

**HIGH-PERFORMING AND LOW-SPENDING  
SCHOOL DISTRICTS: BEST PRACTICES  
AND OTHER FACTORS**

**Pursuant to Senate Resolution 243 of 2010**

**December 2010**



General Assembly of the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania  
JOINT STATE GOVERNMENT COMMISSION  
108 Finance Building  
Harrisburg, PA 17120

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## SENATE RESOLUTION 243 OF 2010

On March 22, 2010, the Senate of Pennsylvania adopted Senate Resolution 243 “[d]irecting the Joint State Government Commission to conduct a study of efficiency in public school funding....”<sup>1</sup> More specifically, the Senate directed “the Joint State Government Commission to conduct a study of the 82 school districts found to be successful schools in the APA costing-out study and to issue a report ... of their best practices and other factors that are believed to help contribute to this recognized efficiency and success.”<sup>2</sup>

## BACKGROUND

Governor Edward G. Rendell was elected in 2002 promising to increase funding for basic education. During his two terms as governor, basic education funding has been increased significantly, even during years of challenging economic conditions. Student performance on the Pennsylvania System of School Assessment (PSSA) exams has improved in recent years with math scores increasing more significantly than reading scores. Table 1 shows the amount of state tax dollars (including federal pass-through dollars) used to fund basic education in the Commonwealth during the last eight years. Table 2 shows the percentage of students scoring at least proficient in math and reading on the PSSA exams over the same time period.

As Table 1 reveals, state funding for basic education increased from approximately \$8.4 billion to \$14.1 billion between fiscal years 2002-2003 and 2009-2010.<sup>3</sup> This amount represents a 67.6 percent increase and includes all federal pass-through dollars.<sup>4</sup> During that same time period, the percentage of students proficient in math and reading increased in four selected grade levels (third, fifth, eighth and eleventh)<sup>5</sup> with the exception of reading scores in eleventh grade. More specifically, the percentage of students at least proficient in math in fifth grade increased from 56 to 74 percent; in eighth grade from 51 to 75 percent; and in eleventh grade from 49 to 60 percent. Proficiency in reading also showed some gains in the selected years with the exception of eleventh grade where the percent of students scoring proficient in reading remained flat at 67

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<sup>1</sup> Senate Resolution 243 of 2010, P.N. 1173, pg. 1, lines 1-5.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., pg. 3, lines 14-20.

<sup>3</sup> Commonwealth of Pennsylvania, “2004-05 Governor’s Executive Budget,” pg. E14.9; 2010-11 Governor’s Executive Budget, pg. E14.10.

<sup>4</sup> During this time, inflation increased by approximately 19.3 percent. Source: United States Department of Labor, Bureau of Labor Statistics, “Inflation Calculator.”

<sup>5</sup> These grade levels were selected because the PSSA test was previously administered in only fifth, eighth and eleventh grades. In 2004-05, third grade was added to the list. Staff wanted to exhibit the progression of test score results and have the results be comparable over time.

percent for both 2002-03 and 2009-10 school years. Students at least proficient in reading in fifth grade increased from 58 to 64 percent and in eighth grade from 63 to 82 percent. Third graders were not scored in math and reading on the PSSA until 2004-05, but from that year to 2009-10, the percentage of third graders scoring at least proficient in math increased from 81 to 85 percent and from 66 to 75 in reading.

Even with the significant increases in PSSA exam scores, many of Governor Rendell's critics argue the vast amount of money spent on education should have better prepared districts to meet Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) targets by 2013-14. Furthermore, many legislators, school districts and residents from some areas of the Commonwealth argued the state education funding system that determines how much state money individual school districts received was unfair and outdated. Some districts were receiving significantly more per student than were other districts.

**Table 1**  
**State Basic Education Program Funding Summary<sup>1</sup>**  
**Fiscal Years 2002-03 Through 2009-10**

in Millions of Dollars					
Fiscal Year	General Fund	Special Funds	Federal Funds	Other Funds	Total <sup>2</sup>
2002-03	\$6,931.1	\$1.2	\$1,446.1	\$59.6	\$8,438.6
2003-04	7,250.3	1.2	1,560.5	74.4	8,886.4
2004-05	7,836.3	1.2	1,572.0	81.4	9,490.9
2005-06	8,102.0	1.2	1,716.0	108.6	9,927.9
2006-07	8,773.3	1.2	1,765.7	116.9	10,657.1
2007-08	9,327.6	0.9	1,836.0	115.1	11,279.6
2008-09	9,597.0	1.1	1,904.5	740.8	12,243.5
2009-10 (Budgeted)	9,101.4	1.1	4,308.1	738.0	14,148.7

1. Unless specified, all values are actual values as listed in the Governor's Budget two fiscal years following the fiscal year listed. The 2009-10 budgeted figures were listed as available amounts in the 2010-11 Governor's Budget.

2. Detail may not sum to total due to rounding.

SOURCES: Commonwealth of Pennsylvania, Governor's Executive Budgets 2004-05 & 2005-06, pg. E14.9; and Governor's Executive Budgets 2006-07, 2007-08, 2008-09, 2009-10, & 2010-11, pg. E14.10.



**Table 2**  
**Percentage of Pennsylvania Students Scoring at Least Proficient**  
**on the Math and Reading Sections of the PSSA**  
**Fiscal Years 2002-03 Through 2009-10**

Fiscal Year	3 <sup>rd</sup> Grade		5 <sup>th</sup> Grade		8 <sup>th</sup> Grade		11 <sup>th</sup> Grade	
	Math	Reading	Math	Reading	Math	Reading	Math	Reading
2002-03	NA	NA	56%	58%	51%	63%	49%	67%
2003-04	NA	NA	61	63	NA	NA	40	61
2004-05	81%	68%	69	64	63	64	51	65
2005-06	83	69	67	61	62	71	52	65
2006-07	79	73	71	60	68	75	54	65
2007-08	81	77	73	62	70	78	56	65
2008-09	82	77	74	65	71	81	56	65
2009-10	85	75	74	64	75	82	60	67

SOURCE: Pennsylvania Department of Education, PSSA Results (various years).

Historically, public school funding has been a contentious issue in the Commonwealth, pitting those favoring increased state funding against those opposed to higher local property taxes and perceived “wasteful” school district spending. The former suggests additional state spending on K-12 public education will enhance learning opportunities for all students and balance resources between school districts from varying socioeconomic areas. The latter counters by citing high property tax rates and spending by districts are not producing adequate results.

The equity and adequacy issues have dominated the education policy landscape for many years. Policymakers have wrestled with what constitutes equitable school funding and whether such funding is adequate to help students successfully achieve Pennsylvania’s academic standards. The Rendell administration entered office in January 2003 determined to address these issues, while other policymakers began to more closely scrutinize how tax dollars were being spent and what was being produced.

Act 114 was enacted in July 2006 to address questions regarding education funding. The Act contained a provision directing “the State Board of Education to conduct or provide for a comprehensive Statewide costing-out study to arrive at a determination of the basic cost per pupil to provide an education that will permit a student to meet the State’s academic standards and assessments. ... The study shall consider both adequacy and equity.”<sup>6</sup> The legislation further stated that:

“[a]t a minimum the study shall include all of the following:  
(1) Determine what educational resources and related expenditures are required to provide a quality primary and secondary education for each student in the Commonwealth’s public schools. The study shall include examining exemplary school districts that are high-performing and low-spending school districts. As

<sup>6</sup> Act of July 11, 2006, P.L. 1092, No. 114, §2599.3 (a) and (b).

part of the determination to be conducted under this paragraph, a review shall be conducted of school district tax efforts in support of public schools, including both local and State tax support.

(2) Examine the potential use of geographic cost-of-education indexing in the Commonwealth.

(3) Investigate additional categories of funding that may be necessary to meet needs unique to schools and students, including all of the following:

(i) Poverty.

(ii) Limited English proficiency.

(iii) Students with disabilities.

(iv) Scarcity and density of population.

(v) Issues related to the rural, urban or suburban nature of the school district.

(vi) Issues related to research-based analysis of the difficulty of the educational task.

(4) Study the issue of student population growth and decline to determine the cost impact of both factors.”<sup>7</sup>

In the Fall of 2006, the State Board issued a Request for Proposals (RFP) for “a comprehensive Statewide costing-out study” as directed by Act 114. In reviewing this RFP, the State Board adhered to the language in Act 114 with the notable exception of adding a section specifically detailing methodologies to be used by the contractor to complete the study. The RFP specifically stated:

“Contractor shall, at a minimum, use each of the following methodologies in conducting its research necessary to address the issues described above:

(1) Professional judgment panels-At a minimum, professional judgment panels shall be convened in at least 9 geographic regions of the Commonwealth .... Contractor may propose additional panels based on its analysis of economic, demographic and educational factors. Representative panels shall include rural, suburban and urban school districts. Each panel is to be composed of educators and others such as parents, legislators and representatives of business selected by the contractor. The panels are tasked to design model schools and the essential instructional and support service program components that will assist all students to attain proficiency in the State academic standards. The panels shall include analysis of the difficulty of the educational task. The costs associated with these models shall then be determined.

(2) Successful school districts-A statistical modeling approach that determines the resources used by the best school districts as determined by test scores, attendance, graduation rates and related data. This amount is then used to determine the resources needed to achieve similar results in every school.

(3) Evidence-based-Education policy experts develop models based on research-proven instructional and support services practices that have demonstrated success in assisting students to attain proficiency. A

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<sup>7</sup> Act of July 11, 2006, P.L. 1092, No. 114, §2599.3 (e).

determination is then made as to the cost to develop and implement the model schools and requisite program components. The applicant may propose enhancements and alternatives to these methods. Applicants that choose to do so shall provide a thorough explanation of the alternative proposed and state why it is superior to the method it is proposed to replace.”<sup>8</sup>

Ultimately, the private firm of Augenblick, Palaich, and Associates Inc, of Denver, Colorado, (APA) was awarded the \$644,127 contract in December 2006.<sup>9</sup> The firm followed the RFP minimum requirements that evidence based, professional judgment and successful schools models all be used. The study, commonly referred to as the Costing Out Study, was released in November 2007, with a revised version being released one month later. The report contained 16 findings and recommendations.<sup>10</sup> The recommendations that received the most media attention involved per-pupil spending, disparity between districts in available resources and academic standards.

According to the study, current average per-pupil spending is \$9,512, which APA suggested should be raised to \$11,926, or an increase of 25 percent. In terms of total overall spending, districts would collectively have to spend an additional \$4.38 billion to achieve the goal of all students meeting state proficiency standards by 2014. The study also confirmed a disparity, with the state’s wealthiest districts identified as the most prepared to meet these spending needs, with only a 6.6 percent increase needed in their revenue. Poorer districts would need to raise an additional 37.5 percent. Since current state revenues account for only half of all district revenue, bearing the burden would certainly fall to local revenue sources. Comparatively, the study noted at the time, Pennsylvania was in line with both state and local taxing levels nationwide, but it lagged six to twelve percent behind its border states.<sup>11</sup>

After the release of the Costing Out Study, Governor Rendell and others sharing his desire to increase state education funding consistently touted APA’s study as proof the state was not doing enough to support basic education. Opponents of the study argued the recommendations were too expensive and would not produce satisfactory results for students to justify funding basic education at the level recommended by the study.

These disagreements with the study came to a peak in December 2009, when the Senate Education Committee held a public hearing to review this criticism. Critics of the study cited a lack of correlation between spending and achievement and an over-reliance on traditional methods of funding without exploring new approaches to improving achievement.<sup>12</sup> Examples of other approaches districts should take to improve achievement included merit pay for teachers, additional local decision-making and evaluating student improvement, not simply performance,

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<sup>8</sup> Pennsylvania Department of Education (PDE), State Board of Education, “Request for Proposals for Education Costing Out Study, RFP Number CN00022214,” October 6, 2006.

<sup>9</sup> PDE, “Pa State Board of Education Awards Contract for Education Costing-Out Study,” December 13, 2006.

<sup>10</sup> APA, Costing Out the Resources Needed to Meet Pennsylvania’s Public Education Goals, December 2007.

<sup>11</sup> APA, Costing Out Study, December 2007, pgs. 49-50; PDE, State Board of Education, “Summary of Costing-Out Study,” December 2007; and Education Law Center, “Pennsylvania’s Costing-Out Study,” November 19, 2007.

<sup>12</sup> Senate Education Committee, “Public Hearing on the Costing Out Study,” December 8, 2009; and John Hood, CATO Institute Policy Analysis No. 126, “Education: Is America Spending Too Much?” February 18, 1990.

on an assessment test.<sup>13</sup> Presenters also criticized the study for neglecting to examine private and charter schools where spending is often much less per pupil than in traditional K-12 institutions.<sup>14</sup>

Critics pointed to other costing out studies performed by Augenblick, which all call for dramatic increases in spending with a lack of evidence increasing spending actually results in any measurable increase in achievement.<sup>15</sup> Kentucky, for example, has reformed its education funding system with an “emphasis on equality in student performance and achievement, and not simply equality in funding.”<sup>16</sup> In New Jersey, education spending has tripled over the last 40 years “while results have stayed largely flat.”<sup>17</sup> The Evergreen Freedom Foundation, a free-market think tank in Washington state, commented “you can’t give an excellent education for free, [but] how you spend dollars is as important as how much you spend.”<sup>18</sup>

Those who support increased spending cite several sources that indicate students are succeeding in Pennsylvania, and over 80 percent of schools have met the Federal No Child Left Behind goals for 2010.<sup>19</sup> In addition, reading and math scores are up in all categories, while Pennsylvania ranks in the top 10 in proportion of students taking the SAT exam.<sup>20</sup> Overall, 75 percent of students are performing at grade level and even though the federal targets will be increasing towards reaching 100 percent by 2014, analysts feel the state is well positioned to meet those goals.<sup>21</sup> In fact, the Center on Education Policy lauded Pennsylvania in 2009 as the only state where achievement test scores were on the rise, across the board, from 2002 through 2008.<sup>22</sup> Some policy makers point to this as proof that “taxpayers are making a wise investment in public schools,”<sup>23</sup> and feel the spending goals outlined in the Costing Out Study are achieving results.<sup>24</sup>

When the Senate Education Committee held the December 2009 public hearing, the State Board of Education and Augenblick refused to reveal why the 82 districts identified in the Pennsylvania Costing Out Study as successful schools had obtained such high student achievement. The Board and APA have consistently cited the details of their specific methodologies as “proprietary information.”<sup>25</sup> The firm has consistently stood by its methods to

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<sup>13</sup> Senate Education Committee, “Public Hearing on the Costing Out Study,” December 8, 2009.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> William Hoyt, University of Kentucky, Gatton College of Business and Economics, “An Evaluation of the Kentucky Education Reform Act.”

