



A Voice for Kids A Voice for Kids A Voice for Kids A Voice for Kids A Voice for Kids A Voice for Kids

Why it Matters

Our future as a Commonwealth and a nation depends in large measure upon the knowledge, skills, creativity, and determination of our people. Those who will lead us into that future rely upon us to provide them with the kind of education that will give them genuine opportunities to be successful – as citizens in a complex world, as employees and employers in a high-tech and knowledge-based global economy, and as parents of succeeding generations of children whom they will raise to succeed them just as we must raise our children to succeed us.

What Works

Students need a variety of supports, and schools need consistent focus in order to assure 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 is most vital for young people who face the greatest challenges – those living in poverty, learning to speak English, or having disabilities. Minimally, we need to provide:

- **Adequate, equitable, and reliable state funding** to school districts – with districts accountable for effective spending – so that education improvement initiatives can be implemented and supported on a consistent basis across the state and over time. What would a sound state finance system look like? In a 1996 report published by the National Conference of State Legislatures, five principles of such a finance system were identified:¹
 - Equity for students and taxpayers.
 - Adequacy of funding to support attainment of standards.
 - Accountability for the use of funds.
 - Stability for predictable levels of revenues and expenditures.
 - Efficiency.
- **High quality teaching**, which requires a renewed emphasis on effective methods of professional development to help teachers work in increasingly complex school environments. Professional development that is most effective in changing teacher behavior and increasing student achievement is provided on-site in school classrooms by trained coaches who model, teach, and critique their peers.² If the

long-term goal of professional development is improved student achievement, it must be focused on change in instructional practice to increase the effectiveness of teaching and the degree of learning.³

- **High quality prekindergarten** programs, which are described in another white paper on early care and education.
- **Full-day kindergarten** as an effective gateway to learning. Full-day kindergarten has been proven to increase school success for young children, especially those who enter school at-risk for later failure. At the same time, full-day kindergarten is an effective building block on top of high-quality pre-K for these children. Children in full-day kindergarten programs make more progress in literacy and math than those in half-day programs⁴ and have lower retention rates and special education placements in the primary grades.⁵ Full-day kindergartners outscore children in half-day programs on standardized achievement tests⁶ and are more creative and more engaged in learning, behave better, and transition more successfully to first grade.⁷
- **College and career readiness**, which is described in another white paper on youth development
- **Improved access to postsecondary education**, which is described in another white paper on youth development.

Where Are We Now?

In recent years, Pennsylvania has made strides on several of these fronts, but much more is needed.

- **Adequate, Equitable, and Reliable State Funding:** Until this year, Pennsylvania had the distinction of having one of the most irrational and inequitable school finance systems in the country. The largest education line item in the state budget – general aid to school districts – distributed \$4.951 billion in 2007-08. Of this amount, \$2.961 billion (or 60 percent) was distributed based upon 1991 data – the last year the school aid formula actually was used. The remainder was based upon annual *ad hoc* decisions by the General Assembly about how to distribute that year's increase in the basic education line item. People stare in disbelief when this is explained to them, but it is true.⁸ In 2005-06 (the latest year of state-by-state comparable data), only six states contributed a smaller share of the revenues to support public schools; Pennsylvania's state share was only three-fourths that of the average state.⁹ In 2006-07, the gap between the highest and lowest spending district (current expenditures) was \$11,693.¹⁰ In a typical classroom of 25 students, the highest spending district had \$292,000 more available than a class in the lowest spending district. (This excludes data on the Bryn Athyn School district, which operates no schools and has much higher per pupil spending.) This spending gap of 2.6 to 1 represents extreme inequity for students, but the low state share and resulting heavy reliance on property taxes in Pennsylvania also causes inequity

for taxpayers. In some wealthy districts, local taxpayers are paying local taxes that equal only one percent of the market value of their properties, while in other districts tax rates are as high as five percent – a ratio of 5 to 1.¹¹ (Bryn Athyn, with by far the lowest tax rate in the state, is excluded from this analysis also.) But in 2006, the General Assembly passed legislation (Act 114) requiring the State Board of Education to conduct a Costing-Out Study to determine the costs needed for all students to achieve the state's academic standards. This study, completed in December 2007, showed that 471 of the state's 501 districts were spending less than their adequacy levels, and that the combined shortfall was \$4.38 billion (about \$2,400 per pupil). This study was the basis of Governor Rendell's budget proposal for 2008-09, a proposal that was adopted in large measure by the General Assembly in Act 61 of 2008. While the legislature appropriated a large increase in basic education aid and distributed it according to the Governor's proposed adequacy formula, and while it stated its intent to fully fund it in six years, Act 61 fell short of incorporating a permanent formula in statute.

