

## A Return to “Normal” Public Schools Is Not Enough

By James M. Trutko

The 2020-21 school year was a dismal one for public education in Cuyahoga County as schools were buffeted by the Covid pandemic and by social and political currents. Most parents and the public hoped that schools would return to “normal” for the county’s 130,000 public school students this year, but even if Covid disruptions faded in spring, the public schools’ “normal” performance fails to prepare many students for the future and handicaps Cuyahoga County’s economic growth.

The Ohio Department of Education’s proficiency tests compare what students have learned in Ohio’s 608 public school districts. Although critics harp about their limitations, proficiency tests generally assess the acquisition of useful knowledge that is correlated with future educational performance and job success.

Each year, each district gives about 21 comparable statewide proficiency tests for various subjects covered in grades 3 through 12. Over the past five years, students in the 31 Cuyahoga County school districts have taken over 2,700 proficiency tests, more than sufficient to draw some conclusions. The tests reveal disturbing findings about the recent performance of Cuyahoga County’s districts -- a third (10) of Cuyahoga County districts rank in the bottom 10% of all 608 Ohio districts.

The five-year average proficiency score for all 31 local districts is 65%, about the statewide average, but district performance varies widely. In the best district, 93% of students pass proficiency; in the worst district, only 24% pass proficiency. Unfortunately, ten Cuyahoga County public school districts with 60,600 (47%) students had average scores below the 50% proficiency threshold: South Euclid-Lyndhurst, Cleveland Hts.-University Hts., Bedford, Richmond Hts., Warrensville Hts., Euclid, Maple Hts., Garfield Hts., Cleveland, and East Cleveland. So even in a “normal” school year, a sizeable number of the county’s public-school students are trapped in districts where the overall proficiency results are terrible. Overall, an estimated 57,000 (44%) of the county’s 130,000 public school students do not achieve test proficiency.

**Average % Proficient and Expenditures/Pupil By Low-Performing School Districts**

Cuyahoga District (N=31)	5-yr Avg Prof %	Enrollment	Est Non-Proficient Enrollment	Total 2020-21 Expenditures (\$Mil)	Est Non-Proficient Exp (\$Mil)	Exp Per Pupil
12 Districts > 80% Proficiency		32,400	4,324	\$636.0	\$84.7	\$19,629
9 Districts > 50%-79% Proficiency		37,083	12,499	\$699.9	\$236.0	\$18,873
South Euclid-Lyndhurst	48%	3,121	1,620	\$66.9	\$34.7	\$21,442
Cleveland Hts-University Hts	47%	4,850	2,581	\$117.4	\$62.5	\$24,204
Bedford City	43%	2,787	1,581	\$51.7	\$29.3	\$18,539
Richmond Hts	39%	678	415	\$25.6	\$15.7	\$37,748
Euclid City	35%	4,667	3,055	\$106.3	\$69.6	\$22,769
Warrensville Hts City	34%	1,599	1,050	\$50.7	\$33.3	\$31,679
Maple Hts City	34%	3,373	2,230	\$46.7	\$30.9	\$13,854
Garfield Hts City	32%	3,358	2,270	\$47.4	\$32.1	\$14,120
Cleveland Municipal	30%	34,511	24,168	\$708.2	\$495.9	\$20,521
East Cleveland City	24%	1,644	1,249	\$38.4	\$29.2	\$23,393
Total/Average	37%	130,071	57,042	\$2,595.1	\$1,153.7	\$19,951
10 Districts < 50% Proficiency		60,588	40,219	\$1,259.2	\$833.1	
% of Tot: Districts < 50% Prof		47%	71%	49%	72%	

Source: Ohio Dept of Education, 2016-21 Proficiency data, 2020-21 Financial data.

The proficiency tests reveal three trends across all 31 districts. First, the tests confirm that school shutdowns and online learning have negatively affected children: the average proficiency test scores for Cuyahoga County’s 31 public school districts dropped by over 10% from 69% in 2018-19 to 57% in 2020-21. It’s hard to see how a 10% deficit will be made up and continued closures are likely to widen the gap.

