



# background

Report # 130

School Readiness in Pennsylvania

November 2011

## School readiness a work in progress

*Despite progress, 15 Pennsylvania counties remain 'high risk'*

Pennsylvania has made considerable progress in the past 10 years toward strengthening the infrastructure necessary to prepare young children to enter school ready to learn and succeed. Higher child care standards, incentives for child care providers to improve the quality of their programs and other steps have helped Pennsylvania shed its once dismal standing as one of the least supportive states in terms of preschool education.

A state report suggests, however, that in the majority of counties across the state more work needs to be done to address gaps in reaching children who could benefit the most from quality early education opportunities.

About 35% of Pennsylvania's 737,202 children under the age of 5 years participate in state-funded programs that promote quality early education, such as Keystone STARS, Head Start, Early Intervention and Pre-K Counts programs, according to the 2009-2010 Reach and Risk Report by the state Office of Child Development and Early Learning (OCDEL).

Meanwhile, more than half of young children experience at least one of the factors the state identifies as putting them at risk of school failure, such as low birth weight, low maternal education and living in an economically at-risk family.

In Allegheny County, where nearly 54% of children experience at least one risk factor for school failure, more than 39% are enrolled in state-support quality early education programs.

The annual report is intended to help identify communities at risk, determine how many children are being

reached with quality early learning programs that can help lessen the risk of school failure and to better inform the allocation of resources.

Each county is assigned a numerical risk level based on 10 family and educational risk indicators. Counties are then ranked in one of four categories: "low risk" of school failure, "moderate-low risk," "moderate-high risk" and "high risk" of school failure.

The majority – 31 counties – received a "moderate-high risk" ranking, with 5 counties ranked "low risk" and 15 counties receiving a "high risk" of school failure ranking.

### Can Progress Be Sustained?

Quality early education has emerged as one of the most important ways to help children reach their potential and succeed in school. Those opportunities are especially important for children with circumstances that put them at risk of failing in school.

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*Significant steps were taken to improve Pennsylvania's early childhood education infrastructure. But maintaining quality and expanding opportunities to more children who can benefit from early learning stand as key challenges at a time of severe state budget cuts.*

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Pennsylvania has made significant progress in recognizing the role of early education and creating an infrastructure for quality early learning opportunities, including effective programs and higher child care standards. Increased state funding over the past 10 years is a key reason why.

But severe budget constraints raise questions about whether the state will continue to expand quality early education to a wider population.

### Children At Risk

About 58% of Pennsylvania's children live in an economically at-risk family, which the report defines as families with incomes of 300% of the federal poverty level or below, a range that makes it difficult to afford quality early education and their children.

Other risk factors include low birth weight, a mother not receiving adequate prenatal care, poor student

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performance in school, and so-called “toxic stress” factors, such as exposure to violence, physical and emotional abuse and neglect. To determine risk rankings, OCDEL weighed those risk factors and participation levels in public, quality early education programs in each county.

In the western Pennsylvania, for example, Butler County was the only county given a “low risk” ranking. About 39% of children under age 5 lived in households with an annual income of up to 300% of the federal poverty level – well below the statewide average. Nearly 15% of Butler County children were born to mothers who didn’t receive early prenatal care compared to 20% statewide and 7% of mothers had less than a high school education compared to 16% statewide.

The other counties in the state to receive a low-risk ranking were Chester, Montgomery, Bucks and Centre.

Allegheny County was among 16 counties with a “moderate-low risk” ranking. About 54% of children lived in economically at-risk families, less than the state average. The percentages of mothers who did not receive early prenatal care and mothers with less than a high school education were about half of the statewide average.

In Fayette County, which ranked “high risk,” 76% of children live in economically disadvantaged families and 20% of mothers have less than a high school education. Also, nearly 29% of third graders scored below proficient in the Pennsylvania System of School Assessment reading test compared to 22% statewide. Other high-risk counties include Philadelphia, Erie, Indiana and Greene.

### Programs With Promise

Several programs show promise in lessening such risks. The most widely

used is Keystone STARS, which reached 15% of children under age 5. The program is designed to improve childcare quality by offering providers training in how to promote early learning, other assistance and financial incentives. About 4% of children statewide were enrolled in the highest quality STAR 3 and STAR 4 sites. The program is so popular among providers that there is often a waiting list for training and other support.

Early Intervention served 9% of children under age 5. Early Intervention serves children with disabilities/developmental delays to help them to succeed in early education settings. Head Start state and federal programs reached 5% of the children with comprehensive early learning services.

Pennsylvania Pre-K Counts offers high-quality pre-kindergarten opportunities to 3- and 4-year-old children at risk of school failure due to low income or language or special needs. The program reached about 4% of the state’s population of children under 5.

OCDEL reported positive outcomes for a sample of children in Pre-K Counts, Head Start Supplemental Assistance Program, and Keystone STARS levels 3 and 4. Children’s skills, knowledge and behavior were assessed, as were accomplishments in language and literacy, mathematical and scientific thinking and social

development and other areas. The number of children who showed gains across all areas increased significantly.

### Challenges Ahead

Maintaining a quality network of early education services is an ongoing challenge. Take, for example, the popular Keystone STARS program. “It’s a constant struggle to keep quality standards, accountability, monitoring, training and technical assistance in place,” said Laurie Mulvey, director of the University of Pittsburgh Office of Child Development (OCD) Division of Service Demonstrations. “You’ll still have turnover in teachers. There are always new providers. There is always room for growth.”

Funding to continue to improve the early childhood infrastructure has emerged as a serious challenge at a time of severe budget cuts.

Another is building on gains children make in early education. Effective early learning programs alone do not guarantee children’s long-term success. “The probability is greater today that a kindergarten teacher will get a child who is ready for school,” said Raymond Firth, director of the OCD Division of Policy Initiatives. “But if they then go into a school that is not that good, they are going to slip backward.”



## references

Pennsylvania Office of Child Development and Early Learning (2011). Program Reach and Risk Assessment 2009-2010. [www.pakeys.org/pages/get.aspx?page=EarlyLearning\\_Reach](http://www.pakeys.org/pages/get.aspx?page=EarlyLearning_Reach)

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