

PA Department of Education: Report: Early childhood education opportunities lacking in many counties.

Text of Nov. 23 press release.

HARRISBURG -- Although more than half of Pennsylvania's children share at least one risk factor that may hinder success in school, only about one-third of children under age 5 have access to the quality early learning opportunities that can mitigate those risks, according to a new state report.

The 2009-2010 Program Reach and Risk Report released by Pennsylvania's Office of Child Development and Early Learning found that while the state has made significant progress serving young children, gaps remain in serving those who could benefit most from a quality early education experience.

"Too many young children in Pennsylvania start their path to education facing financial hardship or other obstacles, such as learning English as a second language, having special needs, or living in a household where education has not been made a priority," said acting Secretary of Public Welfare Michael Nardone. "These are the children who need quality early learning opportunities long before they enter a kindergarten classroom.

"This report helps us pinpoint those children at most risk of failing in school so we can effectively direct our early education resources," Nardone said.

Acting Secretary of Education Thomas E. Gluck said the report is a valuable tool for the state and local communities to identify areas of highest need and determine if those areas offer adequate quality early learning opportunities.

"Providing at-risk children with quality early education from birth is a proven strategy to prepare them for kindergarten and for success in school," Gluck said. "This investment pays for itself many times over as children who receive quality early learning opportunities are less likely to require expensive special education and remediation services, and more likely to graduate from high school, attend college or career training, and achieve success in the workforce."

The Reach and Risk report compiles information by county on the number of children affected by 10 risk factors for school failure and the number of children served by early childhood programs. The findings help better target investment for early childhood programs such as Pennsylvania Pre-K Counts, Keystone STARS, Early Intervention, Nurse-Family Partnership, Parent-Child Home Program and Head Start. New to the 2009-2010 report are additional home visiting program data, preschool child outcomes and refined risk level methodology.

Among the report's findings:

- Children in 46 of Pennsylvania's 67 counties and 21 of the state's 27 largest cities are at moderate-to-high risk or high risk of school failure.

- More than half of children under age 5 live in economically at-risk families, which the report identifies as one of the 10 major risk factors for school failure.
- In every county, at least 29 percent of children under age 5 live in economically at-risk households.
- In 23 of the 27 largest cities, more than half of children under 5 live in economically at-risk households.

The report found only about one-third of Pennsylvania children under age 5 currently participate in state or federally funded quality early education programs. The majority of these children are served through the Keystone STARS program, which ensures technical assistance and high voluntary standards for child care providers in the community. However, only four percent of children under age 5 in Pennsylvania were served in high quality STAR 3 and 4 programs.

Evidence-based research shows children who have access to quality early childhood education show measurable gains in early learning skills – gains that can translate into long-term savings in special education and remediation costs. These children also are more likely to graduate from high school, attend college or quality job training programs and become valuable members of the workforce.

Evidence also suggests that quality early education programs for children and families translate into a more competitive workforce and stronger tax base, while reducing expenses related to public assistance and crime control.

The full Reach and Risk report is available online at www.pakeys.org. More information on Pennsylvania's Office of Child Development and Early Learning can be found at www.education.state.pa.us or www.dpw.state.pa.us.

Editor's Note: Risk level scores for each county are listed below. Risk level was determined based on 10 family and educational risk indicators. A rating of one (low risk) to four (high risk) was given for each risk factor, based on the percentage of children affected.

Low Risk

Bucks - 1.10
Butler - 1.20
Centre - 1.00
Chester - 1.20
Montgomery - 1.20

Moderate-low risk

Allegheny - 1.90
Beaver - 2.10
Columbia - 2.10

Cumberland - 1.60
Delaware - 2.10
Elk - 1.70
Lancaster - 2.20
Monroe - 2.10
Montour - 2.10
Northampton - 2.00
Pike - 1.80
Union - 1.90
Washington - 1.90
Wayne - 1.80
Westmoreland - 1.50
York - 2.10

Moderate-high risk

Adams - 2.70
Armstrong - 2.30
Bedford - 2.60
Berks - 2.80
Blair - 2.80
Cambria - 2.30
Cameron - 2.50
Carbon - 2.30
Clarion - 2.70
Clinton - 2.90
Franklin - 2.80
Fulton - 2.30
Huntingdon - 2.70
Jefferson - 2.80
Juniata - 2.30
Lackawanna - 2.80
Lehigh - 2.70
Luzerne - 2.80
Lycoming - 2.90
Mercer - 2.60
Mifflin - 2.70
Northumberland - 2.80
Perry - 2.70
Potter - 2.60
Snyder - 2.50
Somerset - 2.40
Sullivan - 2.90
Susquehanna - 2.50
Tioga - 2.50

Warren - 2.70
Wyoming - 2.30

High risk

Bradford - 3.40
Clearfield - 3.00
Crawford - 3.30
Dauphin - 3.10
Erie - 3.50
Fayette - 3.60
Forest - 3.10
Greene - 3.40
Indiana - 3.00
Lawrence - 3.00
Lebanon - 3.00
McKean - 3.40
Philadelphia - 3.70
Schuylkill - 3.00
Venango - 3.40

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