

## Keystone of Success: Delivering a High-Quality Education to Pennsylvania's Children

While many children in Pennsylvania receive a quality education and are academically prepared to succeed in postsecondary education, the workplace, and the community, far too many others – in districts large and small, rural and urban – must struggle to achieve the barest essentials of learning.

Almost half the students in Pennsylvania's schools do not meet standards of proficiency on state exams, indicating they are not adequately prepared for future careers or adulthood. The learning conditions in many Pennsylvania schools are inadequate. Pennsylvania ranks 47th out of 50 states in the equity of its public education financing. That translates into uneven results and unfair learning barriers for thousands of children.

Money alone will not solve our educational problems. Increased accountability for outcomes is also required. Research-proven steps – such as small class sizes, full-day kindergarten, and qualified and supported teachers – can help bring about the educational improvement that Pennsylvania needs.

**The goal: Pennsylvania should work with local school districts to invest in proven educational strategies, and restore state educational funding equity while instituting a more effective accountability system.**

### The Problem Is Real

While many children in Pennsylvania receive quality schooling and go on to succeed in postsecondary education, the workplace, and the community, too many others struggle to gain the barest essentials of learning.

*Student academic achievement is lagging.* Pennsylvania must do more to improve its students' academic achievement.

- Nearly half of Pennsylvania's school students do not meet academic standards of proficiency, meaning that they are not adequately prepared for future careers or

adulthood.<sup>1</sup>

- Pennsylvania students' SAT scores, the most widely used college entrance exam, are stagnant and trail most states. In 2001, the average score was 999, well below the national average of 1020 and lower than all but five other states. While the national average score rose by 12 points since 1987, Pennsylvania's rose by only three points.
- Encouragingly, a high and rising percentage of Pennsylvania's high school students take college entrance exams

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(71 percent of graduates took the SAT in 2001), but even compared to nearby states and those with comparable test-taking rates, Pennsylvania's scores lag. Maryland, New Jersey and Connecticut, where 65 percent to 82 percent of students took the SAT, scored higher than Pennsylvania by 13 to 20 points.<sup>2</sup> Only New York's scores – one point higher than Pennsylvania's – nearly matched Pennsylvania.

*The conditions of many Pennsylvania schools keep children from learning.* Many schools do not provide an environment that is conducive to learning. Children need safe, appropriate school settings, and class sizes that are small enough to ensure proper discipline and personal attention from the teacher.

- About 20 percent of Pennsylvania school districts have at least one inadequate building, 70 percent reported needing building upgrades or repairs, and 57 percent reported at least one unsatisfactory environmental condition such as lighting, heating or roofing.<sup>3</sup>
- Despite studies showing that small class sizes improve student performance, especially in the early grades, only one elementary classroom in three holds 20 or more students, and nearly 12 percent have 27 or more.<sup>4</sup>

*Many Pennsylvania children do not enter school ready to learn.* Children must come to school ready and able to learn – or risk falling farther and farther behind as they progress through school.

- Only half of Pennsylvania children eligible for Head Start – the quality preschool program for very poor children – are served, largely because of federal funding limitations and the lack of state supplemental funding.
- Only 2,400 of 120,000 children eligible for prekindergarten in Pennsylvania are served, because the state does not provide any funding for prekindergarten classes.<sup>5</sup>

*Inadequate and inequitable state funding for public education makes uneven academic performance results inevitable.* State government funds a declining share of the costs of educating children and spends a declining share of its overall budget on

education.

- Pennsylvania spends less per pupil than most states, ranking 15<sup>th</sup> lowest of all states in per-student expenditure and spending only \$3,249 per student – nearly \$1,100 less than the national average.<sup>6</sup>
- Pennsylvania's contribution to the costs of educating children is going the wrong way, from providing more than 50 percent of the cost a generation ago, to providing only about 36 percent today.<sup>7</sup>
- State funding increases for education are trailing other major state spending. From 1994-95 to 2000-01, basic education spending rose by just 14 percent, compared to 24 percent for welfare and other social service programs and 63 percent for corrections.

*Pennsylvania has one of the nation's most inequitable public education funding systems – fourth worst of all states.* In January 2002, Education Week issued its sixth annual 50-state report card on public education, and Pennsylvania received a D-minus grade in the equity of its public education financing.<sup>8</sup> Only three states ranked lower, and in the previous year's report, seven states ranked lower than Pennsylvania – meaning that Pennsylvania is slipping.

According to the state's financial report, Selected Expenditure Data For Pennsylvania Public Schools, total spending during 1999-2000 ranged from \$5,302 per pupil in the lowest-spending district to \$14,406 per pupil in the highest spending district.<sup>9</sup>

*Pennsylvania's funding inequity ushers in educational inequity.* Money isn't everything, but too often, this inequity translates into young people who are not prepared for postsecondary education or the workforce, and communities that cannot attract new families or new businesses to strengthen their economic base.

