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The 2005-06 Report of The Pennsylvania System of School Assessment PSSA

Overview of Pennsylvania's Progress

Under the leadership of Governor Edward G. Rendell, schools and school districts across the Commonwealth have reaped the benefits of targeted investments in proven practices to ensure that **ALL** children have an opportunity to achieve at high levels. The success of those investments relies on local leaders to implement them effectively. Thankfully, in Pennsylvania, scores of superintendents, principals, teachers and local education leaders work diligently to raise student achievement.

Pennsylvania's efforts have already paid dividends. This year's PSSA results confirm that last year's unprecedented gains were real and are being sustained. Improving student achievement so that all students are proficient in reading and math is a marathon and not a sprint—and our schools are in it for the long haul.

These results are a product of hard work and generous funding support under the leadership of Governor Rendell. The Basic Education Subsidy has increased by nearly \$700 million since Governor Rendell took office. The 2006-07 budget alone increases the Basic Education Subsidy by more than \$267 million. These investments have proven wise and effective, with tremendous improvement in student achievement – especially amongst minority populations and struggling schools – under Governor Rendell's leadership.

While there was not significant movement in overall test scores over last year, since 2002 students across Pennsylvania have made significant progress in achievement. This is extremely encouraging news for the Commonwealth:

- Across **ALL** grade levels, subjects and demographic groups, achievement levels are on the rise. By focusing on the lowest performing students, the achievement gap between student subgroups is closing. This is happening at the same time that **ALL** subgroups proficiency rates are rising.
- Looking back at the lowest performing schools in 2002, those where less than 50% of students were proficient, tremendous improvements have been realized. These schools have made great strides and are catching up to their higher achieving peers.
- The number of schools who had high percentages of students scoring below basic has shrunk dramatically since 2002. Scores of these schools have shown dramatic improvement and many of their lowest performing students have climbed to basic levels.

Marathon...Not a Sprint

When assessing student performance year to year, it is viewed as a marathon and not a sprint. The finish line is 2014 when every student must cross it at 100% proficiency in math and reading. Pennsylvania students generally maintained strong performance from last year:

- Third grade math and reading scores went up 1.7 percentage points and 1.0 percentage point, respectively.
- Fifth grade math and reading decreased slightly by 2.1 percentage points and 3.6 percentage points, respectively.
- Eighth grade math decreased slightly by less than one percentage point while reading went up by 6.6 percentage points.
- Eleventh graders improved by 1.2 percentage points in math and 0.1 percentage point in reading.

These results prove that the unprecedented advances of last year were real. Students are maintaining their performance and improving in some areas with no significant decreases anywhere.

The Right Perspective

The true picture of student performance can be seen by looking at where students began in 2002 compared to where they are now in 2006. Since 2002, achievement across every grade level has increased:

- 67% of all 5th grade students were either proficient or advanced in math, up from 53% in 2001-02.
- 61% of all 5th grade students were either proficient or advanced in reading, up from 57% in 2001-02.

- 62% of all 8th grade students were either proficient or advanced in math, up from 52% in 2001-02.
- 71% of all 8th grade students were either proficient or advanced in reading, up from 59% in 2001-02.
- 52% of all 11th grade students were either proficient or advanced in math, up from 50% in 2001-02.
- 65% of all 11th grade students were either proficient or advanced in reading, up from 59% in 2001-02.

Additionally, most student subgroups, which are based upon race or ethnicity, special education needs, limited English proficiency and economically disadvantaged status, have increased their proficiency rates across all grade levels by **DOUBLE DIGITS** since 2002. For example:

- African American 5th graders have improved in math (40%, up from 18%) and reading (34%, up from 22%); African American 8th graders have improved in math (33%, up from 16%) and reading (44%, up from 24%); and African American 11th graders have improved in math (22%, up from 17%) and reading (35%, up from 26%).
- Latino 5th graders have improved in math (47%, up from 29%) and reading (36%, up from 29%); Latino 8th graders have improved in math (39%, up from 24%) and reading (45%, up from 30%); and Latino 11th graders have improved in math (25%, up from 21%) and reading (35%, up from 29%).
- IEP 5th graders have improved in math (33%, up from 17%) and reading (24%, up from 15%); IEP 8th graders have improved in math (20%, up from 10%) and reading (27%, up from 13%); and IEP 11th graders have improved in math (11%, up from 10%) and reading (19%, up from 14%).
- Economically disadvantaged 5th graders have improved in math (49%, up from 29%) and reading (40%, up from 32%); 8th graders have improved in math (42%, up from 25%) and reading (50%, up from 31%); and 11th graders have improved in math (29%, up from 22%) and reading (41%, up from 29%).

