Pittsburgh Public Schools Goal Monitoring Report: Status Update 12th Grade Cohort Graduation Rates

Introduction and Goal

This report provides an update on the progress District Leadership has made in improving graduation rates for 12th-grade cohorts at Pittsburgh Public Schools (PPS). In alignment with best practices established by the Council of Great City Schools, our goal monitoring report seeks to communicate both the current data regarding 12th Grade graduation rates and our plan for a targeted strategic response. By the end of the 2024-2025 school year, we aim for our graduation rate for the 2025 12th grade cohort to be 84.4%. We reached our goal in 2022 and 2023. When we first presented this data, we were still waiting for the 2024 graduation data. We are working hard to keep progressing in the right direction. Graduation rates are a critical milestone for student success. High graduation rates demonstrate a school district's ability to support students in completing their K-12 education while equipping them with the knowledge, skills, and opportunities necessary to thrive in their next phase of life, whether it be college, career, or as a community contributor. Beyond academic milestones, graduation rates reflect our commitment to fostering well-rounded, prepared individuals ready to succeed in an ever-changing world.

At the end of the 20-21 school year, our 12th grade cohort graduation rate was 81.5%, which established the baseline for our 5-year goal of achieving a 85.8% graduation rate at the end of the 2026-2027 school year. During the initial presentation on graduation goal monitoring, the data available was from the 2022-2023 cohort. Since then, we have received 2023-2024 graduation cohort data reflecting growth from 86.1% to 86.9% (SEE ATTACHMENT A). In December 2024, we introduced three strategies to increase our 2024-2025 12th Grade Cohort graduation rate: standardizing communication and engagement, creating a structured documentation process, and implementing graduation mentorship opportunities.

Graduation Monitoring Tools and Supports

As a reminder, PPS evaluates graduation progress by focusing on two key monitoring tools: Graduation Tracker and the Act 158 Dashboard. These tools allow us to track students' pathways to graduation, identify those who may need additional support, and implement timely strategic responses to the data to ensure students stay on track.

Graduation Tracker serves as our internal graduation tracking system, providing real-time insights into students' credit accumulation and overall progress toward meeting graduation requirements. By leveraging the Graduation Tracker, school counselors and administrators can quickly identify students who may be falling behind and intervene with targeted support.

Act 158 Completion Rates reflect students' progress through Pennsylvania's multiple graduation pathways. These pathways provide flexibility by allowing students to demonstrate readiness through Keystone Exam proficiency, alternative assessments, career and technical education (CTE) programs, and other evidence-based achievements. Act 158 ensures that all students, regardless of their strengths and challenges, have a pathway to earn their diploma.

In addition to these tools, PPS continues to invest in key supports to improve graduation outcomes (Promise Coaches and Financial Investments). Promise Coaches play a crucial role in guiding students through their high school journey, offering mentorship and assistance with career exploration, post-secondary planning, and overcoming academic and personal barriers. These coaches are embedded in key high schools—Carrick, Milliones, Perry, and Westinghouse—where they work closely with students who may need additional guidance. Also, our intentional financial investments in school counseling have enhanced student support services. By increasing the number of school counselors, PPS has moved closer to the American School Counselor Association (ASCA) recommended student-to-counselor ratio, ensuring students receive the individualized attention they need to meet their graduation goals.

The Launch of Counselor Connect

As part of our continued efforts to improve graduation rates at PPS, we are excited to introduce *Counselor Connect*—a new app designed to transform how counselors engage with students and track their progress toward graduation, while also enhancing communication with families. This tool will empower school counselors to provide more personalized, data-driven support to students by offering real-time insights into their academic standing and progress. SEE ATTACHMENT B

Key Features and Functionalities of Counselor Connect

Counselor Connect is designed to provide counselors with an easy-to-use platform that tracks student data and manages student-counselor conversations aimed at ensuring students progress towards graduation. The app will auto-populate student demographic information and relevant data, enabling counselors to have a comprehensive view of each student's status. The features include:

