

FIRST THROUGH THIRD GRADES



The first three grades are the critical time for equipping children with the tools for school success. Third graders who are good students, and especially those who are good readers, are firmly on the path to success and are less likely to need a costly – and often ineffective – game of catch-up later.

The Primary Grades: First through Third Grades in Pennsylvania

Children bring widely varying skill levels to the first grade classroom, their learning abilities already influenced by the depth of parental involvement and preschool experiences in their young lives. Even the preparatory advantages of kindergarten aren't a given, because kindergarten attendance is not mandatory, and 9 percent of Pennsylvania first graders had not attended kindergarten in their school district the year before.

A child can get primary grade schooling in one of three ways:

- **Public school.** In 1999-2000, 416,000 children enrolled in grades one through three in

Pennsylvania's 500 public school districts (the 501st, Bryn Athyn, does not operate any schools but pays tuition for its students at other districts).

- **Private or nonpublic school.** In 1999-2000, 87,600 children enrolled in grades one through three in private and nonpublic elementary schools. Of all private and nonpublic elementary students, 91 percent attended religious schools and 67 percent attended Catholic schools. The State Board of Private Academic Schools oversees secular schools, and religious schools, while not subject to state regulation, must certify that they teach the required basic courses for at least 180 days a year.



- **Home schooling:** In 1999-2000, almost 4,000 6- to 8-year-olds were home-schooled. Local public school superintendents oversee home schoolers in their districts.

The state Department of Education oversees public education in Pennsylvania, implementing state laws, regulations devised by the State Board of Education, and its own guidelines to regulate the primary grades and all the other public school grades. Locally, the primary grades are governed by school boards, elected to four-year terms, and the administrative staff they hire. Exceptions are three low-performing districts subjected to state action: the Philadelphia School District, overseen by a five-member School Reform Commission jointly appointed by the governor and mayor; the

Chester-Upland School District, with a three-member Board of Control appointed by the Pennsylvania Secretary of Education; and the Harrisburg School District, with a five-member Board of Control appointed by the mayor.

In most Pennsylvania school districts, kindergarten and the primary grades – housed in the same buildings and overseen by the same principals – flow in a continuum of curriculum, materials, and academic goals. First through third graders, generally from 6 through 8 years old, spend most of their days in one classroom, taught by one teacher, five hours a day in the state-mandated 180-day school year. Some get additional help, inside the classroom or separately, to overcome learning difficulties.

Fact Box

First through Third Grades

- **Definition:** The first three grades in Pennsylvania elementary schools, also known as the primary grades.
- **Eligibility:** Children who turn 5 years, 7 months old by September 1 may enter first grade, and they generally complete third grade at about age 8. However, school attendance in Pennsylvania is not mandatory until children are 8 years old.
- **Participation:** 416,000 Pennsylvania children enrolled in grades one through three in public schools in 1999-2000, and 87,600 enrolled in nonpublic and private schools. Almost 4,000 6- to 8-year-olds were home-schooled.
- **Availability:** At or through all 501 Pennsylvania school districts. Of the state's 77 charter schools, 43 offer classes in the primary grades, five through online programs. Children may also enroll in private and nonpublic elementary schools or be home-schooled.
- **Oversight:** The Pennsylvania Department of Education and local school boards oversee public school programs; the State Board of Private Academic Schools oversees private secular schools; and nonpublic, religious schools must file an affidavit confirming that they teach basic required courses for at least 180 days a year.¹
- **Funding:** Public school per-student instructional costs ranged from a high of \$13,096 to a low of \$3,932 in 1999-2000. Local taxes fund an average of 58 percent of public school costs, and state subsidies cover 38 percent. Federal support and other minor sources cover the remaining 4 percent. Private and nonpublic schools charge tuition.

Resources for Professionals and Consumers

To teach in grades one through three, public school teachers must have either:

- An early childhood certificate that permits teaching in nursery school through third grade. College coursework focuses largely on early literacy;
- An elementary school certificate, a more broadly based credential, that permits teaching in kindergarten through sixth grade;
- Or a kindergarten-through-12 special education, art, music, or physical education certificate.

School districts tend to hire teachers with elementary rather than early childhood certificates because they can be placed more flexibly, although many experts believe the early childhood teaching standards advance the best teaching approaches for the primary grades. Under state law, up to 25 percent of the faculties at charter schools – independent public schools, chartered by school boards and operated free of many state legal requirements by groups of teachers, parents, institutions of higher education, or museums – may lack certification. Although private and religious school teachers do not need to be certified, most of them are, particularly in Catholic schools, which educate two-thirds of nonpublic elementary students.