<sup>17</sup> Rich Lowry, National Review Online, “An Education in Spending: The last thing our education system needs is more money,” October 1, 2010.

<sup>18</sup> Brian Rittmeyer, “Money doesn’t equal performance,” *Pittsburgh-Tribune Review*, April 10, 2005.

<sup>19</sup> Editorial, “School gains: State performance is up, but get ready for next year,” *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*, September 16, 2010.

<sup>20</sup> The Pennsylvania State Education Association, “Good News About Pennsylvania’s Public Schools.”

<sup>21</sup> PDE, News Release, September 14, 2010, “Pennsylvania Students Post Record Gains in Reading, Math Scores: Eight of 10 Schools Meet ‘No Child Left Behind’ Targets for 2010.”

<sup>22</sup> Center on Education Policy, Press Release, August 19, 2009, “Pennsylvania Shows Broad, Consistent Improvement in Test Scores: Only State with Rising Test Scores Across the Board.”

<sup>23</sup> The Pennsylvania State Education Association, “Good News About Pennsylvania’s Public Schools.”

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

<sup>25</sup> Senator Jeffrey Piccola, Press Release, “Piccola Introduces Resolution to Study School Costs,” February 22, 2010; Senate Education Committee, “Public Hearing on the Costing Out Study,” December 8, 2009.

determine the adjusted base cost for per-pupil spending, which it arrived at using adjustment factors including poverty, special education, English language learners, gifted students, district enrollment, geographic size and regional cost of living differences. It also defended the use of evidence-based research panels and their detailed examination of the high performing schools as a well-rounded approach to help put the Commonwealth on the path most likely to meet its expectations for achieving 100 percent proficiency on state assessments.

The lack of specifics provided at the public hearing led to the Senate adopting Senate Resolution 243, in March 2010, charging the Joint State Government Commission (JSGC) to study those 82 districts identified as “exemplary school districts that are high-performing and low-spending school districts,” in the Costing Out Study. The resolution detailed many of the above concerns as reasons why the resolution was introduced.

## **BRIEF HISTORY OF THE PSSA EXAMINATIONS**

Given the significance of the PSSA examination in determining the performance level of school districts in the Costing Out Study, a brief history of the exam and its relationship to Federal law is important for a better contextual understanding of this study’s analysis.

In 1992 the PSSA was established.<sup>26</sup> This test returned to the model of school level reporting and districts participating “every third year based on the strategic planning cycle.”<sup>27</sup> Fifth, eighth and eleventh grade students were assessed for reading and mathematics, and districts could opt into a writing assessment for sixth- and ninth-grade students.<sup>28</sup> Changes were implemented in 1995 that included the following: “all districts were required to participate in the reading and mathematics assessment each year; student-level reports were generated in addition to school reports; and the sixth- and ninth-grade writing assessment became mandatory on a three-year cycle...”<sup>29</sup> Further changes were made in 1999, and “the State Board approved a set of criteria defining Advanced, Proficient, Basic and Below Basic levels of performance,”<sup>30</sup> and math and science results were reported for both the schools and students.<sup>31</sup> Those changes saw “the PSSA [become] a standards-based, criterion-referenced assessment measuring student attainment of the Academic Standards while simultaneously determining the extent to which school programs enabled students to achieve proficiency of the Academic Standards.”<sup>32</sup>

The focus of the PSSA and academic standards testing took a dramatic turn in 2001, with the passage of the federal No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act, which required each state to “establish a timeline for adequate yearly progress. The timeline shall ensure that not later than 12

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<sup>26</sup> Recognizing that not all students, due to their Individual Education Programs (IEPs) or an underlying disability, are able to participate in the PSSAs, a Pennsylvania Alternate System of Assessment, or PASA, is extended to students with “most significant cognitive disabilities,” who are “unable to participate meaningfully in the PSSA.” SOURCE: Pennsylvania Alternative System of Assessment, “About PASA.”

<sup>27</sup> Data Recognition Corp., “Technical Report,” pg. 2.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

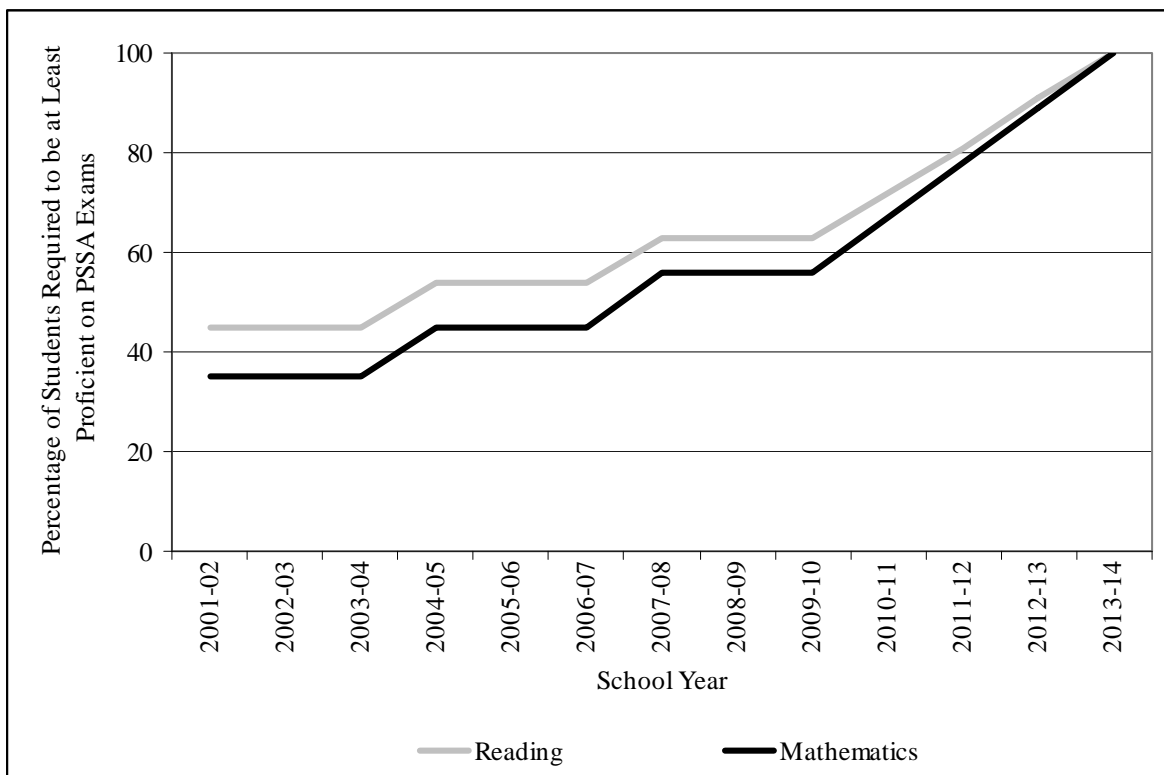
<sup>30</sup> Ibid. at pg. 3.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid.

years after the 2001-2002 school year, all students in each group described...shall meet or exceed the State's standards."<sup>33</sup> The NCLB Act established thresholds, known as Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP), a graduated scale that targets proficiency. The threshold scale began with a reading proficiency of 45 percent of students in 2002-04 rising to 100 percent by 2014 and a math proficiency of 35 percent of students in 2002-04 rising to 100 percent by 2014.<sup>34</sup> Figure 1 illustrates how proficiency targets in math and reading increase gradually from 2001-02 through 2009-10 and then quickly from 2009-10 through 2013-14. The rapid increase in proficiency standards over a four-year span is one point of contention of the NCLB legislation.<sup>35</sup>

**Figure 1**  
**AYP Targets for Math and Reading**  
**2001-02 through 2013-14**



SOURCE: School Reform Commission, School District of Philadelphia, "Adequate Yearly Progress, 2009."

Following the passage of NCLB, some educators and policymakers began questioning “the feasibility and fairness of its goals and time frames.”<sup>36</sup> Even Senator Edward Kennedy, one of the chief proponents of NCLB, called the law’s universal proficiency standard into question, saying, “The idea of 100 percent is, in any legislation, not achievable.”<sup>37</sup> He added, however, the

<sup>33</sup> No Child Left Behind Act of 2001, PL 107-110, January 8, 2002; PDE, “Academic Achievement Report: 2009-2010.”

<sup>34</sup> Seneca Highlands IU Nine, “Adequately Yearly Progress (AYP) Target Thresholds.”

<sup>35</sup> Education Week, “No Child Left Behind,” September 21, 2004.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid.

<sup>37</sup> Amit R. Paley, “No Child Target is Called Out of Reach,” *The Washington Post*, March 14, 2007.

value of the legislation is to inspire students and teachers.<sup>38</sup> The Pennsylvania Costing Out Study also noted “no state or country in the developed world has ever achieved this [100 percent proficiency] goal and it should come as no surprise that the costs involved can be significant.”<sup>39</sup> However, it has also been pointed out that, no matter how one feels about the premise of NCLB, it is nearly impossible for someone to say, “It’s okay to have some children not meet standards.”<sup>40</sup>

Using the 2009-10 PSSA results, 472, or 95 percent of Pennsylvania school districts are meeting 2009-10 AYP targets.<sup>41</sup> However, if all districts do not significantly increase their PSSA results over the next four years, by 2013-14 no district will be meeting 2013-14 AYP targets because of the steep rise in AYP thresholds.

While Senate Resolution 243 limited the scope of the JSGC study to the 82 high-performing districts within the Costing Out Study successful schools model, it should be noted several of these districts would not be considered high-performing if the APA study was performed again with 2009-10 PSSA results. Additionally, there are other districts not included in the original 82 high-performing districts that would now be considered high-performing.

Using the PSSA 2009-10 district PSSA exam results, all high-performing districts in the successful schools model meet current overall student AYP targets in math and reading. That is, all 82 districts meet or exceed the minimum percentage of students that should be proficient in math and reading using the 2009-10 AYP targets.<sup>42</sup> However, if all districts performed the same in 2010-11 on the PSSAs as they did in 2009-10, four districts cited as being high-performing districts in the study would fail to meet the 2010-11 targets. Additionally, 255 other districts not listed as successful districts within the Costing Out Study would meet these targets, presumably indicating these 255 districts might actually be better performing than those listed in the study.

It is important to note staff does not believe the successful schools model was inherently flawed in its approach determining the 82 high-performing districts. Over time, however, some of the 82 districts did not improve as quickly as predicted and other districts not selected possibly improved more than expected. Unless the AYP targets are relaxed or districts are somehow able to rapidly increase their PSSA scores faster than they have in the past, about one-third of districts have a strong likelihood of not meeting AYP targets by 2010-11. The percentage of districts not meeting these targets could grow to about three-quarters of districts in 2011-12, and only a small handful of districts have a solid chance of meeting 2012-13 AYP targets by 2012-13.<sup>43</sup> Currently, no district is meeting the 2013-14 AYP targets of 100 percent proficiency among all students.

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<sup>38</sup> Ibid.

<sup>39</sup> APA, Costing Out Study, pg. 57.

<sup>40</sup> Amit R. Paley, “No Child Target is Called Out of Reach,” *The Washington Post*, March 14, 2007.

<sup>41</sup> PDE, “Academic Achievement Report: 2009-10,” see State Report tab.

<sup>42</sup> Districts must meet math and reading AYP targets district-wide and by each subgroup of students. Staff only examined the overall district proficiency and not the proficiency among subgroups (similar to what the Costing Out Study did in their successful school’s model).

<sup>43</sup> These percentages were based on using each district’s 2009-10 PSSA math and reading proficiency scores and comparing them to the APY targets for 2010-11, 2011-12, and 2012-13.

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SR 243 of 2010 directed “the Joint State Government Commission [JSGC] to conduct a study of the 82 school districts found to be successful schools in the APA costing-out study and to issue a report to the chairman of the Education Committee of the Senate of their best practices and other factors that are believed to help contribute to this recognized efficiency and success.”

Given the time frame to conduct this study,<sup>44</sup> JSGC staff decided the most efficient way to complete this study would be to narrow the list of 82 districts down to a select group of the 25 districts and survey superintendents in those districts. Other data were also used to supplement this survey data.

### THE SCHOOL DISTRICT SURVEY

#### Selection of Survey Respondents

Staff believed the best way to determine which best practices and other factors helped contribute to districts being listed as successful in the Costing Out Study was to survey superintendents of those districts and ask about their successful practices. The first step in the survey process was to decide which of the 82 successful districts would be selected as the 25 districts to be surveyed. The 82 districts are included in the Table 3.

