



COVID'S IMPACT ON CHILDREN IN MONTGOMERY COUNTY

The Case For An Ambitious Rebound



***A Children First Report
on Montgomery County Children***

September 2022

children
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THE ADVOCATE FOR KIDS
FORMERLY PCCY

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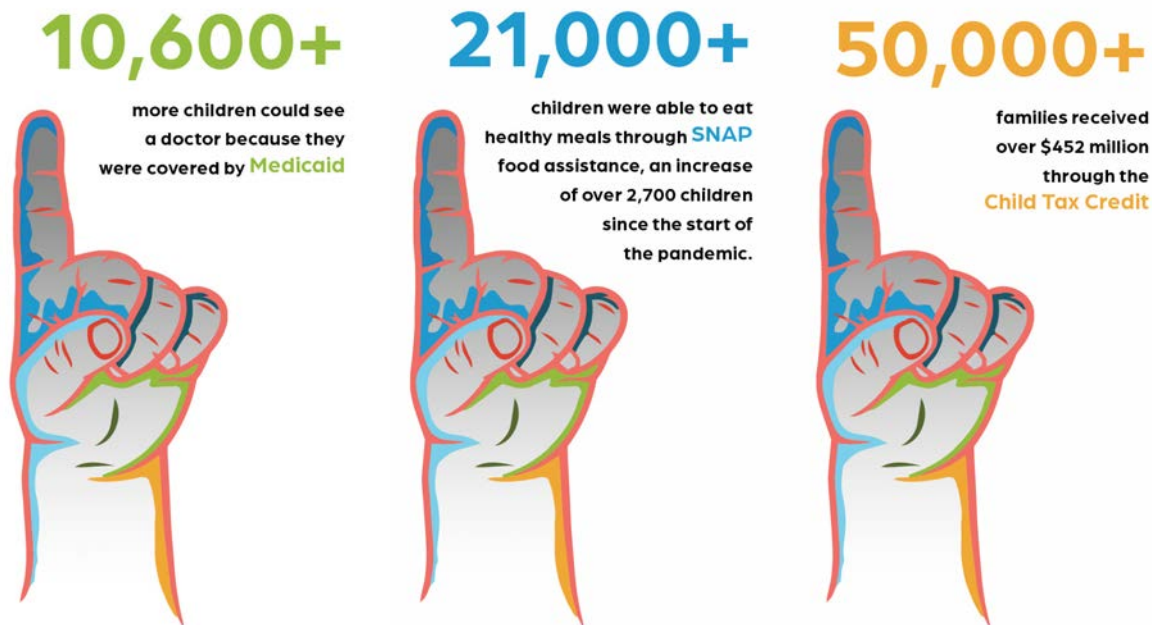
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Introduction

As we emerge from the turmoil and pain of the pandemic, parents in every corner of Montgomery County continue to deal with the alarming effects of COVID on children. The community institutions that partner with parents to support their children's healthy development are also still reeling from the impact of COVID. Although not one child is known to have died from COVID in the county, nearly 2,400 Montgomery County adults perished, often leaving children without grandparents, aunts, uncles, cousins, and worse yet, one or both parents.¹

The lives of children and families would have been much worse had good public policy not served as a life preserver. While parents were unable to work and schools were shuttered, federal flexibility and funds coupled with the Herculean efforts on the part of municipal, county, and school leaders provided extraordinary protections for children. These efforts especially buoyed children of color who otherwise would have fallen through the cracks.

Federal COVID relief policies acted like a safety net, catching children so they didn't fall into an abyss of poverty, hunger, and sickness. In fact, the Child Tax Credit improved the lives of children, lifting thousands out of poverty.



However, children are still suffering from historic levels of anxiety and depression, and most are months, if not years, behind where they should be in school. Meanwhile pediatric health, education, early learning, child protection, and social support systems that partner with parents are stretched thin or exhausted. The staff of these critical child-serving partners are themselves still recovering while having to make the extra effort to help children catch up in every way.

To make matters worse, the staffing crisis in public schools and child care centers means that far fewer families will be able to rely on these essential institutions to be ready and able partners to help our children recover. At the household level, the expiration of the Child Tax Credit is likely to mean that 2,600 Montgomery County children will fall back into poverty, further compounding the impact of COVID on their lives.²

Healing from this pandemic will take much more than a medical solution. It will require federal, state, and local policies and resources to cure the lasting effects of the pandemic on children, and such measures must ensure that the disproportionate needs of children of color are taken into consideration and addressed.

Executive Summary

Montgomery County was ground zero for Pennsylvania, when the first two cases of COVID surfaced in the county on March 7, 2020, and the state's first COVID death occurred only 16 days later. Over the next 24 months, the pandemic made the lives of every child of Montgomery County harder in the short-term; and, for far too many, the long-term consequences are likely to stunt opportunity throughout their lives. Among the myriad of impacts, five key indicators point to the need for robust new policies and resources.

1. Students Fell Further Behind in School – National research makes a compelling case that nearly every student will complete the 2021-22 school year behind due to the many months of virtual and regularly interrupted instruction. Before COVID struck, 35% of the county's public school students were already unable to meet basic English and math targets.³ Worse yet, the very schools that educate the majority of these children are the schools with the least resources to help their students catch up. Targeted efforts to recoup learning losses and push students ahead are urgently needed.

2. Children Are Less Healthy – We know that the pandemic harmed the mental health of children. Pennsylvania's statewide Safe2Say hotline fielded more suicide related calls from students across the state during COVID, yet the number of these calls from youth in Montgomery County jumped by 103%.⁴ Certainly, the feelings of loneliness, hopelessness, fear, and depression reached far and wide across the county and they are likely to continue to affect the lives of thousands of children. Dramatic new supports to improve the mental wellness of children are long overdue.

3. Risk of Childhood Communicable Diseases Rose – Alarming, the percentage of younger children not fully vaccinated against COVID is 57%; among teens, it's 35%.⁵ Moreover, there's been an erosion in the share of children starting school with required inoculations. Public health measures once thought of as routine are now in need of fortification.

4. Fewer Children Were in Poverty – The one glimmer of hope during the pandemic was the impact of federal policy that lifted almost 2,000 children out of poverty in the first year of the shutdown.⁶ Given the lifetime consequences of growing up in poverty, this shift out of poverty had the potential to be a gamechanger for these children. The tragedy is that with federal policy no longer in place, thousands of children are likely to fall back into poverty. That's got to change.

5. Child Care Providers and Schools are Weaker – The economic turmoil caused a hollowing-out of schools and child care centers where both sectors are facing severe labor shortages with insufficient funds to compete for qualified staff. As a result, young children, particularly children of color, are losing access to the crucial developmental benefits of great child care and pre-k, and public-school students will face greater hurdles with larger classes and fewer professionals to support their development.

The lessons learned from the virus are many. First among them is the need to ensure every county and the state has capable public health infrastructure. There is ample research indicating that more lives could have been saved if the nation's public health infrastructure had been more prepared to respond to the sweeping COVID contagion. The county and local medical professionals will need to be focused on building and funding the Montgomery County Health Department so it can aptly respond and protect residents every day and during the next horrific crisis.

Five Things to Do to Protect Children

Put Children First in a Crisis – The County should build on its impressive work to address the needs of children during the crisis and proactively create a structure that ensures lessons learned can be applied and children are better protected next time a public health emergency strikes.