Test participation rates across all subgroups have remained constant, and in many cases have increased. Pennsylvania does not hide struggling students and does not ignore their needs. Three years ago, Governor Rendell made it a priority to ensure that the students who need the most attention and devoted resources would get them. These positive four-year trends speak directly to his commitment.

Success in Struggling Districts

Students in the lowest-performing school districts have made significant progress in reading and math proficiency since the 2001-02 school year. Looking at districts where less than 50% of students were proficient or advanced in 2002, we see that students in all grades and demographic groups are achieving at higher levels. Importantly, the gap between the achievement of all students and student subgroups (black and Latino/Hispanic are the two largest subgroups) has narrowed. Since the 2001-02 year:

- Fifth graders scoring proficient or advanced overall improved by 21.3 percentage points in math and 9.3 percentage points in reading;
 - Eighth graders scoring proficient or advanced overall went up by 16.9 percentage points in math and 17.4 percentage points in reading; and
 - Eleventh graders scoring proficient or advanced increased overall by 5.6 percentage points in math and 9.4 points in reading.
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- **Fifth grade subgroups** scoring proficient or advanced showed *double-digit progress* in **math**. White students improved by 19.8 percentage points, black students by 23.4 percentage points, and Latino/Hispanic students progressed by 19.6 percentage points. White students improved by 7 percentage points, black students by 12.5 percentage points, and Latino/Hispanic students progressed by 8.1 percentage points in **reading**.
 - **Eighth grade subgroups** – all of the largest subgroups showed *double-digit* improvement in math and reading. **Math** scores for white students advanced by 17.8 percentage points, 18.4 percentage points for black students, and 19.4 percentage points in Latino/Hispanic students. **Reading** scores went up by 17.6 percentage points for white students, 20.4 percentage points for black students, and 16.6 percentage points for Latino/Hispanic students.
 - **Eleventh grade subgroups** scoring proficient or advanced showed strong improvement – White students by 9.2 percentage points, black students by 5.6 percentage points and Latino/Hispanic students by 5.4 percentage points in math, while reading scores improved by 13.7 percentage points for white students, 9 percentage points for black students and 8.7 percentage points for Latino/Hispanic students.

Achievement in Struggling Schools

Looking back at the lowest performing schools in 2002, where less than 50% of students were proficient or advanced, great improvements in student achievement have been realized. In many cases these schools have made greater gains than their higher achieving peers:

- Of these 724 low-performing schools, in 2002 only 24% of their students were proficient or advanced in math, while 30% of their students were proficient or advanced in reading.
- However, in 2006 in these same exact schools, 40% of students are now proficient or advanced in math while 44% of students are proficient or advanced in reading.

Progress In Every Cohort Over Three Years

Today's 8th graders in every student subgroup are performing higher than they were as 5th graders three years ago. The percentage of this year's 8th graders scoring proficient or advanced in math improved by 5.9 percentage points and 12.6 percentage points in reading since they were 5th graders in 2003. White, black, and Latino/Hispanic subgroups each showed double-digit improvement in reading, while math score increases ranged from 5 to 7 points.

National trends show that student performance worsens between 8th and 11th grades. Pennsylvania is defying that trend. We have maintained gains overall and across all subgroups in today's 11th graders compared to when they were 8th graders. To further improve secondary schools, the expansion of Governor Rendell's high school reform initiatives, which include Project 720 and Dual Enrollment, must be continued. Additionally, the need to enhance supplemental student assistance through tutoring initiatives, provided through the Accountability Block Grants and Educational Assistance Program, can help increase student proficiency.

