



Performance Lagging for Children Involved in Human Services

In the Pittsburgh Public Schools, as in many districts, certain characteristics tend to indicate how well a student will perform in school compared to his or her peers. A preliminary analysis of integrated school district and human services data suggests that one of the more telling factors is whether a student has a history of receiving human services to address poverty, abuse, neglect, behavioral health problems and other serious circumstances.

Not surprisingly, students with such histories are likely to find themselves on the wrong side of an achievement gap in terms of grade point average, standardized test scores and attendance. As a result, they face longer odds of meeting the eligibility requirements of the school district's signature Pittsburgh Promise scholarship program.

What is perhaps more revealing is data showing just how far students involved in certain types of services, such as child welfare, fall below the achievement levels of classmates who have never experienced the need for such support.

A data-sharing agreement between the Pittsburgh Public Schools and the Allegheny County Department of Human Services (DHS) now makes it possible to integrate and analyze student data from the schools, human services agencies, juvenile justice and other sources. A 2010 preliminary analysis of that data offers the most comprehensive statistical profile to date of city public school students receiving services, as well as students with prior service involvement.

Only 48 percent of students with prior involvement in human services, for example, were proficient in reading on the Pennsylvania System of State Assessment tests, while 67 percent of students who never received services posted proficient scores. Earning a grade point average of at least 2.5 is something 42 percent of students who have received human services in the past have accomplished compared to 72 percent of classmates with no prior human service involvement. Eighty-three percent of students with prior human service involvement attended school at least 90 percent of the time compared to 95 percent of students with no service involvement.

The gap extends to eligibility for the Pittsburgh Promise, which offers up to \$20,000 in post-secondary scholarships to graduates with at least a 2.5 GPA and a 90 percent rate of attendance. Only 34 percent of high school students with prior human services involvement are on track to meet those requirements compared to 68 percent of their classmates who have never received services. This gap leaves more than \$26 million in Promise scholarship dollars on the table.

Students who receive certain kinds of services are at an even greater risk of doing poorly in school. Some 38 percent of students with past involvement in child welfare, for instance, had a GPA of 2.5 or higher – a threshold achieved by only 31 percent of those who have experienced an out-of-home placement. Similarly low numbers of students with Promise-eligible GPAs are found among those who have received behavioral health services in the past. The gap is much wider for students with prior juvenile justice involvement. Only 18 percent have GPAs in line with the scholarship requirements and barely half have attended school 90 percent of the time.

As troubling as those numbers are, the percentages of students with proficient test scores in reading and Promise-eligible GPAs and attendance are even lower among students who have been involved in child welfare, behavioral health and juvenile justice during the last school year.

As such findings suggest, the ability to share and analyze Pittsburgh Public School and DHS data offers a deeper understanding of the circumstances surrounding students of mutual interest. Just as important, this new capacity presents opportunities to develop better-informed strategies and inventions to improve student outcomes.