

The Basics

- 13 school districts with 86,494 students
- The instructional spending gap between the highest and lowest spending districts is at least \$112,000 per classroom
- Low-income student population has grown by over 40% in four years to 22% of all students
- 74% of students attend only half day kindergarten
- Graduation rate is above state average in all but one district
- \$24 million in additional state aid would adequately fund Bucks County Schools

The Bottom Line Is Children Public Education In Bucks County



Bucks County's economy has changed dramatically over the last thirty years. The recent closure of the Lockheed Martin facility in Newtown Township, where approximately 1000 employees will lose their jobs by 2015, portends real challenges for the county's economy. Bucks County is currently undergoing a shift from resource and manufacturing sectors to high-tech firms and jobs dependent on knowledge skills. The closure of Lockheed Martin will only make the job market in Bucks County more competitive. Seven of the largest employers in the

county are school districts, followed by three hospitals, three government entities, two high-tech firms and one college according to the Center for Workforce Information and Analysis (2012). Meanwhile the Bucks County Workforce Investment Board's strategic plan points out that, "Many of the jobs in these organizations require proficiency in basic skills as well as post-secondary training... The shortage of skilled workers is especially acute in industries such as manufacturing and healthcare," both of which require postsecondary training.

To make matters worse, the Workforce Investment Board finds that “the K-12 educational system suffers from a lack of academic alignment of career pathways... Educators and trainers are either unaware of the jobs available in the labor market or misunderstand what skills are needed for those jobs.” This critique of public education must serve as a clarion call for a renewed commitment by county leaders to improve the educational opportunities and outcomes of children across the county.

Progress can be found in the three regional career/technical options for students across the district. Upper Bucks County Technical School, Middle Bucks Institute of Technology and Bucks County Technical High Schools offer programs that provide students with career development and technical training to better transition into the global economy. These regional options are also supplemented by the recently approved \$78 million Bensalem Township School District plan to renovate a high school that will offer career specific education in key STEM sectors such as business, technology, and engineering.

Although the number of students in the county has changed very little over the last five years, with 86,494 children in public schools, the share of the students coming from very low-income households is rising dramatically. In 2012, approximately 19,300 students were eligible for free and reduced-price lunch, up nearly 42% from approximately 13,600 students four years ago. Rising poverty among students requires school districts to make an extra effort to ensure that every student graduates ready for college or a career in today’s highly competitive global economy.

What follows is Public Citizens for Children and Youth’s summary and analysis of key indicators of how well Bucks County’s education system is performing and where improvement is needed. Numbers alone cannot tell the full story, but the data can provide a clearer picture of the educational strengths and opportunities in the county. Specifically, our intention is to inform county efforts to support school districts in their quest to provide all students with a high quality education.

Essential Strategies

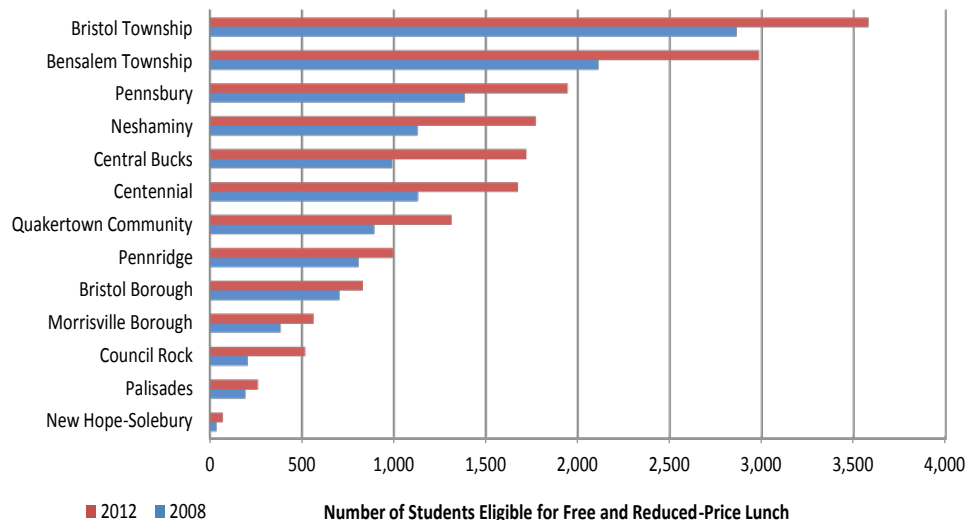
- **Give every child the option to attend full day kindergarten**
- **Increase resources and supports to close academic achievement gaps within every school district**
- **Focus on the supports and resources needed to boost the graduation rates in the three lowest performing districts where 20% of the county’s students are educated**
- **County leaders must build a county-wide coalition to focus on boosting the state’s investment in every district**