Pennsylvania is among the many states with new policies to enhance overall teacher quality. Public school teachers must pursue continuing education and professional development to maintain certification, in courses usually offered through colleges and universities, intermediate units, and professional associations, although the path they follow is largely their own choice. The new teacher preparation requirements also include higher entrance and exit requirements for teacher training programs, and tests of basic skills, subject knowledge, and teaching acumen of would-be teachers.

The state does not offer grade-specific technical assistance, although the Department of Education provides information and some limited help with state and federal programs. School districts can receive technical assistance from various sources, including colleges, professional associations, and numerous consultants and program vendors, but most commonly, from

intermediate units, the regional education agencies providing a variety of services to member school districts. The IUs provide curriculum development, instructional technology, professional development, special education, and a variety of management assistance to their districts. They are also the principal providers of Early Intervention



The Home Schooling Option

A small but distinctive exception to the typical classroom is home schooling, a growing movement in Pennsylvania.

Since 1988, Pennsylvania has allowed parents to educate their children at home, and their numbers have grown from 4,844 in 1990-91 to 23,313 in 1999-2000.

To home school their children, parents must teach a 180-day school year and file an affidavit with the local school superintendent every fall, indicating proof of immunization and subjects to be taught, including the basic courses required in public schools.

Home-schooled children must take national or state reading and math tests, and their parents must keep portfolios of the students' work available for review by the local school superintendent. Superintendents who determine that the schooling is inadequate may request a school board hearing on returning the child to public school. Parents and superintendents may appeal the determination to the Secretary of Education or to Commonwealth Court.⁵

services to children from 3 to 5 years old (see “Early Intervention”). The IUs have also partnered with PDE in providing technical assistance resources to help districts implement the state’s academic standards.

Most school districts give parents, especially those with children entering kindergarten or first grade, information that helps them understand the schools. Some districts let parents choose among elementary schools, providing guidance on weighing the options. Charter schools provide parents with information as a recruiting tool. The state Department of Education Web site profiles every public school with a considerable amount of consumer information, at www.paprofiles.org.

Funding

Though Pennsylvania’s schoolchildren share a home state, spending on their education varies widely among districts – from a high of \$13,096 per student in 1999-2000 to a low of \$3,932, or a spending range of 3.3 to 1.² The inequity has not gone unnoticed. Education Week’s highly regarded *Quality Counts 2002* report gave Pennsylvania a D- grade in education equity – behind all but three other states.³

Private and religious schools are financed through tuition, support from religious denominations, and endowments, but their students also benefit from state-financed transportation, textbooks, instructional materials, and other services, totaling \$155.4 million in 2001-02.⁴

Why the Primary Grades Matter

By the end of third grade, the path to success or failure in school has been charted for most children. “Learning to read and write is critical to a child’s success in school and later in life... [T]he early childhood years – from birth through age eight – are the most important for literacy development,”

says the International Reading Association and the National Association for the Education of Young Children.”⁶

But success is a long way off. Nationally, 37 percent of all fourth graders scored below basic proficiency on the 2000 National Assessment of Educational Progress reading test.⁷ In Pennsylvania, where state testing currently begins in fifth grade, 23 percent scored below basic proficiency on the 2001 PSSA reading test.⁸ Though the two exams determine proficiency levels differently, “below basic” is the lowest level on both, so the unpleasant message is the same – too many children face serious obstacles to future learning because they can’t read well.

State of the States/Best Practices

Most states adopt academic standards and perform assessments to advance student achievement in the early grades. Pennsylvania is among the 49 states with standards and the 37 with standards-based state assessments.⁹ Many states, including Pennsylvania, do not test students until fourth or fifth grade, but that will change by 2005-06, when a new federal law requires annual reading and math tests for all third through eighth graders.

But standards aren’t the only achievement booster. Other proven state policies – a balanced approach to literacy, improved teacher quality, and smaller classes – can heighten the academic prospects of children in the primary grades and point them toward long-term school success.

Reading: More and more studies are demonstrating the effectiveness of research-based literacy approaches, with instruction balanced among phonics, vocabulary, literature, and comprehension.¹⁰

At least 31 states, including Pennsylvania, offer reading-improvement programs in the early grades. Pennsylvania’s four-year, \$100 million Read to Succeed provides competitive grants to school districts. The program identifies children who need help and boosts their reading power through

research-based instruction, continuing classroom assessments, and targeted professional development for preschool and primary teachers.¹¹ However, Read to Succeed heads to its final year in 2002-03. Unless the state renews Read to Succeed in 2003-04, schools must fill the gaps from their own limited resources (see “Reading Readiness and Success” for more on Read to Succeed and federal reading initiatives).

