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COMMONWEALTH OF PENNSYLVANIA
Department of Education
Commonwealth News Bureau
Room 308, Main Capitol Building
Harrisburg, PA 17120

CONTACT: Michael Race
(717) 783-9802

NUMBER OF PENNSYLVANIA STUDENTS ON GRADE LEVEL UP 29 PERCENT SINCE 2002, BUT CHALLENGES REMAIN

*7 in 10 students Now Meeting State Standards;
Under-Funded Districts, High Schools Major Areas of Concern*

HARRISBURG – Student achievement in Pennsylvania continues to rise, as students have again exceeded the ever-increasing targets for math and reading in the Pennsylvania System of School Assessment, Education Secretary Gerald L. Zahorchak announced today.

“We have seen dramatic achievement gains across the commonwealth in the past six years, proving that the state’s targeted investment in proven academic programs and the hard work of our educators is paying off,” Zahorchak said. “But we also have a significant challenge ahead of us: with struggling students in every school district, including large numbers in under-funded school districts and in our high schools.”

Twenty-nine percent more students are on grade level compared to 2002, and historically low-achieving schools are driving Pennsylvania’s progress. Among the notable gains in this year’s PSSA results:

- Student achievement has increased in every subject, at all grade levels and for all ethnic, racial and economic groups of students since 2002.
- 72 school districts have increased the proportion of students who are on grade level by at least 40 percent over the past six years.
- In 5th, 8th and 11th grades (the grades Pennsylvania has tested the longest), the proportion of students on grade level in math has increased from 52 percent in 2001-02 to 66 percent in 2007-08.
- During the same period, the proportion of students on grade level in reading has increased from 58 percent in 2001-02 to 68 percent in 2007-08.
- 479 school districts have a majority of students on grade level in 2007-08, compared to 375 school districts in 2001-02 – an increase of nearly 30 percent.

- The number of students scoring “below basic” (the lowest performance level) has shrunk by 38 percent, while the number scoring “advanced” (highest level) has grown by 88 percent.
- The achievement gap has narrowed by an average of 26 percent for African-American students, 20 percent for Latino students and 23 percent for low-income students.

Zahorchak said the gains made in closing the achievement gap are especially noteworthy because the gap is closing at the same time all students are improving academically.

“We are narrowing the achievement gap between groups of students while simultaneously raising the academic bar for all students,” he said. “As a result, we now have about 48,000 more African-American and Latino students on grade level in reading and math than we did just six years ago.”

The students who are still below grade level are heavily concentrated in high schools and in districts with large funding gaps.

The 2008 PSSA results underscore how students in under-funded schools tend to face greater challenges in making academic gains. School districts with the largest funding gaps have an average of 78 percent more students below grade level than districts that have adequate funding. In addition, 68 percent of students who are “below basic” attend school districts with a shortfall of at least \$2,000 per pupil.

“The General Assembly deserves enormous credit for enacting a new school funding law that sets the historic goal of ensuring that all school districts have adequate resources from the state over the next six years,” Zahorchak said. “This year’s achievement data shows the urgency of living up to our commitment for increased resources.”

Since Governor Rendell took office, Pennsylvania has increased the state’s pre-K–12 resources by \$2.7 billion. Pennsylvania’s total new investment in pre-K–12 education for the 2008-09 school year alone is \$306 million.

The secretary also credited students, parents and educators for Pennsylvania's academic progress, saying the tremendous success would not have been possible without a collaborative effort.

High schools also continue to be an area of concern when it comes to increasing academic achievement, according to the secretary. Two out of every five Pennsylvania high school students are below grade level, while independent research shows that students who score proficient in 11th grade are far more likely to succeed in college. At the current pace, it would take 40 years for all 11th graders to meet state standards.

"Clearly, we need to do more to improve the high school experience and ensure those students stay engaged and challenged through graduation," Zahorchak said. "We simply cannot afford to be content with the status quo."

Pennsylvania has been addressing the challenge of high school reform by:

- Improving teaching and learning in core academic classes through Classrooms for the Future, which provides students with laptops and other technology and gives teachers intensive training in how to use these resources to impact student achievement.
- Enabling high school students to take college classes and earn college credit through the \$10 million Dual Enrollment program.
- Creating a new voluntary model curriculum, along with tools to help identify where individual students are having challenges that will serve as a resource for educators in delivering high-quality instruction throughout the school year.
- Pursuing statewide graduation requirements that will provide a menu of ways for students to demonstrate that they are ready for the workforce or college.

Zahorchak said adequate resources and stronger high schools are just two of the challenges that Pennsylvania faces in increasing student achievement.

"The state and its schools must deepen their commitment to reform in all areas," Zahorchak said.

Seventy-two percent of Pennsylvania schools are meeting all of their Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) targets in spite of higher achievement goals in 2008.

No Child Left Behind requires Pennsylvania to evaluate all public schools and districts annually for AYP based on the results of the PSSA and other factors, including test participation, attendance, and graduation. In 2008, at least 63 percent of students had to be on grade level in reading (compared to 54 percent last year) and at least 56 percent of students had to be on grade level in math (compared to 45 percent last year).

In all, 92 percent of Pennsylvania's school districts – 461 out of 501 – and 72 percent of its schools – 2,235 in all – made AYP or were classified as “making progress” in 2007-08. (A school or district that meets all of its AYP targets for the first year is “making progress,” while a school or district that meets all of its AYP targets for two or more consecutive years is classified as “making AYP.”)

While the number of schools making AYP declined from the previous year, the secretary attributed the drop to the increased performance targets. If the targets had not increased, the number of schools making AYP would have risen by 6 percentage points.

Zahorchak said schools that continue to struggle share some key characteristics, including:

- They are under-funded – three quarters of school districts that did not make AYP have an adequacy shortfall of at least \$2,000 per pupil.
- Their high schools have low achievement – more than half of Pennsylvania's high schools did not make AYP this year.

Information on this year's PSSA and AYP results, including results for districts and schools, can be found at www.paayp.com. For more information on Pennsylvania's education initiatives, visit www.pde.state.pa.us.

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