Who Are The Students?

With over 86,000 students, Bucks County has the second largest public school population of the four counties. The thirteen school districts in Bucks County vary greatly in size, student demographics, and resources.

Over the last four years, little has changed with respect to the race of students attending schools in Bucks County. However, the percentage of students eligible for free and reduced price lunch has grown by 42 percent—the second fastest percentage increase of the four suburban Philadelphia counties. Bristol Township has the most poor students, but every school district saw an increase.

The Number of Bucks County Students Eligible For Free And Reduced Price Lunches Grew By 42% Between 2008 - 2012



Despite being home to a student population with increasing needs for academic supports and resources, Bucks County schools are receiving nearly \$14 million less in state funding than just three years ago.¹

Bucks County Lags in Terms of Access to Full Day Kindergarten

A strong start in school is highly correlated with a lifetime of success.² For this reason, many school districts in the state have expanded half day kindergarten to a full day.³

In Bucks County, only three school districts offer full day kindergarten to all students. Seven additional school districts offer a combination of full day and half day classes. Typically, school districts with limited full day slots reserve those seats for students who would benefit from targeted support before first grade. Only 26% of Bucks County students have the opportunity to attend full day kindergarten. Bucks County has the lowest share of students attending full day kindergarten across the four suburban counties.⁴

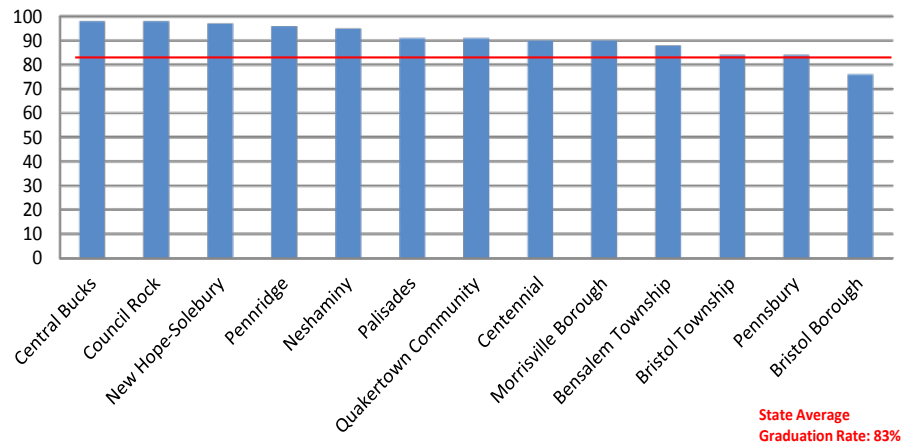
	Half Day Kindergarten Enrollment 2012 - 2013	Full Day Kindergarten Enrollment 2012-2013
Bensalem Township	-	503
Bristol Borough	80	-
Bristol Township	-	559
Centennial	311	24
Central Bucks	1005	31
Council Rock	525	12
Morrisville Borough	15	60
Neshaminy	491	14
New Hope-Solebury	-	76
Palisades	89	-
Pennridge	431	13
Pennsbury	545	76
Quakertown Community	376	-
Total	3,868 (74%)	1,368 (26%)

12 of 13 Bucks County Districts' Graduation Rates Top State Average

Bucks County is doing well with respect to graduation rates. Its high schools have an average graduation rate of 93% compared to the state average of 83%.

