



Life as a teenager in Pennsylvania



Preparing PA Youth for Success in a 21st Century Economy

Ready by 21™ Series

Are We Ready?

In order to compete in a 21st century global economy, Pennsylvania needs a highly-educated and proficient workforce. To prepare this workforce, Pennsylvania must take the steps necessary to assure that all youth have a sound academic background and highly-developed soft skills (communication, thinking and problem-solving) that are required to be successful in the new economy. All students today need rigorous academic courses and career exploration opportunities in high school to adequately prepare them for postsecondary education and 21st century occupations.

Young people who are preparing for college or work require a similar foundation. High school students who plan to enter workforce training programs after they graduate need solid academic skills similar to those needed by students planning to enter college, according to a new study conducted by ACT, Inc., a developer of tests for college admissions and workplace readiness skills. The findings suggest that the math and reading skills needed to be ready for success in workforce training programs are comparable to those needed for success in the first year of college.²

In addition, the American Diploma Project, a multi-state initiative that aims to better prepare high school students for college and careers, reported that employers agree that employees looking to advance in their companies should have high levels of aptitude in math and English skills.³

But too many young people graduate from high school lacking the academic foundation and skills required to be successful in postsecondary education and the workforce. Many more drift away from school without any real means of reconnecting. Numerous young people find themselves out of school and lacking employment, without the skills or opportunities necessary to get back on track. In Pennsylvania, one in 11 16-to-21-year-olds is not working and not in school. These idle youth may lack the resources to reconnect to their lives, but they don't lack the motivation. Research shows they understand leaving school was a grave mistake but find themselves without the means to re-engage in their communities.

How well is Pennsylvania preparing *all* of its young people to be contributing members of society, capable of earning family-sustaining wages one day? What does it mean to be “ready” for college, work and life? Furthermore, what steps should we take as a Commonwealth and as a society to assure that all young people succeed in this new economy?

The Elements of 21st Century Learning

The capacity of young people to be successful in the 21st century goes well beyond basic reading, writing and computing skills. They need to know how to apply knowledge and skills in the context of modern life. To accomplish this, the Partnership for 21st Century Skills (a public-private partnership of key federal education officials and leading national corporations) has identified six fundamental elements for 21st century learning:

- *Emphasize core subjects (English, reading or language arts, mathematics, science, foreign languages, civics, government, economics, arts, history and geography);*
- *Emphasize learning and soft skills (information and communication skills, thinking and problem-solving skills, interpersonal and self-directional skills);*
- *Use 21st century tools to develop learning skills (digital information and communication technologies);*
- *Teach and learn in a 21st century context – students need to learn academic content through real-world examples, applications and experiences both inside and outside of school;*
- *Teach and learn 21st century content (global awareness, financial, economic and business literacy, civic literacy);*
- *Use 21st century assessments that measure 21st century skills – sophisticated balance of assessments.¹¹*

Today's Workers Need Different Skills

By the year 2010, the U.S. will face a shortage of 12 million qualified workers for the fastest-growing job sectors including health care and computer technology. This will make it imperative that *all* youth — both enrolled and out-of-school — have the skills and education to meet this shortage.⁴

A dramatic shift from unskilled to skilled jobs has occurred over the years. Jobs for high school graduates, without any postsecondary education, are disappearing and those that remain do not pay family-sustaining wages. The reality is that a high school diploma is not enough anymore to meet the demands of the workplace and to earn a decent income that can support a family.

Many of the fastest growing high-skill/high wage occupations are being filled with what are called “gold collar” workers. These workers are resourceful problem solvers with job-appropriate training. They are responsible for intermediate decision making and often work in a dynamic environment. To get gold collar jobs, students need additional education after high school, though this is not limited to a 4-year bachelor's degree.⁵

According to the Pennsylvania Workforce Investment Board's High Priority Occupations list, there are hundreds of family-sustaining wage jobs available in Pennsylvania that do not require a bachelor's degree but do require some postsecondary education. For example, architectural and civil drafters can earn an average salary of \$39,430 with postsecondary vocational training. Computer support specialists with an associate's degree can earn \$40,650 in Pennsylvania and physical therapist assistants with associate's degrees can earn approximately \$34,000.

College and Career Readiness and Success

The college readiness rate of high school seniors is distressing. Of public high school students who entered 9th grade in the 2001-02 school year, 22% failed to graduate four years later. This should come as no surprise considering the performance of Pennsylvania's 11th graders on the PSSAs: nearly 50% are not proficient in math and nearly 35% are not proficient in reading, making their prospects for successful postsecondary education or employment bleak.

