

## The Basics

- 12 school districts with 69,567 students
- The instructional spending gap between the highest and lowest spending districts is at least \$98,000 per classroom
- Low-income student population has grown by 33% in just four years
- One-third of young students attend full day kindergarten
- Graduation rate of 93% is the second best in the region
- \$42 million in additional state aid would adequately fund Chester County Schools

## The Bottom Line Is Children Public Education In Chester County



“Chester County is facing challenging times.” So reads the opening sentence of the Chester County Board of Commissioner’s statement adopting the Landscapes2 plan for the County. Chester County was once an economic powerhouse fueled by manufacturing and steel production. The forces now driving Chester County’s growth and prosperity are demanding a smarter workforce and a more robust educational system.

Rapid job growth in knowledge-based industries and the life sciences has challenged the education system to upgrade the skills of its graduates.

The K-12 school system “while considered among the best in the state, has not kept pace with the technological advancements that are needed to prepare today’s students for the workforce or to move on to more industry-specific training,” according to research conducted for the Chester County Planning Commission. In particular, the research monograph notes, “The growth and advancement of information technology as an independent industry, as well as an integral part of the infrastructure for other industries, has not been adequately addressed within the K-12 school system.”

However, some progress in linking education to careers

can be found in the Chester County Technical College High Schools. Divided into three campuses (Pickering, Bradywine, and Pennock's Bridge), Chester County Technical College High School specializes in career and technical education to help students better transition into the global economy.

Chester County was recently rocked by the horrible scandal in the Coatesville School District. Citizen pressure and local leaders quickly replaced the Superintendent and others in the District leadership structure. This report points out other pressing challenges with respect to student success and inadequate resources in Coatesville that

we hope will galvanize local and county officials to swiftly act on behalf of the children of that district.

What follows is Public Citizens for Children and Youth's summary and analysis of key data pertinent to nearly 70,000 Chester County students. Numbers alone cannot tell the complete story of Chester County schools, but the data can provide a clearer picture of educational strengths and opportunities in the County. Specifically, our intention is to inform County efforts to support districts in their quest to provide students with a quality education.

### **Essential Strategies:**

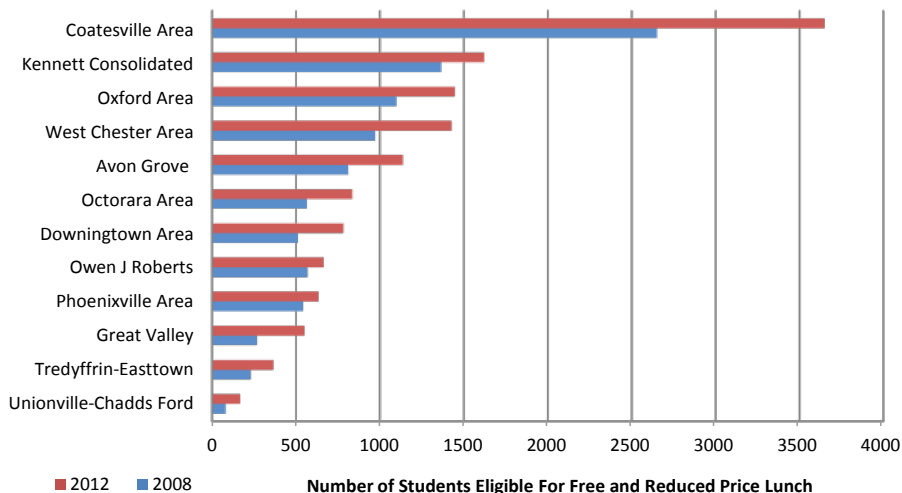
- **Give every child the option to attend full day kindergarten**
- **Increase resources and supports to close the academic achievement gaps within every district with special attention to the increasing need to help English Language Learners reach higher levels of academic performance**
- **Special efforts are needed to boost the academic performance of the Coatesville School District and to heal the community**
- **County leaders must build a county-wide coalition to focus on boosting the state's investment in every district in the County**

### **Who Are The Students?**

Chester County is home to twelve school districts educating 69,567 students.

