



The Allegheny County Department of Human Services
& Pittsburgh Public Schools Partnership

*Improving Educational &
Well Being Outcomes:*

June 2011 Update

by Jeffrey Fraser

James is a ninth grader whose accomplishments on standardized tests stand in contrast to his record of poor grades and high absenteeism. His home life is unstable and he has had missteps serious enough to involve him in the juvenile justice system. James also has the distinction of being part of the first cohort of Pittsburgh Public School students to be studied under a historic data-sharing agreement between the city schools and Allegheny County Department of Human Services that was struck with the hope that it will lead to better outcomes for students like him.

The first year of the agreement that allows the Pittsburgh Public Schools and Department of Human Services (DHS) to integrate data saw steady progress in building a collaborative relationship to improve the academic outcomes and well-being of students of mutual interest. By the end of 2010, the focus had shifted from organizational and technical issues to investigating ways to use the novel data resource for the benefit of students and to improve the effectiveness of the systems that support them.

Among the steps taken was a preliminary analysis of the integrated data, which offered the most comprehensive profile to date of Pittsburgh Public School students involved with DHS services and, in some cases, the juvenile justice system. An advisory group of school and DHS staff began meeting regularly to address issues ranging from data integration to strategies for addressing the needs of students that the data helped bring to light. Certain data were shared with school social workers and counselors working to improve the outcomes of students. Case studies compiled from the data were reviewed with a group of local stakeholders and the Pennsylvania Office of Children, Youth and Families which led to suggestions for refining services to children. The progress and early results of the new data-sharing initiative were regularly shared with a range of community stakeholders, such as foundations, who are engaged in improving the well-being of children.

Perhaps the most significant first-year undertaking was the launch of the initiative's first research project. Having identified a target population from the integrated data, school and DHS staff began investigating ways to improve the outcomes of more than 170 students, like James, who are involved in DHS services and whose grades and school attendance are poor despite earning high marks on Pennsylvania System of School Assessment tests.

Data-Sharing Framework

Pittsburgh Public Schools, DHS and their attorneys worked for nearly a year to overcome legal and other obstacles to craft a framework for integrating student data, which is outlined in a memorandum of understanding signed by officials from both parties in December 2009.

In general, DHS is responsible for integrating and analyzing student data, while the school district's responsibilities include providing DHS with directory information and educational records. Data that are shared include personal identifiers of students; school directory information, such as the school building students are assigned to and grade level; demographic data, including race, gender, age and federal Free and Reduced Lunch eligibility; student performance data, such as grade point average (GPA) and scores on Pennsylvania System of State Assessment (PSSA) tests; attendance data, including days of suspension, excused and unexcused absences and tardy arrivals; and data on students in special programming, including the district's Student Assistance Program, special education and gifted education. DHS and school district data is also integrated with other information stored in the DHS data warehouse, including juvenile justice data.

A key provision of the agreement authorizes the use of the data to initiate and inform an “action research” project. The research initiative is a problem-solving process in which DHS and the school district work together to improve the way they address certain challenges faced by city public school students involved in DHS services that are identified through an analysis of the shared student data.

The agreement also calls for DHS and Pittsburgh Public Schools to keep educational and human service organizations, foundations, neighborhood leaders and other key community stakeholders informed and engaged in the data sharing initiative, its progress and outcomes.

Evidence of the potential of integrating school and DHS data began to emerge within months of the signing of the memorandum of understanding.

Preliminary Data Analysis

In 2010, DHS began a preliminary analysis of the integrated student data that resulted in the most comprehensive, detailed statistical profile to date of Pittsburgh Public School students who are or have recently been involved in DHS services.

The analysis, for example, illustrated the breadth of the population of city public school students who have some involvement in human services. The data reveal that 14,450 students – about 53 percent of district enrollment – have prior involvement with at least one of the 16 human service programs included in the analysis and that 36 percent of those students received services within the last year.

Other details of human services involvement include the following:

- The highest rate of prior human service involvement is found in Special Education schools, where 87 percent have received DHS services with 77 percent receiving services as recently as the last year.
- About 31 percent of city public school students have been involved in child welfare services.
- Some 28 percent of Pittsburgh Public Schools have received county behavioral health services.
- And the needs of 34 percent of students are such that have received support services, including food stamps and Temporary Assistance for Needy Families support.

Allegheny County juvenile justice system data included in DHS Data Warehouse broadens the profile. For instance, about 10 percent of city public school students over the age of 10 have had some involvement with the juvenile justice system. And the circumstances of 3 percent of students warranted juvenile justice out-of-home placement.

