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A PACER Policy Brief

School Performance Profiles: Still Not the Sum of a School's Parts

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Status of Pennsylvania's Efforts to Assess School Quality

Since 2013, the Pennsylvania Department of Education has annually published School Performance Profiles (SPPs), which assign a summative academic performance score for every traditional public and charter school in Pennsylvania by rating each school on a scale from 0 to 100.¹ The publication of SPPs was originally a key component of Pennsylvania's compliance with federal education law. However, federal law has since changed from the waivers granted under the No Child Left Behind Act to the new Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA). ESSA still requires states to identify their lowest performing schools, but it does not require states to assign schools a single letter or numeric grade.

In 2017, in an effort "to create a more holistic school evaluation tool," the Pennsylvania Department of Education announced plans to roll out the Future Ready PA Index for the 2018-19 school year. PDE described the Index as "Pennsylvania's one-stop location for comprehensive information about school success" that "will use a dashboard model to highlight how schools are performing and making progress on multiple indicators."²

The Future Ready PA Index indicators will be divided into three categories:

- (1) state assessment measures,
- (2) on-track measures, and
- (3) college and career measures.³

While the Index includes standardized test scores, it also utilizes other data such as rates of chronic absenteeism and postsecondary transition to school, military, or work. The Index was included in Pennsylvania's Consolidated ESSA Plan,⁴ which was submitted to the federal government in September 2017 and approved in January 2018.⁵

¹ Pennsylvania School Performance Profiles: <http://www.paschoolperformance.org/>.

² "PA.Gov." Act 71. <http://www.education.pa.gov/Pages/Future-Ready-PA.aspx>.

³ "PA.Gov." Act 71. <http://www.education.pa.gov/Pages/Overview-of-the-Dashboard.aspx>.

⁴ PA Department of Education. Every Student Succeeds Act: Pennsylvania Consolidated State Plan. January 18, 2018. http://www.education.pa.gov/Documents/K-12/ESSA/Resources/PA_ESSA_Consolidated_State_Plan_Final.pdf.

⁵ "Pennsylvania's Every Student Succeeds Act Plan Receives Final Approval." Governor Tom Wolf. January 17, 2018. <https://www.governor.pa.gov/pennsylvanias-every-student-succeeds-act-plan-receives-final-approval/>.

As RFA⁶ and other researchers⁷ have documented, there is robust support for the use of a dashboard of multiple measures to assess school quality, rather than a summative score based primarily on standardized test scores. Along with Pennsylvania, four other states—California, Oregon, Idaho, and North Dakota—have also moved away from summative performance ratings for schools in their federally approved plans. Eleven states will use a descriptive rating system (Needs Improvement, Average, Good, Great, Excellent) and six states plan to use a tier-of-support system (Comprehensive Support and Improvement, Targeted Support and Improvement, None).⁸

PDE is still required to calculate School Performance Profiles and to publish them on its website, as SPP building-level scores are a key aspect of the state’s teacher and principal evaluation systems, which are codified in current state law.⁹

Some state policymakers have criticized the use of a dashboard that lacks a summative score to measure school quality, and they argue that utilizing two separate assessment systems could be confusing. In particular, sponsors of Senate Bill 1198 would like “to establish in statute the current Student Performance Profiles webpage, as a *single location* to access *all* accountability measures.”¹⁰ The bill would specifically require PDE to report “school performance profile data, including summative district-level and building-level scores with regard to student performance on assessments and academic growth.”¹¹ S.B. 1198 would also add a new requirement that PDE publish summative *district-level* scores, not something PDE has done in the past. Finally, the bill would require the State Board of Education to approve any changes to the indicators used to comply with the ESSA that PDE may suggest in the future.

As debates ensue over the benefits and pitfalls of a summative school rating metric vs a dashboard of multiple indicators and about the pros and cons of a single vs multiple websites of Pennsylvania school data, it is worth revisiting the concerns raised in past research about Pennsylvania’s current summative rating, the School Performance Profile, and to document that these concerns persist in Pennsylvania’s most recent data.