It is critical to note the 82 school districts determined to be successful schools by the Costing Out study are not all “low-spending” districts. For example, the Lower Merion, Jenkintown and Radnor Township school districts were among the highest spending per student districts in the Commonwealth in 2005-06 (the year the study used for its analysis)<sup>45</sup>. In fact, the study only found seven of the successful 82 districts were both “high-performing” and “low-spending.”<sup>46</sup>

Consequently, commission staff determined the most efficient way to examine the best practices and other factors, as directed by SR 243, was to identify the 25 lowest-spending districts among the eighty-two districts deemed successful by the Costing Out Study. The 25 districts selected are indicated in bold print with an asterisk in Table 3.

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<sup>44</sup> SR 243 was passed by the Senate on March 24, 2010 with a deadline of November 1, 2010.

<sup>45</sup> APA, Costing Out Study, Appendix F. pg. 68-72.

<sup>46</sup> APA, Costing Out Study, Pg 10. NOTE: Those seven districts were General McLane, Greater Latrobe, Wyoming Area, Avon Grove, Penn-Trafford, Cumberland Valley and Norwin.

**Table 3**  
**List of 82 Highly Successful School Districts in Pennsylvania**  
**as Listed in the 2007 Costing Out Study<sup>1</sup>**

Abington	Hempfield Area	Quaker Valley
<b>Abington Heights *</b>	Homer-Center	Radnor Township
<b>Avon Grove *</b>	Jeannette City	Richland
Avonworth	Jenkintown	Rose Tree Media
<b>Beaver Area *</b>	<b>Kiski Area *</b>	Salisbury Township
<b>Bellwood-Antis *</b>	<b>Lampeter-Strasburg *</b>	Scranton
Bethel Park	Lewisburg Area	Shanksville-Stonycreek
Camp Hill	Lower Merion	Souderton Area
Central Bucks	Lower Moreland Twp.	South Fayette Township
Colonial	<b>Manheim Township *</b>	<b>South Williamsport Area *</b>
<b>Cornwall-Lebanon *</b>	Marple Newtown	<b>Southern Fulton *</b>
Council Rock	Methacton	Southern Lehigh
<b>Cumberland Valley *</b>	Midland Borough	State College Area
<b>Dallas *</b>	Moon Area	Susquehanna Comm
Derry Township	Mt Lebanon	Tredyffrin-Easttown
Downingtown Area	New Hope-Solebury	Tri-Valley
Fairview	North Allegheny	Unionville-Chadds Ford
Fox Chapel Area	North Hills	Upper Dublin
<b>Franklin Regional *</b>	<b>Norwin *</b>	Upper Saint Clair
<b>Freeport Area *</b>	<b>Old Forge *</b>	Wallingford-Swarthmore
Garnet Valley	Oswayo Valley	<b>Wayne Highlands *</b>
<b>General Mclane *</b>	Palisades	West Chester Area
Great Valley	Parkland	West Jefferson Hills
<b>Greater Latrobe *</b>	<b>Penn-Trafford *</b>	Wissahickon
<b>Greensburg Salem *</b>	Perkiomen Valley	<b>Wyoming Area *</b>
Hampton Township	<b>Peters Township *</b>	York Suburban
Hatboro-Horsham	<b>Pine-Richland *</b>	
Haverford Township	<b>Port Allegany *</b>	

1. The names listed in bold and followed by an asterisks (\*) are school districts that were selected as one of the 25 school districts to receive a survey.

SOURCE: APA, Costing Out Study, pg. 8.

### **The Survey Questionnaire**

Having selected the 25 districts as the intended survey respondents, staff developed the survey questionnaire. As the purpose of the survey was to identify multiple reasons that enable the chosen districts to achieve success, staff incorporated a variety of factors and provided an opportunity for the superintendents to include all the variables that have relevance in their particular circumstances.

Similar to the Costing Out Study, the survey addressed such topics as educational programs, curriculum implementation, staff configuration, management team and others. The survey examined several types of resources: personnel (teachers, tutors, counselors and administrators), particularly in ratio to the number of students; non-traditional programs and services, including pre-school, after-school and summer school programs as well as early

intervention services; and cost-saving practices such as online learning, collaborative educational programs including Intermediate Unit or similar programs, collaborative group purchasing programs and innovative ways of using classroom space and district facilities.

Most of the questions included in the survey are based on the strategies the authors of the Costing Out Study identified as promising on the basis of their research and analysis. These encompass class size reduction; full-day kindergarten access; expanded pre-school and after-school programs; targeted professional development and training opportunities for teachers; targeted staffing increases, specifically the number of counselors, instructional facilitators and tutors; and strengthening the capacity for school principals to become instructional leaders.<sup>47</sup>

In addition to using the Costing Out Study, the JSGC staff benefited from the input and the expertise of several Pennsylvania educators with many years of experience in the field while preparing the survey questionnaire. Based on this advice and on staff's own research, and in an attempt to comprise multiple variables that could impact how a district performed, staff included the "other factors" section that contains questions on parent and community involvement and certain socio-economic characteristics of the community where the district is located.

Staff grouped the questions and organized the survey in a way that would make it easier to understand for the district administrators. To ensure the questions were formulated, arranged and included all necessary areas, staff shared a copy of the original survey questionnaire with a superintendent of another successful school district not selected to be a part of the survey and solicited suggestions for improvement. The superintendent's advice was used in rephrasing certain questions and reorganizing the survey.

The survey questionnaire was delivered to the selected 25 school districts by mail. The school districts' superintendents were asked to complete the survey by October 15, 2010. They were given an opportunity to respond to the survey in one of four ways, whichever they found most convenient: they could respond in writing by mail, placing their response in the enclosed postage-paid envelope; by e-mail; or via telephone.

A complete copy of the survey questionnaire is included in Appendix B on page 63.

### **Survey Response Rate**

In total, the survey had an excellent response rate of 92 percent, with 23 of 25 surveyed districts responding to the survey. Only Kiski Area and Peters Township did not respond.

## **OTHER DATA AVAILABLE**

In addition to the survey data, the Pennsylvania Department of Education's (PDE) website did provide staff with considerable data on all school districts within Pennsylvania. Data

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<sup>47</sup> APA, Costing Out Study, pgs. 58-59.

used from the PDE's website included district enrollment data, the number of low-income students, the Market Value/Personal Income Aid Ratios of each district, PSSA scores over the last several years and the uses of Educational Accountability Block Grant (EABG) money. Data from the National Center of Educational Statistics (NCES) were also used including the locales (urban, rural, suburban or town) of each district. All of these data was incorporated into the Data Analysis Chapter of this report.

### RESULTS OF SURVEY<sup>48</sup>

The JSGC staff surveyed the 25 school districts identified as high-performing and low-spending to ascertain their best practices and other factors contributing to their success and fiscal austerity. Twenty-three districts responded to the survey representing a response rate of 92 percent. Three primary questions and three other, less substantial, questions were asked to all survey respondents. The following three primary questions asked to all surveyed districts.

1. What are some of your best practices that have helped you improve student performance? Please make sure you list all your best practices including, but not limited to:
  - pre-school and/or K4 programs;
  - early intervention services;
  - full-day kindergarten;
  - reduced class sizes in K-3;
  - smaller or larger schools;
  - math and literacy coaching;
  - tutoring assistance;
  - increased instructional time (extended school day, summer school, and/or after school programs);
  - monitoring individual student achievement;
  - social and emotional wellness and school safety programs;
  - dual enrollment opportunities;
  - career development model such as Career Pathway or Career Academy;
  - professional teacher education and development; and
  - faculty mentoring programs.

Of the best practices you listed, please provide some details on these programs including how many students they impact.

2. What other factors have helped your district maintain a high level of student performance with lower-than-average costs? These factors could include, but are not limited to:

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<sup>48</sup> Throughout this section, staff included several quotes taken directly from the school district surveys. We have tried our best to remove identifying text from the survey quotes because we never indicated on the surveys that direct survey comments would be publicized. Since survey quotes throughout this section are numerous and footnoting each one would be tedious and cumbersome, we have italicized all quotes taken directly from the survey responses rather than citing quotes individually.

- active parent and community involvement including PTO & PTA participation;
- the existence of an educational foundation operating within your district;
- certain socio-economic characteristics of your community that, in your opinion, affect education;
- experience of administrators and school board members; and
- specific administrative structure of your school district at the central office and building levels.

3. What are some of the best cost-saving practices your district utilizes?

These factors could include, but are not limited to:

- online learning opportunities;
- collaborative educational programs including Intermediate Unit or similar programs;
- collaborative group purchasing programs; and
- innovative ways of using classroom space and district facilities.<sup>49</sup>

There was a natural divide in the responses to these questions. Question one dealt primarily with best practices districts use to attain high performance from students. Question three dealt primarily with best practices that assist districts in maintaining reduced costs.

The second question on the survey addressed, in large measure, some of the other factors contributing to a district's attainment as high-performing and low-spending. Many of these factors are extraneous to the day-to-day management of the district, including community support, parent involvement, socio-economic characteristics of the community and the tenure of school board members. It would not be accurate to say districts have no control whatsoever over these issues. For example, districts can facilitate and encourage parental involvement and community support. However, the district must ultimately rely on parents and the community to make this effort a success in helping to improve student achievement.

### **Best Practices that Help Make a District High-Performing**

According to the survey results, the question of what makes the various school districts high-performing elicited an extremely large list of responses. The most frequently cited best practices were offering full-day kindergarten, providing tutoring assistance and increased instructional time, monitoring individual student achievement, providing teacher education and professional development programs, offering dual enrollment and other unique learning opportunities and having reduced class sizes in the lower grade levels.

JSGC staff included in this report the specific language provided directly by the districts to describe how and why these practices have contributed to the success of their students. The results reveal similar practices are often implemented in different ways to achieve positive results.

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<sup>49</sup> These are questions taken directly from the survey given to 25 school districts.

## Full-day Kindergarten

The survey showed full-day kindergarten is one of the most frequently cited strategies as a best practice. Nearly all of the 25 districts in the study have some form of full-day kindergarten, whether for a select group of students deemed “at risk” or for the general population of kindergarten students. One of the respondents stated, “*At-risk students have an opportunity to attend a full-day of kindergarten to focus on language arts and math skills.*” This is not a surprising comment given the importance of proficiency in reading and math in the later grades.

As will be explained in a later in this report, about \$271.4 million was spent by all school districts in Pennsylvania through the EABG program. Of this amount, approximately 62 percent of this money was spent by districts to offer full-day kindergarten programs.

## Tutoring Assistance and Increased Instructional Time

Another common strategy districts referenced as being a best practice was providing tutoring assistance and increased instructional time to students. The comments below are examples of the different methods employed by these districts. Many of these initiatives are structural in nature and can be implemented without significant additional costs.

*“This is a very important part of our tiered approach to meeting student’s needs. Tutoring permits us time both during and after school for the extra time and/or repetitions for difficult concepts. The Elementary faculty offers after school help with teachers on an informal basis, after school tutoring on a more formal basis and summer help in the form of Title 1 reading camp in Grades K-2 and summer math and reading help in grades 1-8. In addition to the before and after school tutoring, the Middle School students are afforded a targeted Advisory period, with a small student to teacher ratio, allowing focused group and individual help in areas of weakness...In addition to the before and after school tutoring, High School students not earning proficiency on the PSSA are afforded focused remediation during the day with a certified teacher.”*

*“In the elementary school we offer before and after school tutoring in math and reading for each grade level. In the middle school we have math tutoring before and after school. Another popular program at the middle school is the homework club which runs Monday through Thursday and is open to all students. At the high school we offer Math and English tutoring two days per week. At all levels, the tutoring is open to all students and is voluntary. Students that are experiencing difficulties in core subjects are encouraged by teachers and counselors to attend tutoring sessions.”*

*“Middle School students have time in their schedule to receive assistance in academic areas of difficulty on a daily basis. Students are assigned if necessary to a skills tutorial with a teacher if they are not proficient on the PSSA. High School*

*students are required to attend an after-school tutorial for any subject in which they are failing during any marking period. We also have an after-school homework program (Jump Start) for students at the elementary and middle school levels.”*

*“Middle School IEP students who are not proficient on the PSSA are assigned to additional time in the area (math or reading) in which they are not proficient. Ninth grade students are assigned to a 60 minute math class if they are not proficient on PSSA math.”*

### Variety of Assessment Tools

Superintendents were consistent and adamant in describing the importance of employing a variety of assessment tools to constantly monitor student progress and achievement. The assessment tools most frequently referenced in the survey responses were: 4Sight Benchmark Assessments; Response to Instruction and Intervention (RtII); and Dynamic Indicators of Basic Early Literacy Skills (DIBELS).

According to Pennsylvania Training & Technical Assistance Network (PATTAN), “[t]he Pennsylvania 4Sight Benchmark Assessments are valid, reliable and aligned to the PSSA and provide an estimate of student performance on the PSSA, as well as PA Academic Standards and Assessment Anchor level data to guide classroom instruction and professional development efforts.”<sup>50</sup>

PATTAN also describes RtII in the following way.