The data also details the achievement gap separating the educational outcomes of students with a history of human services involvement and their Pittsburgh Public Schools classmates. The gap is seen across several measures.

PSSA scores, for example, show reading proficiency was achieved by 48 percent of students who have received human services compared to 67 percent of students with no prior human service involvement. Attendance data show that 83 percent of students with prior human service involvement were present in school 90 percent of the time or more, compared to 95 percent of students with no history of human service involvement. And far fewer students with a history of receiving human services have a GPA of 2.5 or higher—42 percent compared to 72 percent of classmates with no prior human services involvement.

This gap is of particular concern in light of the requirements students need to earn a Pittsburgh Promise scholarship. The privately funded Pittsburgh Promise offers city public school graduates up to \$20,000 to help pay the costs of a post-secondary education. To be eligible, they must have at least a 2.5 GPA and 90 percent attendance or higher.

Analysis of the integrated student data found that a significant gap in Pittsburgh Promise eligibility separates students who have a history of human services involvement and those who do not. Only 34 percent of high school students with prior human services involvement are on track to be eligible for a scholarship compared to 68 percent of students with no prior involvement.

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.

The Phase One Initiative

The first initiative using integrated student data to develop such strategies and interventions to improve education and well being outcomes was begun in 2010 under a provision of the data-sharing agreement that allows the data to be used in an “action research” project. The project calls for DHS and the school district to work together to improve the way they address issues involving students in both systems.

Early analysis of integrated student data identified several possible issues to focus on, such as students who are on the brink of dropping out of school. Another was to identify schools in the district with the combination of low achievement and a high density of students with DHS involvement and develop building-specific strategies to improve outcomes.

Among the findings of greatest concern was the achievement gap separating students who have been involved in DHS or juvenile probation services or both and their classmates who have had no such involvement. The data identified some 170 students in grades 6-9 involved in DHS and/or juvenile justice services who scored in the proficient or advanced ranges on the PSSA but whose performance in school is marred by low GPAs and poor attendance, making them ineligible for the Pittsburgh Promise.

It was that “high achievement/low engagement” population of students that former city public schools Superintendent Mark Roosevelt and DHS Director Marc Cherna decided should be the target of the first research project, known as the Phase One Initiative.

James is one of those students. He scored advanced in math and proficient in reading on his PSSA exams. But in ninth grade his GPA stood at 1.14, barely above failing, and he missed 39 days of school, 16 due to suspensions. His life has not been easy. Allegations of abuse by his mother and a spate of unexcused absences from school brought him to the attention of Allegheny County Children Youth and Families a few years ago. He’s spent the past five years living in shelters or in the custody of kinship caregivers. He changed schools seven times before ninth grade. Last year, he entered the juvenile justice system on a charge of simple assault. A recent evaluation found he had been sexually and physically abused and diagnosed him with post-traumatic stress disorder, personality disorder, attention deficit hyperactivity disorder and conduct disorder.

An intervention to address the needs of students like James and improve their educational outcomes is being designed by the Pittsburgh Public Schools and DHS partnership, which is also responsible for implementing and evaluating the strategies that emerge. The process began last year and involved regular discussions among school and DHS staff, as well with community stakeholders and others.

Several issues and approaches were identified during the discussions, such as evaluating the placements of students, looking at the effectiveness of programs they are enrolled in and finding ways to prevent disrupting the education of students who move from one placement to another. A series of focus groups was also begun to gain the insight of those working with students as well as the students themselves.

Focus Groups

To help inform discussions around designing the Phase One intervention, several focus groups were conducted in 2010 to solicit the insights of middle school students, community engagement experts and members of DHS Youth Partners, former DHS clients who've been hired to work with children receiving human services.

The groups offered a number of considerations for interventions aimed at improving the outcomes of students who show potential on PSSA exams, but who have low grades and attendance. Community engagement experts, for example, mentioned providing leadership opportunities and mentoring as ways to help student realize their potential. They also suggested ways to engage parents and help them understand that their children are capable of doing well in school.

DHS Youth Support Partners who serve in a mentoring and support role of clients, stressed the role that peer pressure, school and social environments have on a student's level of school engagement. Their suggestions included career-focused programming and recruiting mentors, such as recent high school graduates now attending college. They also said that parents often say education is important to them, but are not assertive or supportive of the school.

In their comments, middle school students offered insights into why students don't strive to reach their potential in school. They also spoke at length about the influence of peers, suggesting that some students with potential are concerned that demonstrating academic ability will result in being treated differently by those they hang out with who aren't as capable.