⁶ Duffy, Mark, and Della Jenkins. "A PACER Policy Brief: Creating a Comprehensive Picture of School Performance." Research for Action. November 2015. http://8rri53pm0cs22jk3vvqna1ub-wpengine.netdna-ssl.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/11/RFA_PACER_Creating_Comprehensive_Picture_of_School_Performance_Nov_2015_Final.pdf.

⁷ Mathis, William. "School Accountability, Multiple Measures, and Inspectorates in a Post-NCLB World." (2015). http://nepc.colorado.edu/files/publications/Mathis%20RBOPM-1_0.pdf

⁸ "Resource Title: 50-State Comparison: States' School Accountability Systems." Education Commission of the States. May 31, 2018. <https://www.ecs.org/50-state-comparison-states-school-accountability-systems/>.

⁹ 22 Pa. Code §§ 19, Appendix A.

¹⁰ Legislative Data Processing Center. "Senate Co-Sponsorship Memoranda." The Official Website for the Pennsylvania General Assembly. March 1, 2018.

<http://www.legis.state.pa.us/cfdocs/billInfo/billInfo.cfm?sYear=2017&sInd=0&body=S&type=B&bn=1198> *Emphasis added.*

¹¹ Senate Bill No. 1198. The General Assembly of Pennsylvania. June 8, 2018.

<http://www.legis.state.pa.us/CFDOCS/Legis/PN/Public/btCheck.cfm?txtType=HTM&sessYr=2017&sessInd=0&billBody=S&billTyp=B&billNbr=1198&pn=1835>

Documented Concerns with SPP

1. The SPP systematically favors more advantaged schools

Research has consistently shown that schools serving high numbers of vulnerable students, such as students in poverty, students with disabilities, English language learners, and students of color are likely to be penalized by SPP scores.

Fuller (2014), an associate professor in the Department of Education Policy Studies at the Pennsylvania State University and director of the Center for Evaluation and Education Policy Analysis, found “a very strong relationship” between student poverty and SPP scores and concluded that “SPP scores are more accurate at identifying the percentage of economically disadvantaged students in a school than at identifying the effectiveness of a school.”¹²

Fuller (2017) later found that, in addition to poverty, the overall SPP scores as well as most of the individual components of the SPP were negatively correlated to an array of other school and student characteristics, including student race, ELL status, special education status.¹³ For these reasons, Fuller concluded that “*SPP should not be used as a measure of school effectiveness.*” (emphasis in the original).

The single biggest weakness of the SPP is that 90 percent of a school’s score is based on student performance on standardized test scores -- the Pennsylvania System of School Assessment (PSSA) for elementary and middle schools, and the Keystone Exams for high schools. As we explained in our 2015 report, *Pennsylvania’s School Performance Profile: Not the Sum of its Parts* (RFA, 2015), it is this reliance on test scores that “results in a school rating system [SPP] that favors more advantaged schools.”¹⁴