Even More Encouraging Signs

The targeted interventions are producing positive results. Schools and districts where significant technical and financial supports have been provided are showing impressive progress since 2002-03. While it is too early to draw firm conclusions, this year's test scores show that we are on the right track:

Educational Assistance Program – Governor Rendell launched the Educational Assistance Program (EAP) in 2003-04 with \$38 million to provide extra tutoring support in 81 school districts. The improvement between the percentage of students scoring proficient or advanced between 2002-03 and 2005-06 is as follows:

- **Fifth graders** showed 14 percentage points improvement in math and 5 percentage points increase in reading. Every major student subgroup improved by double-digits in math: white students improved by 11 percentage points, black students by 16 percentage points, and Hispanic/Latinos by 14 percentage points in math, while reading scores went up by 2 percentage points, 6 percentage points, and 6 percentage points respectively.

- **Eighth graders** improved by 14 percentage points in math and 9 percentage points in reading. Student subgroup scores in math showed double-digit improvement in math and most in reading: White student math scores increased by 13 percentage points and reading increased 8 points; black student scores increased 15 percentage points in math and 12 points in reading; Latino/Hispanics students scores increased 17 points in math and 12 points in reading.

Project 720 – National trends show that student performance worsens between 8th to 11th grades. Pennsylvania is defying that trend. Today’s 11th graders across the Commonwealth have maintained gains overall and across all subgroups compared to when they were 8th graders in 2003. However, to truly improve our secondary schools and increase proficiency rates, there is a need to continue the expansion of Governor Rendell’s high school reform initiatives, which included Project 720 and Dual Enrollment.

75 high schools lead Governor Rendell’s high school reform initiative – Project 720 – to increase academic rigor and relevance. while allowing high school students to take college-level courses simultaneously. These schools are only a modest sample, and it is too early to have enough years of data to assess their progress since Project 720 started.

Over 1,250 more students in Project 720 high schools participated in dual enrollment – i.e., took college courses – as compared to last school year. Participating schools commit to implementing all key platform areas over a multi-year period. Progress in the first full year of implementation has been extraordinary:

- Over 1,000 more 9th grade students enrolled in Algebra in Project 720 schools as compared to last year.
- Over 4,600 more 9th and 10th grade students were offered tutoring and extra instructional supports to help keep them on track towards graduation in Project 720 schools as compared to last year. This is a 30% increase over the previous year.
- Over 2,600 more students received personalized career and college counseling in Project 720 schools as compared to last year.
- On the average, Project 720 schools offered 15% more AP opportunities than other high schools across the Commonwealth

These initiatives are just two small components of the Governor’s increased investments in education, totaling nearly \$1.8 billion.

While the news is certainly encouraging, there is still a lot of work needed to ensure the students take the next step. That next step is becoming proficient. Although there is a long way to go in order to see even greater gains, the first few miles have shown promise and, under the Governor’s continued direction, by the time the halfway point of this race is reached the news will be better.

The PSSA is a Rigorous Test

- Gains by Pennsylvania students in reading and math achievement have been measured by results on the PSSA. Based on national critiques of the PSSA, Pennsylvanians should be proud of the progress our students have made:
 - Achieve, Inc., a national non-profit bipartisan organization created by the nation’s governors and business leaders, recently reviewed the PSSA, noting the following about the state’s exams:
 - Grade 5 PSSA: “...should be emulated”
 - Grade 8 PSSA: “...the constructed-response items at grade 8 are excellent and should serve as exemplars.”
 - Grade 11 PSSA: “...The grade 11 test’s level of cognitive demand was closer to grade appropriateness than in many states where Achieve has found the tests at high school to be barely distinguishable from those at grade 8.”
 - Through its study and review of assessments across the nation, the Fordham Foundation noted of the PSSA that “the testing system earned a solid overall rating for trustworthiness and openness, with high marks for internal consistency and reliability of human scoring of open-ended items” and “the middle school math test...has perhaps the best content coverage of any assessment included in this study.”
 - Finally, the Human Resources Research Organization (HumRRO), through its validity study of the 11th grade PSSA, reported three important findings:
 - “A student who performs well on the 11th grade PSSA will in all likelihood perform equally well on the SAT and the college placement exams.”
 - “The PSSA will predict how a student will do in their first year’s college performance with the same accuracy as either the SAT or the university’s placement exams.”
 - “If a student is at proficient or above on their 11th grade PSSA, they have about a 90% chance of placing directly into credit-bearing, college-level course work their first term freshman year.”

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