



Next Steps

Study and Action Guide 7

Through involvement with this Study and Action Guide series, you have learned what we must do to improve our schools and you have taken important steps in demanding that our elected officials address these issues.

In our final Study and Action Guide, we will review the principles for change that we've identified and talk about other ways that you can help this grassroots movement grow.

We are here because of a simple concept: far too many of our children leave school unprepared for the world that awaits them, and it is up to us to bring about the changes that will give every child the opportunity to succeed.

Pennsylvania's school funding system is still among the most regressive in the nation. It ensures that poor children will attend poor schools, while children from wealthy communities are able to learn in classrooms armed with the latest educational tools and strategies.

To give all of our students a chance, we absolutely must fix the funding system. But we cannot stop there. Our schools also have to invest in what we know works and they must be held accountable for student learning outcomes. Only then will we be doing our part to ensure that all children are achieving at the rigorous levels we should expect of them.

There are four basic components of comprehensive school reform.

- **School districts must have adequate resources to provide every child with a quality education.** We have to start out by saying, "This is what it costs to educate a child so that she or he will meet high standards by the time of graduation." By setting this foundation level and adjusting it for factors such as poverty, limited English proficiency and special education, we are explicitly linking the funds that we invest in our schools with the expectations that we hold for student achievement.
- **The state must equitably distribute resources, so that a child's zip code does not determine the value of the education that he receives.** Pennsylvania should find an approach that has the state bear the lion's share of the school funding burden while decreasing local property taxes and providing net new dollars for education. Reform should be designed so that it provides communities with the tax relief they need while creating a sufficiently funded education system.
- **Districts have to be able to invest in the educational practices that we know help children learn.** Decades of school reform have taught us a great deal about the strategies that work and those that do not. The state should ensure that all districts have the resources to provide: a quality teacher in every classroom; pre-kindergarten and full-day kindergarten; family resource centers in high-needs communities; small class size in the early elementary grades; first-rate curriculum aligned with rigorous standards and the technologies to support it; extra time for learning; and adequate and safe facilities.
- **Hold educators accountable for results.** The state must hold educators accountable for their roles and responsibilities in helping children learn. Schools should be rewarded and sanctioned

based on multiple measures of success, including whether their students meet and exceed student achievement growth goals over the course of several years. At the same time, schools must be given the tools for success. And educators and schools should never be forced to compete against one another; collaboration among educators is a crucial ingredient for success.

So how do we turn these ideas into state policy? None of these four pieces alone is sufficient to improve our schools, but together they form the fundamental components of a solution. Now that you have completed this learning process, you are armed with the knowledge to further mobilize your friends, neighbors, co-workers, and community members.

Legislator Accountability

Our elected leaders will only bring about the necessary changes to the current system when voters demand it. So it is the responsibility of each of us to help move these issues to the forefront of public attention.

Hopefully, you now have greater confidence in holding your state legislators accountable for giving Pennsylvania one of the best school funding systems in America. Our legislator scorecard can help you identify what legislators will do when they're really championing an issue – and help you keep track of how committed your legislators are to improving our system of school funding.

By now, you should also have a greater sense of how to evaluate various legislative proposals that emerge. You can stay informed about these developments by staying connected to Good Schools Pennsylvania, or by subscribing to the Public Education Notebook produced by the Education Policy and Leadership Center (www.eplc.org). Also, refer to the accompanying piece, "Criteria for Evaluating Pennsylvania Education Funding Proposals/Budgets."

Remember the value of occasional face-to-face visits with your legislators. When lawmakers know you're paying attention, they are more likely to pay attention, too. And when they know that **many** of you are paying attention, your chances of success increase dramatically.

Dig Deeper into Schools

As this Study and Action Guide series has shown, there is a real need for advocates to go beyond what we typically call "parental engagement" to pay close attention to what goes on in our schools. Dare we suggest that what Pennsylvania needs is many citizens bearing witness to what Jonathan Kozol has described in his various writings as the "savage inequalities" facing many of our children – and the "ordinary resurrections" of children who manage to thrive despite the raw deal that's been handed to them.