Approximately 75% of Chester County public school students are White followed by 10% Hispanic. The percentage of Black and Asian students is roughly equivalent, but the demographic trends are moving in opposite directions. Since 2008, the number of Asian students has increased by 28% while the number of Black students has declined by 6%. The number of Hispanic students has grown by an impressive 30%.<sup>1</sup> However, the number of students who are eligible for free and reduced-price lunch (FRPL)

**The Number of Chester County Students Eligible For Free and Reduced Price Lunches Grew By 33% Between 2008-2012**



has grown rapidly over the last few years.<sup>2</sup> Approximately 15,400 Chester County students qualified for FRPL in 2012, a 33% increase in just four years.

While the Coatesville Area School District had the most poor students in both 2008 and 2012, every school district recorded a double-digit increase, including largely affluent districts.

The number of students qualifying for FRPL more than doubled in the Great Valley School

District and rose by 58% in the Tredyffrin-Easttown School District between 2008 and 2012. School officials across Chester County need to consider whether they are doing enough to educate economically disadvantaged students who may face greater obstacles to achievement.

### **Only 1 in 3 Chester County Kindergarteners Is Enrolled in Full Day K**

A strong start in school is highly correlated with a lifetime of success.<sup>3</sup> For this reason, many school districts in the state have expanded half day kindergarten to a full day.<sup>4</sup> The extended time gives teachers of young children more opportunity to boost the basic skills that serve as a foundation for learning. Unfortunately, only one third of the county's 4,400 kindergarteners are guaranteed access to full day kindergarten. Two of the twelve districts offer only half day kindergarten, while two districts offer both, but full day only to students with the greatest needs.<sup>5</sup>

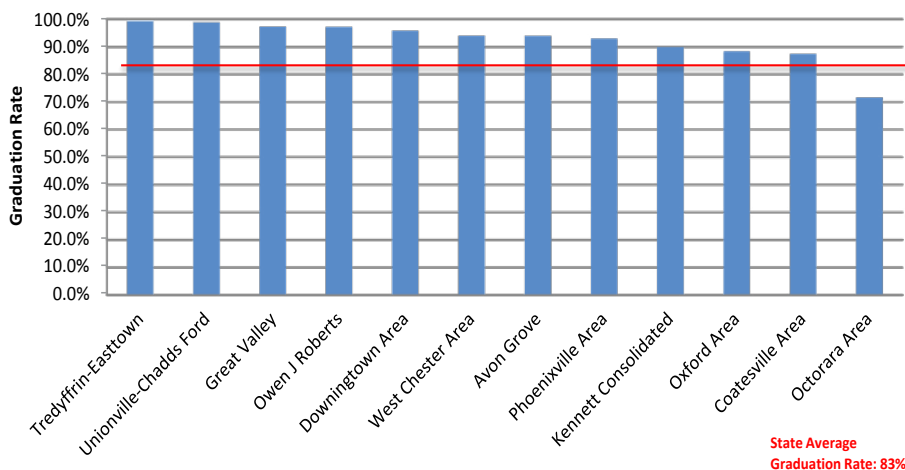
	Half Day Kindergarten Enrollment 2012 - 2013	Full Day Kindergarten Enrollment 2012-2013
Avon Grove	271	3
Coatesville Area	-	587
Dowington Area	628	66
Great Valley	220	30
Kennett Consolidated	-	290
Octorara Ara	-	154
Owen J. Roberts	355	5
Oxford Area	-	265
Phoenixville Area	251	44
Tredyffrin-Easttown	366	-
Unionville-Chadds Ford	174	-
West Chester Area	621	70
Total	2,886 (66%)	1,514 (34%)

### **Chester County: Close Second for Highest Graduation Rate In Region**

Graduation rates have been linked to stronger economies and reduced crime rates.<sup>6</sup>

The good news is that on average, at 93.2%, Chester County schools have the second highest graduation rate of the four southeastern Pennsylvania counties, slightly behind Montgomery County's rate of 93.3%. The county-wide graduation rate is significantly higher than the state average of 82.6%.<sup>7</sup> Only the Octorara Area School District has a graduation rate below the state average. As our analysis of PSSA scores will show later in this report, graduation rates are not a clear indicator of academic performance. Graduation rates should not be divorced from graduating students who are ready to meet the demands of work and post-secondary education.