Invest in Students So They Can Get Ahead – The citizens and elected officials of Montgomery County must build on the wise investments made by the County with Rescue Act funds to support public schools during the crisis and work together to demand that the state boost its share of funding for public schools so that all public schools in the county have the resources to help students catch up and excel.

Close the Gap in Behavioral Health Services for Children and Youth – The County and its citizens must pressure the state to ensure that public and private health care insurers are making it possible for children to readily access quality behavioral health services and remove barriers to mental health first aid, preventative supports, light touch counseling, and intensive best practice therapy.

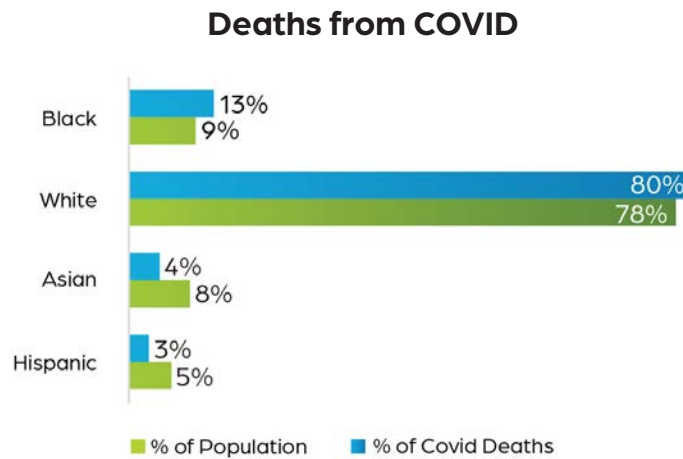
Protect Children from Poverty – To sustain the reduced levels of child poverty achieved during the pandemic, citizens of Montgomery County must push their federal lawmakers to reenact the expanded Child Tax Credit. Further, support must be rallied to continue the flexible enrollment policies in Medicaid, CHIP, and SNAP that protect children's health and ensure their nutrition is never at risk.

Curb the Impact of Inflation on Families by Making Child Care More Affordable – Montgomery County made urgently needed investments in child care during the crisis. Now its leaders and citizens must work to increase funding for child care from Washington and Harrisburg so that families can afford high-quality, child care and pre-k

The Direct Impact of COVID on Montgomery County

The Virus Took a Real Toll on the Health of Children

Fortunately, the virus mostly spared children from the level of death and illness suffered by over 100 million fellow Americans.⁷ Fortunately, no Montgomery County child is known to have died as a result of contracting COVID but nearly 2,400 adults did, often leaving children without grandparents, aunts, uncles, cousins, and worse yet, one or both parents.⁸



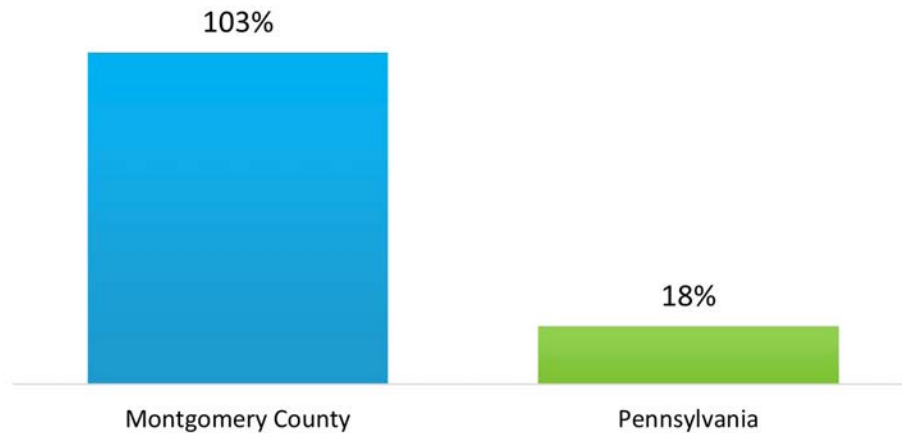
Although children typically escaped the virus' direct physical impact, the pandemic itself caused a mental health crisis for children that continues unabated. Across the country, mental health related emergency department visits spiked 31% for adolescents ages 12 to 17 from March 2019 to March 2021. Worse yet, emergency rooms treated 51% more teenage girls for attempted suicide than normal between February 2019 and February 2021.⁹ This national data from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) is sufficiently alarming to require substantial policy change.

The CDC also found that tens of thousands of children did not seek medical care for mental stress, but 44% of high school students reported feeling “persistently sad or hopeless” during the past year. This may be due to the fact that 29% of student respondents reported a parent or adult living in their home lost their job during the crisis.¹⁰

These findings may explain the latest data from Pennsylvania's Safe2Say hotline which provides students a confidential call for help when they are at risk of bullying, self-harm, drug use, or committing suicide. Prior to March 2020, 17% of tips received by the hotline for the 2019-20 school year were deemed “life safety matter,” meaning a student's immediate physical well-being or safety is at risk. During the remaining months of the 2019-20 school year, 37% of tips were life safety matters, demonstrating the mental strain the pandemic put on students. While statewide the hotline saw an 18% increase in tips relating to suicide from school years 2018-19 to 2019-20, Montgomery County saw a 103% increase over the same period.¹¹

The availability of quality, culturally responsive mental health services was in short supply for children, especially for those insured by Medicaid or CHIP. The pandemic and its aftereffects have exposed the inadequacies of the national, state, and local

Youth Suicide Calls Spike



Source: Safe2Say Something, Annual Reports 2018 – 2020

behavioral health systems, all of which are taking a sustained toll on our children. The County has wisely proposed to use \$5 million from its American Rescue Act funds to increase access to school-based mental health services.

Urgent Recovery Need: The County's investment in school-based mental health can and must be followed by assembling all players to reach agreement on quality standards and investments so that children and youth can receive culturally competent preventive mental health services, mental health first aid, and intensive services.

Public Response to COVID Undermined Child Vaccine Adherence

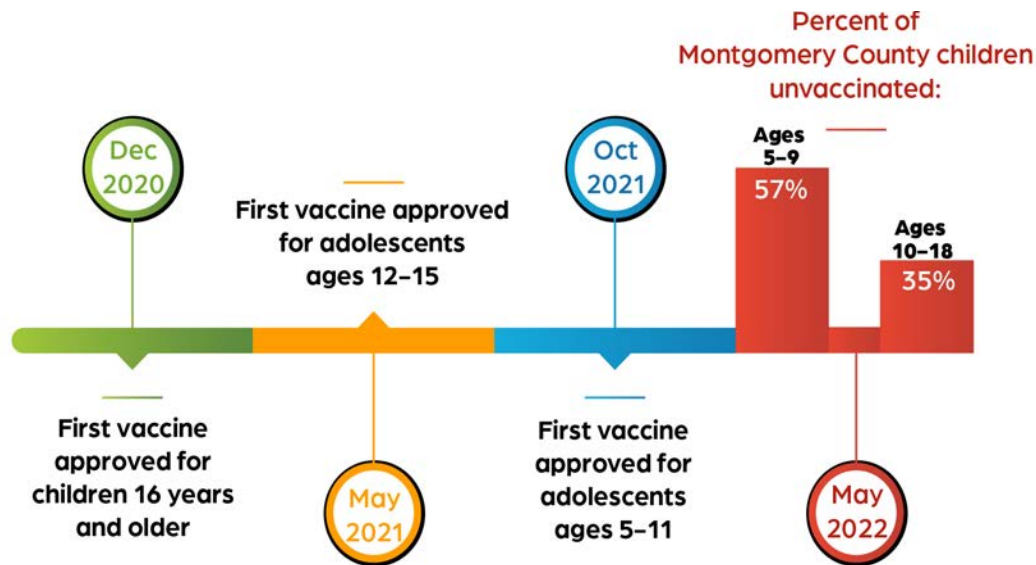
On the health care front, the one shred of good news is that Montgomery County residents heeded the advice of the CDC to get vaccinated. In fact, the percentage of county residents fully vaccinated is 12 percentage points higher than the statewide average full vaccination rate.¹²

The County's assertive and aggressive efforts to ensure rapid access to COVID testing and vaccinations set it apart in the region and are likely the reason for its relatively high vaccination rate.