- The majority of the state's 501 districts have, on average, \$48,000 less to spend per classroom of 25 students than the average expenditure of the 51 highest-performing districts

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(based on performance in the Pennsylvania System of School Assessment) – a figure that rose by \$2,900 since 2001.<sup>10</sup> Districts with more resources can sustain small classes; qualified, well-supported teachers and counselors; well-equipped buildings and up-to-date supplies; enough learning time and attention for students; and rigorous academic standards for student achievement.

*Pennsylvania's funding inequity burdens many communities and families with higher real estate taxes.* Most non-state education funding is supplied by local property taxes. Lower and inequitable state investment results in high property taxes, which are a burden for many homeowners, especially senior citizens on fixed incomes, and an obstacle for local economic development. The problem is often most dramatic in communities that are struggling economically – cities, small towns and rural areas whose economic base is too weak to generate the tax revenues needed to pay rising education costs without resorting to repeated tax increases.

- Over the last 25 years, while the state's share of local education costs fell, communities statewide have raised local property taxes by an estimated \$1.6 billion.<sup>11</sup>

Legislators, businesspeople, and education experts are increasingly recognizing the need to cure this inequity.

- The Pennsylvania State Board of Education called for less reliance on real estate taxes and more on a variety of taxes to ensure stability and to make sure that individuals pay a "reasonable share" relative to wealth.<sup>12</sup>
- Last year, the state House of Representatives voted 195 to 1 to create a select committee to examine and make recommendations for a new system of public education funding, with a resolution acknowledging that Pennsylvania has one of the nation's most inequitable funding systems. The committee is slated to issue its recommendations in September 2002.<sup>13</sup>
- Directed by the state House and Senate to study property taxes and state school funding, the bipartisan Legislative Budget and Finance Committee reported in July that Pennsylvania

schools are more reliant on property taxes than other states' schools because of the low state contribution. The report offered three scenarios to offset local property tax cuts with state tax increases.

- In January, Greater Philadelphia First became the first of the state's four major business groups to call for statewide funding reform. Recognizing that "the depth and competence of the 21<sup>st</sup> century workforce depends upon a quality public school education for the state's children," GPF endorsed a shift from the current reliance on property taxes to state-level taxation to "ensure that each child receives a quality public school education supported by adequate resources."

### The Support Is Strong

Recent statewide surveys reveal the importance of education to Pennsylvanians and their support for greater state action. A January 2002 survey by the Pennsylvania Economy League's IssuesPA project found that:<sup>14</sup>

- Education was second only to the economy as the most important issue facing Pennsylvania.
- Nearly half of respondents believed that "improving the performance of public schools" is the "most important" or "one of the most important" issues for the state to address, a higher percentage than any other issue.
- When asked what should be the primary job of state government, a higher percentage said "improving education systems, schools" than any other single issue.

Another recent survey also found that education was second only to jobs and the economy, with considerable backing for greater state support to schools:<sup>15</sup>

- Two-thirds of respondents believed the state should be responsible for all or some of the additional expenditures to improve public education.
- More than half of voters (52 percent) believed that public education is underfunded in urban and rural areas.

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## The Solution Is Clear and Achievable

The state should take a two-pronged approach to improving school achievement: work with local school districts to invest in proven educational strategies, and restore state educational funding equity while instituting a more effective accountability system.

### *Investing in proven educational strategies*

The state should support a range of effective strategies, implemented together to ensure that kids enter school ready to learn, read on grade level by third grade, achieve academic success throughout school, and enter the community as qualified workers and contributing citizens:

- **School readiness.** Pennsylvania, one of nine states that fail to invest in preschool, should create new opportunities for preschool education, offered in a wide variety of community settings including public schools, child care centers and Head Start programs, and connect these preschool programs to health care and family support services.
- **Full-day kindergarten.** Research shows that children attending full-day kindergarten perform better in school, but only one Pennsylvania kindergartner in three is enrolled in a full-day program. Fewer than 40 percent of school districts offer full-day kindergarten.
- **Small classes in the early grades.** Small classes reduce discipline problems and allow teachers to provide more personal and small group attention.<sup>16</sup> Children who attend smaller classes in kindergarten through third grade perform better on reading and math achievement tests,<sup>17</sup> and sustain higher performances over time.<sup>18</sup>
- **High performance standards and expectations.** Pennsylvania has adopted more rigorous education standards, and the promising results show in Education Week's grade of B-minus for Standards and Accountability. Building on these efforts, Pennsylvania can continue to refine its school district assessment profiles to rate school districts against objective benchmarks, improve efforts to turn around underperforming schools, and provide

for more parent and public involvement in the accountability process. Finally, it can develop requirements and supports for helping students who have fallen behind.

