



# background

Report # 135

Data Sharing Among Schools And Human Services

November 2011

## Sharing Data to Help Children

## New insights gained

### *Sharing data leads to range of possibilities*

James is a ninth grader in the Pittsburgh Public Schools whose accomplishments on standardized tests stand in sharp contrast to his record of consistently poor grades and high absenteeism. His home life is unstable. He's been abused. He's spent the past five years in kinship care. And he's committed missteps serious enough to involve him in the juvenile justice system.

James also has the distinction of being part of the first group of Pittsburgh Public School students to be studied under a novel data-sharing agreement between the city schools and the Allegheny County Department of Human Services that was struck with the hope that it will lead to better outcomes for students like him.

The agreement enables the city public schools and the county Department of Human Services (DHS) to share data on issues ranging from student achievement and attendance to housing, child welfare, juvenile justice and mental health services.

Evidence of the potential of integrating school and DHS data began to emerge within months of the signing of the memorandum of understanding in December 2009.

A DHS analysis of the integrated data resulted in the most comprehensive statistical profile to date of Pittsburgh Public School students who are or recently have been involved in human services and revealed the breadth of the population of city public school students who have some involvement in human services.

The data revealed, for example, that 14,450 students – about 53 percent of district enrollment – have prior involvement with at least one human

service program and that 36 percent of those students received services within the last year.

The highest rate of prior human service involvement is found in Special Education schools, where 87 percent have received DHS services and 77 percent received services as recently as the last year. About 31 percent of city public school students have involvement in child welfare services and one in five students with prior Child Youth and Families involvement have been placed outside of their home. About 10 percent of city public school students over the age of 10 have had some involvement with the juvenile justice system.

The data also detail the achievement gap separating the educational outcomes of students with a history of human services involvement and their Pittsburgh Public Schools classmates. Pennsylvania System of State Assessment (PSSA) scores, for example,

*Several obstacles stood in the way of reaching a novel data-sharing agreement between the Allegheny County Department of Human Services and the Pittsburgh Public Schools, not the least of which were strict laws protecting confidentiality.*

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show 48 percent of students with human services involvement achieved reading proficiency compared to 67 percent of students who have never received human services.

And far fewer students who have received human services at some point in their lives have a GPA of 2.5 or higher – 47 percent compared to 72 percent of classmates with no history of receiving human services.

Other uses of the new data offered a glimpse of the data-sharing partnership's potential. For example, data showed that more than 500 students are at risk of failing out of their magnet schools and 430 of them are active users of DHS services. As a result, several steps were taken, 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.

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## Research Initiative

A key provision of the agreement authorizes the schools and DHS to 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 challenges faced by students involved in DHS services that are identified through an analysis of the shared student data.

School and DHS officials decided the first research initiative should focus on 170 students 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.

James is one of those students. He scored advanced in math and proficient in reading on the PSSA. But in ninth grade his GPA was barely above failing, and he missed 39 days of school, 16 due to suspensions. He’s been in kinship care and has changed schools seven times. He entered the juvenile justice system on a charge of simple assault. An evaluation determined he’d been sexually and physically abused and that he has post-traumatic stress disorder, personality disorder, attention deficit hyperactivity disorder and conduct disorder.

An intervention to improve the educational outcomes of students like James is being designed by the Pittsburgh Public Schools and DHS partnership. The process has included discussions among DHS and school officials and community stakeholders, from which issues and approaches were identified, such as evaluating the placements of students, looking at the effectiveness of programs they are enrolled in and finding ways to avoid

## How the data-sharing agreement works

Here are the key provisions of the Pittsburgh Public Schools and Allegheny County Department of Human Services (DHS) data-sharing agreement:

- School district responsibilities include providing directory information and educational records of students for whom DHS has legal custody.
- The school district also provides certain information for other students enrolled, including personal identifiers, such as names and home addresses; achievement data; attendance; and data on students in special programming.
- All student data provided by the school district is considered confidential and applicable state and federal laws govern its release.
- All reports prepared from the data that contain personally identifiable information are considered to be confidential.
- DHS agreed to seek parental consent for releasing student records when the data suggest students might benefit from additional intervention and direct collaboration between DHS and the school district.
- A key provision authorizes the use of the data for conducting an “action research” project, a problem-solving process in which DHS and the school district work toward improving the way they address certain issues involving students of mutual interest.

disrupting the education of students who move from one placement to another. And focus groups were conducted to gain insight from those who regularly work with students and from students themselves.

Without the ability to integrate and analyze school district and DHS data,

the opportunity to steer students like James toward the success they have demonstrated the potential to achieve would have been missed, said DHS Director Marc Cherna. “We wouldn’t have picked up on any of these kids. We would have never known.”



## references

*This report is largely based on the following publications.*

Fraser, J. (2011). *Framework for Collaboration: The Memorandum of Understanding between Allegheny County DHS and Pittsburgh Public Schools*. Pittsburgh, PA: Allegheny County Department of Human Resources. [www.alleghenycounty.us/WorkArea/linkit.aspx?LinkIdentifier=id&ItemID=32826](http://www.alleghenycounty.us/WorkArea/linkit.aspx?LinkIdentifier=id&ItemID=32826)

Fraser, J. (2011). *The Allegheny County Department of Human Services & Pittsburgh Public Schools Partnership: Improving Educational and Well-Being Outcomes*. Pittsburgh, PA: Allegheny County Department of Human Resources. [www.alleghenycounty.us/WorkArea/DownloadAsset.aspx?id=34806](http://www.alleghenycounty.us/WorkArea/DownloadAsset.aspx?id=34806)

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