RtII is “...an early intervening strategy and carries dual meaning in Pennsylvania. It is a comprehensive, multi-tiered, standards aligned strategy to enable early identification and intervention for students at academic or behavioral risk. ... At a later date, RtII may be considered as one alternative to the aptitude-achievement discrepancy model for the identification of students with learning disabilities after the establishment of specific progress measures. RtII allows educators to identify and address academic and behavioral difficulties prior to student failure. Monitoring student response to a series of increasingly intense interventions assists in preventing failure and provides data that may guide eligibility decisions for learning disabilities. The overarching goal of RtII is to improve student achievement using research based interventions matched to the instructional need and level of the student.”<sup>51</sup>

The Dynamic Development Group defines DIBELS as

“...a set of procedures and measures for assessing the acquisition of early literacy skills from kindergarten through sixth grade. They are designed to be short (one

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<sup>50</sup> PATTAN, “Assessing to Learn: Pennsylvania Benchmark Initiative Basic Information.”

<sup>51</sup> PATTAN, “Response to Instruction and Intervention (RtII).”



minute) fluency measures used to regularly monitor the development of early literacy and early reading skills.”<sup>52</sup>

Many of the districts use these and other assessment tools to measure individual, classroom, building and district level student achievement. The following comments describe some of the measurements and programs.

*“It’s important to target instruction based on individual student needs.”*

*“PSSA and 4Sight data is reviewed by both building administrators and teachers. Lesson plans do reflect instructional and curriculum decisions based on the review of the data. Teachers also do an analysis on end of the marking period and semester exams. It is expected that information derived from the analysis drive instruction.”*

*“Through RtII, universal screening tools like DIBELS, 4Sight, and common local assessments are used to monitor the progress of each student in grades K-8...”*

*“Our professional staff has been using 4Sight testing, starting in grade three to monitor student progress throughout the year. In grades K-2 D.I.B.E.L.S assessments predict how well children are doing in reading comprehension and fluency.”*

*“Elementary students in Tier 2 or 3 RtII[I] groups in reading are monitored bi-weekly. Elementary teachers also use progress monitoring for students who are functioning only slightly above benchmark. Elementary teachers analyze this data at monthly meetings and adjustments are made in the frequency or intensity of student interventions. Middle School teachers meet twice weekly, by team, to discuss data and to monitor progress across the curriculum. Specific student needs are used by core team teachers and shared with Advisory teachers for targeted improvements. Middle School teachers have also used 4-sight and other similar diagnostic and prescriptive software as data management tools.”*

### Teacher Education and Continuing Professional Development

Teacher education and continuing professional development opportunities were also referenced many times in the survey results as best practices districts employ to attain student achievement.

*“The district engages all professional staff in a comprehensive professional development program. The strength of the program centers on the collaborative approach between the administrative and teachers to provide content specific, on-going, classroom embedded professional development. Intense monitoring of*

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<sup>52</sup> Dynamic Measurement Group, “What are DIBELS? Dynamic Indicators of Basic Early Literacy Skills.”

*student achievement provides the basis for decision making related to the activities offered.”*

*“We view our principle professional development similar to how we view our teacher professional development. The culture of a learning community that we strive to create requires us to foster learning for principals in two distinct ways. First, we want to provide our principals the tools they need to help ensure the successful implementation of District initiatives. We expect our principals to be thoroughly involved in all aspects of District professional development. Even though this has been a struggle for our District, we continue with our strategic attempts to help principals understand the capacity their leadership plays in school reform. Secondly, we want our principals to develop personal professional goals and think of themselves as life-long learners. We feel it is important that our principals continue to grow and learn because of intrinsic motivators and we want principals who model this type of behavior to our teachers.”*

*“Our district employs an instructional cabinet approach, both at the building and district level, for decisions the direction of professional development...Teachers are asked to conduct peer observations, participate in peer roundtable discussions moderated by an administrator, engage in a book study, and attend evening professional development sessions to practice and learn new skills.”*

### Dual Enrollment and Other Unique Learning Opportunities

Many of the responding school districts indicated their students were afforded the opportunity to take college courses for both high school and post-secondary credit. Known as “dual enrollment” this program has produced partnerships between school districts and institutions of higher education and enabled students to receive college-level education while completing their secondary education. Districts have been able to establish these partnerships through the Pennsylvania Dual Enrollment Grant Program initiated in 2005. Survey results showed participation in dual enrollment ranged from a small number of students in districts where the program is beginning to almost 50 percent of juniors and seniors in one particular district.

One of the districts responding to the survey indicated it has partnered with other school districts in its region in what is known as the Regional Choice Initiative (RCI). Students are permitted to take classes in other participating districts that are not currently offered by their district of residence. The RCI also has established “Choice Academies” which afford students the opportunity “...to complete a rigorous and diversified hybrid learning experience.”

Many districts have also established Career Academies or Career Pathways initiatives to implement a more rigorous curriculum tied to general categories of career opportunities.

## Small Class Sizes

Several districts indicated their reduced class sizes in Kindergarten through third grade also improved student performance. In addition to asking superintendents if reduced class sizes contributed student achievement, the survey also asked respondents to provide the number of students in their Kindergarten through third grade class. More specifically, the survey asked:

4. What is the average number of students in your Kindergarten through 3<sup>rd</sup> grade classes? (Note: We are looking for number of students per class, not the number of students per staff member.)

Staff initially expected superintendents to answer this question with an average number of students over all grades Kindergarten through third grade. Unfortunately, about half of the survey respondents answered the question as staff anticipated and about half answered it by giving the average class size in each grade separately. Of the districts that gave one average for all grades, the average class size ranged from 19 to 23 students per class. Of the districts that answered the question by giving the average number of student in each class by grade level:

- the average Kindergarten class size ranged from 15 to 21;
- the average first grade class size ranged from 17 to 22 students;
- the average second grade class size ranged from 17 to 23 students; and
- the average third grade class size ranged from 19 to 25 students and one district listing the average class size of third grade classes to be 30 students.

While staff did not ask about teacher's aides, a few of the surveys indicated if a classroom gets over a certain number of students, the district places a teacher's aide in that classroom to assist the teacher. It is evident from the survey results that these high-performing and low-spending districts make a concerted effort to keep class sizes reduced in Kindergarten through third grade.

## Counselor-to-student ratio<sup>53</sup>

School district administrators were surveyed about the counselor-to-student ratio in their districts. The respondents were instructed to include all guidance, career and similar counselors when computing this ratio.

According to the responses, this ratio varies significantly from district to district and, in some cases, even from building to building within one district. Some districts provided the counselor-to-student ratio for the elementary, middle and high school separately; some provided separate numbers for junior- and senior-high. Others offered one number for the whole district, without any grade specification. That made it somewhat difficult to compare the numbers.

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<sup>53</sup> It should be noted that survey respondents were not specifically asked if counselor-to-student ratios impact education. Staff included a question on this topic because previous research has suggested that counselors can benefit educational achievement of students.

The general picture is, however, sufficiently clear. Most districts tend to have more counselors available to high school students than to children in elementary school. Of the districts that listed the student-to-counselor ratio by level, elementary school counselor-to-student ratios tended to range from 501-1,552 to 1, with at least one district falling outside of that range with an elementary school student-to-counselor ratio of 375 to 1. The ratio numbers at the middle school level were generally between 270 and 609 to 1. In most districts, the number of students per counselor at the high-school level ranged between 350 and 450.

Several survey respondents indicated their districts employ counselors and psychologists or counselors and remedial teachers to meet their students' needs. Some districts supplement their counselors with school-based and community-based counseling services provided by outside agencies. One district even noted all building-wide administrators have an active, if informal, counseling role.

School counselors generally fall into one of two categories: guidance and career. Guidance counselors are engaged in the traditional practices most parents and students are accustomed to in the schools. They work directly with students to promote their academic, personal and social development. Guidance counselors review student test scores and work with teachers and parents to ensure students stay on track to advance grade levels and eventually graduate. Guidance counselors are also used to help address disciplinary issues, such as bullying, and often develop strategies to help schools and students navigate through these challenging issues.<sup>54</sup>

Career counselors fill a somewhat new position. As school districts have initiated practices geared towards career exploration and preparation, career counselors have been employed to focus almost exclusively on activities intended to prepare students for the job market. Job search, interviewing, resume writing and other such skills are often within the purview of career counselors.<sup>55</sup>

### **Best Practices Help Keep District Costs Low**

The third question on the survey asked superintendents to list some of the best cost-saving practices utilized by their districts. According to survey respondents, commonly used cost-saving initiatives across the school districts include participating in joint purchasing agreements with Intermediate Units (IUs) and other districts, having an efficient administrative structure, creating regular cycles to review curriculum and technology for cost saving measures, having low staff turnover, and reviewing whether it is more cost-effective to contract out or provide in-house for items such as employee benefits, auxiliary services and special education.

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<sup>54</sup> United States Department of Labor, Bureau of Labor Statistics, "Occupational Outlook Handbook, 2010-11 Edition: Counselors"

<sup>55</sup> Ibid.

## Joint Purchasing

A majority of the superintendents expressly mentioned the use of joint purchasing agreements through the local IU, other districts, or by working with the local municipalities to combine real estate, earned income and per capita tax collections. A few superintendents also mentioned they utilize state contract pricing when it is cost effective. Some surveys noted the local IUs were used by districts for actions such as joint purchasing of general supplies, diesel fuel and natural gas, staff development programs and education of some special needs students.

In addition to working with the IU, several districts indicated they partner directly with other districts to share expenses. Survey respondents mentioned collaborating with other districts to provide food services, transportation, special education services as well as make joint purchases on various employee benefits and computer software. It appears this collaboration does not even have to occur with neighboring districts. One survey respondent noted “[t]he cafeteria manager recently secured a joint purchasing agreement with school districts outside of our region. This change has resulted in substantial savings in costs while having a positive effect on the quality of the menu offerings.”

## Administrative Structure

In addition to collaboration, many survey respondents indicated they are operating with a very efficient administrative structure. Several superintendents’ comments are listed below emphasize this point.

*“[Our district has]...an efficient administrative structure that includes the assignment of two elementary buildings to the elementary principals. A single individual administers all Buildings and Grounds functions. Central office staff assists with building level duties. ... Book keeping responsibilities were recently transferred to the central office resulting in lower personnel costs.”*

*“Effort is made to avoid a top-heavy central administration. Superintendent, business manager and curriculum coordinator are the only central administration. Anytime there is a resignation or retirement, it is seen as an opportunity to analyze the cost-effective manner, cutting staff if possible. For example, many years ago the high school employed one principal, two assistants and two guidance counselors. It was decided that much of what was done by an assistant could be done by a counselor so when the opportunity presented, we went to two administrators and three counselors.”*

Other data reviewed by staff confirm this assertion of efficient use of administrators by the surveyed districts. According to data from PDE,<sup>56</sup> the average administrator-to-student ratio for the 25 districts surveyed<sup>57</sup> was 1 to 263. The average ratio for all districts statewide is 1 to

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<sup>56</sup> PDE, “Professional and Support Personnel Data and Statistics (2009-10).”

<sup>57</sup> Recall that the 25 districts surveyed were the 25 lowest-cost districts (according to the Costing Out Study) among the study’s 82 high-performing districts.

239. This indicates that the 25 districts representing high-performing, low-spending districts maintain a leaner administrative structure than the average district statewide. Nevertheless, one superintendent commented while his district did maintain a very lean administrative structure, it was becoming increasingly difficult to maintain that arrangement. More specifically, he acknowledged:

*“As the state and federal governments continue to pile on requirements and regulations, it is becoming more and more difficult to maintain a smaller administrative staff which is something that has kept our costs down. Just read through a school board policy manual and see all the things mandated. ... We are struggling with how to avoid hiring a director of special education and still meet all requirements. Keeping up with the mandates and helping students achieve academic proficiency while dealing with a host of social issues are pushing our people over the limit. No business in the world would ask a middle manager (principal) to do as much and be responsible for as much as is asked of a principal. We’ve been fortunate in our district to have great administrators who put in a great deal of time, but it is becoming impossible to keep up with it all.*

*Consider what educators are being asked to do:*

*Educators are being called to greater accountability, using data to guide decisions and research to determine instruction. Educators are being expected to inspire students toward greater academic achievement while simultaneously dealing with a tsunami of social issues. All this is to be accomplished against a background of growing student apathy, shrinking resources, more pervasive family dysfunction and a growing sense of entitlement from parents, students and taxpayers.*

*The state needs to take a hard look at all the little things being asked of schools and give some relief. Presently, Intermediate Units are required to hold regular meetings of superintendents, principals and curriculum directors. Any new law from the legislature or requirement coming out of PDE, should be sent to IUs to be reviewed by these groups BEFORE adoption and BEFORE it comes down to the districts. These are the people who are in touch with reality and who can see what these new requirements will cost. They are your go-to people for saving money.”*

### Periodic Review of Technology and Curriculums

Several school districts mentioned they review their technology and curricula on a regular, rotating basis to make sure they are using the most up-to-date technology and curricula available. One school district in particular mentioned it is “*on a schedule for upgrade so that expenses are balanced from year to year.*” Staff is uncertain about the degree to which these measures are cost savings techniques versus efficiency measures. However, they have been

included in the report because they were reported as being cost savings techniques by several districts responding to the survey.

### Low Staff Turnover

Several superintendents indicated they had low staff turnover. This would clearly result in cost savings by negating the need for hiring and training costs. Low staff turnover may bring additional benefits as well: people with experience are likely to be better at their jobs, and people who know each other can often work together more efficiently.

