



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

Pennsylvania Partnerships for Children

Why it Matters

One in seven Pennsylvanians (about 1.7 million) is a young person between the age of 12 and 21. It is critical that the Commonwealth help these young people transition into healthy adults with the skills and knowledge needed to be successful in postsecondary education, in the workplace, and in life.

Nearly two million children in the Commonwealth are in families with both parents working, with the potential for a lack of supervision that has serious and long-term implications. Quality afterschool programs promote learning and positive development for our youth in safe environments. Students who regularly participate in afterschool programs have better attitudes toward school and demonstrate increased scores on standardized tests into their high school years.¹

Dropping out of school not only impacts our youth, it significantly impacts our economy and communities. Research tells us that young people who dropout of high school are much more likely than their diploma-holding peers to be unemployed, live in poverty, become teen parents, suffer from substance abuse, receive cash assistance, and serve time in prison.

Only 25 percent of employers indicate that most recent high school graduates with no further education are well prepared or extremely well prepared for typical jobs in their companies. In order for Pennsylvania to compete and thrive in a 21st century economy, it needs a highly-educated and proficient workforce. A strong academic background is necessary to succeed as well as soft skills, and career exploration opportunities.

Furthermore, a high school diploma is not enough anymore. Modern careers in a competitive economy require a postsecondary education. Jobs for high school graduates, without any postsecondary education, are disappearing and those that remain do not pay family-sustaining wages. Earnings estimates from the U.S. Bureau of Census² 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

What Works

The challenge, while daunting, is not overwhelming. Youth development and afterschool programs help children, their parents and the community in a variety of important ways. Components of a successful Pennsylvania youth development strategy should include:

- High-quality afterschool and youth development programs available to all of Pennsylvania's children and youth;
- An effective strategy to address the issue of students at risk of dropping out of school, and re-engaging those students who have already left school;
- Career education for youth, parents, educators and the community to enable young people to make informed decisions about their futures and to ensure they have the necessary skills, knowledge and training to be responsible citizens and successful in a career of their choosing;
- The opportunity to attend postsecondary education to develop the education and skill requirements for high-quality, high-wage 21st century occupations.

High-Quality Afterschool and Youth Development Programs

Where Are We Now

Nearly 90 percent of a child's time is spent outside of school. Many of these young people are unsupervised for 20 to 25 hours per week.³ Research clearly shows that quality afterschool programs keep our young people safe and out of trouble, improve academic achievement and help working families.

Pennsylvania citizens support quality afterschool programs. In an April 2005 opinion poll, nearly six out of every ten voters said that there are not enough afterschool programs in Pennsylvania. Two-thirds of voters said that they are more likely to vote for a candidate who supports increased funding for afterschool programs.⁴

Afterschool programs engage children and youth in constructive supervised activities designed to promote learning and positive development beyond the traditional school day. These programs are offered by a variety of providers including school districts, non-profit and community organizations, libraries, recreation centers and faith-based institutions.

The Time is Now

It's important that every young person in the Commonwealth have access to high-quality afterschool and youth development opportunities that engage children and youth in constructive supervised activities designed to promote learning and positive development beyond the traditional school day or school year.

Barriers to participation in high-quality afterschool programs should be reduced by supporting proven and innovative strategies. In addition, state investments in programs that support afterschool, such as subsidized child care and other education-related programs, should be increased. Legislators should also use the results of the soon to be conducted Legislative Budget & Finance Committee's report on the availability of afterschool programming and the afterschool needs of children and youth in the Commonwealth to target funding to programs and areas of need.

The Commonwealth should increase coordination among federal, state and locally-funded afterschool initiatives including subsidized child care, 21st Century Community Learning Centers, summer youth employment programs, tutoring programs, and other state-supported efforts to leverage existing resources to help families take advantage of afterschool programs. It should also create additional programs geared to increase the availability and quality of afterschool programming, such as a grant program to support opportunities targeted at middle school students to foster academic achievement and career exploration.

Close the Graduation Gap and Re-engage those who have Dropped Out

Where Are We Now

Nationally, the one million students who drop out of high school each year cost the nation more than \$260 billion dollars: That's in lost wages, lost taxes, and lost productivity over their lifetimes.⁵

Although some students take longer than four years to graduate from high school, of the ninth graders in Pennsylvania who started high school in the 2003-04 school year, nearly 21 percent did not graduate four years later (2006-07).

While it isn't surprising that the graduation gap is wide in the Commonwealth's urban districts, it is also quite clear that this is a statewide issue.

- 2 out of 5 kids in urban districts fail to graduate
- 1 out of 6 kids in rural districts fails to graduate
- 1 out of 8 kids in suburban districts fails to graduate

A recent study of dropouts by Johns Hopkins University shows the four strongest predictors of not graduating from high school are poor attendance, poor behavior, failing math, and failing English – all determined by the end of sixth grade.⁶ The Commonwealth is currently designing a diagnostics system that will help identify potential dropouts.

