



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

*Improving Educational &
Well Being Outcomes:*

July 2012 Update

by Jeffery Fraser

It's a little after six on a chilly January evening. Inside the Pittsburgh Public Schools (PPS) Gifted Center, 13-year-old Derek¹ sits at a desk, his attention fixed on a computer screen. He could have gone home after school, like his friends. But instead he chose to come here and figure out how to get rid of a few remaining bugs in a computer game he designed and programmed under the tutelage of Susan McCoy, a teacher in the three-month-old ACHIEVE after-school program.

The game is PacMan-like in concept, but with a football theme. The protagonist, a running back, must navigate a maze while avoiding the clutches of a menacing linebacker. "He's doing a really, really good job," said McCoy.

For Derek, such a complimentary review of his work is something that does not often come his way. His standardized test scores suggest that he has the ability to do well academically, particularly in math. But his performance in his home school is marred by mediocre grades, disinterest, a recent suspension and more than a dozen unexcused absences in the past year. And during that time, he's had to deal with an unstable home environment and intermittent foster care.

The fact that the ACHIEVE after-school program exists to offer students like Derek an opportunity to turn around their academic careers is an example of the potential of a first-of-its-kind legal agreement between PPS and the Allegheny County Department of Human Services (DHS). This agreement (or Memorandum of Understanding) was designed to make it possible to integrate and share data on students whose circumstances have led them to be involved in child welfare and other human services, including, for some, the juvenile justice system.

It was an analysis of the shared data that identified Derek and other students involved in human services who show promise on standardized tests, but underachieve in the classroom. The partnership between DHS, PPS and community stakeholders that emerged from the data-sharing agreement led to a research project to identify new ways to help those children, which, in turn, resulted in the design and implementation of the ACHIEVE after-school program. The after school program is funded by grants from the Richard King Mellon Foundation, The Grable Foundation and the Heinz Endowments.

The agreement allows PPS-specific information (e.g., grades, attendance and disciplinary action) to be integrated in the DHS data warehouse, which contains data specific to human services (e.g., child welfare, mental health and homelessness) as well as juvenile justice information. Attorneys for the county and school district worked for more than a year to draft an agreement that satisfies federal and state confidentiality laws.

The second year of the data-sharing agreement brought other opportunities to improve school performance of children involved in human services. For example, the Administration for Children and Families Children's Bureau of the U.S. Department of Health & Human Services awarded DHS a grant to develop new ways to use data to address truancy and improve the educational stability of children in care. DHS was also one of four agencies selected to receive a grant from the MacArthur Foundation to study the relationship between public housing residency and students' academic performance and outcomes.

DHS also expanded its data-sharing arrangement beyond PPS, signing a similar Memorandum of Understanding with the Clairton City School District. The agreement, similar to the one signed with PPS in late 2009, is expected to be the first of several such arrangements negotiated with public school districts in Allegheny County. The Clairton data was integrated during the early months of 2012.

1 The names of students mentioned in this report have been changed and certain personal information has been omitted to protect their identities.

'High Achievement / Low Engagement'

DHS uses the data to prepare analytical reports related to students involved in human services in order to identify attributes and indicators related to academic successes and challenges. These data give educators and those who work in child welfare and other human services a more complete portrait of the youth they work with and help them keep track of what is happening in their lives, both inside and outside of school. In addition to analytical research, a key provision of the agreements authorizes the use of the data to conduct an "action research" project, a problem-solving process in which DHS and school districts work toward improving the way they address certain issues affecting youth involved in both systems.

Early analyses of the PPS data identified more than 760 students who scored in the proficient range or higher on the Pennsylvania System of State Assessment (PSSA) math and reading tests, but had grade-point averages below 2.5 and poor attendance in school. Among the "high achievement/low engagement" group of students, Derek and more than 170 others were identified as having experienced circumstances that led them to receive human services. Those students became the focus of the first research project under the data-sharing agreement.

Strategies to address this group of students emerged from discussions that involved DHS staff, educators and community stakeholders. Focus groups included middle school students, former DHS clients and community engagement experts. Among the suggestions were offering the students educational enrichment to kindle an interest in academics and finding ways to help them overcome peer pressure and embrace the notion that it's "cool to succeed." ACHIEVE evolved from this process and is a good example of how the data are used to form an action agenda.

ACHIEVE's first semester began in November 2011. Fifty students were identified from the original 170 who were eligible; 65 percent of those students voluntarily enrolled, representing grades six through eight from eight Pittsburgh middle schools. Each of the thirty enrolled students has a history of DHS service involvement, a GPA below 2.5 and PSSA scores of proficient or higher.

Derek, for example, is in 8th grade and carries a 2.3 GPA. Last year, he received a two-day suspension and had 14 unexcused absences. He's been involved in the child welfare system since 2005. Recently, he moved from a foster home back to live with his mother. On the PSSA tests, however, he was proficient in reading and advanced in math.