“As it relates to mental wellbeing, the pandemic was the great neutralizer. Across all people, age groups, and backgrounds, the pandemic affected everyone. For those of us with teenagers and young children, we were all in homes and our children did not have access to extracurricular activities, social groups, sports, or friends - at least in person. I think there was great deal of harm done and a sense of loss of time and experience.” - Jason Fisher, Parent



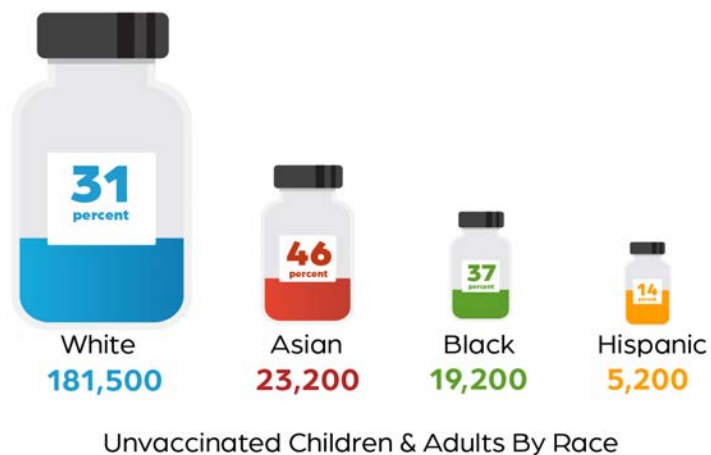


Yet, as of April 2022, 35% of county children over ten years old and 57% of children ages five to nine years old were not fully vaccinated. Additionally, Black residents of all ages are 13% less likely to be fully vaccinated than White residents, while Asian residents are 37% less likely to be vaccinated than White residents.¹³

It's noteworthy that the County had a free COVID drive-through testing site operational by March 2020, with six regional testing sites operating within four months of the shutdown and sites across the county by the end of the year. Similarly, within weeks of the vaccine's availability, the County opened its first free vaccination clinic in January 2021, and it aggressively marketed and created additional sites for vaccinations throughout 2021. The County also held a series of public events in multiple languages to reach non-English speaking parent to education them on the safety and urgency of vaccinations for themselves and their eligible children.

On the other hand, the ill-informed anti-vaccination campaign orchestrated across the country had an alarming impact on parental comfort with childhood immunizations. Nearly 2,600 Montgomery County students started school in a provisional immunization status because they did not have the full complement of required vaccines. This equates to a 250% jump in the number of children exempted from basic immunizations between the 2018-19 and 2021-22 school years.¹⁴

Anti-Vax Campaigns Led To Low COVID-19 Immunization Rates



As the public health emergency wanes, parents will need much more guidance on the urgency, or lack thereof, to ensure their children are fully vaccinated against COVID. The county's expert leadership to push vaccinations during the pandemic must now be directed to reverse the trend of declining adherence to school vaccination protocols.

Fortunately for county residents, unique among the five southeastern Pennsylvania counties is the existence of the Montgomery County Immunization Coalition. Since 2003, the Coalition has been raising awareness and organizing stakeholders to ensure adherence to immunization established protocols. The Coalition created the AmVaxador program which recruits volunteers and deploys them with resources in several languages to get the word out about vaccine safety and need for children to receive their immunizations. Since the onset of the COVID crisis, the Coalition held 19 Town Halls to promote immunization across the county. This work is impressive, and with sufficient resources, it may be ensure parents in the county to do not fall prey to misleading information about the safety of childhood vaccines.

Urgent Recovery Need: The Montgomery County Health Department must increase the reach of the AmVAXador program to ensure parents understand and embrace vaccine expectations so that all children in the county can be protected against preventable contagious childhood diseases. Further, the Department must carefully track COVID trends and continue to work proactively to protect children from the virus and its mutations.

A Reinforced Safety Net Reduced Child Poverty

Federal COVID Relief Funds Lifted Children Out of Poverty

Over the two years living with the contagion, and within months of the pandemic shuttering the economy, Congress authorized a robust set of direct payments to families to support them during the crisis. Without question, these extraordinary and necessary resources for families staved off widespread homelessness, hunger, and deprivation.

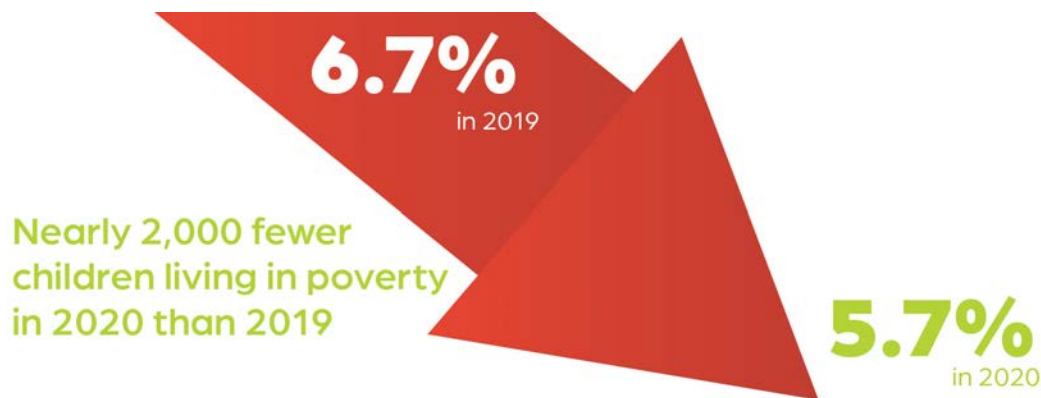
The Child Tax Credit alone had an extraordinary positive impact, with nearly 2,000 of the county's children rising out of poverty between 2019 and 2020.