By documenting the real conditions of our schools, we can be stronger advocates in the policy arena as well as do what's possible locally to ensure that our schools have the resources they need to provide a rich curriculum, or needed professional development, or other necessary interventions that help struggling students succeed.

We've suggested using surveys designed by Philadelphia Citizens for Children and Youth, or the essay "Tale of Two Schools" to gain a better picture of what is happening in your schools. You can also deepen your learning of how you can play a role in closing the achievement and opportunity gaps in your community by reviewing the Education Law Center's Action Plan and Toolkit for community-based advocacy, available at: <http://www.elc-pa.org/pubs/downloads/english/schoolreports/parent%20toolkit%207%2027%2005.pdf>

If you want to go deeper into school leadership, the Education Policy and Leadership Center (EPLC) offers its own training programs to prepare citizens to become education leaders in their communities. Information is available at <http://www.eplc.org/leadership.html>.

Public engagement is even more essential now that it looks certain that Pennsylvania will begin to require voter approval of increases in school district taxes beyond an index amount. While it's too early to tell how this will affect the ability of schools to maintain and improve existing academic programs, it is not too soon to begin laying the foundation for communities to support their schools if the need for a referendum ever arises. There are several opportunities for citizens to take part in long-range planning, in school improvement, and in coordinating the relationship between schools and communities. Through your engagement, you can help create a climate in which the community understands what it is being asked to support and what improvements in student achievement they can expect in return for higher taxes.

Regardless of what happens in Pennsylvania, the No Child Left Behind law will continue to drive changes in classrooms, schools and communities. Proficiency requirements increase again in 2008. There will be real consequences for schools that do not achieve at higher levels with their students. Schools and communities have much work to do to make the best of coming changes.

Stay involved with Good Schools Pennsylvania

Public education will always need champions – those who understand that schools and communities rise and fall together -- and who work to make great schools happen. As part of your continuing advocacy, consider initiating dialogue not only with state lawmakers, but with others in your community who should be joining us in the advocacy effort and who are critical to leveraging support for change from our elected officials. Seek endorsements for this campaign for educational equity from your school board, local and county government, your faith-based community, civic and school groups, local media and businesses. Deepen your involvement with Good Schools Pennsylvania by volunteering to make presentations in your community, or by leading other groups of citizens through the Study and Action Guide.

With the understanding of education policy and finance issues you have gained from your work with Good Schools Pennsylvania, you are also a prime candidate to be an excellent school board member. The hours can be long and the choices difficult, but there are few in your community who could serve as effectively as you. In most cases, running for school board involves little competition and little cost. But it is another way to put your experience and knowledge in play for the students and taxpayers in your community. Again, the Education Policy and Leadership Center is a good resource for training specific to school board candidates.

Your participation in the Good Schools Pennsylvania Study and Action Guide has already made you a leader in your community. By putting what you have learned into action, you have become a champion for children. Is there any better title than that? **Thank you for being an advocate for children, and remember – Every Kid Counts!**

Criteria for Evaluating Pennsylvania Education Funding Proposals/Budgets

Here are eight questions that the Governor, every legislator, school district officials, parents and taxpayers should ask about the next state budget for public education, or any proposal affecting school funding.

1. Does it increase the annual share (percentage) of Elementary/Secondary Education revenues that come from state sources?
2. Does it increase the amount of state revenues appropriated annually per pupil for Elementary/Secondary Education?
3. Does it reduce the dependency on real property taxes in school districts to support Elementary/Secondary Education?
4. Does it reduce the large gap of financial and educational resources available in the lowest-spending school districts compared to the highest-spending districts?
5. Does it provide sufficient funding to ensure that adequate financial resources are available to support the educational capacity necessary to give every student an opportunity to accomplish the state's academic proficiency expectations?
6. Does it ensure that education funding will be used first to provide the educational capacity that has been proven to have a positive effect on student learning?
7. Does it create a rational and reliable statewide education funding system that provides a predictable method for determining state funding responsibilities for elementary/secondary education from year to year?
8. Does it enable the Pennsylvania public education system to meet the educational needs of all of its students?