Only Bristol Borough is graduating students at a lower rate than the state average. As the share of poor students rises across the county, more school districts are likely to find it difficult to maintain their strong graduation rates.⁵

Nearly Every Bucks County School District Exceeds the State Graduation Rate



Academic Performance Full Of Bright Spots But 16,000 Students Need Help

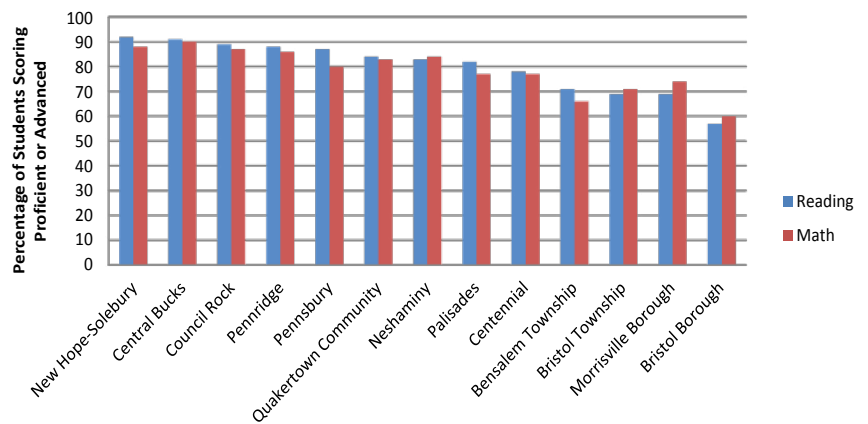
The annual Pennsylvania System of School Assessment (PSSA) is a standards-based assessment designed to measure student performance as it relates to state standards. Student scores are categorized into four levels: (1) Advanced, (2) Proficient, (3) Basic, and (4) Below Basic. Scoring proficient or advanced indicates that a student is performing at grade level or above in the tested subject.

Here, too, there is good news for Bucks County. It boasts some of the highest performing districts in the region and the state. Clearly, many students are prepared to meet the demands of state standards. On the whole, Bucks County students score above the state average on PSSA scores. More than eight of every ten students are proficient or advanced in math and reading. However, nearly 16,000 students are still not able to read or do math at grade level.⁶

Central Bucks and New Hope-Solebury lead the county in reading and math scores where approximately 90% of students are scoring at grade level or above. Unfortunately, these numbers stand in stark contrast

to the proficiency levels of other districts in the county. In Bristol Borough only 57% of the students are proficient or advanced in reading and 60% are proficient or advanced in math. Bensalem Township, Bristol Township, and Morrisville Borough are also lagging, scoring below the state average of 72% in proficiency or above in reading and 76% in math. In Bensalem 70% of students are meeting or exceeding proficiency in math and 71% in reading. In Bristol Township, 72% of students are meeting the targets in math and 70% in reading and in Morrisville, 75% of students are at proficient or above in math and 70% in reading.