“Applying for Medical Assistance allowed for continuity of care for my grandchildren. My grandson requires specialized care and he frequents the doctor’s office often. When my husband and I assumed care of our grandkids, we didn’t want their insurance to lapse and applying for Medical Assistance gave us peace of mind.” - Madeline McMahan, Parent



Historic One Year Drop in Child Poverty



While this trend was consistent among all of the five southeastern Pennsylvania counties, Montgomery County had an astonishing 15% decline in the number of children in poverty, the third largest reduction in the region.¹⁵ In fact, the Child Tax Credit significantly increased the purchasing power of parents by putting an estimated \$453 million into their hands in 2021, which equates to a \$147 million raise for families compared to 2019.¹⁶

On top of these payments to parents, the federal pandemic relief extended and enhanced unemployment payments that included a guaranteed \$600 a week for workers who were laid off due to COVID.¹⁷ The CARES Act also reimbursed employers for leave taken by employees who had to take care of a sick child or other dependent, marking the first-ever federal enactment of paid leave policy for parents. Nearly all these benefits are no longer available, and, in most cases, their expiration makes sense. That's not the case though for the Child Tax Credit, which came to an end on December 15, 2021. Its expiration is likely to mean that thousands more children across the county will fall back into poverty.¹⁸

Meanwhile, data shows that men returned to work at three times the rate of women within the first 12 months of the pandemic.¹⁹ As of February 2022, there were approximately 3,300 fewer women working in the county, mirroring the "she-cession" widely reported across the country, while the number of men working increased by about 1,900 compared to February 2020.²⁰ These trends are especially troubling because, before the pandemic, 77% of families had all present parents in the workforce, meaning 23% of the county's families had only one or no source of income for their household.²¹

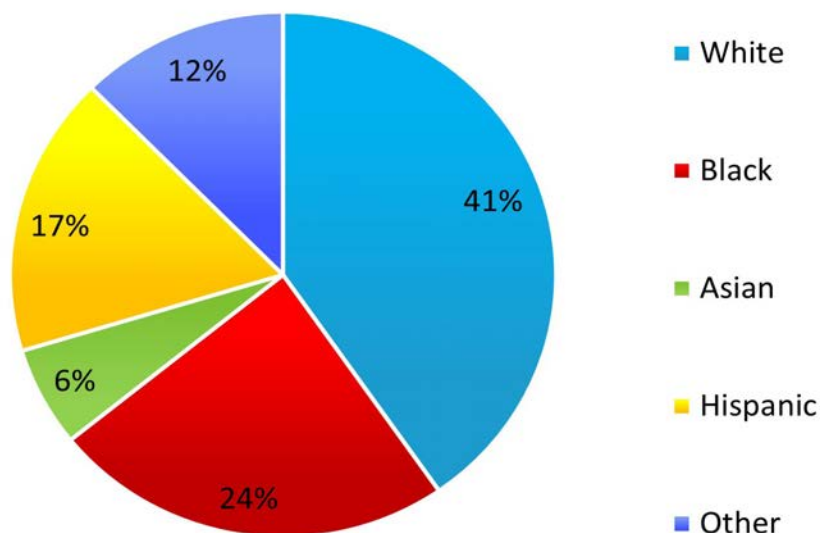
Urgent Recovery Need: Child poverty stunts the healthy development of children with lifelong consequences that will be exacerbated by the pandemic's effect on children's lives. For this reason alone, all policy makers should agree that the Child Tax Credit must be reenacted.



"We do well and we are still having to make decisions around basic needs, such as childcare. I can't imagine what families with less are having to deal with." - Kojo Marfo, Parent



Medicaid Was a Lifesaver for Children of Color



Public Health Insurance Kept Children Healthy

Similarly, sound federal and state policies increased access to health insurance coverage for parents and children, providing a life preserver for parents who lost their job and, as a result, their health care coverage.

In fact, to meet the burgeoning health care needs of all residents, Medicaid enrollment rose by 29% in the county compared to the pre-pandemic level. While reliance on public insurance is and should be a last resort, during COVID, employment-related health care coverage rapidly evaporated as parents lost their jobs and employers cut costs.

With federal aid, Pennsylvania was able to make sure children didn't fall through the cracks by expanding health care coverage via Medicaid to 200,000 more children, representing a 17% increase from February 2020 to February 2022.²² Now, Medicaid is the single largest health insurer for Pennsylvania children, with approximately 41% of all children living in the Commonwealth covered by its comprehensive health benefits, according to Pennsylvania Partnerships for Children.²³

In Montgomery County during the pandemic, over 10,600 children were newly enrolled in Medicaid on top of the approximately 49,000 Montgomery County



“Income should not be the sole determinant of who qualifies for what. Our family household does well on paper, but we also have a lot of bills, such as student loans, that we are juggling and that does not get factored into the conversation, but certainly takes away from what we are able to pay for childcare.”

- Brittanie Applewhite, Parent



children already insured by the program. This represents a 22% expansion in public health insurance coverage for children.²⁴

What lies ahead for these children is unclear. Some parents who lost health coverage due to COVID-related layoffs may return to jobs that don't offer health insurance. Many parents are already struggling to make ends meet due to the dual effects of temporary job loss and inflation, making it harder to cover household expenses and pay for health insurance.

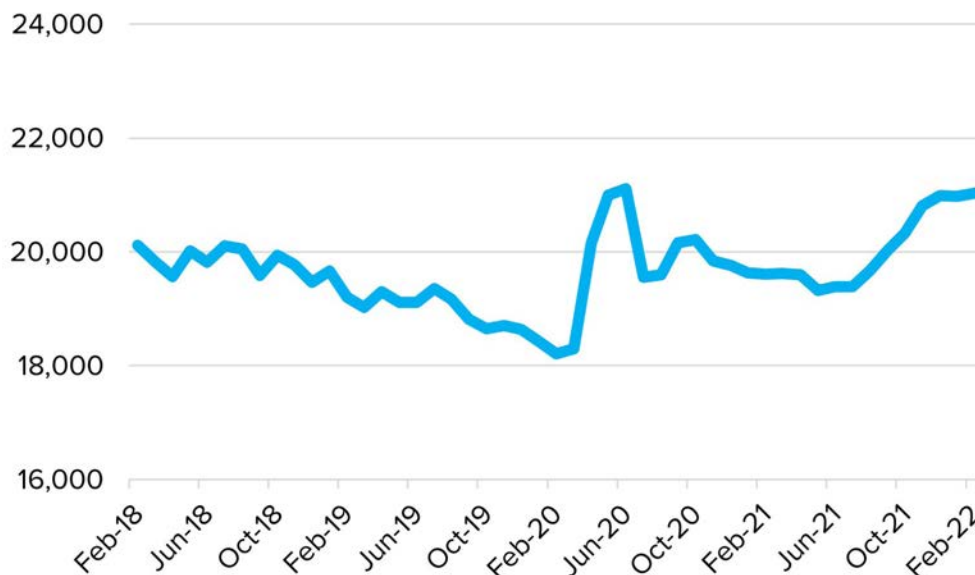
Meanwhile, in response to the government largess offered during COVID, some state lawmakers are looking for ways to drive down government spending by shrinking the number of children and parents who can rely on Medicaid for health care coverage. While children of all races benefitted from the expansion, children of color are at the greatest risk from a policy reversal. For example, over 3,200 more Black children in the county gained access to health care through Medicaid since 2019.²⁵

Urgent Recovery Need: Moderate- and low-income parents need the assurance that their children can rely on Medicaid, thus state and federal funds must continue to be available to ensure the continuity of their health care coverage.

Abating Hunger Became a Priority

Federal flexibility enabled schools to provide school breakfasts, lunches, and snacks to children at home for the period of remote instruction. Where schools had to close or parents chose not to send their children to in-person instruction, parents were encouraged to come to the school to pick up meals.

Child SNAP Enrollment



Source: Pennsylvania Department of Human Services. Medical Assistance, Food Stamps, and Cash Assistance Statistics Report, February 2020 – February 2022.