Teacher quality: When it comes to student success, the most important factor in the classroom is the quality of the teacher, but many teacher training programs aren’t aligned with new research on effective teaching, and many veteran teachers don’t have access to it.¹²

Pennsylvania is among the many states with new policies designed to enhance overall teacher quality, including:

- Higher entrance and exit requirements for teacher training programs.
- Tests of basic skills, subject knowledge, and teaching acumen of would-be teachers.
- Continuing professional development requirements.

However, more can be done to align both initial preparation and professional development – training for new teachers and continuing education for veterans of the classroom – with research-based, effective practices in literacy instruction. Of the five states that require early childhood certification for kindergarten teachers, only Ohio extends that mandate through third grade.

Smaller classes: Many struggling students, especially low-income children, improve significantly when they get smaller classes in the early grades. The most vivid demonstration is Tennessee’s Student-Teacher Achievement Ratio program, or STAR, which put some kindergartners through third graders in classes of 13 to 17 students, while others stayed in “regular” classes of 22 to 26 students. In every grade, small-class students, especially those who entered the program early and stayed for three or four years, scored better on standardized achievement tests. Even through ninth grade, the gains have persisted, even though all students returned to “regular” classes in fourth grade. The gains were most significant for low-income, minority, and urban students.¹³

Wisconsin found classroom benefits, too, when kindergartners through third graders were assigned to classes of 15 or fewer students through its Student Achievement Guarantee in

Education (SAGE) program – fewer discipline problems, more time for instruction and in-depth study of material, more time for individualized instruction, and increased parental satisfaction.¹⁴

At least 20 states have reduced class sizes.¹⁵ Pennsylvania is not among them, although Empowerment Districts – the poorest-performing districts – can use additional state funding to reduce class sizes in kindergarten through third grade. However, initial use of empowerment funds has focused on more basic structural needs of the districts, such as updating curricula, buying textbooks and supplies, and providing professional development. Most states target their class size reduction dollars at low-income children, but California’s initiative is the largest – a statewide move toward classes of



20 or fewer students in kindergarten through third grade. At \$1 billion a year, the program has increased student achievement but also fostered some unintended consequences. For instance, wealthier districts initially got more funds than poorer districts, and more advantaged schools have lured some of the best urban teachers away from their districts, so urban teachers' overall qualifications and experience levels have declined significantly.¹⁶

Situation Analysis

The first requirement imposed on school boards by the Public School Code of 1949 is the requirement to “establish, equip, furnish, and maintain a sufficient number of elementary public schools.”¹⁷ The law does not single out the primary grades, but they are affected by the entire body of state law, State Board of Education regulations, and standards and guidelines of the Pennsylvania Department of Education. However, the federal government expanded its role in education – and especially early education – with passage in early 2002 of the No Child Left Behind Act. The law requires states to set

proficiency standards, test all third- through eighth-graders annually, increase teacher quality standards, and assist failing schools. It creates two new federal reading programs and continues funding for before- and after-school programs, class size reduction, and professional development for teachers

Occasionally, state legislators have tried to enact voluntary class size reduction programs, but the costs and a lack of consensus among lawmakers and education groups about the efficacy of class size reduction have kept the idea on the ground.

In the school funding arena, legislative interest in correcting school funding inequities has been rising since the state Supreme Court decided not to intervene in 1999. A select committee in the state House of Representatives began holding hearings on education equity in 2001, for a report scheduled for release in May 2002. In the meantime, two major school finance bills were introduced in the 2001-02 legislative session:

- The Successful Schools Budget proposal, introduced as House Bill 2344 by Rep. Nicholas Micozzie (R-Delaware), would shift most of the school funding burden from the local property



tax to the state income tax. The proposal would reduce the gap between high- and low-spending districts, pegging per-pupil spending to spending in the most successful districts, and fleshing out the formula with adjustments for the percentage of students eligible for subsidized lunch, requiring special education, and speaking languages other than English. Low-spending districts could increase their spending while lowering local taxes, and high-spending districts would receive additional state funds that would let them reduce taxes.

- Senate Bill 1373, introduced by Sen. James Rhoades (R-Schuylkill), would increase the state income tax and mandate local tax reductions of \$1 for every new dollar of state funds received. The formula would be based on the state's median instructional spending and local wealth, with poorer districts receiving a greater share of state funds. However, the dollar-for-dollar tax reduction requirement would not allow low-spending districts to increase overall spending. After the first year, districts' local tax increases could not exceed median statewide spending growth, although voters could approve higher local taxes through referenda.