**Nearly Every Chester County School District Exceeds The State Graduate Rate**



## Academic Performance Full Of Bright Spots But Nearly 10,000 Students Need Help

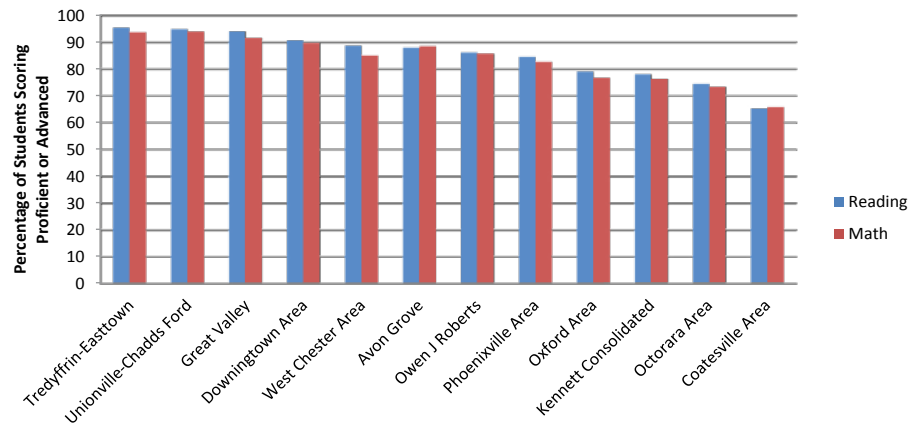
The annual Pennsylvania System of School Assessment (PSSA) is a standards-based assessment designed to measure student performance as it relates to state standards. Student scores are categorized into four levels: (1) Advanced, (2) Proficient, (3) Basic, and (4) Below Basic. Scoring proficient or advanced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

No Child Left Behind (NCLB) requires annual testing in reading and math for all students in grades 3-8 and one high school grade (11th grade in Pennsylvania). The PSSA reading and math assessment has been given annually in grades 5, 8, and 11 since 1998. The grade 3 PSSA reading and math assessment was first administered in 2004-05, and grades 4, 6, and 7 were first added in 2005-06.

In an attempt to accurately gauge how students were doing in suburban districts—and to avoid over weighting grades 3-8, our analysis selected one grade at the elementary, middle, and high school level.<sup>8</sup>

Our analysis showed that districts across the county are doing well. On average the districts have higher PSSA scores in reading and math than the district averages of the three other suburban counties, Bucks, Delaware and Montgomery. For Chester County as a whole, 86.1%, are scoring proficient or advanced on their PSSA reading, but nearly 10,000 students are not meeting the same targets. Tredyffrin-Easttown has the highest percentage of students scoring proficient or advanced on the PSSA reading at an impressive 95.5% rate. Coatesville Area has the lowest percentage of students scoring proficient or advanced on the PSSA reading with a 65.9%.<sup>9</sup>

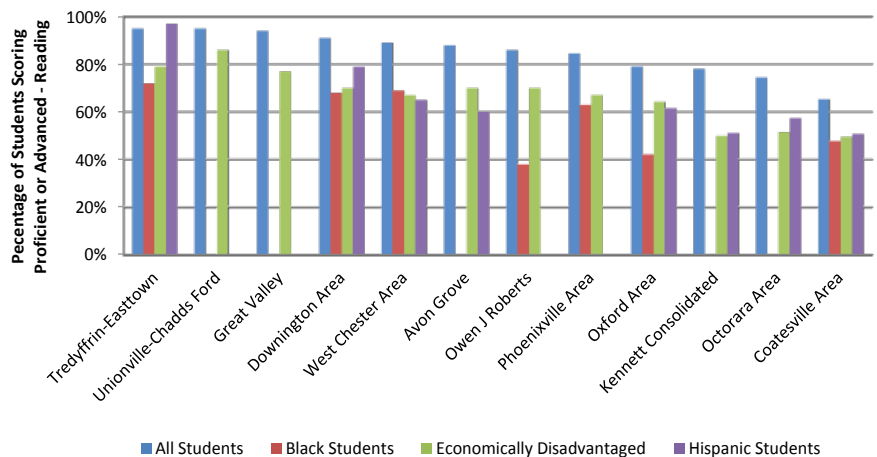
**86% of Chester County Students Perform at or Above Grade Level on 2012 PSSA Exams**



## A Closer Look Spells Trouble in Some Districts

The average level of performance for a district only tells a piece of the story. PCCY looked at student performance on the 3rd, 8th, and 11th grade state reading assessments and found that many districts in the county could do a better job ensuring that all students perform equally well.<sup>10</sup>