Some school districts also set up additional school meal distribution sites. Although children weren't attending in-person school for several months, over 340,000 Pennsylvania children had a midday meal thanks to the school lunch program and 210,000 started their day with free school breakfasts.²⁶

Families also benefitted from new federal flexibility that permitted them access to the SNAP program to purchase food for themselves and their children. Over 2,700 more Montgomery County children were enrolled in SNAP, bringing childhood hunger relief via SNAP to over 21,000 children in the county. In fact, 19% more Montgomery County residents and 16% more county children relied on SNAP during the pandemic compared to pre-pandemic enrollment from February 2020.

As a result, in Montgomery County, nearly \$300 million in SNAP funds went to families so they could purchase food during the pandemic.²⁷ Wisely, the County also allocated \$2 million in CARES Act funding to keep food pantries stocked during the crisis.

Urgent Recovery Need: Although unemployment is low and wage rates are increasing, given the rapidly rising inflation rate, public policies that ensure no child is hungry must be maintained and invigorated. Congress must ensure continued access to food resources for children.

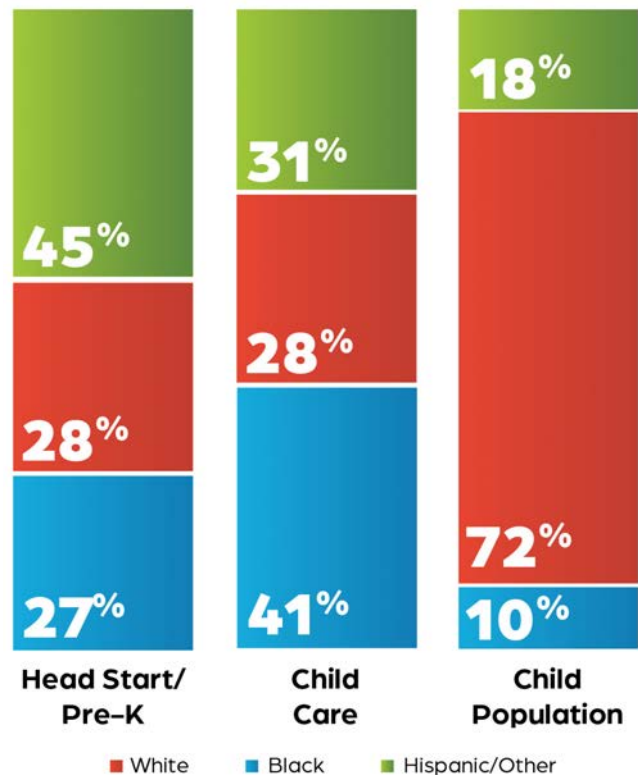
Troubling Signs On The Horizon For Those Who Teach Our Children

A Shortage of Child Care and Under-Resourced Schools Will Take a Lasting Toll on Children

It's safe to say that the county's economic recovery was fueled by the grit and determination of employers and employees who, on top of keeping local businesses viable, were caring for their children at home while schools and child care centers were shuttered.

Sadly, 53,800 Montgomery County residents resigned or lost their jobs in the first three months of the pandemic.²⁸ To some extent, these job losses were a result of approximately 200 business closures across the county at the onset of the pandemic.²⁹ Parents also left their jobs to care for children because there was no one else to tend to the first priority in their lives – their children.

Early Learning Programs Serve Strong Proportions of Children of Color



Once schools and child care centers reopened, thousands of parents were still unable to return to work because of health risks to them or a family member.

In large measure due to extraordinary federal and state financial supports for businesses, as of September 2021, there have been over 600 Montgomery County businesses that have opened since the onset of the pandemic.³⁰ And the official unemployment rate returned to the county's pre-pandemic level of 3.7% by November 2021.³¹

These traditional macro-economic indicators of economic recovery starkly contrast with the economic stress that families are feeling due to inflation and the weakened state of the critical partners they rely on to safely raise their children - child care centers and public schools.

Child Care Sector Suffers Long Lasting Impact of the Virus

The expiration of federal assistance and rising inflation means that more parents must work more to stay above water. Yet the shortage of child care is making it very hard to work more hours, or even simply go to work.

The average cost of full-time child care across the state is at least \$12,530 a year for infants or toddlers, \$10,640 for pre-school aged children, and \$9,800 for afterschool and summer care, and these costs are expected to continue to rise in 2022.³² Even at the current costs, a year of child care is likely to be more expensive than attending a year of college at West Chester University.

Federal and state policymakers recognized the essential role of the child care sector by authorizing funds to subsidize child care program operations during the pandemic when programs were closed and/or had very low levels of enrollment.

Child Care Supply Plummet



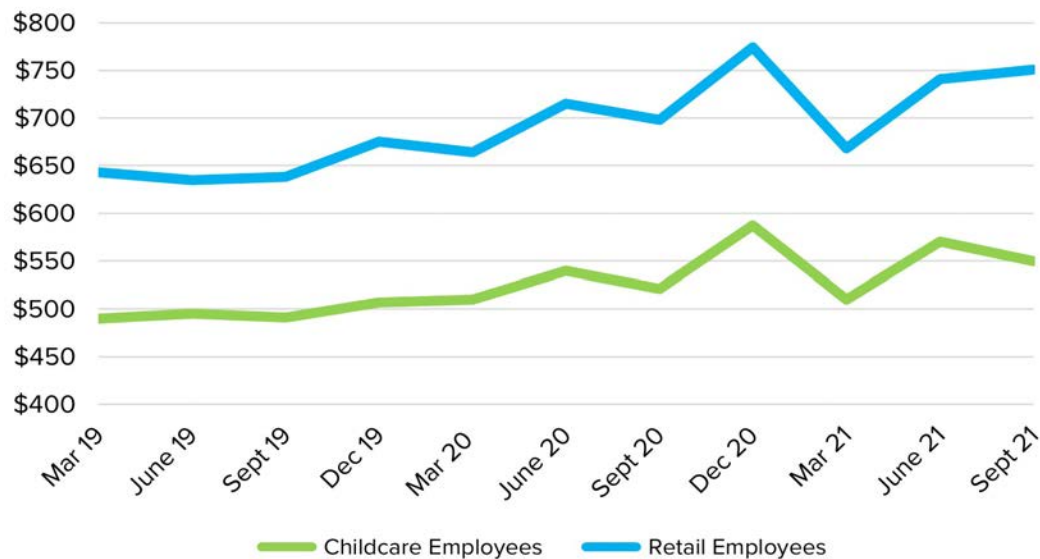
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“We didn’t qualify for the full CTC. We pay \$1,900 a month for child care. Trips to the supermarket are increasingly high, especially if you want to give your children healthy options like fruits and veggies. When eligibility thresholds are made around who qualifies for what, I wish expenses were taken into account too and not simply gross income. We are in a pandemic and need help too!”

- Ariana Deshields, Parent

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Child Care Wages Trail Retail Industry By \$200 Per Week



Source: U.S. Department of Labor, Bureau of Labor Statistics. Quarterly Census of Employment and Wages, 2019 – 2021.