**Average % Proficient By School Year**

School Year	Avg Prof %	# Tests
2016-2017 Avg	64%	720
2017-2018 Avg	68%	652
2018-2019 Avg	69%	652
2019-2020 Avg	61%	126
2020-2021 Avg	57%	617
5-Yr Avg	65%	2767

Note: Tests with less than 10 respondents are not included.

Second, the proficiency test results in intermediate schools are only 60%, eight points lower than elementary schools and six points lower than high schools. The poorer intermediate school results clearly warrant more study.

**Average % Proficient By Grade Level/Grade**

Gr Level	Avg Prof %	# Tests
3-5 Elem Avg	68%	930
6-8 Intermed Avg	60%	898
9-12 HS Avg	66%	939
Grand Avg	65%	2767

Note: Tests with less than 10 respondents are not included.

Third, scores for the critical foundation skills math (59%) and English (65%), are much lower than those for social studies (78%) and science (68%). Many observers regard critical foundation skills to be more difficult to remediate.

**Average % Proficient By Subject**

Subject	Avg Prof %	# Tests
Social Studies Avg	76%	354
Science Avg	68%	395
English Avg	65%	1007
Mathematics Avg	59%	1011
Grand Average	65%	2767

Note: Tests with less than 10 respondents are not included.  
Note: Red indicates cells < 65%

The results of 2,700 proficiency tests from local schools indicates significant changes must be made if Cuyahoga County resident and community organization want more students to pass proficiency tests and be ready for adulthood. A “new normal” for public schools must start with increasing parental pressure on school boards and on state legislators to change educational policies and laws. The goal should be creating a simpler, controlled environment for skills acquisition that uses informal customs and traditions, discipline, technology, and explicitly recognizes personal responsibility.

By speaking out forcefully at school board meetings, especially when school boards are considering school levies, parents will alert a complaisant public to school issues. Engaged parents can gradually force school boards to recognize that individual children and their parents are the primary clients of the educational system, and the school mission must be focused on student mastery of skills and core knowledge, not their social or political opinions or group identity.

The other part of the educational solution involves state legislators changing state laws to give school boards and parents more power against the powerful educational interest groups. First, state law should be modified to restrict collective bargaining agreements to eliminate automatic cost drivers like step increases and seniority increases, to restrict excessive vacation leave provisions, and to create performance incentives and penalties. These restrictions need to be enacted at a state level because busy superintendents dealing daily with teachers and part-time school boards cannot bargain effectively against powerful, professional union negotiators.

Second, state legislators should create “Proficiency Scholarships” to be used during the summer by parents whose children failed the state proficiency tests. A state grant of \$5,000 would allow parents to obtain remedial education focused specifically on core foundational skills. The grant should be usable at any public or existing charter school that has set up a grade and subject-specific remedial classes of at least three hours per day for a month or more during the summer. “Proficiency Scholarships” would give parents of students in failing districts and parents of disadvantaged children a real ability to remedy their child’s educational problems by accessing other schools and teachers

If assertive parents show up at school board meetings and contact state legislators, the region may be able to look forward to a “new normal” for public schools where failing schools perform better and more students master the core skills they will need to get better jobs and have a better life. But without more parent involvement and state action that leads to a major change in educational philosophy and substantial educational reform, residents of Cuyahoga County cannot expect improved educational results that will lead to more economic growth, stronger property values, and more economic opportunity for the disadvantaged.

