

PA Department of Public Welfare: New report: Early childhood education opportunities still lag in many Pennsylvania counties.

Text of May 3 press release.

HARRISBURG -- Children in three-quarters of Pennsylvania's counties face a moderate to high risk of failing in school, in part because they lack access to high-quality education resources in their earliest years, according to a new state report.

The 2008-2009 Reach and Risk Assessment Report, released today by Pennsylvania's Office of Child Development and Early Learning, finds that while the commonwealth continues to make progress serving young children, gaps remain in serving those children who could benefit the most from a quality early education experience.

"We are seeing amazing results from our early education initiatives, and we know these programs are preparing our children for success in school," said Secretary of Education Gerald L. Zahorchak. "This report highlights the advancements we've made in reaching more children, but also makes clear that there are thousands of at-risk children that could benefit."

Secretary of Public Welfare Harriet Dichter said the report is a valuable tool to identify regions and cities most likely to benefit from expanded programs designed to offset risk factors for young children.

"In this economy, we need to work harder than ever to be strategic and resourceful in our public investments," Dichter said. "This report gives us a targeted snapshot of both the places our early education programs are reaching as well as the regions where more efforts and investments need to be made."

The Reach and Risk report compiles information by county on the number of children affected by seven risk factors for school failure, as well as the number of children served by early childhood programs. The findings are intended to help better target funding for early childhood programs such as Pennsylvania Pre-K Counts, Keystone STARS, Early Intervention and Head Start.

Among the findings of the Reach and Risk report:

- Children in 51 of Pennsylvania's 67 counties and 24 of the state's 27 largest cities are at moderate-to-high risk or high risk of school failure.
- More than one-third of children under age 5 are living in low-income families, which the report identifies as one of the seven major risk factors for school failure.
- In every Pennsylvania county, at least 15 percent of children under age 5 live in low-income households.
- In 20 of the 27 largest cities, more than half of children under 5 live in low-income households.

The report finds only about one-third of Pennsylvania children under age 5 currently participate in state or federally funded 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 three 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 greater tax base, while reducing expenses related to public assistance and crime control.

The full Reach and Risk report is available 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 seven 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 1.0
Montgomery 1.0

Moderate-low risk

Butler 1.14
Centre 1.14
Chester 1.14
Pike 1.14
Westmoreland 1.14
Cumberland 1.29
Elk 1.29
Union 1.57
Washington 1.71
Monroe 1.86
Snyder 1.86
Wayne 1.86

Moderate-high risk

Beaver 2
Cameron 2
Carbon 2.14
Columbia 2.14
Delaware 2.14
Fulton 2.14
Montour 2.14
Northampton 2.14
Sullivan 2.14
Susquehanna 2.14
York 2.14
Armstrong 2.29
Bedford 2.29
Forest 2.29
Juniata 2.29
Perry 2.29
Warren 2.29
Wyoming 2.29
Franklin 2.43
Lackawanna 2.43
Adams 2.57
Allegheny 2.57
Clarion 2.57
Lancaster 2.57
Potter 2.57
Schuylkill 2.57
Huntingdon 2.71
Indiana 2.71
Lebanon 2.71
Tioga 2.71
Somerset 2.86
Blair 3.0
Bradford 3.0
Cambria 3.0
Jefferson 3.0
Lehigh 3.0
Luzerne 3.0
Lycoming 3.0
Northumberland 3.0

High risk

Lawrence 3.14
Mifflin 3.14
Berks 3.29
Clearfield 3.43

Dauphin 3.43
Erie 3.43
Mercer 3.43
Venango 3.57
Clinton 3.71
Crawford 3.71
McKean 3.71
Greene 3.86
Fayette 4.0
Philadelphia 4.0

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