- **High-Quality Teaching:** During the past couple of years, the State Board of Education and the Pennsylvania Department of Education (PDE) have taken important steps to improve the quality and rigor of both the initial preservice preparation of future teachers and the continuing professional education of current teachers. These changes should result in future teachers who are better prepared to teach children at different levels of development from pre-K through middle school, English language learners, and students with disabilities. They also should result in better literacy instruction in the earliest grades and better curricular content instruction in later elementary and middle school classes. The State Board has tightened the requirements on allowable professional development under Act 48 so that it focuses on teachers' instructional needs for improved student achievement. And since 2005, with support from the Annenberg Foundation, the Pennsylvania High School Coaching initiative has trained, supported, and placed literacy coaches in 24 high schools in 16 diverse districts – with very promising student achievement results.
- **Full-Day Kindergarten:** In recent years, Pennsylvania has gone from having only 29 percent of its kindergartners in full-day programs to having almost 56.7 percent in 2006-07 – due in large part to the Education Accountability Block Grant. Last year, 350 districts spent about \$155.6 million of their block grant funds to support full-day kindergarten for 56,939 students.¹² Despite this progress, Pennsylvania still trails the nation; about two-thirds of all American kindergartners are in full-day programs.

The Time is Now

We believe there are a number of vital tasks that the Commonwealth must undertake in the next few years to assure continued progress on all these fronts.

- **Adequate, Equitable, and Reliable State Funding:** Act 61 of 2008 put the Commonwealth on the road to having a school funding system based upon the twin principles of adequacy and equity. And the statement of the General Assembly that it intends to fully fund the formula within six years is at least a promise of reliability. But it is not yet an assurance of reliability. PPC recommends that the Governor and General Assembly complete the work they started with Act 114 of 2006 and Act 61 of 2008.
 - Enact the formula adopted for 2008-09 subsidies as a permanent statutory formula to be fully phased in by 2013-14, including a specific implementation schedule. This new statutory language should make clear that once fully funded, the formula will remain in place and be updated annually with the most current data available. This will allow school districts to plan program improvements that increase student achievement and reduce the pressure on local property taxpayers.

- **High-Quality Teaching:** We recommend two actions the state should take to continue its efforts to improve the quality of teaching in the Commonwealth's public schools:
 - Implement the recent revisions in teacher education and professional development requirements faithfully and monitor the implementation by teacher preparation programs and school districts. This will be necessary to assure that the intended purposes of improving teacher instructional strategies and preparation for increasingly diverse classrooms are actually achieved.
 - Provide financial support and technical assistance to expand and institutionalize the successful coaching efforts of the Pennsylvania High School Coaching Initiative. Such peer coaching can be supported today by school districts under the block grant and are among the allowable uses of increased basic education funding under Act 61's accountability provisions. But the state can do more by incorporating this model into all state-supported professional development initiatives, and expanding beyond pilot schools and one subject area at one grade level.

- **Full-Day Kindergarten:** There are two things the state must do to continue to support the expansion of full-day kindergarten.
 - Restore funding for the block grant (which was cut in 2008-09) at least to 2007-08 levels. More block grant funds have been used by districts to support full-day kindergarten than any other program since the inception of the block grant.

- Fully fund and make permanent the basic education funding formula enacted in Act 61 of 2008. The new formula counts actual numbers of kindergarten students for the first time since 1991 and provides twice as much state aid for those in full-day kindergarten as for those in half-day programs.

¹ Education Partners Project, *Principles of a Sound State Education Finance System*, 1996.

² Joyce and Showers, *Student Achievement through Staff Development*, 2002.

³ Skinner, *School-Based Professional Development*, 2005.

⁴ Ohio Legislative Office of Education Oversight, *An Overview of Full-Day Kindergarten*, 1997.

⁵ National Association of School Psychologists, *Full Versus Half-Day Kindergarten*, 1997.

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ Cryan, Sheehan, Weichel, and Bandy-Hedden, "Success Outcomes of Full-Day Kindergarten: More Positive Behavior and Increased Achievement in the Years After," *Early Childhood Research Quarterly* 7, 1992.

⁸ The Education Policy and Leadership Center, *Pennsylvania Education Finance Primer*, 2006.

⁹ National Center for Education Statistics, *Revenues and Expenditures for Public Elementary and Secondary Education: School Year 2005-06 (Fiscal Year 2006)*, 2008.

¹⁰ Pennsylvania Department of Education, *School District Annual Financial Reports, 2006-07*.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² Pennsylvania Department of Education, *2006-07 kindergarten enrollment data; 2007-08 Education Accountability Block Grant Mid-Year Report*.