90% of Bucks County Students Perform at or Above Grade Level on 2012 PSSA Exams

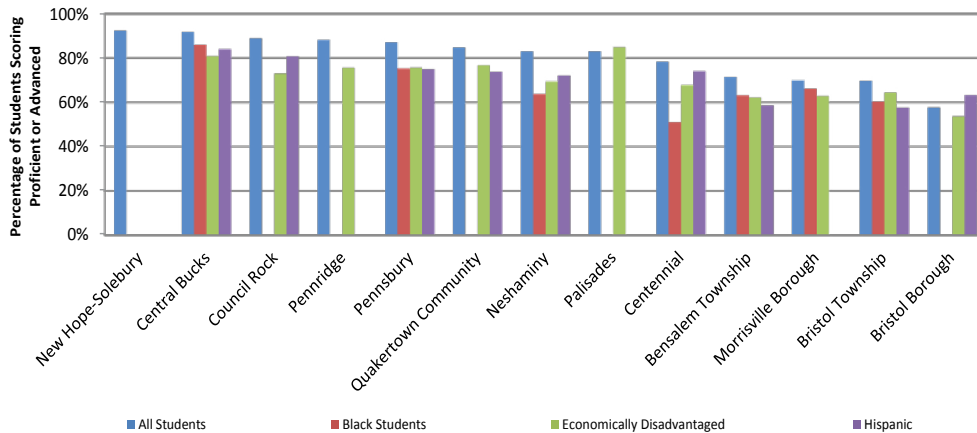


A Closer Look Spells Trouble in Some Districts

A closer examination of student subgroups within Bucks County districts reveals a troubling trend. For instance, in the Centennial School District the share of all students reading at grade level or above is 78%, yet only 51% of Black students are testing at grade level or above in reading. Likewise, Neshaminy School District must be more intentional in meeting the needs of their Black students. While 83% of all

students scored proficient or advanced on the reading PSSA, the percentage of Black students testing at these levels in reading was only 63%. Council Rock, where almost 90% of all of their students performed at grade level or above on the PSSA reading, also displays disparity where only 73% of their economically disadvantaged students are reading at or above grade level.^{7,8}

Reading Achievement Gaps Persist In Many Bucks County School Districts While Others Reduce Disparities



But Some Good News in Other Districts

Some school districts have relatively small gaps between all students and those who are minority or poor. Though more work has to be done to improve the performance of all groups of students in Morrisville Borough, the district stands out for having small performance gaps. Morrisville Borough stands out because with 57% of their students being eligible for free and reduced price lunch, the economically disadvantaged students are only scoring seven percentage points lower than all students

in reading and Black students are scoring four percentage points lower compared to all students.

Central Bucks stands out with nearly 81% of economically disadvantaged, 84% of Hispanic students and 86% of Black students scoring proficient or advanced on the PSSA reading. This is good news since nearly 92% of all students in Central Bucks are reading at or above grade level.

Education Funding Affects Academic Outputs

A report on educational outputs would be incomplete without an examination of monetary inputs. Sufficient funding alone will not fix all the challenges of public education,

but without adequate funds, schools cannot provide the resources necessary to help their students succeed.

Pennsylvania: One Of Three States Without A Funding Formula

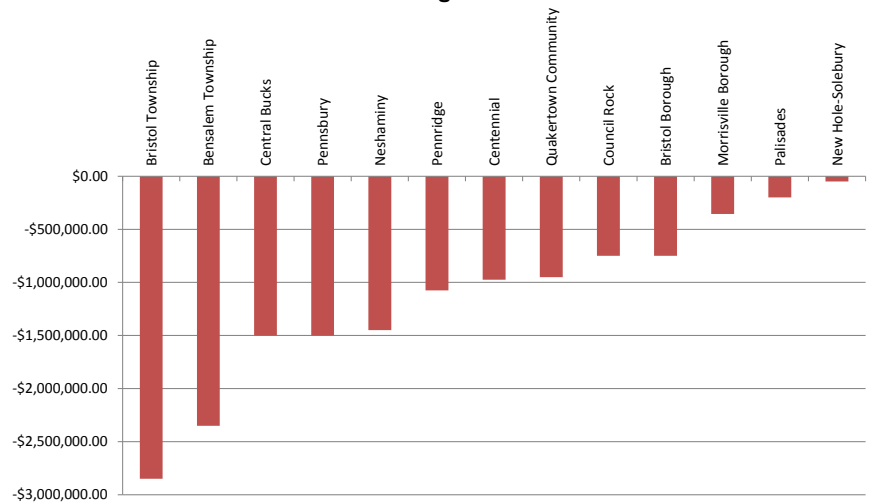
Research shows that investing in public education is central to a strong economy and improving social outcomes. Yet despite the research, Bucks County's thirteen school districts, like all Pennsylvania school districts, function year-to-year without a consistent funding formula. Pennsylvania is one of only three states without a fair funding formula. Formulas help to ensure that school funds are distributed in a way that reflects student needs. On a policy level, it is unwise to distribute funds without considering the actual cost to address specific student and district needs. Most states use an accurate student count and adjust funding to distribute more state aid to districts based on the share of students in poverty, or where local tax effort is high or wealth is low or a combination of such factors.