**Reading Achievement Gaps Persist in Many Chester County School Districts While Others Reduce Disparities**



## **But Some Good News for Vulnerable Populations**

There is some good news with respect to the performance of vulnerable populations. For instance, although an achievement gap still exists in Downingtown Area and West Chester Area, the performance of economically disadvantaged and Hispanic students is rising. In West Chester, 58% of economically disadvantaged students scored proficient or advanced on the PSSA reading in 2009 compared to

66% in 2012. Similarly, 50% of Hispanic students in Downingtown Area scored proficient or advanced on the PSSA reading in 2010 versus 79% of Hispanic students who scored proficient or advanced on the PSSA reading in 2012. These districts have significant progress to minimize academic disparities as measured by the PSSA.

## **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 with-

out adequate funds, schools cannot provide the resources necessary to help their students succeed.

## **Pennsylvania: One Of Three States Without A Funding Formula**

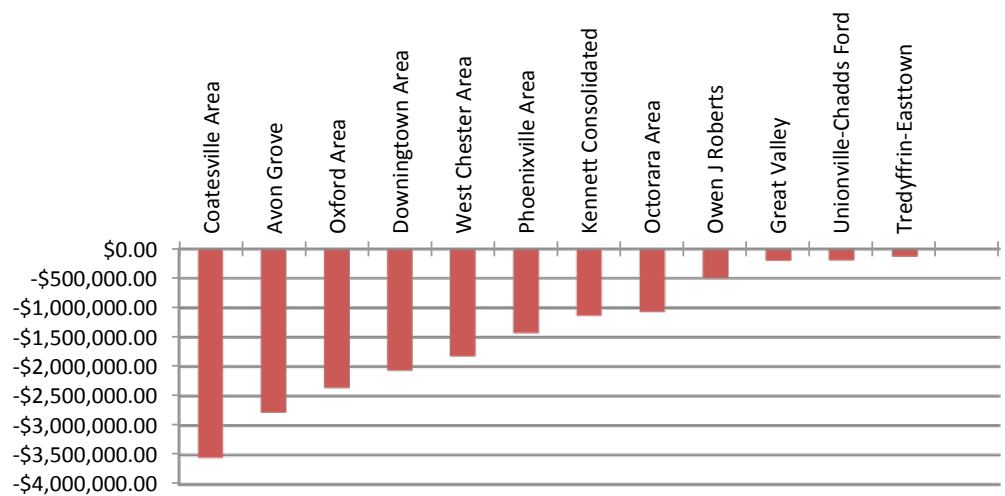
Research shows that investing in public education is central to a strong economy and improving social outcomes.<sup>11</sup> Yet despite the research Chester County's 12 school districts, along with hundreds throughout the state, function year to year without a predictable funding formula. Pennsylvania is one of only three states without a fair funding formula.

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 where wealth is low or a combination of such factors.

On a policy level, distributing funds without considering the actual cost necessary to address the specific needs of students and school

districts is unwise. On a practical level, school districts are forced to budget and operate without the ability to plan, or project their budgets. In 2011 the state cut \$1 billion in aid to school districts. These cuts were felt across the state by nearly every school district. Today, Chester County districts are operating with \$17 million less than they had in 2010.<sup>12</sup>

**Every District Is Receiving Less State Funding Than 2010 - 2011**

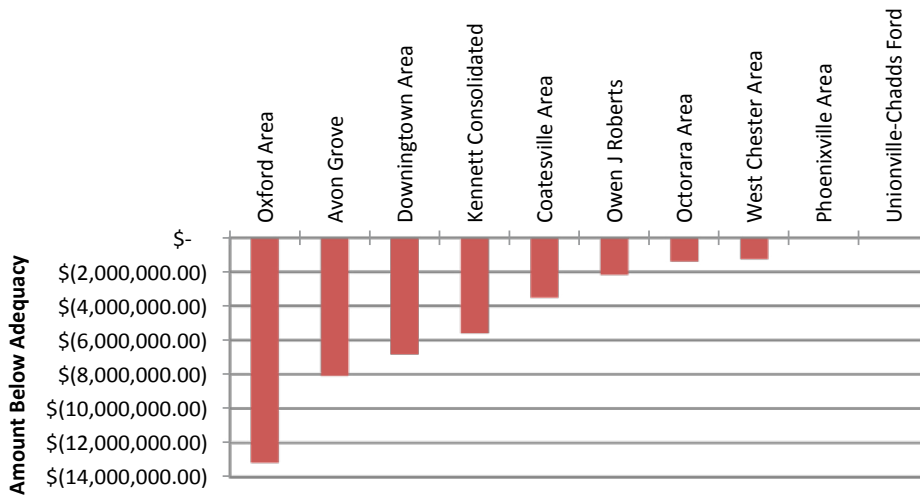


## Chester County: Underfunded By At Least \$42 Million

To better understand how Chester County's current funding levels compare to the research-based state funding formula, PCCY's updated analysis found that following the formula, adopted in 2008, would bring Chester County school districts at least \$42 million