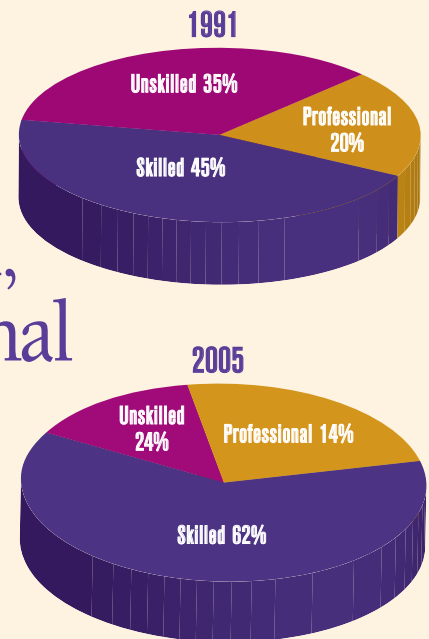
While the PSSA should not be the only indicator of a student's high school performance or their readiness to move on to postsecondary education, a study done for the PA Department of Education indicates that student scores on the PSSA have a strong correlation with performance on the SAT, a very common college entry requirement.⁶ It is logical to assume that if a Pennsylvania student scores poorly on the PSSA, he or she may not be college ready.

While a large number of young people graduate from high school and enroll in postsecondary education, many require remediation or even worse, fail to graduate. In Pennsylvania, 75.5% of high school graduates plan on continuing their education. Of high school graduates nationwide entering four-year institutions, just over six in 10 earn a bachelor's degree within six years.⁷

Research from the U.S. Department of Education shows that college students who need remedial classes are six times more likely to drop out than those who do not. A recent report in *Education Week* validates those figures. The journal reported that about one-third of first-time freshmen in four-year public institutions, and nearly half of first-time freshmen in two-year public institutions enroll in at least one remedial course.⁸

Bureau of Labor Statistics,
1991 to 2005

Skilled, Unskilled, Professional



Pennsylvania lacks a consistent data set from our four-year colleges, community colleges and postsecondary career training programs that would allow us to sort out if young people are completing their education and job training and ultimately, successfully entering the workforce. National studies indicate that 48% of college instructors are dissatisfied with the job public high schools are doing in preparing students for college.⁹

In Pennsylvania, only 41% of high school graduates are deemed “college-ready” as outlined by the Manhattan Institute. College-ready is defined as students who graduate from high school with a regular diploma; have the minimum level of academic coursework to be eligible to enroll in college; and, score at the basic level or above on the NAEP reading assessment.

Students heading from high school to work are not faring much better. Only 25% of employers indicate that most recent high school graduates with no further education are extremely or well prepared for typical jobs in their company, compared to 75% of employers who say most 4-year college graduates and 74% of employers who say 2-year college graduates are extremely or well prepared.¹⁰

“Eighty percent of the fastest-growing jobs require education and training beyond high school. These are the jobs that will drive innovation in the world economy and determine which country will lead that economy.”

Emily Stover DeRocco, Assistant Secretary of Employment and Training, U.S. Dept. of Labor

What Do We Need to Do?

A high school diploma is not enough anymore. Modern careers in a competitive economy command abilities that only can be obtained through postsecondary education. There are, however, multiple pathways to this knowledge and skill set beyond a 4-year bachelor's degree. *Many* routes can lead to a level of competence that will enable our youth to be confident, successful, skilled adults and contributing members of society.

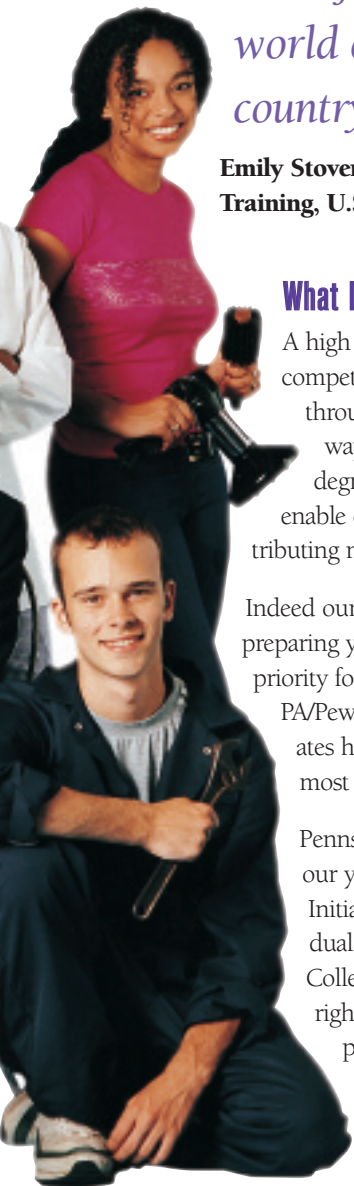
Indeed our economic viability demands such an end result. It seems that preparing youth for postsecondary education and the jobs of tomorrow is a priority for Pennsylvania voters this election season. In a May 2006 Issues PA/Pew poll, 85% of voters polled said being sure high school graduates have the skills they need to be college and career ready is the most important education issue.