The absence of a funding formula perpetuates disparities among districts across the county.⁹ In 2011-2012 the instructional spending gap between the highest and lowest spending school districts was \$5,600 or about \$112,000 for every classroom of 20 students.

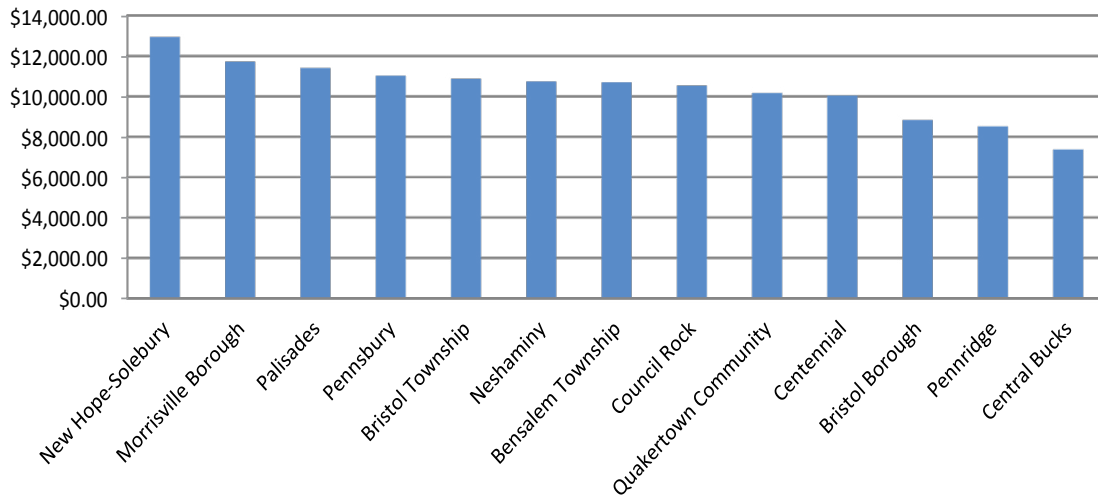
In some cases, small districts struggle to provide quality education because of challenges associated with costs and economies of scale. Research has found that

costs can be inversely related to school district size.¹⁰ For instance, New Hope-Solebury, Morrisville, and Palisades School Districts, each with student enrollment below 2,000, have relatively high per pupil expenditures in an attempt to provide their students with a quality education. This may explain why New Hope-Solebury School District must spend almost \$13,000 per student. However, Bristol Borough School District, also a small district, has only \$8,800 to spend per student. This \$4,000 gap shows that while small districts may cost more – not all small districts have the resources they need to meet those costs.