in additional funding this year to adequately educate students.<sup>13</sup> Every Chester County school district except for Tredyffrin-Easttown and Great Valley would receive additional funding if the funding formula was being followed.

### \$42 Million In Additional State Aid Would Adequately Fund Chester County Schools

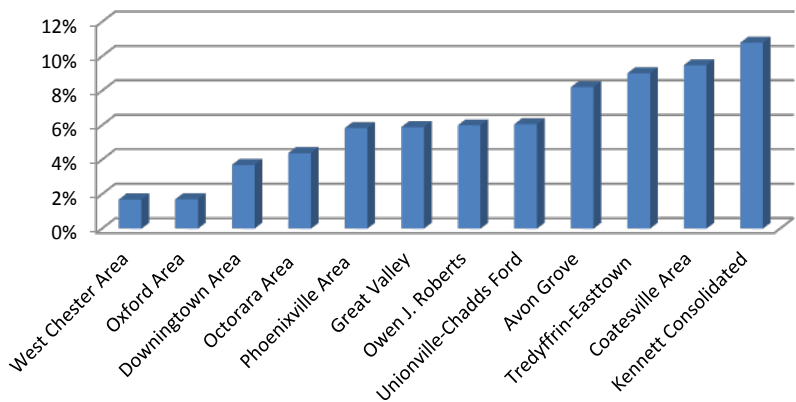


## As Funding Disparities Rise, So Do Taxes

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

While wealthier communities can increase the local tax effort minimally and generate funds to compensate for state cuts, districts with a weak property tax base – the very districts with the highest concentration of students who need extra assistance to

### 12 of 12 Districts Have Raised Property Taxes In The Last Three Years



achieve, are not able to raise taxes enough because local tax burdens are already disproportionately high.

As a result, low wealth communities, no matter how heavily taxed, typically yield very little new revenue.

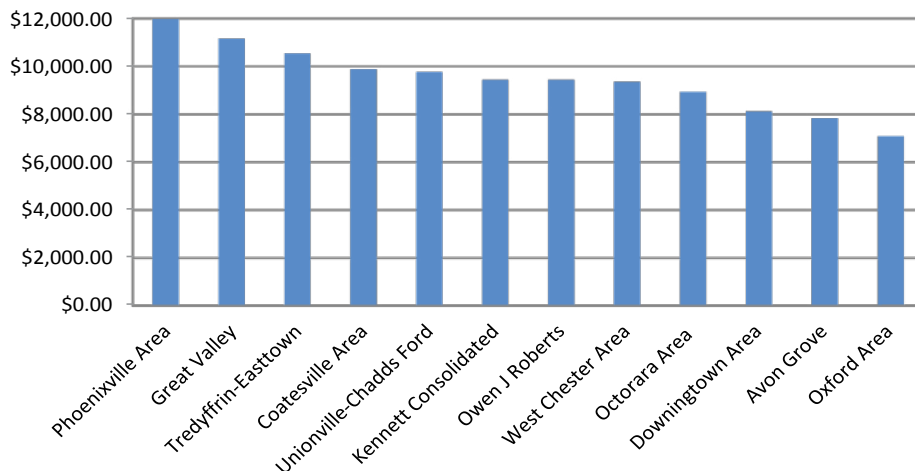
The disparity in local tax effort is quite distinct in Chester County. For example, the millage tax rate for the Octorara Area School District, the highest in the county, is approximately twice as high as the rates for West Chester Area School District. Yet, despite Octorara Area having the highest millage rate in Chester County, the district is one of the lowest spending per student for instructional costs.