Case Review

The benefits of having the capacity to cull integrated human services and school district data were demonstrated in other ways during 2010. In October, for example, the addition of school-related data offered a more complete profile of young DHS clients whose cases were reviewed with the Deputy Secretary of the Pennsylvania Department of Public Welfare Office of Children, Youth and Families. The discussions that followed, which included DHS and Pittsburgh Public Schools staff, led to practice recommendations to improve children's outcomes.

Thomas, an 8th grade student, was one of those children. Truancy referrals brought him to the attention of the child welfare system in 2006. Chronic truancy was the basis of removing him from his mother's home last year. One of his brothers had dropped out of school. Thomas lives with his father, who has a history of alcohol use and domestic abuse and had been incarcerated in the Allegheny County Jail several times. Thomas's mother has a history of depression and alcohol use.

The 15-year-old Thomas repeated the 4th grade and before he entered the 6th grade he had changed schools five times. Over the years, CYF arranged several interventions to curb his truancy, including in-home services, family-focused solution-based services, family therapy and a truancy prevention program. But, during the 2009-2010 school year, he missed 52 days of school and his GPA was a dismal 0.44.

Yet, despite his poor GPA and absenteeism, Thomas scored in the advanced range in both math and reading on the PSSA exams.

The discussion that followed review of Thomas's circumstances resulted in several practice recommendations. One was to investigate the possibility of testing Thomas for the school district's Gifted Program and to determine his interest in attending a magnet school. Another idea was to look into ways he might recover lost credits. Conducting a vocational assessment to determine his areas of interests was an idea raised. Still another idea was to simply talk with him about the Pittsburgh Promise scholarship program and explain how, despite his poor school record to date, he will start fresh in 9th grade – that if he improves his grades and attendance to the levels the PSSA suggests is possible he'll be on track to earn a scholarship and a chance to embark on a brighter future.

Other Uses of Data

The data-sharing partnership is also assisting school counselors and social workers help their students succeed in school and become eligible for Pittsburgh Promise scholarships. Counselors and social workers were given a file that contained a worksheet of information about each of their students who were part of the Phase One Initiative of "high achievement/low engagement". The files included up-to-date PSSA scores, attendance rates and GPAs and worksheet to help them track the out-reach and interventions performed for each student.

The information was used to complement steps subsequently taken by the school district to improve student outcomes, particularly those of 6th through 9th grade students whose PSSA scores suggest have potential, but whose performance at school falls short of Pittsburgh Promise eligibility standards. Counselors and social workers were asked, for example, to review those students and meet with each to discuss how their potential doesn't align with their attendance or GPAs, and to explore with them reasons for their low engagement and possible solutions.

Other uses of the combined school, human services and juvenile justice data in 2010 also offered a glimpse of the data-sharing partnership's potential. The data revealed that more than 500 Pittsburgh Public Schools students are at risk of failing out of their magnet schools. Of those students, DHS had legal custody of 22 and 430 of the students were active users of DHS services. Another 74 students are not involved in human services.

Several steps were taken as a result of the findings, ranging from holding permanency-planning conferences for students in DHS custody to informing the school district of students failing magnet schools who were not involved in DHS services.

DHS also did analyses related to other issues and interests. One such analysis, conducted in support of the Homeless Education Network, examined the relationship between homelessness and educational outcomes.

Reports and Presentations

From the beginning, the data-sharing partnership between the Pittsburgh Public Schools and DHS has been a transparent process. Presentations on the data-sharing agreement, the process and its potential began even before the integration of school district, DHS and juvenile justice data was completed. A robust effort to disseminate not just information about the process, but early findings, continued throughout the first year under the agreement.

DHS, for example, produced a report on the findings of its analysis of the combined student data. Another report was published that detailed how school, DHS and community leaders overcame considerable obstacles to reach the historic data-sharing agreement and partnership.

Regular sessions were held to present findings and progress to key community stakeholders, including foundations and other organizations whose work involves improving the well-being of children in southwestern Pennsylvania. Some 15 presentations of the data were made to groups within DHS and Pittsburgh Public Schools, as well to outside organizations, including the Allegheny County Children's Cabinet, The Heinz Endowments, The Homeless Education Network and the Homeless Education Fund's annual summit. One such presentation describing the data-sharing partnership, its potential and early findings was part of the case review session with the state Office of Children, Youth and Families in October. "I couldn't be happier with what I've seen," said a state Department of Public Welfare Deputy Director following the presentation. "Hopefully, we'll all start to see these kids as our kids."



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