- **Highly qualified teachers and professional development tied to standards.** Developing and retaining highly qualified teachers, essential to a quality education, can be achieved by (1) supporting innovative teacher education programs that provide more time in hands-on settings; (2) strengthening mentoring programs for new teachers; (3) providing incentives for teachers to attain National Board for Professional Teaching Standards, higher than Pennsylvania's but now reached by only 49 percent of the state's teachers<sup>9</sup>; and (4) targeting professional development on students' most critical learning needs.
- **Safe Schools and Facilities.** With Pennsylvania school repair and renovation needs estimated in the billions of dollars, a long-term and ongoing initiative is needed to help school districts repair and modernize their facilities.

### *Restoring equity to the state education funding system*

The key elements of academic success for all Pennsylvania students cannot be attained until a more equitable funding system is established. The specifics of any funding overhaul will require considerable debate and negotiation by the next governor and the legislature, but there can be no mistake that resolution must be reached now rather than later. Any solution should include:

- Sufficient resources to guarantee a quality education to students regardless of where they live, beginning with preschool and imparting the academic and other skills needed to continue to postsecondary education or enter the workforce.
- Reduced reliance on local property taxes to fund basic education, with complementary increased reliance on broader, fairer revenue sources, such as the state income tax.
- An increase in the state's share of education costs

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that close the spending gap and allow for local property tax reductions, and fairer distribution among the state's 501 school districts to reduce disparity between rich and poor districts.

- A more effective system of accountability to ensure that school districts use state funds to improve student achievement.

## The Time is Now

Children enter the future on a foundation of learning, built stone by stone with the new concepts and thinking skills absorbed in each day of school. If that foundation is weak, then children have few hopes for a bright future and little to contribute to communities and the workplace. If the foundation is strong, they become solid citizens and sought-after employees. Their fate and the state's are intertwined. By assuring every child a strong educational foundation, Pennsylvania will maintain strong communities and its economic zeal well into the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

## Notes

1 Pennsylvania Department of Education PSSA scores, [www.pde.psu.edu/pssa2000-01/0001narr.pdf](http://www.pde.psu.edu/pssa2000-01/0001narr.pdf)

2 Students in Ohio and West Virginia scored 74 and 30 points higher, but a much smaller portion of their students took the SAT as their college entrance exam.

3 *School Facilities: Profiles of School Condition by State*. United States Government Accounting Office, HEHS-96-148 (June 24, 1996).

4 Pennsylvania System of School Assessment, Pennsylvania Department of Education, 1999-2000.

5 Pennsylvania Department of Education, Public Elementary School Enrollment by Grade and County, 2001.

6 Common Core of Data, National Public Education Financial Survey, U.S. Department of Education, 2001

7 Pennsylvania School Reform Network, 2001.

8 Education Week. *Quality Counts 2002*.

9 Selected Expenditure Data For Pennsylvania Public Schools, Pennsylvania Department of Education, [www.pde.state.pa.us/financial/exp9899/table5.pdf](http://www.pde.state.pa.us/financial/exp9899/table5.pdf).

10 House Resolution 42, Pennsylvania General Assembly, 2001.

11 *A Blueprint for Equity: Reform of School Funding, Questions and Answers*, Pennsylvania Association of Rural and Small Schools, 2001.

12 "Funding equity for schools sought." Pennlive.com, January 18, 2002, [www.pennlive.com/news/patriotnews/index.ssf/?xml/story.ssf/html\\_standard.xml?/base/news/101134985427028136.xml](http://www.pennlive.com/news/patriotnews/index.ssf/?xml/story.ssf/html_standard.xml?/base/news/101134985427028136.xml)

13 Pennsylvania House Resolution 42, 2001.

14 Statewide Baseline Survey of 1,012 Pennsylvania Adults, Center for Opinion Research, Millersville University, Pennsylvania Economy League (2002).

15 Statewide Survey of 800 Likely Pennsylvania Voters, Lester & Associates, November 2001.

16 Halbach et al. "Class Size Reduction: From Promise to Practice," *Educational Leadership*, 2001.

17 Finn et al. "The Enduring Effects of Small Classes," *Teachers College Record*, 2001.

18 Nye et al. "The Long-Term Effects of Small Classes in Early Grades: Lasting Benefits of Mathematics Achievement in Grade 9," *The Journal of Experimental Education*, 2001.

19 National Board of Professional Teaching Standards (NBPTS), [www.nbcts.org](http://www.nbcts.org).



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