Every District Is Receiving Less State Funding Than 2010-2011



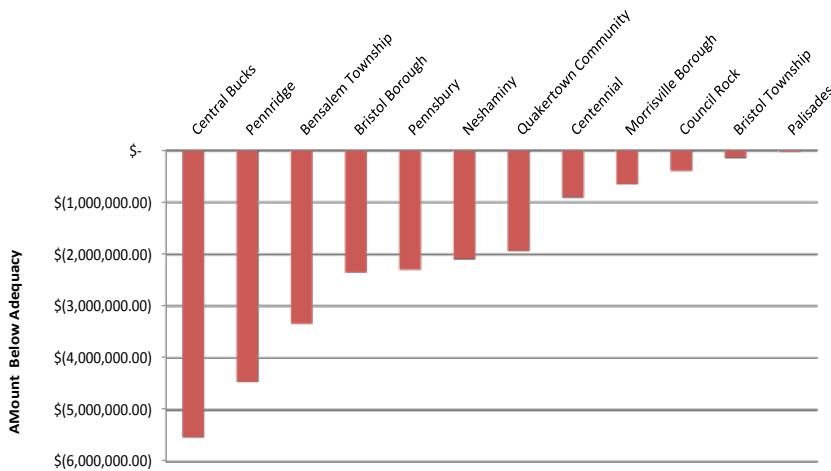
75% Per Classroom Spending Difference Across The County



Note: The per student spending levels shown are Actual Instruction Expenses from 2011 to 2012 as calculated by the PA Department of Education.

Bucks County Schools: Underfunded by \$24 Million

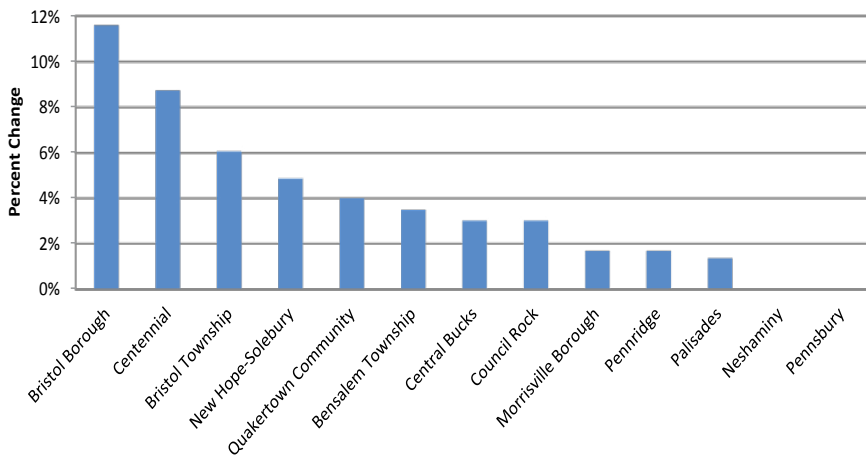
\$24 Million In Additional State Aid Would Adequately Fund Bucks County Schools



Based on the school funding formula abandoned by the state legislature in 2010, Bucks County School Districts are currently short \$24 million in additional state aid needed to bring the districts up to the adequacy target set by that formula.¹¹ Those funds could go a long way to provide support for the growing numbers of low-income students in schools, as well as to provide property tax relief for highly taxed, low-wealth communities. The New Hope-Solebury School District is the only Bucks County school district that is not underfunded compared to the adequacy target adopted by the State in 2008.¹²

As Funding Disparities Rise, So Do Taxes

11 of 13 Districts Have Raised Property Taxes In The Last Three Years



To cope with state budget cuts, the burden of funding schools has fallen on local communities. In the past three years, many school districts have raised property taxes at least once. However, even when districts do opt to increase property taxes, disparities between the districts continue to grow.

Wealthier communities can increase the local tax effort minimally and generate funds to compensate for state cuts. Districts with a weak

property tax base, however, are not able to raise taxes enough to have a significant impact because the local tax burdens are already disproportionately high. As a result, low-wealth communities, no matter how heavily taxed, typically yield very little new revenue. These are the same communities whose school districts have the highest concentration of students who need extra assistance to achieve academic success.

This disparity in local tax effort is pronounced in Bucks County.¹³ For instance, the percent change in the tax rate for Bristol Borough is the highest in the county and is approximately twice as high as the rates for Bristol Township and New Hope-Solebury.¹⁴ Yet despite this increase in property taxes, Bristol Borough is the third lowest spending district in the County and its students are still struggling to perform at grade level on the PSSA.