### Employee Benefits, Auxiliary Services and Special Education

A few districts reported they have kept escalating employee benefit costs low by self-funding their medical insurance and other benefits such as dental, prescription drugs, and workers compensation and unemployment. A school district that sponsors a self-funded healthcare plan stated:

*“Since July 1, 2006, we have not increased our contributions for the funding of our self-insured healthcare plan. While it should be noted that while a member of the Northeast Pennsylvania’s School District Health Trust, we were, without a doubt, overpaying, it has resulted in no increases for almost four and one half years...In addition, we believe that we take a more vested interest in our staff’s wellness and try to implement programs that assist, such as Blue Health Solution’s “10 in 10” weight loss program.”*

Districts also noted that other auxiliary services such as transportation, cafeteria and technology are areas where they have examined reducing costs. There did not seem to be a clear indication from survey respondents whether it is most cost-effective to provide all of these auxiliary services through outsourcing or by providing them in-house. Some districts found providing some of these services in-house was the most cost effective way to offer services. For example, with regard to transportation, one survey respondent stated:

*“Beginning for the school year September 2007, we purchased 3 mini-buses (1 with a wheelchair lift) and 4 minivans. Before we took on this initiative, we were contracting 21 minivans that were transporting the same amount of students. We have saved over \$200,000 per year in expenses by running a more efficient bus fleet for these isolated areas. We are continuing to isolate areas of transportation where we can “chip away”. We have and believe we can add to savings in areas such as extra-curricular transportation and field trip transportation. Additionally, we have taken complete responsibility for Intermediate Unit & Early Intervention transportation and, again, believe we have successfully achieved better efficiency.”*

Other districts reported they have reduced costs by outsourcing some of their auxiliary services to outside agencies and companies. For example, one superintendent noted they outsource their “*cafeteria, transportation and technology services*” in order to save money. That same district also noted the cafeteria brings in additional revenue for the school district.

Several surveys stated special education costs were constantly being evaluated to save funds where possible. While some districts use the local IUs and small consortiums of neighboring districts to educate some of their special education students as cost savings measures, others stated they recently had stopped using their local IU to provide special education services believing they could provide the same services at a reduced cost. Below are some of the comments superintendents made regarding the cost of educating special education students.

*“[We] operate an in-house autistic classroom and allow other LEA’s to enter generating additional income.”*

*“The district utilizes best practice in the administration and delivery of programs to its special education students. In recent years, the district has made a focused effort to offer a continuum of services by taking over special education services previously operated by the intermediate unit. The district has also created programs that allow exceptional students in placements outside the district to return to [school] for their educational program. In pursuing these goals, the district has reduced its overall costs while providing greater opportunities for its students. The size of the special education staff, both professional and administrative, has increased. These increases have been more than offset by a reduction in tuition paid to the intermediate unit and tuition charged to out-of-district students.”*

*“We use Intermediate Unit services for special needs students and we share classrooms with other county districts for programs for individual students that may not be offered at other district[s]. We share a career and technology center among six county school districts to provide specialized education services.”*

*“The [school] utilizes the Intermediate Unit for deliver[y] of four special education classrooms, the English Language Learner program, and various off-site classrooms for autistic students.”*

The results of the survey indicate larger school districts would be well-advised to consider providing employee benefits, auxiliary services and special education programs and services in-house rather than through consortia arrangements. Smaller districts are more likely to enjoy cost savings from outsourcing or collaborating with other entities to provide these programs and services. The survey results clearly demonstrate a need for districts to regularly re-evaluate whether it is a more cost-effective use of tax dollars to provide programs and services in-house or contract out with other providers.



## Other Factors Can Help Districts Become High-Performing and Low-Spending

### Parent and Community Involvement

School districts reported active parent and community involvement in the schools plays a large role in being deemed high-performing and low-spending. Of the 23 districts that responded to the survey, 18 (or 78 percent) listed parent and community involvement as a significant reason for their district's successful. The quotes below were from several surveys demonstrating the importance of parent and community support to the successful districts.

*“Our Community-District partnership is a significant factor in our success.”*

*“The ... School District has a very active Parents’ Advisory Counsel that represents all grade levels as well as special needs parents. We meet monthly to discuss issues, share information and utilize these parents as ambassadors for our school district. Each school has a PTO including the high school, which sponsors a senior graduation night lock-in party. This group raises \$40,000 per year to make this experience so attractive that we have averages 98.5 percent attendance by graduating seniors. We encourage our community members that have concerns to come to our school board meetings, share their thoughts during the visitor portion of the meeting. There will always be follow-up on every visitor comment.”*

*“Our community supports our students. Education is seen as important and school events are often the center of community focus. Residents whose children have been out of the schools for many years, still take an interest in the students and progress of the district. This commitment from the community is essential.”*

*“Overall, the ... School District can credit a great deal of their success in maintaining a high level of student performance with lower than average costs on strong parental and community support.”*

*“The ... School District has a vested interest in continuously enhancing our family and community engagement. The district strategic plan includes family and community engagement as a goal with specific activities designed to bring this goal to fruition.”*

### Education Foundations

Education foundations are another example of a tool used by successful districts to supplement funding from other sources. The survey results showed 10 school districts (43 percent of the respondents) indicated the presence of an educational foundation. These entities are typically non-profit organizations and assist districts in raising funds to cover the costs of expenses district budgets cannot include.

*“[The Foundation provides support for more technology resources.] Our Foundation [has] annually ... provided \$50,000 of support for programs and materials that ... would not have been provided through the General Fund Budget. The Foundation has also made commitments to physical plant and extracurricular activities in the amounts of hundreds of thousands of dollars.”*

*“The ... Community Education Foundation was founded in 2008. It has awarded teacher grants in the amount of \$4,000 already since it was founded. While in its infancy, a great group of dedicated volunteers are making sure that it will grow into a revenue source for the future of the school district.”*

### School Board Members and Administrator Experience

Another important factor indicated by superintendents is the experience of administrators and school board members. Overall, 15 of the 23 responding districts (or 65 percent) listed this as an important factor. Of these 15, eight specifically mentioned school board members having a very positive impact. This is significant as district administrators have very little control over whom is elected to govern the district. Below are some quotes from the district surveys emphasizing the importance of experienced administrators and board members.

*“Both the administrative team and the school board are veterans. ... Promotion from within the organization is common but is not assumed. The administrative team is experienced, knowledgeable and works collaboratively. ... [The Board Members] provide clear direction as to the district’s mission and vision but they do not tend to micro-manage the district.”*

*“Administrators that are directly involved with students and curriculum currently have in excess of 18 years of experience in public education and employees in non-curriculum areas, such as business services and food service operations have a lifetime of experience in those fields. We have a good cross-section of educated, experienced Board members, including former and current administrators at this and other districts.”*

*We have an “[e]ducationally focused and supportive school board.”*

*We have “[a]n experienced and collaborative administrative team.” We also have “... solid working relations between [school] board-administration and teachers.”*

*We have a “... Board that is supportive of academic efforts.”*

*“Our District has an extremely supportive Board of School Directors. They do not micro-manage educational decisions. They ask good questions and require the administration to work hard, but in the end, they provide their support.”*

*“We have a highly- qualified [school] board.”*

## Socio-Economic Characteristics of Community

The socio-economic characteristics of any community often define how the community functions. When queried about this particular factor, eight districts (35 percent of the respondents) indicated the socio-economic conditions in their community contributed significantly to their ability to maintain high student performance and keep spending down.

Staff believes the socio-economic characteristics of school districts play a far more significant role than what superintendents are willing to acknowledge. This is particularly the case with high-performing and low-spending districts where administrators are more likely to attribute success to their educational and administrative practices than to the characteristics of their communities.

Below are some of the thoughts garnered from superintendents in the survey.

*“We have a “[f]avorable sociology-economic characteristics that positively affect education.”*

*“This district is suburban in nature. It does have a strong tradition of an agricultural background. While the community has a diverse social economic composition, it has a tradition of excellence and is believed by the community to provide students with a strong and complete education.”*

*“Our socio-economic characteristics are: 98% Caucasian; 1% African-American; Less than 1% Native American, Hispanic, and Asian/Pacific Islander. As you can see, we are very homogeneous. We have few English Language Learners as well.”*

Socio-economic characteristics of a district’s community will be explained in much greater detail in the Other Available Data section later in this chapter. The other data have shown there are strong correlations between district PSSA scores and the percentage of economically disadvantaged students as well as between district PSSA scores and the locale of the district (urban, suburban, rural, or town).

While correlation does not equate to causation, it is probably safe to assume districts with a higher economic disadvantaged population need to work harder to obtain high PSSA scores. Additionally, since nearly all cities have a larger than average percentage of economically disadvantaged students, it would be logical to assert urban districts require additional resources to obtain PSSA test scores similar to districts with low poverty rates.

## District Facilities

One question asked of district superintendents concerned overall district facilities. Specifically, the survey asked: “Do you believe that your district’s facilities (and classrooms in particular) are adequate for your needs?” Most of the responding districts stated their facilities

adequately met their needs. There were a few that mentioned some of their buildings do need upgrading, but overall, classroom space did not seem to be a big issue with the responding districts. A few districts noted they are in need of additional space (mostly outdoor space). One survey respondent stated “...with the increased emphasis on student wellness, we continue to have space/facility concerns to promote the cardiovascular support necessary to move our students toward healthy choices for a lifetime.”

### Teacher and Staff Quality

Finally, while the survey did not ask about the quality of teachers, several superintendents took the opportunity to give credit for their highly successful school district to their teachers and other staff members. One superintendent stated “[a] positive, collaborative relationship with our teacher organization has also been integral in making the changes that have enabled us to continue with our tradition of excellence.” Another superintendent echoed those sentiments by noting “... this District’s success in lower spending and yet deemed high performing is largely due to competent and caring employees including support staff, teachers and administrators.”

## **OTHER AVAILABLE DATA**

### **Educational Accountability Block Grants**

In addition to the survey data, staff also reviewed Educational Accountability Block Grants (EABG) funding to better understand what initiatives the 25 high-performing, low-spending districts use to attain and maintain their success. One potential drawback of using EABG data is some districts could potentially implement best practices without the use of EABG funds and therefore may not appear within these data. However, when staff compared individual survey responses to EABG funding data, it appears many of the surveyed districts’ best practices were funded, at least in-part, by EABG funds.

**Table 4**  
**Budget Allocation for EABGs**  
**Fiscal Year 2004-05 to 2009-10**

<b>Year</b>	<b>Funding Per Year (in millions of dollars)</b>
2004-05	\$200.0
2005-06	200.0
2006-07	250.0
2007-08	275.0
2008-09	271.4
2009-10	271.4

SOURCE: PDE, "2009-10 Accountability Block Grant Mid-Year Report," pg. 2.

**Table 5**  
**EABG Funding, Number of Districts and**  
**Students Impacted by Strategy**  
**Fiscal Year 2009-10**

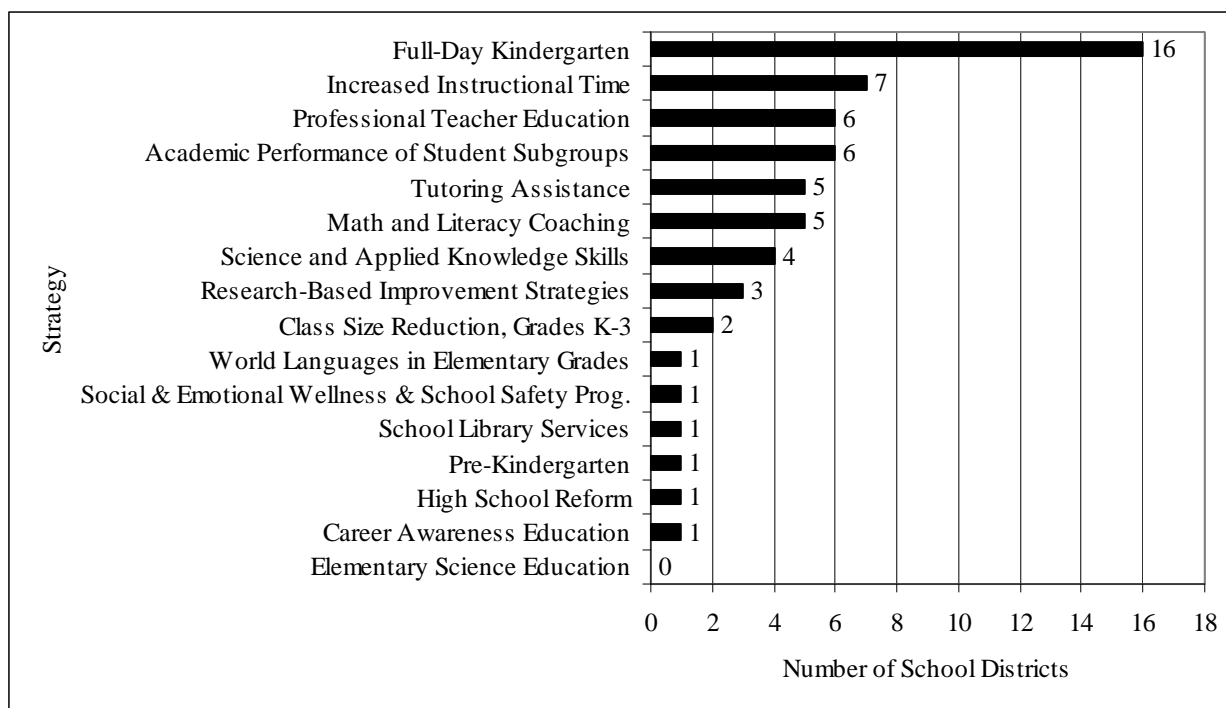
<b>Strategy</b>	<b>Funding (in millions of dollars)</b>	<b>Number of Districts</b>	<b>Number of Students Benefitting</b>
Full-Day Kindergarten	\$169.789	489	62,690
Math and Literacy Coaching	20.033	127	312,762
Pre-Kindergarten	15.265	46	3,539
Class Size Reduction, Grades K-3	14.454	102	21,627
Increased Instructional Time	12.852	185	127,451
Academic Performance of Student Subgroups	9.907	115	79,819
Professional Teacher Education	6.970	130	375,512
Social & Emotional Wellness & School Safety Prog.	5.901	95	195,118
Research-Based Improvement Strategies	4.263	49	51,895
Science and Applied Knowledge Skills	4.130	79	127,526
Tutoring Assistance	3.197	72	17,444
High School Reform	2.590	21	13,176
Career Awareness Education	0.801	21	20,092
Elementary Science Education	0.491	11	14,002
World Languages in Elementary Grades	0.469	7	3,051
School Library Services	0.313	9	15,091

SOURCE: PDE, "2009-10 Accountability Block Grant Mid-Year Report," Appendix C: Funding Level for Each ABG Strategy.

