



## Pennsylvania’s Academic Performance and Implications for Charter School Reform

The 2011-12 state PSSA results show declines across the board, and fewer districts and schools making Adequate Year Progress. Here are some key facts concerning this latest development, and what lawmakers can do to help children in the worst-performing schools.

### Performance Statewide Declined

- The **percentage of students proficient** in reading and math **declined** for 4<sup>th</sup>, 8<sup>th</sup> and 11<sup>th</sup> grade students.
- The National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), which is both a harder test than the PSSA, and allows us to compare performance with other states, showed **declines from 2009 to 2011 among 8<sup>th</sup> grade students**.

Pennsylvania Statewide Test Results						
PSSA Results				NAEP Results		
Percent Proficient & Advanced				Percent Proficient & Advanced		
	2010-11	2011-12	Change	2009	2011	Change
Math - 4th	85.2	83	-2.2	46	48	2
Math - 8th	76.9	76.4	-0.5	40	39	-1
Math - 11th	60.3	60	-0.3	N/A	N/A	N/A
Reading - 4th	73.3	72.1	-1.2	37	41	4
Reading - 8th	81.8	79.8	-2	40	38	-2
Reading - 11th	69.1	67.8	-1.3	N/A	N/A	N/A

- As a result of lower test scores and increasing requirements under No Child Left Behind, fewer schools and school districts made Adequate Yearly Progress.
  - In 2011-12, **61 percent of school districts** made AYP, compared with 93 percent in 2010-11.
  - In 2011-12, **49 percent of schools** made AYP, compared with 72 percent in 2010-11.
- A **widespread cheating scandal** may partly explain the drop in PSSA scores in 2011-12.
  - A *Philadelphia Inquirer* examination of schools under investigation for possible cheating found that almost all of the probed schools saw declines in test scores, in many cases dramatic.
  - A total of 30 schools across Pennsylvania saw a decline of **more than 20 percent** in their overall proficiency rate in **both** math and reading.

## Increased Spending Has Not Increased Performance

- Pennsylvania has **doubled overall K-12 education spending** in the last 15 years, from 1996 to 2011. Pennsylvania now spends nearly \$15,000 per student on average.
- Public school **staffing increased by about 35,000 employees over 10 years**, while student enrollment declined about the same amount.
- School districts had more than **\$3 billion in reserve funds** as of 2011, which represents a tripling in 14 years. That is, they've been able to save large portions of their allotted education funds, despite increases in spending and claims of education funding cuts.
  
- Pennsylvania's average composite SAT score in reading and math has hovered around 995 during that time.
- The NAEP shows **only about 40 percent of 4<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup>-graders are proficient in reading and math with scores unchanged for nearly 10 years.**
- Increased spending does not guarantee better academic results. A **2010 study** from the 21<sup>st</sup> Century Partnership for Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics Education (21PSTEM) looked at 30 Pennsylvania school districts that improved the most on 11<sup>th</sup> grade reading and math performance and the 30 districts that declined the most from 2004 to 2010. **Schools that declined in performance had *higher* increases in total per-student spending.**

## In Our Largest Cities, Charter Schools Outperformed Traditional Schools

In many of the largest, worst-performing districts, charter schools are proving more likely to make AYP.

- In Philadelphia, **13 percent of district schools made AYP**, compared with 53 percent of charter schools.
- In Pittsburgh, **11 percent of district schools made AYP**, compared with 39 percent of charter schools in Allegheny County.
- In Allentown, **10 percent of district schools made AYP**, compared with 50 percent of charter schools in Lehigh County.
- In Harrisburg, **only one of 12 district schools made AYP**, compared with one of the two Dauphin County charter schools.
- In Erie, **only one of the 21 district schools made AYP**, compared with one of five Erie County charter schools.
- In Reading, **none of the 24** district schools made AYP. Only one charter school served Berks County in 2012; it did not meet AYP requirements.
- In Scranton, **only 12 percent** of district schools made AYP. The only charter school in Lackawanna County met AYP.

Percentage of Schools Making AYP, 2011-12			
	Made AYP	Missed	Percent
Philadelphia District	33	217	13%
Philadelphia Charter	43	38	53%
Pittsburgh District	6	50	11%
Allegheny Co Charter	7	11	39%
Allentown District	2	18	10%
Lehigh Charter	2	2	50%
Harrisburg District	1	10	9%
Dauphin Co Charter	1	1	50%
Erie District	1	20	5%
Erie Charter	1	4	20%
Reading District	0	24	0%
Berks Co Charter	0	1	0%
Scranton District	2	15	12%
Lackawanna Co Charter	1	0	100%

### **Lawmakers Have a Chance to Expand Public School Options**

Legislation pending before the General Assembly would reform the state charter school law, including:

- Creating a statewide board that can authorize new charter schools. Currently, only school districts can approve new brick-and-mortar charter schools (the state handles cyber charters), effectively limiting the options for parents. This is like giving McDonald’s sole authority to approve new Wendy’s locations.
- Increasing ethics rules and accountability measures for charter school operators.
- Providing funding for charter schools directly from the state, rather than through school districts.
- Providing a “parent trigger” whereby parents could convert a failing district school to a charter school. Such measures make schools directly accountable to parents for providing children a quality education. Current legislation would allow this only when 50 percent of parents *and* 50 percent of teachers support such a conversion. Strengthening such language to allow a group of parents to perform such a turnaround alone would create a meaningful parent trigger.

###

*Nathan Benefield is director of policy analysis with the Commonwealth Foundation ([www.CommonwealthFoundation.org](http://www.CommonwealthFoundation.org)), Pennsylvania's free-market think tank.*