While a 2.3 GPA isn't alarming, it is below the grade threshold that PPS graduates must meet to qualify for The Pittsburgh Promise scholarships.² "The goal is to get them engaged in school and on pace to be Promise [scholarship]-eligible. That means raising their GPAs and improving their attendance," said Emily Kulick, a DHS research analyst who works with the data-sharing partnerships. "But we also want to show them that it can be fun to be smart and that there are real-world applications for what they are learning in school. They may not like science in school, but they may be interested in crime scene investigation, which is applied science."

The students attend ACHIEVE twice a week from 4:00 to 6:30 PM. They play games and eat dinner together and with teachers, before dispersing for a variety of classes from which they choose, such as aviation, ceramics, animation, crime scene investigation and fashion design. The classes, which are modeled after the successful programming at the Gifted Center and are not offered in their home schools, blend academics with an element of fun, such as Derek's class in computer game design.

² The privately-funded Pittsburgh Promise offers Pittsburgh public high school graduates up to \$40,000 to help pay the costs of a post-secondary education at an accredited school in Pennsylvania. Eligibility requirements include graduating with at least a 2.5 GPA and an attendance rate of 90 percent or higher.

Inside ACHIEVE

Derek's January evening is typical for the program. He arrived at the Gifted Center on a school bus around 4 PM from his home school and immediately headed to a table stocked with games. He chooses Connect Four, which is similar to tic-tac-toe, but is played with plastic discs dropped into vertical columns. He defeated a fellow student and then dispatched a guest in less than five minutes, dismissing the competition as "too easy." Next, the students were served dinner, which featured a ham barbecue sandwich as the entrée. Derek says that he is aware that he has the ability to do well in school, but is "not much interested" in his classes, which he finds "real boring." By his own admission, he often fails to turn in his homework or, when he does, it's often done in haste the morning it is due. That has not been the case with the classes he's taking in ACHIEVE, particularly his game design class, which he headed for after dinner. "It's fun and different," he said. "It's an interesting way of doing math and science." His school counselor had described ACHIEVE program in such terms, he said, which is why he enrolled in the program – that and the fact that his mother wanted him to try it.

A few weeks earlier, Derek and other students built their first computer game together. Now he has created one on his own, which features a football running back – represented by an image of Steelers halfback Rashard Mendenhall – whose objective is to run a maze without getting "stuck" by Baltimore Ravens linebacker Ray Lewis. It didn't take Derek long to find a bug that he needed to fix. "It teaches him to think logically," McCoy, his teacher, said. "He made this pretty quickly. But just now when we were playing, he went to the second level and realized that when he went off the screen nothing happened." Derek nodded. "I forgot to put a portal in here."

In another classroom, students quietly studied a diagram of a tooth and a fact sheet on tooth structure in the crime scene investigation class taught by Helen Norfleet, a teacher in the Gifted Center. The amateur sleuths were working a school vandalism case involving a wall ruined by graffiti. They hoped to match a bite taken out of an apple that the perpetrator carelessly left at the scene with the tooth structure of one their suspects.

Meanwhile, in Bill Robb's animation class not far away, Antonio was at work creating a video, using stop-action photography and Lego blocks and characters. The eighth-grader has received mental health services on and off since 2007, and while academically he scored in the proficient ranges of the PSSA reading and math tests, his GPA has fallen to 2.2 and he was given a four-day suspension last year.

Animation is a painstakingly slow process, but Antonio has stayed with it and he eagerly demonstrated the results on the computer screen. A Lego character rises from a chair, walks to a door and, just as he steps outside, is doused with water dumped from the villain on the roof above. "The reason he went outside is because he's bored sitting around the house," he said.

Down the hall, Cassandra, who is in 6th grade, took a seat at a potter's wheel. She has been in foster care and first received mental health services three years ago. In school, she's almost at the Pittsburgh Promise grade threshold with a 2.4 GPA, and she's proficient in reading and math on the PSSA. But she was suspended a total of seven days last year, which contradicts her shy, quiet presence in Cynthia Blackwell's ceramics class. Earlier, she made a sketch of a bowl she intended to shape from the clay. But she struggles at first to work the clay into anything recognizable. When, at that point, she was asked what she was making, Cassandra was noncommittal. "Whatever comes out." After a few wobbly moments and some coaching from Blackwell, the clay was centered, acquired definition and even, in its early stages, resembled her drawing. "You have great control," said Blackwell, recipient of the Pennsylvania Art Educators Association's 2011 Outstanding Middle Level Art Educator Award. "[Cassandra] has mastered it," she said to the class. "See how steady it is?" Cassandra grinned and said to the guest who earlier had asked what she was making: "It's a bowl."

That evening, the ACHIEVE students demonstrated a level of engagement in their classes that they too often fail to show at their home schools. The hope is that such an interest in learning is contagious. "We want to give them a new peer group and

raise their self-confidence. They have so much potential, but they need to learn strategies to achieve academic success. We want our students to know that it is realistic for them to become eligible for The Promise, attend a post-secondary school and be successful,” said Lindsay Legé, ACHIEVE Program Coordinator and DHS Scholar in Local Government.

