

Area youth's preparation for school inconsistent

Luzerne County shows uneven results in getting children ready to begin school.

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Luzerne County's success in preparing young children for school is mixed at best, according to a new report that warns there is a serious lack of pre-kindergarten programs in public schools and high quality child care available statewide.

The Pennsylvania Partnerships for Children released the first of what it promises will be annual "School Readiness in Pennsylvania" reports, "designed to give policymakers and community leaders the information they need to measure the outcomes of their investments" in early childhood programs.

The report gauges 14 "indicators," which include family income, child abuse, children born at low birth rates, child care availability, and state standardized test scores. Compared to state averages or to similar-sized counties, Luzerne County ranks inconsistently:

- Nearly 44 percent of children under age 5 live in low-income families, compared to 37 percent statewide. The report defines low income as 200-percent above the federal poverty level. Different government agencies use slightly different rates, but generally for a single person living alone, the poverty level is about \$9,500.
- Fewer children in the county were born to parents with less than a high school degree -- about 14 percent here compared to 16 percent statewide. Fewer children are also born at low birth weights (under 5 pounds, 9 ounces) -- 7.1 percent here compared to 8.1 percent statewide.
- More children have access to "accredited, high quality" child care, though the rates are still low. According to the report, there are enough such child care slots available in the county to accommodate 5 percent of the children who are old enough to attend, compare to a 3.9 percent rate statewide.

For some indicators, the state gives raw numbers rather than percentages, so there is no way to compare the county's success to an average. But those figures can be compared to 10 similar-sized counties: Berks, Chester, Dauphin, Erie, Lancaster, Lehigh, Northampton, Westmoreland and York.

Among those counties, Luzerne has the fewest children -- 1,116 -- receiving early intervention services to "assist with developmental delays or disabilities" before they enter school. Luzerne ranks in the middle in the number of slots available -- 1,163 -- in "the subsidized child care system" designed to help low income families, and ranks fifth in the number of slots available in the Head Start pre-school program -- 708.

When it comes to kindergarten, nearly all public school students in the county are enrolled in full-day classes, but there are no public school pre-kindergarten programs, which the report contends "improves school readiness."