2. SPP’s documented bias against schools serving disadvantaged students continues

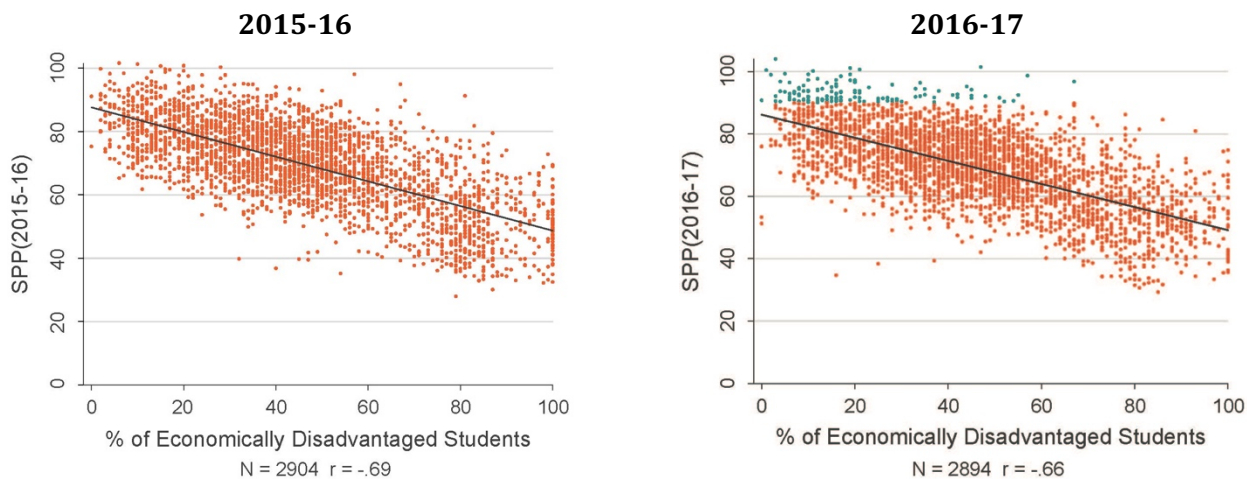
The bias against disadvantaged schools in SPP scores as documented in analyses of past years of SPP scores persist. Figure 1 below demonstrates the relationship between SPP and student poverty for the 2015-16 and the 2016-17 school years.

¹² Fuller, Ed, (2014). *An Examination of Pennsylvania School Performance Profile Scores*. Center for Evaluation and Education Policy Analysis. <http://vamboozled.com/wp-content/uploads/2014/10/Fuller.pdf>

¹³ Fuller, Ed. (2017). *Problems and prospects for school accountability in Pennsylvania*. Center for Education Evaluation and Policy Analysis. <https://ceepablog.files.wordpress.com/2017/02/ceepa-white-paper-problems-and-propsects-with-the-pennsylvania-school-performance-profile.pdf>

¹⁴ Sludden, John et al. (2015) *Pennsylvania’s School Performance Profile: Not the Sum of Its Parts*. Research for Action. <https://www.researchforaction.org/publications/pennsylvanias-school-performance-profile-not-the-sum-of-its-parts/>.

Figure 1. Pennsylvania public schools by SPP and student poverty



As shown in Figure 1, in both 2015-16 and 2016-17, SPP scores are strongly correlated to the number of students experiencing economic disadvantage, exhibiting bias against schools serving students living in poverty.

3. SPPs mask deep inequality across and within schools

The summative score provided by SPP can often mask deep inequity both across and within schools. To illustrate this issue, we compared the student demographics in schools scoring 90 or above on the SPP in the 2016-2017 school year with that of all other schools. Of roughly 2,900 public schools in Pennsylvania, 122 schools scored 90 or above on the SPP.¹⁵ These schools are represented by green dots in Figure 1 above.

Table 1 below shows that these 122 high scoring schools serve significantly fewer students in poverty, fewer English language learning students, and fewer black and Hispanic students than the average for Pennsylvania schools during the 2016-17 school year.

Table 1: Student demographics of schools scoring 90 or above on the SPP in 2016-17¹⁶

Student demographic groups	State Average	Schools with SPP scores of 90 or above (N = 122)
Economically Disadvantaged	46%	20%
ELL	3%	1%
White	71%	81%
Black or African American	13%	4%
Hispanic	10%	4%
Multi-racial	4%	3%
Asian	3%	8%