- **Graduation Progress and Status:** Counselors can access up-to-date information on students' graduation requirements, including credits earned, remaining coursework, and overall academic standing. The app will ensure counselors have a clear picture of students' progress toward graduation and identify those who may need additional support.
- **Real-Time Academic Insights:** Counselors will be able to monitor students' grades, attendance, and other academic indicators in real time. This feature allows for timely interventions and ensures that students receive the support they need as soon as challenges arise.
- **Identification of Barriers to Graduation:** The app will create opportunities for Counselors to input additional barriers to graduation, such as non-academic factors that may be impacting students' ability to stay on track. This could include personal, social, or economic challenges, providing counselors with the necessary data to offer tailored support.

Once counselors enter any additional information about a student's situation, *Counselor Connect* will auto-generate a personalized letter for the student's family. This letter will outline the student's current progress, graduation preparedness, Act 158 Status and any areas that may need attention. The generated letter will be sent directly to the student's parent or guardian, ensuring that families are kept informed and can engage in the support process.

Impact on Graduation Support

The launch of *Counselor Connect* represents a significant step forward in how PPS supports students on their path to graduation. By leveraging the power of continuous conversation tracking and data, the app enables counselors to offer more targeted, efficient, and proactive support. It ensures that counselors are not only tracking academic progress but also actively engaging with families to address potential barriers to graduation.

This tool aligns with our overarching goal to improve graduation rates, particularly for our most at-risk student populations. With *Counselor Connect*, we aim to reduce disparities in graduation rates by providing counselors with the tools and information they need to engage meaningfully with students and families, ultimately ensuring that every student has the support they need to succeed.

As we continue to integrate this new tool, we anticipate that *Counselor Connect* will be an invaluable resource in supporting students, improving communication between school and home, and driving progress toward our graduation rate goals.

With these tools and supports in place, we now turn to an analysis of our most recent graduation data to assess our progress and identify areas for continued improvement.

The Data

When we initially presented this graduation data, the official 2023-2024 cohort graduation rates had not yet been released by the state. Now, with the updated data, we see that the overall graduation rate increased from 86.1% in 2022-2023 to 86.9% in 2023-2024. While there are still disparities in the data, we have seen growth closing the gap when disaggregating the data by subgroup. The most recent figures (2023-2024 cohort graduation rates) reveal that English Language Learners (ELL) graduated at a rate of 78.2%, students with Individualized Education Plans (IEPs) graduated at 75.9%, African American students graduated at 85.4%, and Economically Disadvantaged students graduated at a rate of 84.8%. In contrast, their white peers graduated at a rate of 91.1%, highlighting a continued gap that we set out to address through targeted interventions (SEE ATTACHMENT C). When comparing our data to state averages, African American, ELL, and Economically Disadvantaged students in the district are outperforming their peers statewide. African American students at PPS have a graduation rate of 85.4%, compared to the state average of 80.53%. ELL students have shown notable improvement, increasing from below the state average to now surpassing it, with a graduation rate of 78.2% compared to the state's 72.48% and Economically Disadvantaged students graduated at a rate of 84.8% compared to the states average of 82.8%.

While White students continue to have the highest graduation rates within the District, their rate of 91.1% remains slightly below the state average of 91.63%.

Graduation Tracker Data

When evaluating students' progress toward graduation, 84% of seniors are currently on track to graduate based on credit accumulation alone as of April 1, 2025. This percentage provides a promising outlook but also underscores the importance of continued support for the remaining students who are at risk of not completing their graduation requirements on time. While Perry and CAPA lead the district with 94% and 96% of their students on track to graduate based on credit completion alone, other schools, such as SAC and Westinghouse, continue to face challenges, with only 54% and 72% of their students meeting credit requirements. Identifying and addressing the challenges unique to these schools will be a key focus moving forward. SEE ATTACHMENT D

Act 158 Data

Additionally, our ACT 158 completion rates have shown meaningful growth. As of April 1, 2025, 78% of students have met the ACT 158 graduation requirement, reflecting a 7% increase from this time last year when the completion rate was 71% (SEE ATTACHMENT E). This improvement demonstrates the impact of our efforts to guide students through Pennsylvania's multiple graduation pathways, ensuring they have diverse opportunities to meet their graduation requirements. However, while we celebrate this growth, we must remain focused on closing the remaining gaps and ensuring all students, regardless of their background or circumstances, have a clear and supported path to earning their diploma.