Each year since 2004, the Commonwealth has provided the opportunity for Pennsylvania’s public schools to apply for EABG funds. These PDE grants have offered districts the ability to expand various programs including, but not limited to early childhood education programs, support for struggling students, enhancing teacher quality, and support for research-based programs.<sup>58</sup> Since 2004, funding for EABGs has increased 35.7 percent,<sup>59</sup> or a little more than two and a half times the rate of inflation during the same time period.<sup>60</sup> As shown in Table 4 on page 31, in the 2009-10 fiscal year, the General Assembly appropriated \$271.4 million dollars for EABGs. These grants are utilized by the majority of school districts across Pennsylvania, as represented in Table 5.

While EABG funding has only been around since 2004, a few surveyed districts specifically mentioned the use of EABG for funding some of their best practices they believe contribute to their high-performing status. One survey respondent stated: “[T]he district has had full day kindergarten for several years. The Accountability Block Grant has been wonderful for our district.”

**Figure 2**  
**Number of the 25 Survey Districts<sup>1</sup> using EABG Funding by Strategy**  
**Fiscal Year 2009-10**



1. The 25 surveyed districts represent high-performing, low-spending districts.  
 SOURCE: PDE, “2009-10 Accountability Block Grant Mid-Year Report. Appendix B: Number of Students Benefiting From Each ABG Strategy.”

<sup>58</sup> PDE, “2009-10 Accountability Block Grant Mid-Year Report,” pg. 2.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid.

<sup>60</sup> According to the United States Department of Labor, Bureau of Labor Statistics, “Inflation Calculator,” from 2004 through 2009, inflation increased about 13.6 percent.

Upon further review of EAGB data, the 25 high-performing, low-spending school districts all received at least some assistance from EAGBs. As observed in Figure 2, 16 (64 percent) of these districts used EAGB funds towards full-day kindergarten in 2009-10. Twenty percent or more of these districts also used EAGB funds to help pay for programs for increased instructional time, professional teacher education, academic performance of student subgroups,<sup>61</sup> tutoring assistance and math and literacy coaching.

As previously stated in the survey results, full-day kindergarten, increased instructional time, teacher education and continuing professional development and tutoring assistance were some of the most frequently cited reasons for strong district performance. Staff found these strategies were likely employed as a result of receiving EAGB funding.

Figure 3 further illustrates the relationship between the percentage of all districts using EAGB funds and the percentage of the 25 high-performing, low-spending school districts using EAGB for various initiatives. For example, while over 95 percent of all districts use EAGB for full-day kindergarten, only 64 percent of high-performing, low-spending districts did the same.

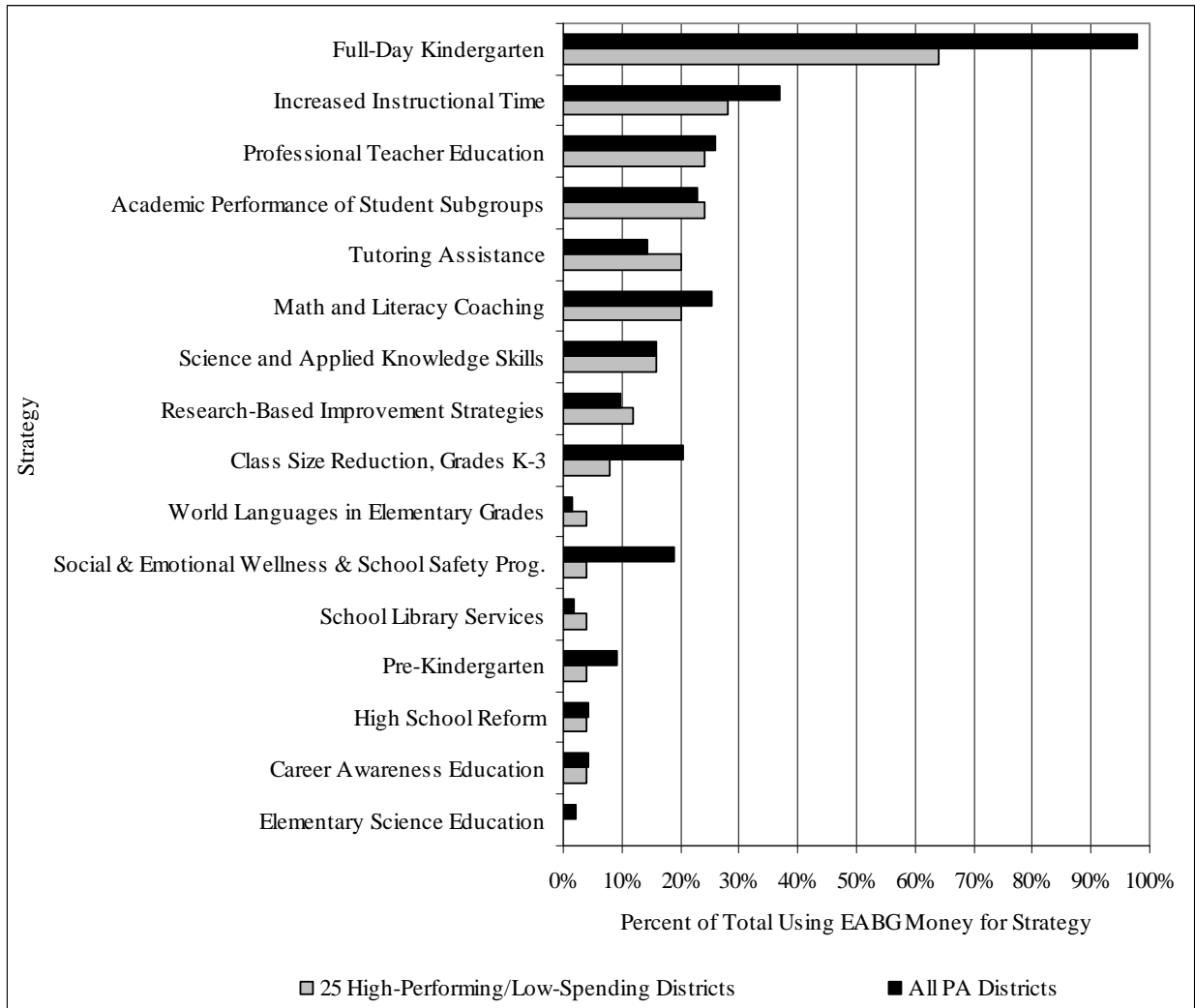
It should be noted with many of the EAGB strategies, the percentage of all districts using money for each initiative was greater than the percentage of high-performing, low-spending districts using EAGB money for the same strategy. As will be discussed in the next section, this may be because the 25 high-performing, low-spending districts are significantly different in socio-economic demographics from the average Pennsylvania district.

For example, only one of the school districts in the survey used EAGB dollars to fund social and emotional wellness and school safety strategies. Surveyed districts likely either determined such programs were not a priority or used other revenue to provide them. However, almost 20 percent of all districts in the Commonwealth used EAGB funds for social and emotional wellness and school safety strategies. The socio-economic characteristics of districts likely determined whether EAGB funds would be used for various strategies. As will be demonstrated in the next section, socio-economic factors contribute to student achievement.

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<sup>61</sup> According to the PDE's 2009-2010 Accountability Block Grant Mid-Year Report: "Students in subgroups identified under the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) must also reach proficiency levels in reading and math. These subgroups include: Ethnic (White, Black, Asian/Pacific Islander, Latino/Hispanic, Native American, Multi-racial), students with IEP (Individualized Education Program), ED (Economically Disadvantaged) and LEP (Limited English Proficiency)."

**Figure 3**  
**Percentage of all School Districts and 25 Survey Districts<sup>1</sup>**  
**Using EABG Funding by Strategy**



1. The 25 surveyed districts represent high-performing, low-spending districts.  
 SOURCE: See Figure 2.

**Socio-Economic Demographics that Impact Student Achievement**

Having examined the best practices, cost savings measures and other factors of the 25 selected school districts via the survey responses and EABG data, this sub-section will review other data to analyze the socio-economic variables impacting student achievement in all 82 of the successful school districts in comparison with all school districts in the Commonwealth. Where necessary, the 25 selected school districts will be mentioned to illustrate whether or not survey results displayed earlier in this report can be generalized to all districts across the Commonwealth.



**Table 6**  
**School Districts Listed in the Costing Out Study as Successful Districts<sup>1</sup>**

<b>School District Name<sup>2</sup></b>	<b>County</b>	<b>NCES Locale (2008-09)</b>	<b>Enrollment (2009-10)</b>
Abington	Montgomery	Suburb: Large	7,423
<b>Abington Heights *</b>	<b>Lackawanna</b>	<b>Suburb: Large</b>	<b>3,474</b>
<b>Avon Grove *</b>	<b>Chester</b>	<b>Rural: Fringe</b>	<b>5,430</b>
Avonworth	Allegheny	Suburb: Large	1,408
<b>Beaver Area *</b>	<b>Beaver</b>	<b>Suburb: Large</b>	<b>1,991</b>
<b>Bellwood-Antis *</b>	<b>Blair</b>	<b>Suburb: Small</b>	<b>1,315</b>
Bethel Park	Allegheny	Suburb: Large	4,772
Camp Hill	Cumberland	Suburb: Large	1,172
Central Bucks	Bucks	Suburb: Large	20,436
Colonial	Montgomery	Suburb: Large	4,671
<b>Cornwall-Lebanon *</b>	<b>Lebanon</b>	<b>Rural: Fringe</b>	<b>4,674</b>
Council Rock	Bucks	Suburb: Large	12,152
<b>Cumberland Valley *</b>	<b>Cumberland</b>	<b>Rural: Fringe</b>	<b>7,717</b>
<b>Dallas *</b>	<b>Luzerne</b>	<b>Suburb: Large</b>	<b>2,729</b>
Derry Township	Dauphin	Suburb: Large	3,551
Downingtown Area	Chester	Suburb: Large	11,823
Fairview	Erie	Rural: Fringe	1,619
Fox Chapel Area	Allegheny	Suburb: Large	4,362
<b>Franklin Regional *</b>	<b>Westmoreland</b>	<b>Suburb: Large</b>	<b>3,690</b>
<b>Freeport Area *</b>	<b>Armstrong</b>	<b>Suburb: Large</b>	<b>1,980</b>
Garnet Valley	Delaware	Suburb: Large	4,743
<b>General McLane *</b>	<b>Erie</b>	<b>Rural: Fringe</b>	<b>2,192</b>
Great Valley	Chester	Suburb: Large	4,045
<b>Greater Latrobe *</b>	<b>Westmoreland</b>	<b>Suburb: Large</b>	<b>4,220</b>
<b>Greensburg Salem *</b>	<b>Westmoreland</b>	<b>Suburb: Large</b>	<b>2,988</b>
Hampton Township	Allegheny	Suburb: Large	3,107
Hatboro-Horsham	Montgomery	Suburb: Large	5,119
Haverford Township	Delaware	Suburb: Large	5,571
Hempfield Area	Westmoreland	Suburb: Large	6,253
Homer-Center	Indiana	Rural: Fringe	907
Jeannette City	Westmoreland	Suburb: Large	1,180
Jenkintown	Montgomery	Suburb: Large	592
<b>Kiski Area *</b>	<b>Westmoreland</b>	<b>Rural: Fringe</b>	<b>4,027</b>
<b>Lampeter-Strasburg *</b>	<b>Lancaster</b>	<b>Rural: Fringe</b>	<b>3,205</b>
Lewisburg Area	Union	Town: Fringe	1,905
Lower Merion	Montgomery	Suburb: Large	7,036
Lower Moreland Twp.	Montgomery	Suburb: Large	2,073
<b>Manheim Township *</b>	<b>Lancaster</b>	<b>Suburb: Large</b>	<b>5,788</b>
Marple Newtown	Delaware	Suburb: Large	3,484

