

New Report Shines Light On the Educational Needs of System-Involved Students in Philadelphia¹

June 2014

It is a startling report: one in five Philadelphia high school students (and 17% district-wide) are involved with the child welfare or juvenile justice system and these children are in educational crisis. They fall far below their peers academically, are more likely to be eligible for special education services, experience higher rates of absenteeism, and lower rates of grade promotion and credit accumulation: all of which place these youth at greater risk of dropping out.

The study, conducted by the PolicyLab at The Children's Hospital of Philadelphia (PolicyLab), was commissioned through a collaboration among the Mayor's Office of Education, School District of Philadelphia (SDP), School Reform Commission, Philadelphia Department of Human Services (DHS) and Philadelphia Youth Network. The study examines the educational outcomes of students in the 3rd, 7th, 9th, and 12th grades attending public schools in Philadelphia during the 2011-12 school year, a cohort of over 68,000 students. ***Findings revealed that students with a history of child welfare or juvenile justice involvement had substantially lower PSSA scores and promotion rates; higher rates of special education eligibility and absenteeism; accumulated fewer credits and disproportionately attended district-run comprehensive neighborhood schools and alternative schools compared to their never-involved peers.***

Methodology: PolicyLab classified students into four categories: 1) students with no history of DHS involvement; 2) those receiving out-of-home services before or during the school year; 3) students receiving juvenile justice services before or during the year (JJ); and, 4) students receiving other types of DHS assistance such as prevention services. The cross-sectional report collected data on attendance, grade promotion, standardized test (PSSA) scores, credit accumulation, grade promotion, and the type and location of schools attended.

¹ The full report, *Supporting the Needs of Students Involved with the Child Welfare and Juvenile Justice System in the School District of Philadelphia* is available at http://policylab.chop.edu/sites/default/files/pdf/publications/PolicyLab_Report_Supporting_Students_Involved_with_Child_Welfare_June_2014.pdf.

KEY FINDINGS

- **Approximately 17% of Philadelphia students are system involved; this number increases to 1 in 5 for high school students.**
 - DHS-involved students are dispersed throughout the city, not clustered in particular neighborhoods or zip codes.

- **System-involved students predominantly attend comprehensive neighborhood schools and alternative education schools.²**
 - Thus, students with a history of DHS involvement are less likely to be enrolled in charter, special admission, or citywide schools.
 - Comprehensive and alternative schools educate nearly 75% of 12th graders ever involved with DHS.

- **Educational outcomes of system-involved youth were poorer than those of non-system involved youth.**
 - Data on attendance, credit accumulation, grade promotion and standardized test scores reveal a pattern in which students with no history of DHS involvement have the best outcomes, followed by students with a history of receiving other DHS services, students with a history of out-of-home services, and then students with a history of juvenile justice involvement.

- **Standardized test scores were lower for students with a history of DHS involvement.**
 - In aggregate, students with a history of DHS involvement scored lower on standardized tests (math and reading PSSA) than their never-involved peers.
 - Approximately 30% of students with a history of JJ involvement were proficient in reading and math in 8th grade;
 - Approximately 40% of students with current or prior out-of-home DHS involvement scored proficient in reading and just over 30% in math in 8th grade; and,
 - Peers with no history of involvement scored approximately 65% proficient in reading and 60% in math in 8th grade.
 - Students with a history of JJ involvement were the least likely of all groups to be proficient on state standardized tests in 8th grade.
 - For all students, regardless of DHS involvement, standardized scores generally trended downward between 8th - 11th grade. However, students attending traditional charter schools during the 2011-12 school year who were ever-involved with DHS exhibited an upward trend in scores between 8th -11th grades – a pattern more similar to the other children in these schools who maintained PSSA proficiency.

² Notably, the Report focuses on students in the School District of Philadelphia and does not include system-involved students attending cyber charter schools or virtual learning programs or youth placed in out-of-district residential placements such as group homes, RTFs or juvenile justice placements.

- Notably, students (including students with a history of DHS involvement) attending special admission or citywide schools had higher PSSA scores than students attending comprehensive neighborhood schools or traditional charter schools.³
- **Special education rates were higher among students ever involved with DHS.**
 - Nearly 1 in 4 students ever involved with the child welfare and/or juvenile justice system received special education services. ***This rate is 64% higher than students with no history of DHS involvement.***
 - Students ever involved with DHS are more likely to receive special education services (23%) than their never-involved peers (14%).
 - **Attendance rates were poorer among students with a history of DHS** Average days absent for all 9th graders in 2011-12 is 17.2 days.
 - Average days absent for 9th graders with current/prior out-of-home DHS involvement – approximately. 26 compared to 15 for never-involved students (*i.e.* they missed nearly *two more weeks* of school than never-involved peers).
 - Average days absent for 9th graders with current or prior JJ involvement – approx. 34 days absent (*i.e.* missed nearly *four more weeks* of school than never-involved peers).
- **Promotion to 9th grade was lower for students with a history of DHS involvement.**⁴
 - Overall, 86% of students were promoted on time to 9th grade.
 - For students with no DHS involvement this number actually increases to 90%.
 - For students with a current or prior out-of-home placement promotion is approximately 71%.
 - Only 62% of students with JJ involvement were promoted on time to 9th grade.
- **Fewer credits were accumulated by 9th grade students with a history of DHS involvement.**⁵
 - Students with no system involvement earned 6 credits in 9th grade while those with other DHS involvement earned 5.5 credits.
 - Students in current or prior out-of-home placements earned 5 credits while JJ involved students earned approximately 4.5 credits in 9th grade.

The PolicyLab study highlights the exceptional vulnerability and profound educational needs of system-involved students across multiple domains. The Report clearly underscores the need for increased supports and targeted interventions for system-involved youth, particularly with regard to remedial help, truancy prevention and special education supports. Most importantly, perhaps, the

³ However, the authors caution that it is beyond the scope of the report to draw conclusions regarding a causal relationship between school type and academic performance and the data does not account for population characteristics such as number of educational placements or special education needs, the degree of DHS involvement, and the migration of high-performing students to charter settings and under-performing students to other types of schools.

⁴ Data from District-run schools *only*.

⁵ Data from District-run schools *only*.

Report establishes a baseline need for a systemic and cross-agency response to these findings that must include all stakeholders, particularly in light of the constricted resources of the School District of Philadelphia. This includes not only DHS but the multiple systems and providers that touch these students including the Court, Juvenile Probation, mental health and other service providers, as well as students, families, advocates and communities. We need to think strategically and resourcefully – to identify each barrier that contributes to these outcomes and identify how each system can play a role in changing infrastructures and developing policies to support and expand opportunities for these students. By undertaking such a collaborative and cross-systems effort, we can create a safety net for these students to be successful in the classroom and beyond.

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