



# The Daily News

ONLINE EDITION

Current Conditions

Cloudy 79°  
5 Day Forecast



- News
- Classifieds
- Community
- Directory
- Shopping
- My Zwire!

Home -> News -> News -> Top Stories

Thursday 25 August, 2005

NEWS SEARCH

## Top Stories

### Schools studying ways to bridge growing 'graduation gap' issue

By: Patrick Cloonan Daily News Staff Writer

June 25, 2005

[Email to a friend](#) [Voice your opinion](#)

#### A non-profit organization found one in five Pennsylvania ninth-graders won't make it through to high school graduation.

"Almost 350 school districts (out of 501) are losing one or more out of every 10 kids," said Joan L. Benso, president and CEO of Pennsylvania Partnerships for Children. "That's far too many."

Specifically, PPC said, of 153,523 ninth-graders enrolled in 2000-01, 33,349, - or 21.7 percent - did not graduate in 2003-04.

But local education officials said there's more than meets the eye about what PPC calls a "graduation gap."

"It's much more complex than simply looking at the numbers from ninth grade to graduation," West Mifflin Area School District spokeswoman Rachel Hathorn said. "The district has become more aggressive (in) making sure no child is left behind."

"We know that this is a serious problem and it needs to be addressed," said Dr. Linda Croushore, executive director of Mon Valley Education Consortium. "This report further encourages (schools) to look at each student as an individual, not as a statistic, and at where they are going."

Using data from annual school district enrollment and graduation reports submitted to the Pennsylvania Department of Education, PPC found two in five urban, one in eight suburban and one in six rural ninth-graders in 2000-01 did not graduate from high school in the same district four years later.

"The problems youth have in graduating from high school and transitioning successfully to adulthood are multifaceted and cannot be blamed solely on a school district's performance," Benso said. "There are children living in poverty, kids with emotional and physical disabilities, kids in foster care and kids with unique challenges all across Pennsylvania."

"There has been a lot of effort in the region, in the Mon Valley, to try to do a better job to follow the kids who sometimes are removed from school, but whose records are never requested at a new school, or just quit coming to school and no parent identifies them as having withdrawn," Croushore said.

That effort dates back to the 2002 leadership retreat, an annual tradition for MVEC.

That effort was prior to the state release of any disaggregated information," the MVEC director said. "They've started to give districts more specific information. The state had never done anything more than general data."

What the consortium did turned out to be an eye-opener, and the talk of that retreat, she recalled.

"We prepared a data book for each of the participating leadership teams from 14 school districts that were present for the two-day event," Croushore said. "We chose to include in this book information over time from 1995 to 2002."

Advertisement

**INSWEB** Are you paying too much for auto insurance?

ZIP code where you park at night.

Do you currently have auto insurance?	Yes	No
Have you had a U.S driver's license for more than 3 years?	Yes	No
Has any driver in your household had 2 or more accidents or moving violations in the last 3 years?	Yes	No

- News
  - Top Stories
  - Features
  - Sports
  - Entertainment
  - In Tune weekend magazine
  - Lifestyles
  - Editorial
  - Society
  - Latest Deaths
  - National Headlines
  - Weather
  - National News
- Sports Wire!
- Lifestyles
- Personal Finance
- Consumer Guide
- Classifieds
- Fun and Games
- Business Directory
- Our Newspaper
- Community
- Links

PPC released a listing of each district's enrollment percentage drop from ninth to 12th grade, and percentages of students in free or reduced lunch programs, limited English proficiency, disabilities and severe disabilities.

Some area districts appear to show relative stability, with a drop of only 3.2 percent in Norwin, 4.4 in South Allegheny, 6.7 in Yough, 8.5 in West Jefferson Hills and 12 in East Allegheny.

As Dr. Thomas Knight, East Allegheny's superintendent, pointed out, "a lot of the population in East Allegheny is a mobile, transient population." And many tend to move east, often next door into Norwin and Penn-Trafford.