Pennsylvania's school funding will also depend on the new governor who takes office in 2003. All of the candidates have addressed school funding with proposals ranging from raising state taxes to offset local tax cuts, to funding education through riverboat gaming or slot machines at race tracks.

In the state policy arena, many groups represent a variety of interests, including parents, teachers, school board members, school administrators, principals, school business officials, rural school districts, urban school districts, pupil transportation companies, teacher education institutions, private and nonpublic schools, charter school operators, home schooling parents, and private school management companies.

Most, particularly the traditional education groups, share some common issues, such as support for increased funding and education equity, and opposition to school vouchers and privatization. But over the past 20 years, education groups have divided over many significant issues, particularly new state programs and funding, collective bargaining, and the distribution of power and authority among the state, districts, schools, and school personnel. In this atmosphere, state government has become as much an arena for deciding disputes as a target for unified advocacy.

POLICY DIRECTIONS

Some Pennsylvania children enter fourth grade after four unfruitful years of school. Pennsylvania's schools are inequitably funded, many classes are too large, and teachers are not always attuned to the latest research on reaching the youngest minds.

Pennsylvania could start more children on a successful school career through:

■ **Smaller classes:** To improve children's learning by the end of third grade, the state should reduce class sizes, targeting school districts with high rates of low-income and low-performing students on fifth grade (and eventually third grade) state tests. The program should begin in kindergarten and first grade, expanding to second grade in the second year and third grade in the third year.

■ **Enhanced teacher training:** The state should reinforce its existing teacher-quality policies with a stronger literacy focus in the primary grades. Potential approaches include requiring that kindergarten through third grade teachers have early childhood teaching certificates or concentrate their professional development on early literacy instruction.

■ **Education equity:** Finally, state lawmakers should recognize their constitutional responsibility to "provide for the maintenance and support of a thorough and efficient system of public education to serve the needs of the Commonwealth" by reforming the state's public education funding system.¹⁸ The state should assume a larger share of funding, shifting school financing away from over reliance on local property taxes. A revised system should also diminish the gap between high- and low-spending districts, so all children have an opportunity to learn and succeed in school — regardless of where in Pennsylvania they happen to live.

ENDNOTES

First through Third Grades

- ¹ 24 PS § 13-1327(c).
- ² 1999-2000 Annual Financial Reports of school districts.
- ³ *Education Week. Quality Counts 2002*, 2002.
- ⁴ 2001-02 State budget.
- ⁵ 24 PS § 13-1327.1.
- ⁶ International Reading Association and National Association for the Education of Young Children. *Learning to Read and Write: Developmentally Appropriate Practices for Young Children*, 1998.
- ⁷ National Center for Education Statistics. *The Nation's Report Card: Fourth Grade Reading 2000, 2001*.
- ⁸ Pennsylvania Department of Education. *Summary of 2001 Pennsylvania System of School Assessment (PSSA)*, 2001.
- ⁹ *Education Week*, 2002.
- ¹⁰ National Research Council. *Preventing Reading Difficulties in Young Children*. 1998. National Institute for Literacy. *Put Reading First: The Research Building Blocks for Teaching Children to Read*, 2001.
- ¹¹ Education Commission of the States. *ECS State Notes: Reading*, 2001.
- ¹² National Research Council. *Op. cit.* Darling-Hammond. "Teacher Quality and Student Achievement: A Review of State Policy Evidence." *Education Policy Analysis Archives*, 2000. <http://epaa.asu.edu/epaa/v8n1>.
- ¹³ Finn, Gerber, Achilles, Boyd-Zaharias. "The Enduring Effects of Small Classes," *Teachers College Record*. 2001. Nye, Hedges, and Konstantopoulos. "The Long-Term Effects of Small Classes in Early Grades," *The Journal of Experimental Education*, 2001.
- ¹⁴ Halbach, Ehrle, Zahorick, and Molnar. "Class Size Reduction: From Promise to Practice," *Educational Leadership*, 2001.
- ¹⁵ Education Commission of the States. *ECS State Notes*, 1999.
- ¹⁶ Steicher, Bohrnstedt, Kirst, McRobbie, and Williams. "Class Size Reduction in California: A Story of Hope, Promise, and Unintended Consequences," *Phi Delta Kappan*, 2001.
- ¹⁷ 24 PS § 5-501.
- ¹⁸ Pennsylvania Constitution, Article III, Section 14.



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June 2002

Mission Statement

Pennsylvania Partnerships for Children is a strong, effective and trusted voice for improving the health, early education and well-being of the Commonwealth's children.

Funding generously provided by the Howard Heinz Endowment, with additional research, data collection, and analysis by Pennsylvania KIDS COUNT and State Fiscal Analysis Initiative staff.