Superintendent's Evaluation of the Data

The latest Act 158 and Grad Track data provide a nuanced view of our progress in ensuring students meet graduation requirements. While we are encouraged by an increase in the number of students who have completed their Act 158 requirements compared to this time last year, the data also reinforces the persistent challenges that remain in some of our most struggling schools.

One key factor affecting on-track graduation rates is the inconsistency in how schools are standardizing student meetings and intervention strategies. Schools that have established clear, structured cadences for monitoring student

progress demonstrate the impact of intentional planning and support. Conversely, struggling schools, where on-track rates are significantly lower, indicate a need for greater consistency in engaging students with their credit completion and Act 158 pathways. Additionally, while we have worked to ensure that counselors effectively manage their caseloads and adapt to evolving expectations, we recognize that long-standing habits and approaches can sometimes hinder progress. Some counselors have struggled to shift their practices to align with updated graduation tracking efforts, creating inconsistencies in student support. With the in-house creation and launch of Counselor Connect, we believe this new app will bridge the gap between student graduation requirements and counselor support. It will facilitate timely interventions, consistent monitoring, and a structured cadence of communication—helping students and families stay informed and engaged in the graduation process. Additionally, it will create accountability for counselors by requiring them to establish and maintain regular meetings with students, ensuring our students receive the necessary guidance and support.

Looking ahead, our focus extends beyond the current senior class—we are also making a concerted effort to educate students in grades 9–11 about graduation requirements. One initiative supporting this effort is the Graduation Requirements presentation, posters, and booklet, which were introduced to all high school students. Centered around the theme 'Putting the Pieces of Your Puzzle Together,' these resources serve as supports to help students understand and plan their path to graduation. By strengthening early awareness and intervention, we aim to sustain and accelerate the gains we have made, positioning more students for long-term success.

Continuous Improvement Approach

In December 2024, we outlined our strategy for increasing our 12th Grade Cohort Graduation Rate by adopting continuous improvement cycles, specifically through the Plan, Do, Check, Act (PDCA) methodology. This iterative process allows for systematic evaluation and refinement of identified strategies, ensuring that our efforts are consistently aligned with student needs and educational outcomes. This approach has been deemed effective as it promotes ongoing progress through evidence, reflection, and refinement. Continuous improvement cycles ensure that every step taken toward the 12th Grade Cohort Graduation goal is driven by data, grounded in evidence, and focused on student achievement, fostering sustainable improvements in schools.

Strategic Responses and Plan

Our strategic responses within implementation of continuous improvement cycles focus on three critical areas designed to address gaps revealed by our assessment data: standardizing communication and engagement, creating a structured documentation process, and Implementing Graduation mentorship opportunities.

Timeline for Implementation

Since the December 2024 presentation, Pittsburgh Public Schools has implemented a series of targeted strategies aimed at increasing the graduation rate for this year's 12th-grade cohort. This timeline follows a structured, data-driven approach that integrates professional learning, instructional supports related to graduation requirements, and mentorship programming to drive progress (SEE ATTACHMENT F).

Between December 2024 and April 2025, key initiatives have included:

- Deploying graduation-focused marketing materials to enhance student awareness of graduation requirements, including Graduation Requirement Posters, Graduation Preparation Presentations, and an interactive Graduation Jeopardy game to reinforce key expectations while checking for understanding.
- Conducting individualized senior status meetings with district leadership, school administrators, and counselors to assess student progress and determine targeted interventions.

