

Life as a teenager in Pennsylvania



Graduation Gap Youth in Transition Series

Executive Summary

Every year in Pennsylvania, one out of five high school students fails to graduate.

Of the 153,523 ninth graders who started high school in 2000-01, those not reaching graduation four years later (2003-04) totaled 33,349 or 21.7 percent – more than one in five students. Nationally, only 71 percent of ninth graders graduate four years later (*National Education Summit on High Schools, NGA and Achieve, Inc., 2005*).

While it wouldn't surprise anyone that the graduation gap is wide in urban districts, it is clear also that this is a statewide issue. One in eight suburban ninth graders and one in six rural ninth graders in 2000-01 did not graduate from high school in the same district four years later. For example, if a ninth grade homeroom in a rural district has 24 students, just 20 students from that classroom will graduate four years later. In a suburban homeroom of 24 students, only 21 will graduate from high school in the same district four years later.

Urban, Rural and Suburban Graduation Gap

Urban 

2 out of 5 kids fail to graduate

Rural 

1 out of 6 kids fails to graduate

Suburban 

1 out of 8 kids fails to graduate

Who are Youth in Transition?

They are young people who are moving from adolescence to teen years to adulthood. These transitions include middle school to high school; high school to college; high school to the military, to the workforce, or perhaps, to marriage and family. Unfortunately, some young adults don't make this shift successfully, instead drifting through their post high-school years out of school and out of a job, transitioning to no place at all.

How do young people transition successfully to adulthood?

What are the driving forces in their lives that determine whether they'll hit bumps in the road on the journey through school and beyond?

Young adults need:

- An education that prepares them for the rigors of college or a competitive labor market; they need skills that create the potential to earn wages that will support themselves and a family someday;
- To avoid risky behaviors such as illegal drug use in order to become healthy, well-adjusted adults;
- Strong interpersonal relationships with friends and family who support their growth and achievements;
- Strong connections to the community that forge a sense of belonging.

The absence of any of these key factors – such as a high school education and diploma – creates turmoil in the transition from youth to adulthood.

To view data by county or school district, go to <http://www.papartnerships.org/dropouts/index.asp>

Statement of the Problem

Adult life for young people without at least a high school diploma is full of economic problems and few opportunities to advance skills or boost knowledge. Dropouts earn less than their diploma-holding peers. Low wages and high job turnover lead to family instability when these young people marry and have children.

Earnings estimates from the U.S. Bureau of Census show the median Pennsylvania income by educational attainment to be:

- \$7,800 for less than a high school diploma;
- \$25,021 for high school diploma or GED;
- \$30,000 for some college, no degree;
- \$32,182 for associate's degree;
- \$45,246 for bachelor's degree; and
- \$62,919 for post-graduate degree

(Pennsylvania Workforce Development, 2004 Current Population Survey)

The less education a worker has, the more likely he or she is to be unemployed. In 2004, the unemployment rate was 9 percent for Pennsylvanians with less than a high school diploma versus 6 percent for high school graduates and 3 percent for college graduates. *(Pennsylvania Workforce Development)*

If every Pennsylvanian simply graduated from high school, our combined annual earnings would increase by \$107.4 million more. *(“States that Raise their High School Graduation Rates Could Generate Millions More in Higher Wages,” Alliance for Excellent Education, 2005)*

In addition, dropouts have higher rates of teen pregnancy, substance abuse and crime. Eighty percent of those incarcerated are dropouts. *(NASSP, What Counts, 2005)*

An unsettling trend growing across the country shows dropouts getting younger. In Pennsylvania, the greatest losses occur in the first two years of high school – 7.9 percent between ninth and 10th grades and 7.3 percent between 10th and 11th.

Urban, Rural and Suburban Graduation Gap

Districts	Grade 9 2000-01	Graduates 2003-04	Graduation Gap	% Gap
Urban	39,453	21,767	17,686	44.8%
Rural	40,010	33,575	6,435	16.1%
Suburban	74,060	64,832	9,228	12.5%
TOTAL	153,523	120,174	33,349	21.7%

What do we Know?

In 2003, 1.1 million 16-19-year-olds and 2.4 million 20- to 25-year-olds across the country did not have a high school diploma and were not enrolled in school, for a total of 3.5 million. (*U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, as reported in "One Third of a Nation," Educational Testing Service*)

"Disconnected young adults," according to the 2004 Kids Count Data Book, are young adults 18-24 who are not enrolled in school, not working and have no degree beyond high school. In Pennsylvania in 2002, there were 134,000 "disconnected young adults." Fourteen percent of 18-24-year-olds in Pennsylvania are disconnected; 15 percent in the United States. (*2004 Kids Count Data Book, Annie E. Casey Foundation*)

A recent study of dropouts by Johns Hopkins University shows the four strongest predictors of not graduating from high school are poor attendance, poor behavior, failing math, and failing English – all determined by the end of sixth grade (*Robert Balfanz and Liza Herzog, Keeping Middle Grades Students on Track to Graduation, 2005*). Similarly, there is a very high correlation between the percentage of students in a district who score below proficient on eighth grade PSSA exams and the percentage who do not graduate on time.