Higher percentages are found in Duquesne City (31.5), Clairton City (35.5) and McKeesport Area (41.1). PPC described MASD as suburban, but the district has more than half its buildings in decidedly urban McKeesport.

"There is also research that the more urban a school district may be, that tracking ought to start as early as sixth grade," Croushore said, "and that the numbers might be exacerbated even more."

More students participate in the federal free and reduced lunch program in some districts than in others. The local range is from 9.8 percent in 2003-04 in West Jefferson Hills to 86.9 in Clairton City.

There is little if any problem with limited English proficiency in area districts.

The number of students who are disabled ranges, in most cases, between one in seven and one in 10, but it's almost one in four, or 24.2 percent, in Clairton City.

A local breakdown is as follows:

\* McKeesport Area, listed as a suburban district, with a 41.1 percent drop over four years; 60.3 percent in free/reduced lunch programs; 0.1 percent with limited English proficiency; 16.7 percent disabled; 2.7 percent severely disabled.

\* Clairton City, urban, with 35.5 percent drop; 86.9 percent in lunch programs; 0.3 percent LEP; 24.2 percent disabled; 2.5 percent severely disabled.

\* Duquesne City, urban, 31.5; 88.5; 0.2; 17.2; 3.7.

\* East Allegheny, suburban, 12.0; 37.5; 0.2; 16.4; 2.5.

\* Elizabeth Forward, suburban, 20.2; 23.0; 0.1; 14.1; 0.8.

\* Gateway, suburban, 17.2; 22.0; 1.4; 14.7; 1.5.

\* Norwin, suburban, 3.2; 20.4; 0.2; 11.7; 2.3.

\* South Allegheny, suburban, 4.4; 35.3; 0.2; 14.5; 1.1.

\* Steel Valley, suburban, 28.7; 43.0; 1.8; 13.4; 2.0.

\* West Jefferson Hills, suburban, 8.5; 9.8; 0.2; 11.1; 1.4.

\* West Mifflin Area, suburban, 21.8; 32.9; 0.1; 13.2; 1.5.

\* Woodland Hills, suburban, 31.4; 51.3; 0.4; 16.5; 2.4.

\* Yough, suburban, 6.7; 32.3; 0.0; 12.9; 1.2.

Some students do drop out. Hathhorn said it is a small percentage in West Mifflin Area. East Allegheny gives a breakdown that shows how small it can be, in figures given to the PDE:

In 1997-98, 1.7 percent; 1998-99, 1.3; 1999-2000, 2.1 (or 20 students); in 2000-01, 3.2 (31); 2001-02, 2.5 (14); and 2002-03, 1.5 (nine).

West Mifflin offers two summer school programs. One is through a federal accountability block grant. The other is offered by West Mifflin-based Community College of Allegheny County's South Campus.

Also, Hathhorn said, "the district offers a student mentoring program that pairs upperclassmen with incoming freshmen. The high school is implementing a faculty mentor program in which teachers provide guidance to students."

"Our belief is if we have one student drop out, that's one student too many," EA's Knight said. "The district has continued to review its practices (and) now is working to move away from the idea of multiple-year retention.

"We believe that is probably one of the biggest reasons why students choose to drop out," he continued. "We are working hard to identify students who are experiencing academic difficulties and to provide them with the necessary support and guidance to get them back on track."

EASD's efforts include an after-school tutoring program, EA Cats (alternative school from 2:30-5:30 p.m.), smaller class sizes, more individual attention and a counseling component.

"It's all designed at helping kids turn it around," the East Allegheny superintendent said.

PPC's report is available at [www.papartnerships.org/dropouts/index.asp](http://www.papartnerships.org/dropouts/index.asp)

©The Daily News 2005

 [Email to a friend](#)  [Voice your opinion](#)  [Top](#)

*Send us your community news, events, letters to the editor and other suggestions. Now, you can submit birth, wedding and engagement announcements online too!*

Copyright © 1995 - 2005 [PowerOne Media, Inc.](#) All Rights Reserved.