- Implementing ongoing monitoring of Grad Track and ACT 158 data to ensure students are meeting necessary benchmarks.
- Hosting Leading and Learning Institute sessions to equip principals with strategies for successfully launching and sustaining the Graduation Mentorship Program in their schools.
- Establishing partnerships with local companies to provide incentives that recognize and motivate students making steady progress toward graduation.
- Creating and Launching "Counselor Connect," a structured support network designed to foster collaboration, share best practices, and streamline communication among school counselors working to guide students toward successful completion of graduation requirements.

Implementation of Strategies

1. Standardized Communication and Engagement for Graduation Success
Plan: Key components of this strategy include developing clear and consistent messaging, proactive student and family engagement, and data-driven monitoring and intervention. This involves creating standardized communication materials, launching structured check-ins at key transition points, and implementing real-time tracking tools to identify at-risk students. The ultimate goal is to increase graduation rates by ensuring students, families, and educators have access to clear, accessible information about requirements, available supports, and pathways to success.

Do: The Communications Team has developed graduation-focused marketing materials, now placed in every high school, to ensure students are consistently reminded of key milestones and requirements. These materials include multilingual infographics, guides, and presentations distributed via our high schools, counselor meetings, family engagement events and District website. Additionally, structured check-ins have been implemented at the 12th-grade level to initially provide students and families with updates on credit progress and intervention opportunities. Counselors have begun utilizing real-time tracking tools to monitor student progress, enabling early intervention through credit recovery, mentoring, and academic support programs.

Check (Challenges): A significant challenge has been ensuring that all students and families are actively engaging with the provided information. While the materials are available in multiple formats and languages, initial feedback suggests that some families remain unaware of key graduation requirements. Additionally, while the structured check-ins are effective, counselor capacity remains a constraint, limiting the frequency of individualized meetings. Another challenge is ensuring that data tracking tools are used consistently across all schools, as some schools have faced technical or training barriers that slow implementation.

Act (Next Steps): To enhance outreach, the Communications Team will collaborate with school leaders to expand digital messaging efforts through social media and direct outreach platforms. Additional professional learning will be provided to counselors on optimizing their use of tracking tools and structuring efficient student check-ins.

2. Structured Documentation Process
Plan: To improve graduation rates across PPS, we created and will launch a structured documentation process that ensures accurate, real-time tracking of student progress. This app aims to address the challenges posed by student mobility within the district by providing a standardized record-keeping process that includes credit completion, intervention plans, and graduation requirements. Additionally, we planned to ensure the widespread use of Grad Track across the district by counselors, aiming to streamline graduation progress tracking and documentation for

students. The strategy was designed to create seamless transitions for students between schools, allowing for more effective identification of students at risk, timely interventions, and support for their successful graduation.

Do: Since the presentation of this strategy, significant steps have been taken to make improvements to our Power BI system, merging Graduation Tracker and Act 158 updates into one Dashboard. All school counselors and transition counselors are now required to utilize the Graduation Tracker feature in eSchoolPlus for every student in grades 9–12 and provide updates. To support this, the IT and Student Support Services teams have hosted multiple professional learning sessions and office hours from September 2024 to present, ensuring counselors are equipped with the necessary skills to effectively use the tool and provide targeted support to students.

Check (Challenges): Despite progress, challenges have emerged in ensuring consistent use of the Graduation Tracker across all schools. While counselors are utilizing the tool, some have encountered difficulties in fully adopting the system, either due to technical issues or insufficient familiarity with certain features. Although the professional learning sessions have been helpful, some schools require additional support to ensure full engagement with the tool. Some schools are still in the process of standardizing their documentation practices, which impacts the consistency of tracking and intervention efforts.

