose, the mean improvement was 0.25, which lifted the average GPA of those students to 2.37.

Overall, however, the mean GPA of all of the students who attended the program at least 20 percent of the time slipped from 2.31 to 2.15. The overall mean school absence rate of those students rose slightly to nine percent.

One finding was that program attendance was not a strong indicator of outcomes in students' home schools. "We found that educational outcomes were harder to influence than we thought. Moving kids any way, regardless of [program] attendance, was difficult," said Kathryn Collins, an analyst with DHS.

Keeping students who attended infrequently engaged in the after-school program was among the challenges ACHIEVE encountered.

Transportation was another. In some cases, students would miss the van. The transit service was also inconsistent, which had an impact on program attendance as well as enrollment. In one case, for example, a parent removed her children from the program after the van failed to pick them up at their home school, leaving them stranded.

Program attendance was also affected by scheduling conflicts with other after-school activities students were involved in, such as sports, being mentored and church activities.

## LESSONS LEARNED

Some aspects of the ACHIEVE model may have affected overall outcomes. Enrollment, for example, was open to children with behavioral issues who likely would have been excluded from some other after-school programs. Of the 48 children who participated, 13 had at least three prior school suspensions, and four had 10 or more. Accepting students who scored no higher than proficient on the PSSA tests meant that some did not have a strong academic base to build upon. And more than half of ACHIEVE students were eighth graders, the highest grade level eligible. Throughout the district, GPA tends to decline as students move to the higher grades.

The length of time students were exposed to the program was another possible issue. The 2.5-hour program was offered twice a week the first year and three times a week the second year. Only one-third of ACHIEVE students attended at least half of the days the program was offered.

The ACHIEVE experience also suggested that students might be better served by an after-school program held at their home school. "It is difficult to improve school outcomes with an after-school program that is not connected well to the student's home school and the teachers who see those kids every day," Collins said.

As part of ACHIEVE, the Pittsburgh Public Schools teachers who taught the students were given training in trauma-informed care and other instruction to help them better understand and work with children with high rates of human services involvement. Identifying such training as one of the strengths of ACHIEVE, DHS officials decided to offer the training to teachers in other after-school programs who work with children involved in human services.

Another outcome is that DHS is working to connect students involved with human services to other high-quality after-school programs that operate in the district. DHS is also encouraging the after-school programs it funds to sharpen their focus on student outcomes in their home schools and will likely include outcome measures such as school attendance in future contracts with these after-school providers.

“Overall, after-school programs spend a lot of time with these children,” said Emily Kulick, manager of external partnerships with the DHS Office of Data Analysis, Research and Evaluation (DARE). “Having a broader perspective and being able to help these children in other facets of their lives is an opportunity for them to take on a supportive role.”

Perhaps the most significant lesson learned from ACHIEVE is that the sharing of human services and school data can be the powerful decision-making tool that was envisioned in 2009, when the legal obstacles to data integration in Allegheny County were resolved, clearing the way for the data-sharing agreement. “This was a pilot to see if sharing data helps make better decisions. From my standpoint, it was 100 percent successful,” said Lisa Kuzma, senior program officer with the Richard King Mellon Foundation. “We used data to identify the kids. We used data to come up with an intervention. We tried it. And then we used data to determine whether it worked. We didn’t get the outcomes we wanted, but we used data the right way.”