Conclusion

For Bucks County to thrive in the decades ahead the county's school districts must have the resources to offer every student the quality education needed for success in life. The loss of a major employer like Lockheed Martin means even greater competition of every job that remains in the county. That suggests that every young person looking for a job must be at the top of their game if the county's economy is to rebound and thrive. For this reason, this closure of the Lockheed Martin facility is a siren calling leaders to address the early signs of struggle in school districts across the county.

This report is intended to offer county leaders a clear diagnosis of the challenges faced by the most important economic development asset in the county – the public education system. The solutions require a concerted county-wide effort to increase educational opportunity starting with improving the earliest years of schooling, helping school districts target educational and county resources to boost the skills and performance of children who face the most challenges and fully engaging in efforts to build public support for a strong state investment in public education through a fair and predictable state school funding formula that can result in better schools and fairer taxes.

A History of School Funding in Pennsylvania

2006: The General Assembly called for an independent study to determine the actual cost of educating students in the commonwealth with a focus on adequacy and equity.

2007: The Costing Out Study found that Pennsylvania was underfunding education by \$4 billion annually, and that 94% of districts had inadequate resources to meet state standards. The report also found that the state relied too heavily on local property taxes to fund education, thus perpetuating the gap between resources available to rich and poor school districts.

2008: The Study was used to develop:

- 1) Adequacy target, or the amount of funding districts would need to meet state standards.
- 2) Student and District Weights, or additional funding that reflected the real cost of educating students.
 - For small districts
 - For districts with high local cost of living
 - English Language Learners
 - Students in poverty

2008-2010: Three years of state funding increases distributed to school districts via the formula.

2011: \$1 billion cut made to state aid for public education.

2012: Cuts to public education locked in with level funding.

Endnotes

1. Source: Pennsylvania Department of Education:
<http://www.portal.state.pa.us/portal/server.pt?open=514&objID=509210&mode=2>
2. Clark, P. (2001). Recent Research on All-Day Kindergarten. Clearinghouse on Elementary and Early Childhood Education, <http://ecap-websvr.crc.uiuc.edu/eeearchive/digests/2001/clark01.pdf>
3. Pennsylvania Partnerships for Children. (2013, November) Full Day K: A Proven Success. Retrieved from:
http://www.papartnerships.org/publication_files/ppc-full-day-k-2011-report.pdf
4. Source: Pennsylvania Department of Education:
http://www.portal.state.pa.us/portal/server.pt/community/enrollment/7407/public_school_enrollment_reports/620541
5. Source: Pennsylvania Department of Education:
http://www.education.state.pa.us/portal/server.pt/community/pennsylvania_department_of_education/7237/info/757639
6. Source: Pennsylvania Department of Education:
http://www.portal.state.pa.us/portal/server.pt/community/school_assessments/7442
7. Source: Pennsylvania Department of Education:
http://www.portal.state.pa.us/portal/server.pt/community/school_assessments/7442
8. Source: Pennsylvania Department of Education:
http://www.portal.state.pa.us/portal/server.pt/community/school_assessments/7442
9. Source: Pennsylvania Department of Education:
<http://www.portal.state.pa.us/portal/server.pt?open=514&objID=509210&mode=2>
10. Bowles, T. J. & Bosworth, R. (2002). Scale economies in public education: evidence from school level data. *Journal of Education Finance*, 28(2), 285-299
11. Analysis done by Public Citizens for Children and Youth (PCCY)
12. Analysis done by Public Citizens for Children and Youth (PCCY)
13. Source: Pennsylvania Department of Education:
http://www.portal.state.pa.us/portal/server.pt/community/financial_data_elements/7672
14. Source: Pennsylvania Department of Education:
http://www.portal.state.pa.us/portal/server.pt/community/financial_data_elements/7672



1709 Benjamin Franklin Parkway, 6th Floor
Philadelphia, PA 19103
215-563-5848