Students who enter ninth grade reading significantly below grade level are 20 times more likely to drop out of high school than are their highest achieving classmates. (*Alliance for Excellent Education, June 2005*)

We know, too, that there are family and community factors that contribute to kids completing - or not completing - high school, including socioeconomic status, physical and mental health, vocational career experience, and civic and community engagement (*Thaddeus Ferber and Karen Pittman, State Youth Policy, The Forum for Youth Investment, 2002*)

"It is easier to build strong children than to repair broken men." - Frederick Douglass

9th-10th % Gap	10th-11th % Gap	11th-12th % Gap	12th-Grad. % Gap
20.8%	19.9%	8.9%	4.4%
4.4%	4.3%	3.4%	5.0%
2.8%	3.5%	3.1%	3.6%
7.9%	7.3%	4.3%	4.2%

Child Well-Being Indicators

The following indicators of child well-being help create a picture of what it's like to be a pre-teen or teenager in Pennsylvania and why so many young people might have a difficult time transitioning to adulthood:

Pennsylvania Youth: A Snapshot

- One in 7 Pennsylvanians (1,688,643) is a young person, 12-21, faced with the challenges of transitioning from youth to adulthood.

Poverty

- One in 3 Pennsylvanians aged 12-21 lives in a low-income family, below 200 percent of federal poverty level (\$37,700 for a family of four);
- The more concentrated the poverty in a community, the greater the likelihood that students will not complete high school on time.

Foster Care

- Last year in Pennsylvania, 12,166 children (eight out of 1,000) aged 12-20 were placed out of the home for a variety of reasons including family instability, poverty, and abuse and neglect. Children who endure disruptions of parenting are likelier to have poor academic performance as well as diminished physical and behavioral health.

Juvenile Justice

- More than 40,000 Pennsylvania youth ages 12-21 had a juvenile court disposition in 2003. Academically, incarcerated youth function at a significantly lower level than peers their age. (Connect for Kids: "Critical Connections")

Teen Parents

- In Pennsylvania, there are 26,047 teenage girls who are juggling the challenges of being a young mother;
- In 2002, 9.2 percent of babies (1 in 11) were born to mothers under age 20.

Limited English Proficiency (LEP)

- Statewide, 1 in 50 students has limited English proficiency, but in some districts such as Allentown, Lancaster and Lebanon, more than 1 in 10 students struggle to learn English.

Disabilities

- Fourteen percent (255,370) of Pennsylvania high school students have disabilities;
- Approximately 29,659 students (1.6 percent) have severe disabilities.

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Promising Practices

Improving the graduation rate and helping youth transition successfully to adulthood are key issues in the discussion centered on high school reform – in Pennsylvania and across the country. Gov. Ed Rendell has joined the National Governors Association (NGA) in endorsing new ways to decrease the number of high school dropouts.

The NGA-Achieve National Education Summit on High Schools in February 2005 recommended several steps including aligning high school standards to college and workplace expectations; upgrading the high school curriculum; improving teacher knowledge and skills; improving principal training and recruitment; holding high schools and colleges accountable for postsecondary access and success; expanding high school options - including smaller and more personalized learning communities - to meet the needs of all youth; and providing support to low-performing students.

Pennsylvania has begun to address the graduation gap through Project 720 (focused on a more challenging high school curriculum, smaller learning communities, and increased counseling). Other promising interventions include state-funded tutoring for low-achieving students, Annenberg Foundation-funded coaches for literacy and math teachers in high-need districts, and gubernatorial proposals to expand dual enrollment (high school and postsecondary) programs and reform career and technical education.

In communities as diverse as the city of Allentown and Canton, in rural Bradford County, schools are beginning to implement a variety of promising practices, such as:

- Replacing large impersonal high schools with smaller learning communities;
- Requiring a more rigorous core curriculum for all high school students;
- Designing programs for overage ninth graders to get them on track to graduate;
- Providing alternative schools for students needing greater discipline or a different structure (e.g., pregnant or parenting high schoolers);
- Hiring career resource coaches to help students focus on their futures;
- Revising the senior year to provide students opportunities for part-time work or early graduation and college admissions;
- Providing professional development for teachers on differentiated instruction to meet individual student needs;
- Designing programs that retrieve dropouts and support their efforts to earn diplomas.

*Improving the graduation
rate and helping youth
transition successfully
to adulthood...*

