



**Pennsylvania  
Partnerships  
for Children**



**PCCY**  
Public Citizens for  
Children and Youth

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## **U.S. Election 2008 – Education**

### **Why it Matters**

Our future as a Commonwealth and as a nation depends in large measure upon the knowledge, skills, creativity and determination of our people. Today's youth rely upon adult society to provide them with the kind of education that will give them genuine opportunities to be successful.

Most of the issues facing public education require action on the state and school district level. Congress and the new president will also play an important role in assuring that Pennsylvania has adequate resources to educate its children, including access to postsecondary education. In the last decade, the federal government moved aggressively in setting accountability standards through the No Child Left Behind Act but has not provided adequate fiscal support for successful implementation.

### **What Works**

Students need a variety of supports and schools need consistent focus in order to ensure that all young people enter school prepared for learning, progress through school successfully, and graduate ready for what lies beyond – postsecondary education and careers that provide family-sustaining incomes. This support is vital for young people who face the greatest challenges: those living in poverty, learning to speak English, or having physical or mental disabilities. While states and local school districts have the primary responsibility for providing appropriate learning opportunities, the federal government has played a more active role over the past two decades including increasing accessibility to postsecondary education for high school graduates.

We know that young people who are preparing for college or work upon graduation require a similar foundation; they both need solid academic skills, according to a study conducted by ACT, Inc., a developer of tests for college admissions and workplace readiness skills. The findings suggest that the math and reading skills necessary for success in workforce training programs are comparable to those needed for success in the first year of college.<sup>1</sup> A high school diploma is not enough anymore. A dramatic shift from unskilled to skilled jobs has occurred over the years. Jobs for high school graduates without any postsecondary education are disappearing and those that remain do not pay family-sustaining wages. Many of the fastest growing high-skill/high-wage occupations are being filled by what are called “gold collar” workers. These workers are resourceful problem solvers with job appropriate training, responsible for intermediate

decision making in a dynamic work environment.<sup>ii</sup> To secure these gold collar jobs, students need postsecondary education but not necessarily a four-year bachelor's degree. Adult life for young people without at least a high school diploma is full of economic problems and few opportunities to advance skills or boost knowledge. Those who leave school without graduating earn less than their diploma-holding peers. Low wages and high job turnover lead to family instability when these young people marry and have children. Earnings estimates from the U.S. Bureau of Census<sup>iii</sup> show the median Pennsylvania income by educational attainment to be:

- \$19,818 for less than a high school diploma
- \$26,275 for high school diploma or GED
- \$31,909 for some college, or associate's degree
- \$43,368 for bachelor's degree
- \$59,982 for post-graduate degree

The less education a worker has, the more likely he or she is to be unemployed. In 2007, the unemployment rate was 6.8 percent for Pennsylvanians with less than a high school diploma versus 4.3 percent for high school graduates and 1.4 percent for college graduates.<sup>iv</sup> If every Pennsylvanian simply graduated from high school, our combined annual earnings would increase by \$107.4 million.<sup>v</sup> In addition, those who do not finish high school have higher rates of teen pregnancy, substance abuse and crime. Eighty percent of those incarcerated have dropped out of high school.<sup>vi</sup>

### **Where Are We Now?**

The federal No Child Left Behind Act and associated state education reforms including major increases in funding at the state level have strengthened standards, increased accountability, contributed to higher levels of student achievement, and a narrowing of the achievement gap in Pennsylvania. Student achievement on state tests has increased between 2002 and 2008 in all subjects, at all grade levels, and among all racial, ethnic, and economic groups of students. During those six years, the percentage of 5<sup>th</sup>, 8<sup>th</sup>, and 11<sup>th</sup> graders reading on grade level increased from 58-68 percent; the percentage for math increased from 52-66 percent. During the same period, the achievement gap has narrowed by 26 percent for African-Americans, 20 percent for Latinos, and 23 percent for low-income students. And in 2008, 72 percent of all schools met their Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) goals.<sup>vii</sup>

Over the course of the past generation, Pennsylvania has greatly expanded a culture of postsecondary education expectations. In 1987-88, only 58 percent of high school graduates intended to further their education, but two decades later 73 percent did.<sup>viii</sup> For many of these students (and the quarter of graduates not yet aspiring to postsecondary education), access to a successful collegiate experience depends upon having a rigorous and relevant high school curriculum, good information about college and financial aid, and access to financial aid.

College affordability is a concern for students and parents across the Commonwealth. Over the past several years, the share of Pennsylvania family income needed to pay for college expenses at public four-year institutions – even after financial aid - has increased from 30% to 39%; for the 20 percent of the population with the lowest income, the cost of college has risen to 94% of their income.<sup>ix</sup> Downturns in the economy as well as the mortgage crisis have generated a ripple effect on all forms of credit – including student loans – reducing their availability and affordability.

### **The Time is Now**

Congress and the next president must undertake the following key tasks to ensure continued educational progress:

Federal funding of No Child Left Behind, career and technical education, and special education should be increased. Federal rules for implementing these programs are major drivers of state and local education costs, and the federal government has never provided adequate appropriations to implement its policies.

The No Child Left Behind Act should be supported by adequate funding, improved and then reauthorized. Although diagnosing a problem is a first critical step; without treatment supports it turns into another unfunded mandate, a weak tool on which to rely. In addition to increasing funding, a number of improvements can and should be made (such as allowing all states to use valid and reliable growth models for measuring adequate yearly progress, providing greater flexibility in the order in which sanctions are implemented, staggering testing to allow for testing subjects other than just math and reading, and designating schools as “in need of improvement” only when the same subgroup fails to make AYP for two consecutive years). But the thrust of the law – setting and measuring high expectations for academic achievement by all students and holding states, districts, and schools accountable, should continue to be the centerpiece of NCLB.

All young people – regardless of where they live, their race, income level, or work-related aspirations – should have the opportunity to attend postsecondary education regardless of their ability to pay for it. The recent reauthorization of the Higher Education Act promoted postsecondary access by assuring greater student access to information about college prices and financial aid and by simplifying the application process for federal financial aid. The federal government should provide funding, in partnership with the states, to ensure that all students, including the economically and educationally disadvantaged have the opportunity to go to college and are encouraged to attend.

As college costs continue to grow more rapidly than family incomes, Congress should look for opportunities to improve college affordability. Potential strategies to consider include providing tax incentives to cover a substantial part of tuition and fees at higher education institutions. As it did with homeowners, Congress should develop at least short-term ways to cushion the credit crisis for college students, would-be students,

and their parents, and long-term approaches such as expanding community college opportunities in underserved areas of the country.

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<sup>i</sup> ACT, Inc., *Ready for College and Ready for Work: Same or Different*, 2006.

<sup>ii</sup> University of Pittsburgh, *The Rules have Changed – Play to Win*, 2004.

<sup>iii</sup> 2004 American Community Survey. "Median Earnings for Population 25 Years and Older with Earnings."

<sup>iv</sup> U.S. Bureau of the Census, *Current Population Survey, March Supplement*, 2008.

<sup>v</sup> Alliance for Excellent Education, *States that Raise their High School Graduation Rates Could Generate Millions More in Higher Wages*, 2005.

<sup>vi</sup> NASSP, *What Counts*, 2005.

<sup>vii</sup> Pennsylvania Department of Education, *2007-08 PSSA Results*.

<sup>viii</sup> Pennsylvania Department of Education. *Public Schools: High School Graduates, 1987-88 and 2006-07*.

<sup>ix</sup>The National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education. *Measuring Up: The National Report Card on Higher Education*. 2006