For Derek, his evenings in the ACHIEVE program offer an environment unlike the one he encounters in his home school, where few, if any, of his friends show an interest in learning, participate in class or regularly attend school. “They don’t like it. None of them ever want to go to college or anything. But I do, I think.”

Data on ACHIEVE students’ school performance are gathered for evaluation and, although they were incomplete as of the end of February 2012, they show that GPAs improved for 55 percent of the ACHIEVE students. By the end of January, 35 percent of the students had raised their grades above the threshold for Pittsburgh Promise eligibility.

Derek and his classmates have the opportunity to continue in the ACHIEVE program for a second semester. An additional 18 new students have been recruited to the after-school program, which has added landscape architecture, robotics and two other new courses to the curriculum.

‘More Potential Than Expected’

The data-sharing agreement has opened the door to several new opportunities to further examine the issues affecting these students and to use technology to improve the way their needs are addressed. In 2011, DHS was awarded \$250,000 to improve the educational stability and permanency outcomes of children, aged 10 to 17 years old, in the child welfare system. It was one of ten such grants awarded by the Children’s Bureau of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. A key factor in Allegheny County’s successful proposal was the extensive data available in the DHS data warehouse and access to student data from PPS due to the data-sharing agreement. “There is no way we would have even applied for the grant without the [data-sharing] agreement and the partnership. We wouldn’t have even thought about it,” said Erin Dalton, DHS Deputy Director of the Office of Data Analysis, Research and Evaluation.

DHS is developing software tools under the grant to help remove barriers to finding permanent home environments for children in the child welfare system, as well as ways to improve their education stability and overall well-being. One part of the project is to develop EdMap, a suite of software tools for enhancing the integration of human services, court and education data to improve outcomes for children. A recent development is the online implementation of the Pennsylvania Education Screen, a comprehensive state-wide screening tool that caseworkers are required to complete for all children active in the child welfare system. The data-sharing agreements allow student data to be included in this process. New software tools are also being developed to give stakeholders consistent access to up-to-date information on students in the districts that have signed data-sharing agreements with DHS. Plans include building a notification system to identify emerging issues among children, allowing for earlier intervention on the part of DHS and educators.

Another EdMap tool in development uses geographic information system mapping software to enhance the ability of caseworkers, families and others to create educational stability for children in the child welfare system. The software would display foster homes located near the school a child is attending, providing options for placements that don’t require having the child change schools. Information on the quality of education in schools where a child is being placed could also be made available, as well as the ability to map transportation routes and help determine which schools are within reasonable travel distance.

Also as part of the Children’s Bureau grant, work was begun to develop software that uses human services and school data to address issues, particularly truancy, faced by children involved in the juvenile justice system. The Shared Accountability for Education (SAFE) project is chaired by the Administrative Judge of Family Division of the Court of Common Pleas of

Allegheny County and includes DHS and PPS representatives. The project is focused on using human services and school data to gain insight into children in the juvenile justice system, study court-related processes, develop interventions and identify issues early – all of which could provide opportunities for improving children’s outcomes. For example, timely access to school attendance data would help probation officers and caseworkers to more quickly detect and address emerging truancy problems.

DHS also received a grant from the Annie E. Casey Foundation to build on its work to find new ways to improve educational stability. The data-sharing agreement, and the resulting expanded capabilities for analysis, helped DHS secure a \$250,000 grant from the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation to examine the relationship between public housing, education and child welfare. The grant enables DHS researchers to look at issues such as whether living in assisted housing is associated with better initial education outcomes among children, and whether the associations between public housing and educational outcomes are influenced by residential stability, school stability, and neighborhood and school quality.

“The data-sharing arrangement, which is gathering a large amount of national attention, has a lot more potential than we expected,” said Frederick Thieman, former US Attorney and current President of the Buhl Foundation, who chairs a group of community stakeholders engaged in the data-sharing initiative.

Opening doors

That potential includes helping professionals and agencies develop a better understanding of public school students involved in the human service system, their circumstances and educational issues, and the resources that are available to them. Samantha Murphy, DHS Resources Services Manager/Education Liaison, uses this information to introduce school employees and others to DHS resources. The implementation of the ACHIEVE program has led to training sessions for teachers on common mental health diagnoses, behavior management strategies and other issues of common concern. And DHS has posted a section on its website designed to both acquaint educators with DHS resources and broaden human service workers’ understanding of educational issues.

DHS is expected to perform an analysis of the Clairton data later in the year, which will provide a detailed profile of students in the school district with a history of human services involvement and lead to opportunities for joint interventions. Attorneys for Allegheny County and PPS have begun negotiations to extend the existing data-sharing agreement, which expires in November 2012.

The extension of existing data-sharing agreements, and establishment of additional ones, will enable DHS, educators and community stakeholders to continue to identify issues affecting the education of children involved in human services and provide new opportunities to help students, like Derek, overcome barriers to their academic success.