Act (Next Steps): To address these challenges, the district has created and launched Counselor Connect and will continue providing professional learning sessions for counselors, with a focus on optimizing the use of Grad Tracker and addressing any technical barriers. Once the communication log system is finalized, we will conduct additional training for counselors, student services staff, and school leaders to ensure proper implementation and consistent use. This will include ensuring that counselors are effectively documenting their interactions with students and families to support personalized intervention plans.

The data from the Graduation Tracker will be used to provide regular updates to school leadership, helping to identify areas that require additional support. We will also leverage the combined data from the Graduation Tracker and the Act 158 Dashboard to provide tailored interventions for students and ensure that all schools have the tools and resources necessary to help students stay on track for graduation. Additionally, we will monitor the effectiveness of the communication log system and make necessary adjustments based on feedback from counselors and school leaders to improve its functionality and usability.

3. Graduation Mentorship

Plan: To improve graduation rates across PPS, we have implemented a strategy that pairs students at risk of not graduating with dedicated mentors. These mentors, drawn from school staff and community partners, provide one-on-one guidance, support, and accountability to help students navigate academic, social, and personal challenges. The goal is to ensure that every student at risk of not graduating has a trusted advocate who is invested in their success, with a particular focus on students from historically underserved backgrounds, such as African American students, students with IEPs, and English Language Learners. By addressing the unique needs of these students, we aim to provide equitable access to resources and opportunities that promote academic success, leading to higher graduation rates and improved postsecondary readiness.

Do: Since the introduction of this strategy, high school administrators have developed a mentoring implementation plan specifically targeting struggling seniors, with a focus on historically underserved student populations. A comprehensive mentoring guide and form have been created to help mentors, whether or not they have an educational background, effectively assist their students. After each mentoring session, the form is shared with the student's counselor to ensure consistent follow-up and a cohesive support system.

In addition, the Communications Team has updated the District's graduation requirements webpage to keep families informed about their student's progress toward graduation. Families have received progress updates from the schools, and efforts have been made to ensure ELL families receive translated materials and additional support. To further increase awareness of graduation requirements and success strategies, the district is exploring various communication channels, including social media, PeachJar, and email blasts.

Check (Challenges): One of the primary challenges faced by this strategy is ensuring that students who are at risk of not graduating can fully engage with their mentors. Many 12th-grade students face unique challenges that impact their attendance, such as work or family obligations, which often prevent them from meeting with their mentors. When students are absent, they miss critical interventions and support, which jeopardizes their ability to stay on track for graduation. This attendance issue has proven to be a significant barrier to the success of the mentoring program.

Act (Next Steps): Currently, there are 218 students who are not on track to graduate, 178 of those students are not on track to graduate based on credit completion alone, while 40 of those students are not on track based on Act 158 requirement completion. Based on feedback from principals during the March LLI (Leadership Learning Institute) meeting, a decision was made to shift from a group celebration model to individual acknowledgements for these students. This adjustment was made to accommodate factors such as student availability, the importance of building rapport with the mentor or teacher delivering incentives, and the potential embarrassment students may feel if their at-risk status is made public.

Principals will now reach out to the Office of Communications and Stakeholder Engagement with their incentive numbers. To date, several community organizations and partners, including the Pittsburgh Penguins, Pittsburgh Center for Arts and Media, Macedonia FACE, Carnegie Mellon University, and the Bhutanese Community Association of Pittsburgh, have generously donated incentives to support these individual acknowledgements. Moving forward, the district will continue to monitor attendance and mentor engagement, adjust the support system as necessary, and collaborate with community partners to provide additional incentives and recognition for students who are on the path to graduation.

Conclusion

Pittsburgh Public Schools continues to make steady progress toward improving 12th grade graduation rates, demonstrating a clear commitment to data-driven strategies and support systems. While disparities persist among student groups, ongoing initiatives such as individualized graduation planning, strategic interventions, and cross-departmental collaboration are showing positive impact. Continued focus on targeted supports, particularly for historically underserved subgroups, will be critical to achieving the District's long-term graduation goals and ensuring that all students are equipped for postsecondary success.