**Table 6: (Continued ...)**

<b>School District Name<sup>2</sup></b>	<b>County</b>	<b>NCES Locale (2008-09)</b>	<b>Enrollment (2009-10)</b>
Methacton	Montgomery	Suburb: Large	5,332
Midland Borough	Beaver	Town: Fringe	347
Moon Area	Allegheny	Suburb: Large	3,723
Mt Lebanon	Allegheny	Suburb: Large	5,300
New Hope-Solebury	Bucks	Town: Fringe	1,566
North Allegheny	Allegheny	Suburb: Large	8,047
North Hills	Allegheny	Suburb: Large	4,402
<b>Norwin *</b>	<b>Westmoreland</b>	<b>Suburb: Large</b>	<b>5,235</b>
<b>Old Forge *</b>	<b>Lackawanna</b>	<b>Suburb: Large</b>	<b>909</b>
Oswayo Valley	Potter	Rural: Remote	528
Palisades	Bucks	Rural: Distant	1,898
Parkland	Lehigh	Rural: Fringe	9,292
<b>Penn-Trafford *</b>	<b>Westmoreland</b>	<b>Suburb: Large</b>	<b>4,293</b>
Perkiomen Valley	Montgomery	Suburb: Large	5,878
<b>Peters Township *</b>	<b>Washington</b>	<b>Suburb: Large</b>	<b>4,449</b>
<b>Pine-Richland *</b>	<b>Allegheny</b>	<b>Suburb: Large</b>	<b>4,550</b>
<b>Port Allegany *</b>	<b>McKean</b>	<b>Rural: Remote</b>	<b>951</b>
Quaker Valley	Allegheny	Suburb: Large	2,029
Radnor Township	Delaware	Suburb: Large	3,682
Richland	Cambria	Suburb: Small	1,588
Rose Tree Media	Delaware	Suburb: Large	3,745
Salisbury Township	Lehigh	Suburb: Large	1,669
Scranton	Lackawanna	City: Small	9,548
Shanksville-Stonycreek	Somerset	Rural: Distant	428
Souderton Area	Montgomery	Suburb: Large	6,863
South Fayette Township	Allegheny	Suburb: Large	2,380
<b>South Williamsport Area *</b>	<b>Lycoming</b>	<b>Suburb: Small</b>	<b>1,354</b>
<b>Southern Fulton *</b>	<b>Fulton</b>	<b>Rural: Distant</b>	<b>899</b>
Southern Lehigh	Lehigh	Suburb: Large	3,063
State College Area	Centre	City: Small	7,083
Susquehanna Comm	Susquehanna	Rural: Fringe	876
Tredyffrin-Easttown	Chester	Suburb: Large	6,290
Tri-Valley	Schuylkill	Rural: Distant	888
Unionville-Chadds Ford	Chester	Suburb: Large	4,155
Upper Dublin	Montgomery	Suburb: Large	4,198
Upper Saint Clair	Allegheny	Suburb: Large	4,098
Wallingford-Swarthmore	Delaware	Suburb: Large	3,507
<b>Wayne Highlands *</b>	<b>Wayne</b>	<b>Town: Fringe</b>	<b>2,997</b>
West Chester Area	Chester	Suburb: Large	11,800
West Jefferson Hills	Allegheny	Suburb: Large	2,884
Wissahickon	Montgomery	Suburb: Large	4,481
<b>Wyoming Area *</b>	<b>Luzerne</b>	<b>Suburb: Large</b>	<b>2,515</b>
York Suburban	York	Suburb: Midsize	2,872

1. The Costing Out Study's successful districts were districts that either attained the 2012 requirements for student performance in reading and math PSSA in the 2005-06 school year or saw recent year-to-year improvements in reading and math scores. This suggests the district would have 100 percent of students testing at least proficient by 2014.

2. The names listed in bold and followed by an asterisks (\*) are school districts that were selected as one of the 25 school districts to receive a survey.

SOURCES: APA, Costing Out Study, December 2007; National Center for Education Statistics, "Data Tools;" and PDE, "Public School Enrollment Reports (2009-10)."

As mentioned previously, there is a strong correlation between certain socio-economic demographics and PSSA math and reading test scores. While correlation does not necessarily imply causation, it does not require detailed analysis to understand why certain demographics can lead to lower or higher student achievement. Table 6 contains a list of the 82 districts along with some basic district characteristics such as county location, 2009-10 student enrollments, and the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) locale code<sup>62</sup> which helps identify if the district is in a rural, suburban, town or urban (or city) environment. The full definitions the locale codes can be found in Appendix C of this report.

#### District Locale (Rural, Urban, Suburban and Town)

The first noteworthy statistic is that of the 82 districts the Costing Out Study indicated were highly successful, 73.2 percent of them were from suburban school districts. In contrast, only forty-two percent of all districts statewide are in suburban areas. In other words, suburban districts are significantly over-represented in the successful districts model. This does not necessarily mean the successful schools model within the study was dramatically flawed; it simply indicates that, on average, suburban districts appeared to do better on PSSA exams than districts from cities, towns and rural areas.

The selection of the 25 high-performing, low-spending school districts surveyed in this report further skewed the sample from the average school district in the Commonwealth. Of these 25 districts, all but one is either suburban or rural. Of the eight that are rural, six of them, including Avon Grove, Cornwall-Lebanon, Cumberland Valley, General McLane, Kiski Area and Lampeter-Strasburg, are classified as Rural: Fringe. Rural: Fringe is defined by NCES as a “Census-defined rural territory that is less than or equal to 5 miles from an urbanized area, as well as rural territory that is less than or equal to 2.5 miles from an urban cluster.”<sup>63</sup> While these districts are technically classified as rural, most people living in those districts would probably classify the district as suburban based on its proximity to an urbanized area or urban cluster. In other words, virtually every district that was surveyed for this study was either suburban or nearly suburban. Table 7 and Figure 4 detail the percentage of all Pennsylvania districts, districts identified as high-performing by the Costing Out Study and districts selected for the JSGC survey that are in each NCES locale.

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<sup>62</sup> The latest available NCES locale codes were from 2008-09. It is safe to assume the vast majority of school districts would probably be in the same locale code in 2009-10 as they were in 2008-09.

<sup>63</sup> NCES, “Common Core of Data: New Urban-Centric Codes.”

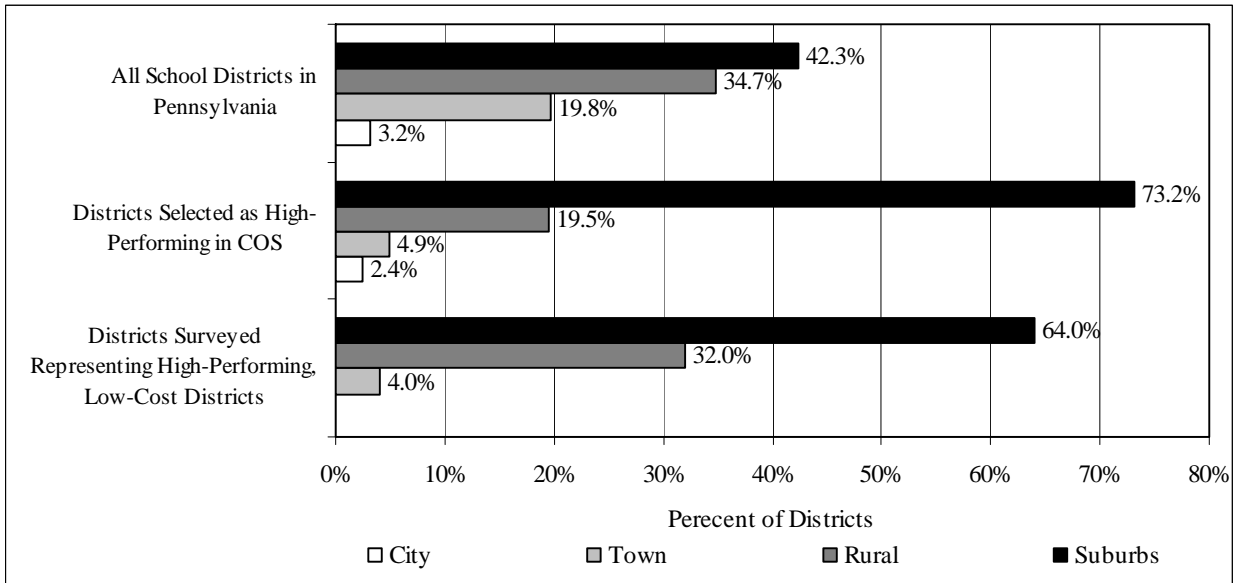
**Table 7**  
**Number and Percentage of Pennsylvania Districts**  
**Located in Cities, Towns, Suburbs, and Rural Areas**

	All School Districts		High-Performing Districts in Costing Out Study		High-Performing, Low-Spending Districts in Survey	
	Number	Percent of total	Number	Percent of total	Number	Percent of total
City: Large	2	0.4%	0	0.0%	0	0.0%
City: Midsize	2	0.4	0	0.0	0	0.0
City: Small	12	2.4	2	2.4	0	0.0
<b>City: Total</b>	<b>16</b>	<b>3.2</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>2.4</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>0.0</b>
Suburb: Large	172	34.3	56	68.3	14	56.0
Suburb: Midsize	20	4.0	1	1.2	0	0.0
Suburb: Small	20	4.0	3	3.7	2	8.0
<b>Suburb: Total</b>	<b>212</b>	<b>42.3</b>	<b>60</b>	<b>73.2</b>	<b>16</b>	<b>64.0</b>
Town: Distant	28	5.6	0	0.0	0	0.0
Town: Fringe	61	12.2	4	4.9	1	4.0
Town: Remote	10	2.0	0	0.0	0	0.0
<b>Town: Total</b>	<b>99</b>	<b>19.8</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>4.9</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>4.0</b>
Rural: Distant	82	16.4	4	4.9	1	4.0
Rural: Fringe	79	15.8	10	12.2	6	24.0
Rural: Remote	13	2.6	2	2.4	1	4.0
<b>Rural: Total</b>	<b>174</b>	<b>34.7</b>	<b>16</b>	<b>19.5</b>	<b>8</b>	<b>32.0</b>
<b>Total</b>	<b>501</b>	<b>100.0</b>	<b>82</b>	<b>100.0</b>	<b>25</b>	<b>100.0</b>

SOURCE: NCES, "Common Core of Data: New Urban-Centric Locale Codes."

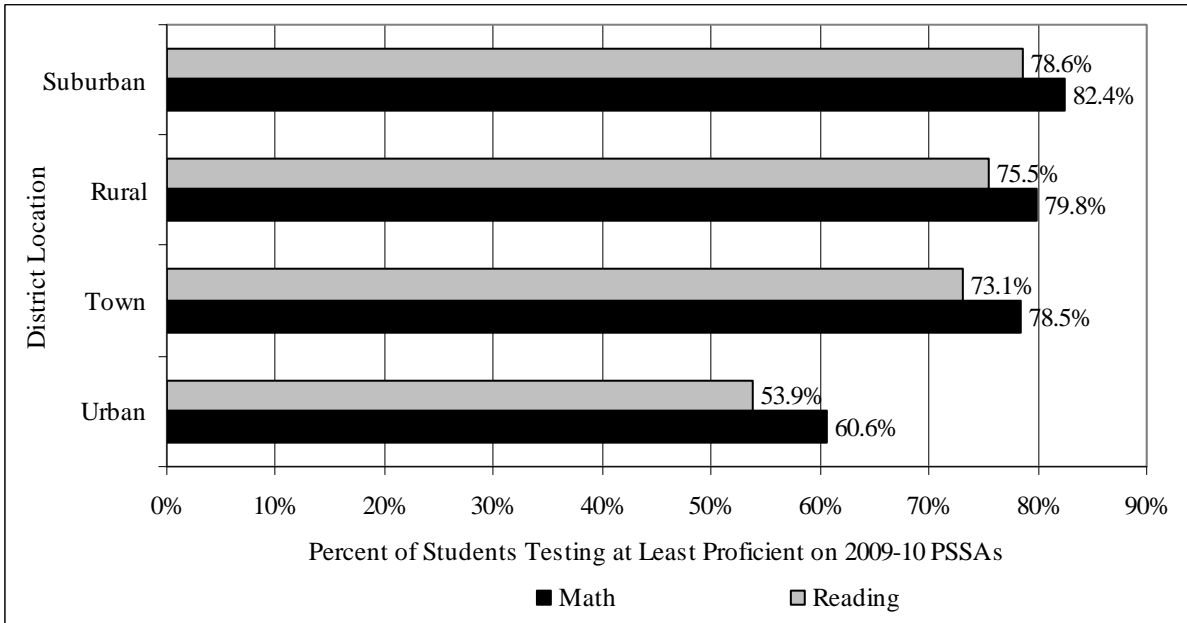
Figure 5 represents a very important finding of this study that should be emphasized. It shows the percentage of students scoring proficient or higher in math and reading by district locale. On average, students in urban districts perform significantly below their peers in suburban, rural and town districts. Most of the next few pages are devoted to examining exactly why urban districts are significantly out-performed by other non-urban districts.

**Figure 4**  
**Percentage of Pennsylvania Districts**  
**Located in Cities, Towns, Suburbs, and Rural Areas<sup>1</sup>**



1. Districts were categorized by NCES locale code.  
 SOURCE: NCES, “Common Core of Data: New Urban-Centric Locale Codes.”