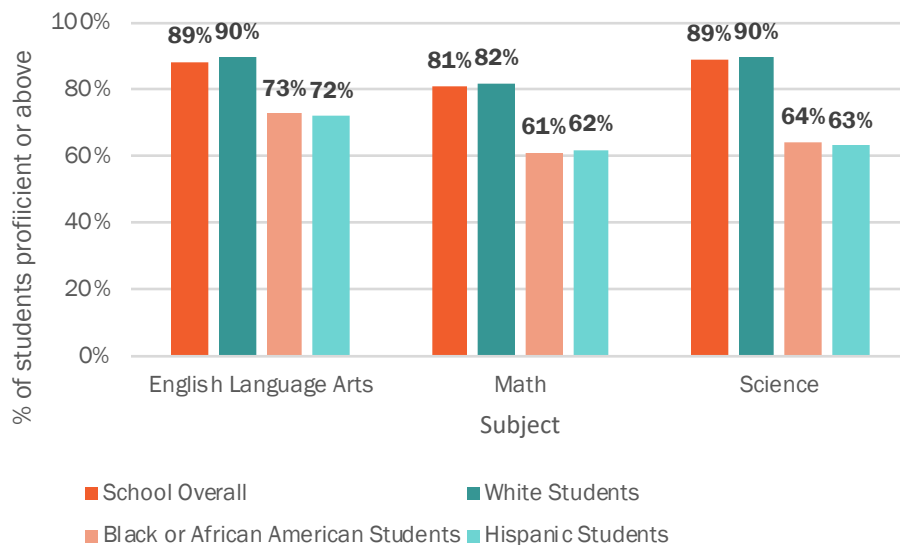
¹⁵ Four additional schools that scored over 90 on SPP are eliminated from our sample, due to missing data used in the analyses below.

¹⁶ Pennsylvania Department of Education, (2017). *School and District Fast Fact Data for SY 2016-2017* [Data file]. <http://www.paschoolperformance.org/Downloads>.

In addition, about half of these high scoring schools serve so few black or Hispanic students that standardized test scores for those subgroups are not reported or included in calculations involving achievement gaps.

The 62 high-scoring schools that do serve significant numbers of disadvantaged students produce starkly different results for these students. Figure 2 presents the average proficiency rates on the PSSA and/or Keystone Exams by racial subgroup for these schools.

Figure 2: Proficiency rates by racial subgroup of the 62 schools scoring 90 or above on Pennsylvania’s School Performance Profile



The summative SPP scores for these 62 schools mask wide gaps in the performance in the subgroups of black and Hispanic students attending those schools when compared to the performance of white students. These gaps range from 16-17% in English Language Arts, 19-20% in Mathematics, and 25-26% in Science. These gaps equal or exceed the achievement gaps that others have documented for Pennsylvania schools statewide.¹⁷

Conclusion

There is good reason that increasing numbers of states are moving away from assigning a summative numerical or letter grade as a public judgement on the performance of their individual public schools. The characteristics that determine the quality of a school are inherently complicated and virtually any summative metric is bound to mask important variation both within and across schools.

¹⁷ Karoly, L. A. (2015). The economic impact of achievement gaps in Pennsylvania’s public schools. RAND Corporation. Retrieved from http://williampennfoundation.org/sites/default/files/reports/RAND_RR1159.pdf. (Notably, as RFA reported in its [2015 analysis of federal civil rights data](#), these statewide achievement gaps correlate to gaps in school funding and to gaps in actual educational opportunities

Research clearly documents that test-based metrics such as the SPP are more reflective of factors outside the control of schools and are too blunt an instrument to provide information on critically important aspects of schooling including the nature of curriculum, the substantive and pedagogical expertise of teachers, or the quality of the relationships among and between the students and adults that populate the school building. The Future Ready PA Index appears to be a step in the right direction, since its dashboard approach attempts to provide a more nuanced and accurate picture of the quality of individual schools. Yet whether using the School Performance Profile, the Future Ready PA Index, some other metric, or some combination, it is crucial that policymakers remember that reliance on a single score is likely to provide an inaccurate and potentially damaging picture of how well schools are serving all students and, in particular, our most vulnerable youth.

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