In fact West Chester Area, the district with the lowest millage rate, invests more per student for instructional costs than Octorara Area School District.<sup>14</sup>

The absence of a funding formula perpetuates disparities among districts across the county.<sup>15</sup> In 2011-2012 the instructional spending gap between the highest and lowest spending school districts

was \$4,900 or about \$98,000 for every classroom of 20 students. Phoenixville Area district has the most to invest per student at \$11,974 while Oxford Area district is spending \$7,095.32 per student for instructional costs. That means that the highest spending district spends 68% more to help students succeed than the lowest spending district has available.

**68% 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.

## **Conclusion**

In spite of strong performance among most districts in the county, every district in Chester County is facing new educational challenges. In the same period that the share of low income students in each district is rising, employer demands for more skilled graduates is on the upswing.

These two trends are putting new pressures on the districts. Unfortunately, state funding for education has declined in the last three years with cuts hitting every district in the county. That means districts had to turn to local taxpayers to fill the gap caused by less state funding and meet mandated obligations. This often means that the kinds of investments known to boost achievement such as

full day kindergarten and targeted assistance to struggling students are not possible.

Chester County School Districts would benefit if the state were to adopt a fair predictable funding formula. If such a system were in place, the pressure on local property taxes could be relieved and districts would have a level of resources needed to ensure every student's success.

For Chester County to continue to hold rank among the state's most prosperous and economically stable counties in the state, county leaders and others must join forces to improve the conditions in, and resources available, to every district in the county.

## **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. This number was reached by subtracting the amount of funding that districts would need to meet state standards from the amount of money that districts were actually spending.
- 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/community/enrollment/7407/public\\_school\\_enrollment\\_reports/620541](http://www.portal.state.pa.us/portal/server.pt/community/enrollment/7407/public_school_enrollment_reports/620541)
2. Source: Pennsylvania Department of Education:  
<http://www.portal.state.pa.us/portal/server.pt?open=514&objID=509210&mode=2>
3. Clark, P. (2001). Recent Research on All-Day Kindergarten. Clearinghouse on Elementary and Early Childhood Education, <http://ecap-webserver.crc.uiuc.edu/eeearchive/digests/2001/clark01.pdf>
4. 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](http://www.papartnerships.org/publication_files/ppc-full-day-k-2011-report.pdf)
5. Source: Pennsylvania Department of Education:  
[http://www.portal.state.pa.us/portal/server.pt/community/enrollment/7407/public\\_school\\_enrollment\\_reports/620541](http://www.portal.state.pa.us/portal/server.pt/community/enrollment/7407/public_school_enrollment_reports/620541)
6. Lochner, L. & Moretti, E. (2004). The effect of education on crime: evidence from prison inmates, arrests, and self-reports. *The American Economic Review*, 94(1) 155-189.
7. Source: Pennsylvania Department of Education:  
[http://www.education.state.pa.us/portal/server.pt/community/pennsylvania\\_department\\_of\\_education/7237/info/757639](http://www.education.state.pa.us/portal/server.pt/community/pennsylvania_department_of_education/7237/info/757639)
8. PCCY calculated district PSSA performance based on three distinct data points, the first assessment at the elementary level, the final assessment in the middle grades and the final assessment at the secondary level. The methodology was used so that PSSA results in other primary school grades did not skew the overall district performance
9. Source: Pennsylvania Department of Education:  
[http://www.portal.state.pa.us/portal/server.pt/community/school\\_assessments/7442](http://www.portal.state.pa.us/portal/server.pt/community/school_assessments/7442)
10. Source: Pennsylvania Department of Education:  
[http://www.portal.state.pa.us/portal/server.pt/community/school\\_assessments/7442](http://www.portal.state.pa.us/portal/server.pt/community/school_assessments/7442)
11. <http://all4ed.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/09/SavingfUTURES.pdf>
12. Source: Pennsylvania Department of Education:  
<http://www.portal.state.pa.us/portal/server.pt?open=514&objID=509210&mode=2>
13. Analysis done by Public Citizens for Children and Youth (PCCY)
14. Source: Pennsylvania Department of Education:  
[http://www.pde.state.pa.us/portal/server.pt/community/financial\\_data\\_elements/7672](http://www.pde.state.pa.us/portal/server.pt/community/financial_data_elements/7672)
15. Source: Pennsylvania Department of Education:  
[http://www.portal.state.pa.us/portal/server.pt/community/financial\\_data\\_elements/7672](http://www.portal.state.pa.us/portal/server.pt/community/financial_data_elements/7672)





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