The goal of these funds was to avoid the permanent closure of programs since the supply of child care was already insufficient before the pandemic. Montgomery County was among a small group of counties in the state to use federal COVID aid to buoy the child care sector, directing \$12 million in discretionary emergency funds to child care centers and families in need of child care assistance. The County also wisely had regular meetings with key child care stakeholders to ensure that its public health guidance was well understood and ensure the smooth and safe operation of child care centers during the crisis. Yet, temporary county, state and federal aid was not robust enough to stem closures. Since the start of the pandemic, child care supply in the county has plummeted by 26% as of March 2022. Over the same time, 56 providers closed, including seven high-quality programs.³³ Simply put, the child care sector has been decimated.

Child Care Centers Cannot Afford the Price of Hiring and Retaining Staff

Child care costs are expected to keep rising as child care centers close due to the gap between what families can afford to pay, and in turn, what child care providers can afford to pay their staff. As of September 2021, there were approximately 580 fewer child care workers in Montgomery County compared to the pre-pandemic level. This massive exodus is a result of low wages coupled with the risk and stress of caring for children during the pandemic. In that same period, average wages for all workers in the county rose by approximately 7%, but the median wage for child care staff has remained stubbornly low. As of September 2021, child care staff were earning nearly 32% less than employees at big box retail stores or fast-food franchises.³⁴

If child care centers increase the tuition charged to parents to cover the rate of pay needed to attract qualified staff, it will put the cost of child care further out of reach for families and drive down enrollment. It's a vicious cycle that is devastating the child care sector, making it very difficult for parents to earn a living and for employers to hire the workers they need.

The economic prospects of Montgomery County parents, like parents across America, are suffering due to the absence of sound public policies that ensure high-quality child care is available to fully spur economic recovery and growth.

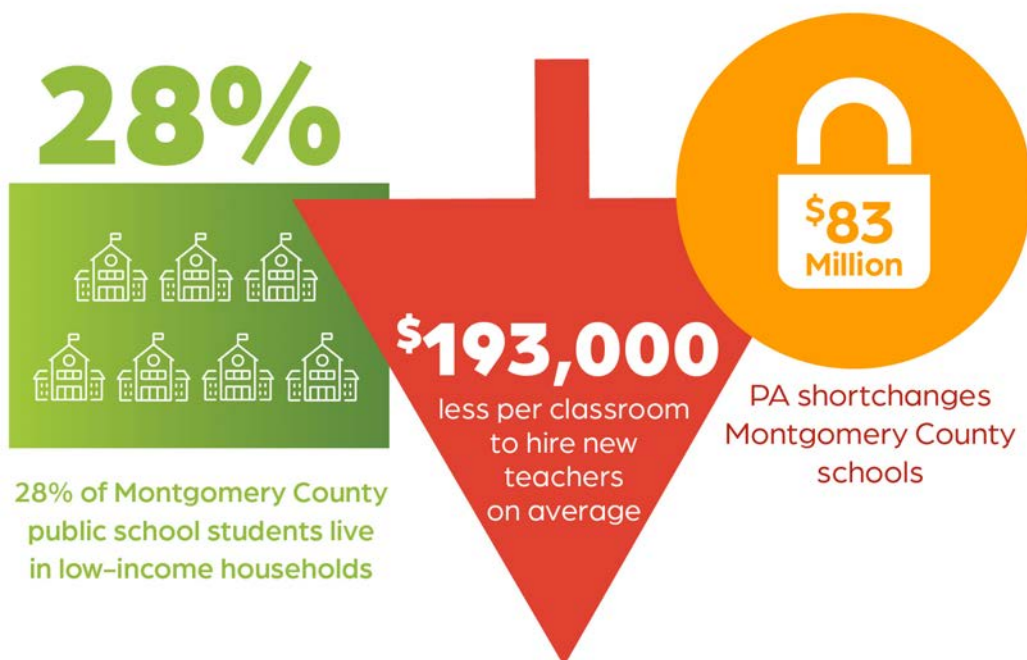
Urgent Recovery Need: Increases in federal and state funds are essential to expand access to great child care that parents can rely on so they can work sufficient hours to support their families.

Schools Started Out Behind, Now Struggle to Catch Up

One of the biggest shocks ever to the American public education system occurred when schools were shuttered to avoid COVID contagion, and 52 million Americans reported their children were attending school virtually, accounting for 67% of all K-12 students.³⁵ The abrupt shift to virtual instruction was hard on faculty, parents, and students. Children suffered from social isolation and their academic and social development suffered.³⁶ While these trends were universal, some students had it worse than others.



“We do pretty well, and we are still having to make decisions and sacrifices. The CTC was good, but people were reliant on that money coming in and now that it stopped – how are people going to close that gap? The cost of things just keeps going up.” - Julie Faizon, Parent



In Montgomery County, every school district closed for most, if not all, of the period of March to June 2020, with some districts still mandating temporary closures into the 2020-21 school year. However, some districts were able to rapidly rely on virtual instruction because their students already had school-issued computers to take home. Other districts had neither the inventory of computers nor the tech capacity to make that shift quickly, causing far too many students to lose at least three months of learning in the 2019-20 school year.

In large measure, successful virtual learning became dependent on a parent's income. Startling national data indicates that 40% of American parents were responsible for the cost of buying a computer for their child's virtual learning.³⁷

In nearly every school in the county, consistent with national trends, parents had to pay for internet access so their children could attend virtual classes. With 6% of Montgomery County families with children experiencing poverty, it's likely that many students were not sufficiently able to attend classes while instruction was virtual.³⁸

However, it's widely accepted that COVID exacerbated the already existing academic opportunities due to the funding disparities between school districts.

According to estimates based on a Pew Research study, about one in four students in the Norristown Area School District, where 75% of students are from low-income households and 87% are students of color, do not have high-speed internet access, compared to only one in 26 students in the much more affluent Lower Merion School District, where 11% of students are low-income and 33% are children of color.³⁹ These students are more likely to experience learning loss because they are on the wrong side of the digital divide.

The interruption of learning compounded the already dire educational gaps across the schools in the county. Before COVID struck, 35% of public school students were failing to meet basic English and math targets at the key third and eighth grade benchmarks.⁴⁰ It's safe to say that things got worse for these students during COVID.

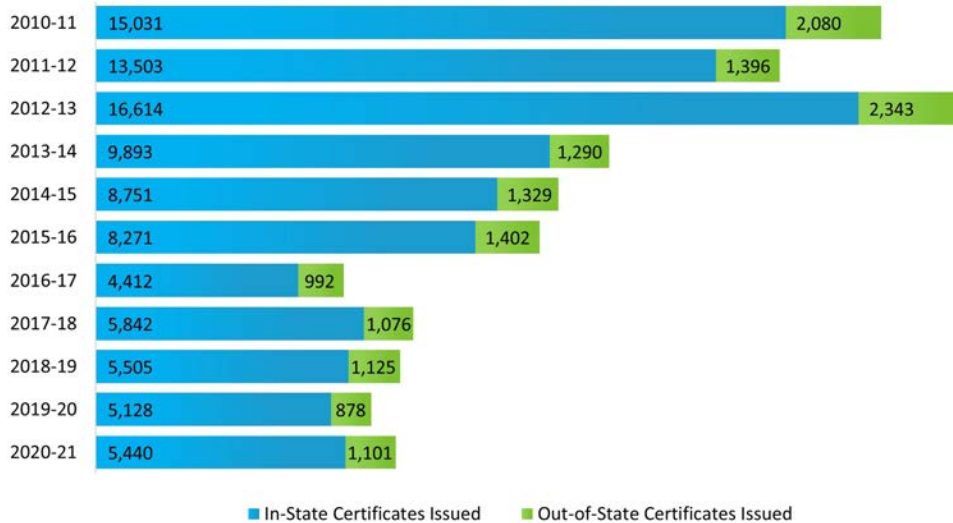
There is a dearth of reliable data to prove that children lost ground. Pennsylvania required public schools to participate in the state assessments in 2021. However, tens of thousands of students were exempted from the tests because their schools were still closed for in-person instruction.