The Time is Now

It's important for the Commonwealth to develop a comprehensive strategy to address the dropout problem that includes both dropout prevention and dropout re-engagement components.

Pennsylvania must make re-engaging out-of-school youth to get a high school diploma or GED plus postsecondary education a state priority by developing an integrated system to provide opportunities for them to come back to get their diploma as well as the skills, training and career counseling they need to earn a family-sustaining wage. Re-engagement education programs must be comprehensive, youth-centered, flexible, provide strong connections to postsecondary education and high-skill, high wage occupations.

Such a strategy should include support for both existing and new regional partnerships that implement local strategies reconnecting dropouts to high quality education options (including postsecondary) and successful careers.

Throughout these efforts, the Commonwealth must take steps to assure that the comprehensive needs of youth are addressed in all our youth-serving systems. For example, the juvenile court system must take steps to assure that every young person has an education plan; at the same time the public education system must become flexible enough to support special populations of young people such as foster care youth, pregnant and parenting teens, and young people who need to work.

College and Career Readiness and Success

Where Are We Now

Eighty percent of the fastest-growing jobs require education and training beyond high school.⁷ Preparing youth for postsecondary education and the jobs of tomorrow is a priority for Pennsylvania voters this election season. In a May 2006 Issues PA/Pew poll, 85 percent of voters polled said being sure high school graduates have the skills they need to be college and career ready is the most important education issue.

Consider the facts:

- Nearly 45 percent of Pennsylvania's 11th graders are not proficient in math and 35 percent are not proficient in reading (as measured by the PSSA exam), making their prospects for successful postsecondary education or employment bleak.
- In Pennsylvania, 76.1 percent of high school graduates plan on continuing their education. Of high schools graduates nationwide entering four-year institutions, just over six in ten earn a bachelor's degree within six years.
- In 2007, more than 44 percent of Pennsylvania's graduates did not score proficient on the reading and math 11th grade PSSAs, the 12th grade retake, or did not take the PSSAs.

The Time Is Now

The Commonwealth has implemented a number of important efforts to increase the rigor and relevance of the high school curriculum in order to improve the academic skills of today's high school students. These include Project 720, the state's high school reform initiative, dual enrollment that allows high school students to take postsecondary courses for both high school and college credit, early work on the development of model curricula in core courses and graduation competency exams. The latter may (for this year at least) only be offered to school districts on a voluntary basis. These limited and largely voluntary efforts, while useful and promising, are not sufficient to meet the need in this critical area. Specific policy recommendations include the following:

- More closely align pre-K to 12 education with the postsecondary system to better prepare high school students for postsecondary success.
- Institute a more appropriate uniform statewide accountability and support system that measures student performance throughout their high school careers and provides support to all academically struggling students. PPC continues to support a system such as that proposed by the State Board of Education and recommended by the Governor's Commission on College and Career Success.

- Provide all middle school and high school students with individualized academic and career counseling that links their future plans with a more focused and rigorous secondary school experience and assure state guidelines for approving counselor training programs include appropriate focus on both career and college counseling.
- Improve the quality and increase the relevance of career and technical education and increase the state's financial support for it.

Postsecondary Access

Where We Are Now

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 go on for further education, but two decades later 73 percent did.⁸ 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, even after financial aid, needed to pay for college expenses at public four-year institutions has increased from 30% to 39% -- and for the 20 percent of the population with the lowest income, it has risen to 94% of their income.⁹ In addition, as the mortgage crisis has snowballed, it generated a ripple effect on all forms of credit, including student loans – in the form of reduced availability and higher interest rates.

The Time Is Now

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 Commonwealth should:

- Provide last-dollar scholarships to recent high school graduates from families with income less than 200 percent FPIG to attend community college and the PASSHE universities (if they are accepted). Eligible youth should also be able to attend private and state-related colleges and universities tuition-free provided the colleges and universities participate in the program, transfer credits for courses taken, and accept the same payment levels provided to the PASSHE universities

- Create a re-engagement college access fund dedicated to young adults who have dropped out of high school to re-engage them and assist them in the completion of their high school credential and assist them in acquiring an associate degree.

¹ Huang, D. et al, A Decade of Results: The impact of the LA's Best After School Enrichment Program on subsequent student achievement and performance. 2000.

² *2004 American Community Survey*. "Median Earnings for Population 25 Years and Older with Earnings."

³ U. S. Department of Education and Justice

⁴ Philadelphia Safe and Sound, Statewide Expansion of After-School Programs and Effective Deterrent to Youth Violence, Poll Shows, 2005

⁵ Margaret Spellings, Secretary of Education, Sept. 2005; www.ed.gov/news/pressrelease/2005/09/09282005.html

⁶ Balfanz and Herzog, *Keeping Middle Grades Students on Track to Graduation*, 2005.

⁷ U. S. Bureau of Labor Statistics

⁸ Pennsylvania Department of Education. *Public Schools: High School Graduates, 1987-88 and 2006-07*.

⁹ The National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education. *Measuring Up: The National Report Card on Higher Education*. 2006