

# LancasterOnline.com

## **1 in 3 local births to moms with no diploma**

*County has third-highest rate of births to uneducated mothers in state.*

By Dom Yanchunas  
Lancaster New Era

Published: Aug 23, 2005 1:34 PM EST

**LANCASTER COUNTY, PA** - Lancaster County has Pennsylvania's third-highest rate of births to mothers who haven't finished high school, according to a statewide report. Pennsylvania Partnerships for Children announced the finding today in its first-ever analysis of school readiness. In Lancaster County, 31 percent of births are to mothers with less than a high-school education.

Among the 11 counties with a mixed urban and non-urban population, that was the highest rate in the state. Only rural Mifflin, with 34 percent, and Juniata, at 32 percent, were higher than Lancaster.

The statewide study, which measured 14 areas of school readiness, is meant to identify areas where gains have been made and where improvement is needed.

The children of uneducated single parents face special challenges that make it tough for them to do well when they start school, said the Rev. Jacquie Sheely, director of Salem Family Ministry in Manheim.

For starters, the parent often needs help finding proper educational, occupational and day-care assistance for herself or himself. Then the question is often as basic as whether the child has enough nutritional food and whether the apartment has enough heat in the winter.

"Whatever is going on immediately around them, that does need to be stabilized right away ... before they can say, 'OK, let's get up and go to school,'" Sheely said.

The birth statistics include teen mothers and older mothers who never finished high school.

The statewide report said there is enough high-quality child care available to serve only 3.9 percent of children ages birth to 4 whose parents work. The partnership identified that as a "critical unmet need."

One improvement is the growth of full-day kindergarten, the report said.

Now 51 percent of public-school students attend full-day kindergarten, compared with 33 percent three years ago.

The report also studied rates of preschool enrollment, number of children living in poverty, class size and other readiness measures.

The partnership encourages communities and families to improve the statistics and better prepare young children for elementary school.

“It is in the best interest of the commonwealth that every child enters school ready to learn and ready to succeed and that every school is fully equipped to give children a strong start to their education,” said Joan L. Benso, president and chief executive of Pennsylvania Partnerships for Children.

Sheely’s family ministry, run by her Salem United Methodist Church in Manheim, works closely with CareerLink to help single parents identify educational and job opportunities.

There is a need for more public and private help for single mothers throughout the county, said Sheely, who lives in Lancaster.

This morning, Sheely had three phone messages waiting for her at her church. Two were from single mothers who need a hand.

“If people really want to help, they need to be quite a bit more non-judgmental. You cannot make generalizations about these young moms,” Sheely said. “The object is to make sure they have a future.”