Pennsylvania has taken a number of important steps to ensure that our young people are adequately prepared for college and careers. Initiatives such as Project 720 (the state's high school reform efforts), dual enrollment, Job Ready PA, and the Governor's Commission for College and Career Success are all excellent efforts to move us in the right direction, but we must go further to assure that ALL our young people will successfully enter adulthood ready to become contributing members of our society.

“High school graduates must be prepared for a 21st century global economy,” say Ken Kay, president and co-founder of the Partnership for 21st Century Skills, and G. Thomas Houlihan, executive director of the Council of Chief State School Officers.

“Traditional metrics are no longer sufficient indicators of student preparedness. A more meaningful, ambitious high school reform agenda can only be reached when high schools succeed in preparing every student for today's global challenges by aligning their improvement efforts with all the results that matter — mastery of core subjects and 21st century skills.”

Education Week, May 17, 2006





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“Our community vibrancy, personal quality of life, economic viability and business competitiveness depend on a well-prepared citizenry and workforce. Public education provides the bedrock from which our national and individual prosperity rise together.”¹

Endnotes

¹ Learning for the 21st Century

² ACT, Inc. – “Ready for College and Ready for Work: Same or Different?”

³ Ed Week, May 10, 2006

⁴ U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics

⁵ “The Rules Have Changed: Play to Win,” University of Pittsburgh

⁶ HUMRO - 2002, 2003

⁷ National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education, 2006

⁸ Ed Week, May 2006

⁹ “Rising to the Challenge: Are High School Graduates Prepared for College and Work?” Achieve, Inc., Feb. 2005

¹⁰ *ibid*

¹¹ Learning for the 21st Century

Action steps for Pennsylvania:

- Take our current efforts to scale. Project 720 and dual enrollment are positive steps forward but too few Pennsylvania youth have the opportunity to enjoy their rewards. Continue to finance these projects until they are present in every high school and for every young person in our state.
- More closely align pre-K-12 education with the postsecondary system to better prepare high school students for postsecondary success, including increasing academic rigor for all students and instituting a more appropriate uniform statewide accountability system that measures student performance throughout their high school careers rather than just on one test or by receiving a diploma. States such as Indiana, Florida, North Carolina, Virginia and Texas are all way ahead of Pennsylvania in this area.
- Institute a unique student identifier for all publicly-financed education programs from pre-K through higher education so that we can track and support our youth.
- Create a system that provides for early detection of struggling students – preferably no later than 6th grade – and provides for extended and individualized instruction to help them get back on track.
- Institute effective career guidance and education programs that expose young people to the jobs of the future in real-world settings and guide students to the appropriate courses for college and career choices.
- Place a higher value on our career and technical education schools and assist them to provide a rigorous curriculum that promotes high academic achievement and advanced career and technical skills. Such is the case at the Greater Johnstown Career and Technology Center which includes such specialties as carpentry and plumbing but also programs for future teachers, architects and engineers.
- Develop mentoring models that are infused in all youth-serving settings so that every young person develops a deep personal connection to at least one adult who makes a personal commitment to support him/her throughout the education and career development experience.
- Connect out-of-school youth with multiple pathways for educational opportunities that allow them to finish high school and gain postsecondary experience that builds on their skills and provides the flexibility required to meet the complexities of their life circumstances. A promising model in Philadelphia features a data-driven, center-based approach to providing services to youth; a blending of multiple appropriations to increase funds supporting out-of-school initiatives; a collaboration with the school district to increase the number of quality-learning opportunities; and a collaboration with family court and the Department of Human Services to create youth-focused reform strategies for youth returning from placement.
- Give students full credit for the knowledge and skills they have gained, either by using interim benchmark assessments to provide maximum credits for students who leave high school without a degree and then return, or through articulation agreements between our publicly-financed higher education institutions so that students don't lose ground moving from an associate to a bachelor degree when they transfer.
- Take steps to assure that the comprehensive needs of youth are addressed in all of our youth-serving systems. For example, the juvenile court system must take steps to assure that every young person has an education plan; at the same time the public education system must become flexible enough to support special populations of young people such as teen parents and those who need to work.