“As an educator, I felt prepared to support my children at home, both academically and emotionally, which provided an enormous amount of consistency over the past few years. I know for my friends and neighbors without a background in education, this time has been much more challenging as far as meeting the needs of their children.” - Amanda Shields, Parent



New Teachers in Short Supply

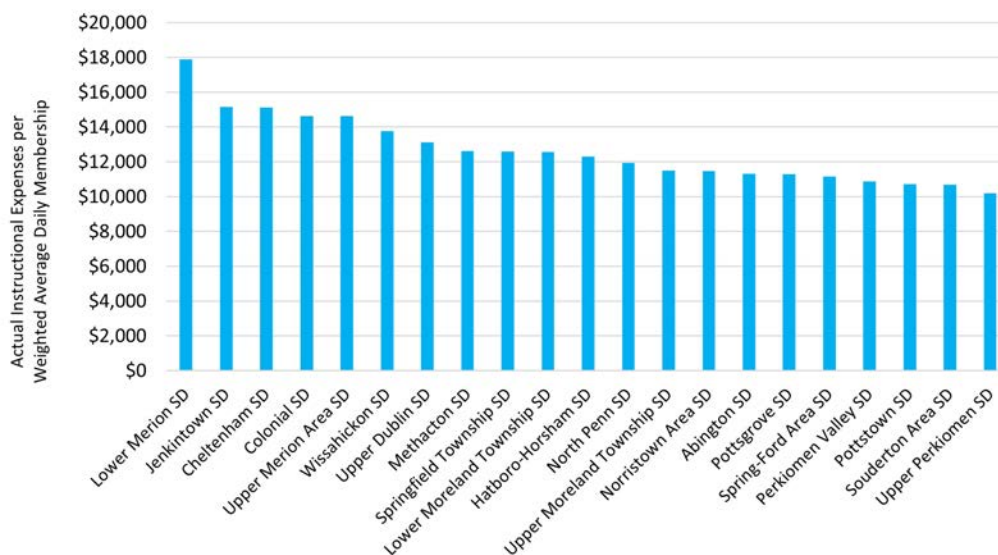


As a result, the Pennsylvania Department of Education cautioned policymakers, school leaders, and parents to not rely on the results as a valid measure of school or student performance. However, an educational assessment of 1.6 million students across the country found that, on average, students had fallen five months behind in math and four months behind in reading by the end of the 2020-21 school year.⁴¹

Schools Don't Have the Resources to Catch Up

Most of the onus to respond to the months of lost learning falls on public schools. Yet school districts entered the 2021-22 school year with record high teacher resignations and too few newly trained teachers to take their place.

A \$7,700 Per Student Gap In Educational Resources Compared to Some Districts



Source: Pennsylvania Department of Education. Annual Financial Report Data, Expenditure Data, 2015 – 2019.

This teacher shortage crisis had been getting worse over time and was dramatically accelerated by the pandemic.

National data indicates that 48% of school districts struggled to hire enough full-time teachers, while 55% struggled to hire paraprofessionals, and 77% struggled to find substitute teachers, according to a 2021 EdWeek Research Center survey.⁴² Add to that challenge the fact that far fewer newly trained teachers are entering the field.

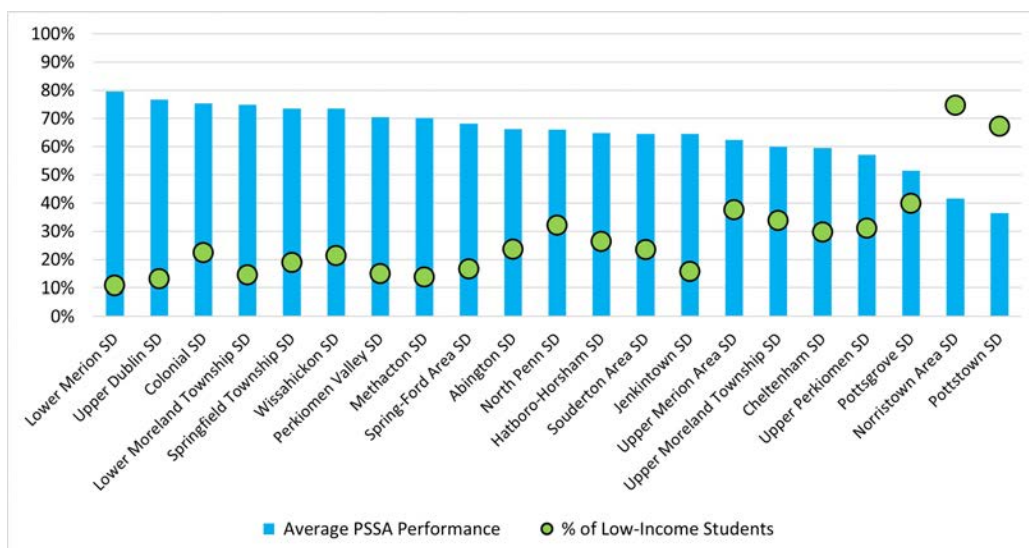
In fact, since the 2013-14 school year, Pennsylvania has seen a 42% decline in new teaching certificates and a 425% increase in Type 1 emergency teaching permits. Type 1 emergency permits are issued in response to a “vacant teaching position with an educational obligation to pursue.”⁴³

Teacher salaries are highly dependent on the wealth of the local community in Pennsylvania because the amount that a school district can spend is so heavily dependent on property taxes. That means that staffing shortages are likely to be most severe in districts that are lower wealth communities. These districts are not likely to be able to offer a competitive salary to attract sufficient teachers to fill their vacancies.

In Montgomery County, based on funds available for instruction, the gap between the district with the most and least resources is almost \$193,000 per classroom (of 25 students).⁴⁴ The schools with less funding will likely have to increase class sizes because they won’t have sufficient funds to hire new teachers, given the shortage.

The resource gap has the most severe impact in districts that have the least resources and educate high concentrations of low-income students. For instance, the Pottstown School District has \$10,700 per student for instruction.

Highest Poverty Schools Linked to Lowest PSSA Performance



PSSA Performance = Average percent of third and eighth grade students earning advanced or proficient on English or Math PSSA exams from 2015 through 2019. Source: Pennsylvania Department of Education. Annual Financial Reports, Expenditure Data, 2019 – 2020. Public Schools Percent of Low-Income Reports, 2019 – 2020.

Its students are six times more likely to be low-income and twice as likely to be students of color than their counterparts in Lower Merion, which has \$17,900 per student to educate its pupils.⁴⁵ This illustrates the irrational methodology used to fund public education in Pennsylvania.

These financial and economic disparities were pronounced before COVID where students in the Pottstown School District were also, unsurprisingly, much further behind academically than the students in Lower Merion or any of the other districts with more resources in the county. This trend holds true across all the districts in the county – the higher the poverty rate of the district, the fewer resources schools have to educate their students, and the further behind the students are academically.