*James M. Trutko is an economist and market research professional. The lifelong Cuyahoga County resident lives in Rocky River and can be reached at [jmtrutko@gmail.com](mailto:jmtrutko@gmail.com).*

**Average % Proficient and Expenditures/Pupil By School District**

Cuyahoga District (N=31)	Avg Prof Rank	5-yr Avg Prof %	Enrollment	Est Non-Proficient Enrollment	Total 2020-21 Expenditures (\$Mil)	Est Non-Proficient Expenditures	Exp Per Pupil	Rank-Exp/Pupil
Solon City	1	93%	4,462	316	\$79,744,000	\$5,650,000	\$17,869	23
Rocky River City	2	92%	2,525	211	\$46,407,000	\$3,880,000	\$18,379	22
Brecksville-Broadview Hts	3	90%	3,592	369	\$76,091,000	\$7,810,000	\$21,184	12
Chagrin Falls Village	4	90%	1,747	182	\$33,616,000	\$3,510,000	\$19,241	18
Bay Village City	5	89%	2,376	251	\$38,278,000	\$4,040,000	\$16,109	27
Beachwood City	6	88%	1,545	182	\$39,008,000	\$4,610,000	\$25,245	4
Orange City	7	85%	1,963	292	\$54,193,000	\$8,060,000	\$27,612	3
Independence Local	8	85%	1,075	160	\$20,773,000	\$3,100,000	\$19,316	17
Cuyahoga Hts Local	9	84%	806	127	\$15,673,000	\$2,460,000	\$19,438	16
North Royalton City	10	83%	3,856	647	\$92,410,000	\$15,510,000	\$23,961	6
Westlake City	11	83%	3,181	538	\$59,978,000	\$10,140,000	\$18,852	19
Strongsville City	12	80%	5,272	1,049	\$79,818,000	\$15,880,000	\$15,140	28
Olmsted Falls City	13	79%	3,349	691	\$46,306,000	\$9,550,000	\$13,827	31
Mayfield City	14	75%	4,057	998	\$90,216,000	\$22,180,000	\$22,236	10
Lakewood City	15	72%	4,341	1,224	\$84,652,000	\$23,860,000	\$19,502	15
Fairview Park City	16	68%	1,514	478	\$25,886,000	\$8,170,000	\$17,094	24
North Olmsted City	17	66%	3,506	1,180	\$65,399,000	\$22,010,000	\$18,653	20
Shaker Hts City	18	63%	4,606	1,687	\$105,648,000	\$38,690,000	\$22,935	8
Berea City	19	62%	5,330	2,017	\$110,211,000	\$41,700,000	\$20,678	13
Parma City	20	60%	9,264	3,694	\$153,285,000	\$61,110,000	\$16,546	25
Brooklyn City	21	53%	1,116	530	\$18,268,000	\$8,680,000	\$16,373	26
South Euclid-Lyndhurst	22	48%	3,121	1,620	\$66,917,000	\$34,730,000	\$21,442	11
Cleveland Hts-University Hts	23	47%	4,850	2,581	\$117,384,000	\$62,470,000	\$24,204	5
Bedford City	24	43%	2,787	1,581	\$51,665,000	\$29,310,000	\$18,539	21
Richmond Hts Local	25	39%	678	415	\$25,576,000	\$15,670,000	\$37,748	1
Euclid City	26	35%	4,667	3,055	\$106,260,000	\$69,550,000	\$22,769	9
Warrensville Hts City	27	34%	1,599	1,050	\$50,659,000	\$33,280,000	\$31,679	2
Maple Hts City	28	34%	3,373	2,230	\$46,732,000	\$30,900,000	\$13,854	30
Garfield Hts City	29	32%	3,358	2,270	\$47,409,000	\$32,050,000	\$14,120	29
Cleveland Municipal	30	30%	34,511	24,168	\$708,183,000	\$495,940,000	\$20,521	14
East Cleveland City	31	24%	1,644	1,249	\$38,449,000	\$29,200,000	\$23,393	7
Total/Average		65%	130,071	57,042	\$2,595,093,000	\$1,153,700,000	\$19,951	
Districts < 50% Proficiency	22-31		60,588	40,219	\$1,259,234,000	\$833,100,000	\$20,784	
% of Tot: Districts < 50% Prof			47%	71%	49%	72%		

Source: Ohio Dept of Education, 2016-21 Proficiency data, 2020-21 Financial data.