The 12 school districts that educate 79% of the county's lowest income students and 73% of the county's students of color have, on average, about \$78,000 less to spend per classroom (of 25 students).⁴⁶ Just as the pandemic has taken a toll on the academic achievement of students with lower incomes than their peers, the teacher shortage and insufficiency of state funding for lower-wealth school districts means students in high-poverty districts will continue to fall behind.

Montgomery County was the first of the five southeastern Pennsylvania counties to direct pandemic relief to school districts. A quarter of the County's CARES Act funds, \$15 million, was allocated using the federal Title 1 formula which meant the funds were distributed in accordance to the share of students in poverty in each school within the school districts.

In addition to providing funding, county leaders wisely met weekly with superintendents from July 2020 through 2021; additional meetings were also held with private school operators as well. The County created a private data hub for public schools to share COVID data so they could gauge their progress and seek out best practices from peers. In addition, the County made strenuous efforts to ensure that sports leagues, camps, and other youth-serving organizations were given guidance and support to navigate COVID safety as they attempted to operate during the crisis.

These measures offer the County invaluable lessons regarding the structures and supports needed to ensure the continuity of education and extra-curricular activities should the County have to contend with a public health crisis in the future.

Urgent Recovery Need: There is no temporary solution to the learning loss for students in Montgomery County. One-time grants for tutoring to help students catch up are a short-term fix and will leave far too many future graduates unprepared for a real-world job or college. State funds to close the educational resource gap are urgently needed to solve the county's root educational disparity.

Recommendations

Federal, state, and local vigilance flattened infection rates which thankfully protected children and most of the adults in their lives. Throughout the crisis there were obvious missed opportunities to meet the needs of children and, as the crisis abates, its lingering effects on children still warrant the attention and action of federal, state, and county officials. To this end, we recommend the following:

Put Children First During a Crisis. Because children are especially vulnerable and have such a broad set of needs, the County would have been well served by appointing a full-time top-tier county administrator to address the needs of children in the event of a crisis. The County made considerable efforts to communicate and plan with leaders in the education, social services, and related agencies serving children. The County can, and should, act now to formalize a structure to ensure lessons learned are not lost and supports are ready to be put in place for children should another public health crisis emerge.

Recommendation: The County should craft a strategy and designate a structure now that ensures children are better protected the next time a public health emergency strikes.

Make a Great Public Health System A Priority. One of the lessons learned from the pandemic is the need to rally behind the critical role that public health systems play and continually invest in keeping those systems modern and ready to respond in the time of crisis.

Recommendation: County leaders and local medical professionals will need to be vigilant as they support the Montgomery County Health Department so it can protect and provide care for residents every day and during a crisis. Further, the County must also continue to track the continuous impact of COVID on children to address troubling trends and proactively implement strategies that boost child vaccination against COVID and other diseases.

Close the Gap in Behavioral Health Services for Children and Youth. Nearly one in five children suffer from a mental, emotional, or behavioral disorder. Alarming, less than half of these youth receive treatment, with children of color receiving the least access to care for their conditions, according to the National Institute of Mental Health.⁴⁷ Further, recent survey data on youth finds that 37% of the responding teens said they had poor mental health during the pandemic and 44% said they felt “persistently” sad or hopeless.⁴⁸ At these rates, upwards of nearly 19,000 teens over 15 years old in Montgomery County are likely to need mental health support, and the sooner they receive it, the less likely it is for their mental health issues to develop into chronic conditions.

Recommendation: The County can and should initiate a process with the state to ensure that at the very least, Medicaid and CHIP insurers are actively working to increase access to behavioral health services in schools. Further, the County can lead efforts to ensure that mental health providers serving children in the county are providing state of the art services that provide accessible, culturally responsive preventative mental health services, mental health first aid, and therapeutic support to children and youth who need intensive services.

Protect Children From Poverty. Before COVID struck, 25% of families were earning too little to cover the basics of raising and caring for their children, according to the 2019 Children First report, *Underwater: What's Sinking Families in Montgomery County*.⁴⁹ In the midst of COVID, the United Way of Pennsylvania surveyed families and found that 64% of families who were struggling to secure basic needs, housing expenses were among their biggest concerns.⁵⁰ To make matters worse, families also faced the economic shock of the pandemic, causing inflation to jump by over 11% between February 2020 and February 2022.⁵¹ Today, nearly 22% of Montgomery County homeowners and 43% of renters spend 30% or more of their income on housing.⁵²

Without question, parents earning less than the median wage have far less purchasing power. That is why the federal Child Tax Credit, lifting nearly 2,000 Montgomery County children out of poverty, was crucial in enabling families with limited incomes to meet more of their immediate household expenses.⁵³

Recommendation: To sustain the reduced levels of child poverty achieved during the pandemic, citizens of Montgomery County and every elected leader at the state and local level must push their federal lawmakers to reenact the expanded Child Tax Credit.

Curb the Impact of Inflation on Families by Making Child Care More Affordable.

The child care crisis is directly affecting the economic stability and growth of Montgomery County. As of December 2021, an estimated 32,000 jobs were unfilled in the county.⁵⁴ Even if parents want to take these jobs, there simply isn't enough child care capacity to enable them to do so.

In many ways, the child care sector is the canary in the coal mine with respect to expected trends post-COVID. Substantial COVID relief was available to help child care programs remain open during the pandemic. Now, without those resources the child care sector is collapsing. To help parents return to the workforce, public policies must support the rebuilding of the child care infrastructure lost during the pandemic.

Recommendation: The citizens of Montgomery County must increase the efforts made on their behalf in Washington and Harrisburg to ensure more resources are made available so families can afford high-quality, affordable child care and pre-k.

Invest in Students So They Can Get Ahead. Most students are still behind in school because of COVID. Yet, prior to the pandemic, most school districts in the county were struggling to help all students meet basic academic benchmarks, so they entered the pandemic shutdowns already far behind. When COVID struck, 25% of Montgomery County students could not read at the third grade level when they entered fourth grade, and 26% could not read at the eighth grade level when they entered ninth grade. Far too many of these students were students of color, who accounted for 45% of the fourth graders who started behind and 40% of the eighth graders who were struggling to learn.⁵⁵

Recommendations: The citizens of Montgomery County must unite and demand that state lawmakers deliver sufficient funds so that every school can afford to hire an ample supply of teachers, provide every student with a computer and, where necessary, free or affordable internet access. To achieve these goals, every state lawmaker should be on the record for supporting an end to the school funding crisis in the Commonwealth and supportive of a strategy to close the state's \$4.6 billion school funding deficit.

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Children First, formerly known as Public Citizens for Children and Youth (PCCY), serves as the leading child advocacy organization working to improve the lives and life chances of children in southeastern Pennsylvania.

Children First undertakes specific and focused projects in areas affecting the healthy growth and development of children, including child care, public education, child health, juvenile justice, and child welfare.

Through thoughtful and informed advocacy, community education, targeted service projects, and budget analysis, Children First watches out and speaks out for children and families.

Children First serves the families of Bucks, Chester, Delaware, Montgomery, and Philadelphia counties as well as children across the Commonwealth. We are a committed advocate and an independent watchdog for the well-being of all our children.

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