**Figure 5**  
**Percent of Students Testing at Least Proficient in**  
**Math and Reading on the 2009-10 PSSAs by District Location<sup>1</sup>**

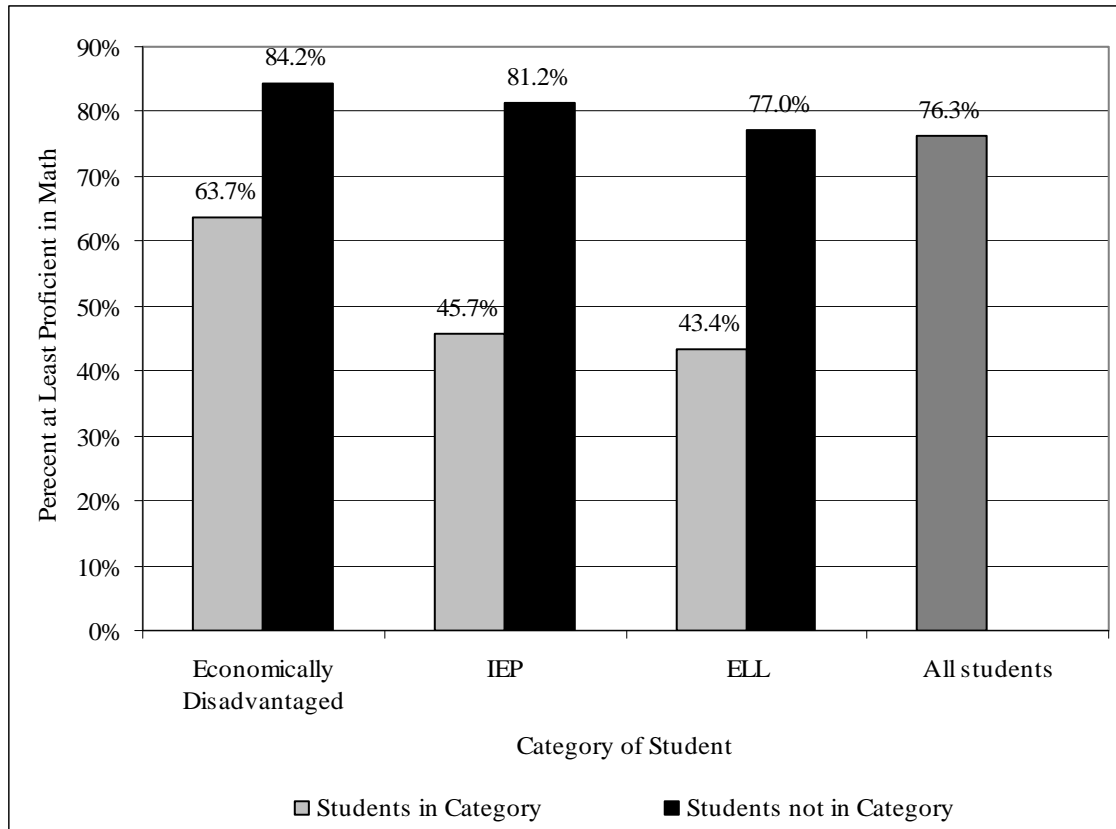


1. Districts were categories by NCES locale code.  
 SOURCES: NCES, “Common Core of Data: New Urban-Centric Locale Codes;” and PDE, “2009-10 PSSA and AYP Results.”

Low-income, IEP and ELL Students<sup>64</sup>

Using 2009-10 PSSA data, the three significant factors that affect how well districts perform on the PSSA test are the percentages of a district's students who are low-income students (sometimes referred to as economically disadvantaged students), have an individualized educational plan (IEP), or are English Language Learners (ELL) students. In Figures 6 and 7, the percentages of students proficient in math and reading in 2009-10 are subdivided by these three student categories. The light gray bars represent the percentage of students who are proficient within these three categories. The black bars represent the same data for students who are not in these categories. For example, 84.2 percent of students who are not economically disadvantaged score at least proficient in math compared to only 63.7 percent of economically disadvantaged students.

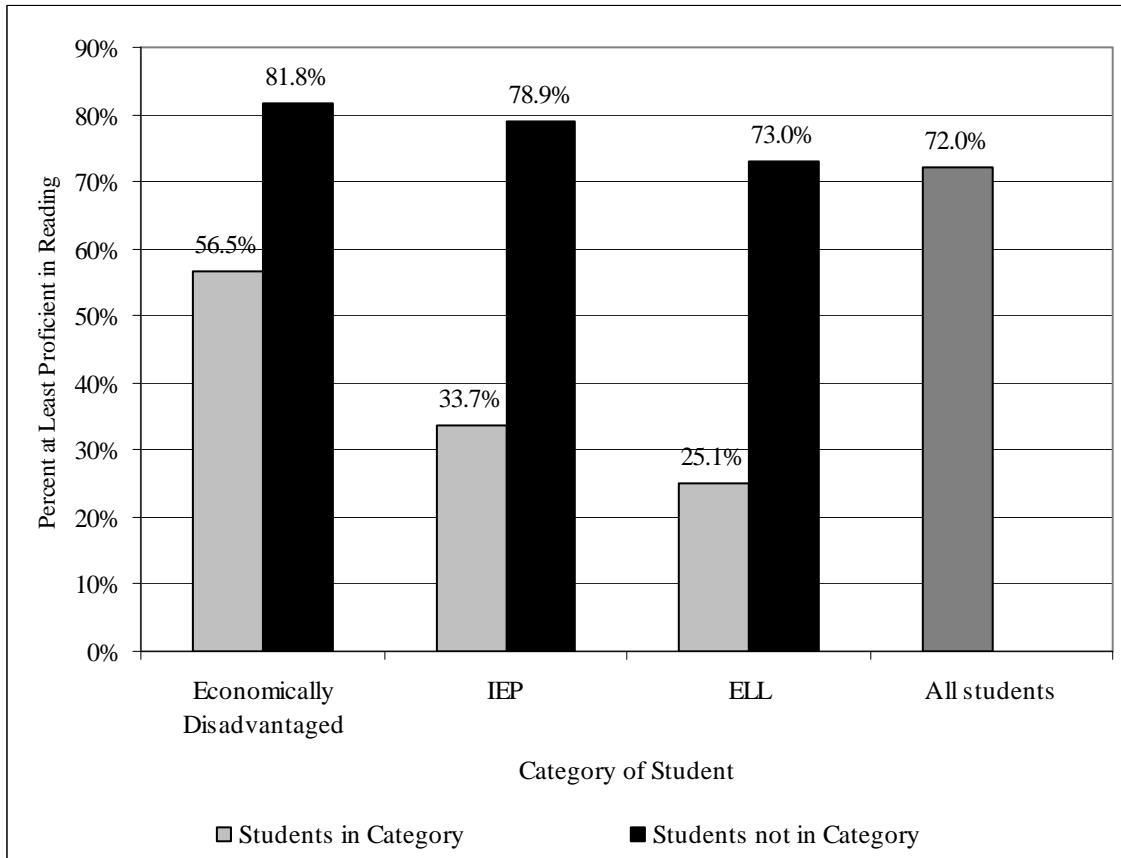
**Figure 6**  
**Percentage of students at Least Proficient in Math**  
**on the 2009-10 PSSA Exam by Student Category**



SOURCE: PDE, "2009-2010 PSSA and AYP Results."

<sup>64</sup> The number of students taking Pennsylvania Alternate System of Assessment (PASA) exam is mentioned a few times throughout this section. Since less than 1.6 percent of all students took the 2009-10 PASA exams, staff did not concentrate on PASA exam results throughout this report. However, when trying to calculate the percentage of ELL students and students with IEPs, it is important to include the students that took the PASA exam because they do represent a significant percentage of those groups of students. More information about the PASA exams can be found in footnote 26 on page 7 of this report.

**Figure 7**  
**Percentage of students at Least Proficient in Reading**  
**on the 2009-10 PSSA Exam by Student Category**



SOURCE: See Figure 6.

It appears there are significant differences between urban school districts and other districts, including all of the high-performing, low-cost districts surveyed. Urban districts have a much higher percentage of ELL students than do other districts. In total, 7.6 percent of all students taking either the 2009-10 PSSA or PASA<sup>65</sup> exams in urban districts were ELL students, compared to only 0.6 percent, 1.3 percent, and 0.7 percent of students from rural areas, suburban areas and towns, respectively.<sup>66</sup> Less than one percent of all students taking the 2009-10 PSSA or PASA exams in the 82 successful districts and the 25 high-performing, low-spending districts were ELL students.<sup>67</sup> Districts that do not have to devote resources to the additional education needs of ELL students would naturally have more resources to spend elsewhere.

<sup>65</sup> See footnote 64.

<sup>66</sup> Using PDE “2009-10 PSSA and AYP Results,” the total number of ELL students was found by taking the higher number of students taking either the math or reading section of the PSSA or PASA exams.

<sup>67</sup> Ibid.

In addition to a higher percentage of ELL students, urban school districts also have a slightly higher percentage of students who have IEPs. In total, 17.8 percent of all students taking either the 2009-10 PSSA or PASA exams in urban districts were students with IEPs, compared to only 16.2 percent, 16.2 percent and 16.4 percent of students from rural areas, suburban areas and towns, respectively.<sup>68</sup> Only 14.9 percent of students from the 82 successful districts and 12.6 percent of students from the 25 high-performing, low-spending districts were students with IEPs.<sup>69</sup> Since many students with IEPs can be very costly to educate and often perform below non-IEP students on PSSA exams, districts with a higher percentage of students with IEPs often have higher than average spending per student that does not necessarily result in higher PSSA scores.

In addition to ELL students and students with IEPs, the percentage of low-income students also significantly impacts overall district achievement. Urban school districts also have a much higher percentage of low-income students than do districts outside of urban areas. Utilizing PDE data on the total number of low-income students by school district<sup>70</sup> and the NCES locale codes for each district, 75.2 percent of all students in urban districts are low-income students. Low-income students compose 37.3 percent of students in towns, 32.0 percent of students in rural areas, 24.9 percent of students in suburban areas, 19.5 percent of students in the 25 surveyed districts, and 13.8 percent of students from the 82 high-performing districts.<sup>71</sup>

As stated previously, students in urban school districts score lower on both the math and reading components of the PSSA than their peers in suburban, rural and town districts. Not surprisingly, economically disadvantaged students make up a much higher percentage of urban students than students in other locales and this fact could very well account for much of the differences between PSSA scores between urban districts versus districts from other locales.

It is possible to examine how districts would do on the PSSA if all economically disadvantaged students' scores were removed from the PSSA data. This theoretical exercise shows that the math and reading proficiency scores for all district locales rise, but the most dramatic increase occurs for urban districts. About 60.6 percent of all students within urban districts were proficient in math in 2009-10. If only scores of students not considered economically disadvantaged are included, that percentage jumps to 74.6 percent! While 74.6 percent is still less than the percent of non-economically disadvantaged students proficient in math in rural, suburban and town districts, the difference is much smaller than before accounting for the economically disadvantaged students. Figure 8 shows the percentage of non-economically disadvantaged students proficient in math and reading across various school district locales. Comparing Figure 8 to Figure 5 on page 39, the difference between urban districts and all other districts is significantly less once economically disadvantaged students' scores are removed.

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<sup>68</sup> Using PDE "2009-10 PSSA and AYP Results," the total number of students with IEPs was found by taking the higher number of students taking either the math or reading section of the PSSAs or PASAs.

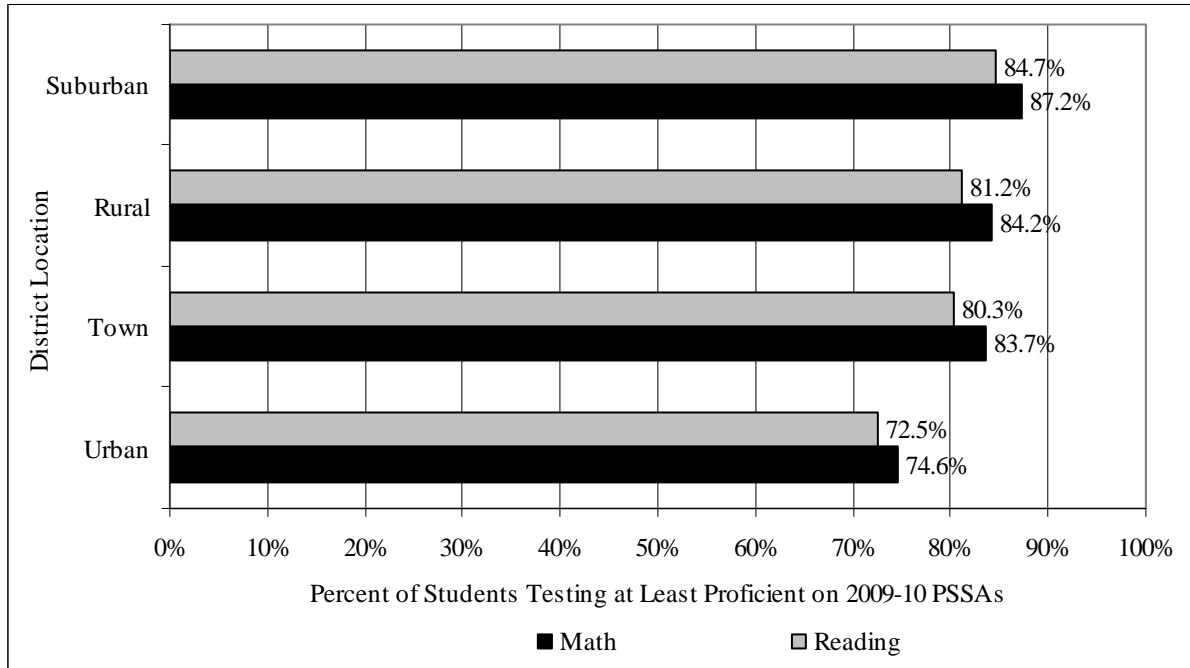
<sup>69</sup> These percentages only include students who took either the 2009-10 PSSA or PASA exams.

<sup>70</sup> PDE, "Low-Income Schools Designated for Teacher Loan Cancellation (Loan Forgiveness)."

<sup>71</sup> Ibid.



**Figure 8**  
**Percent of Students who are Not Economically Disadvantaged who are at**  
**Least Proficient in Math and Reading on the 2009-10 PSSAs by District Locale<sup>1</sup>**



1. Districts were categorized by NCES locale code.

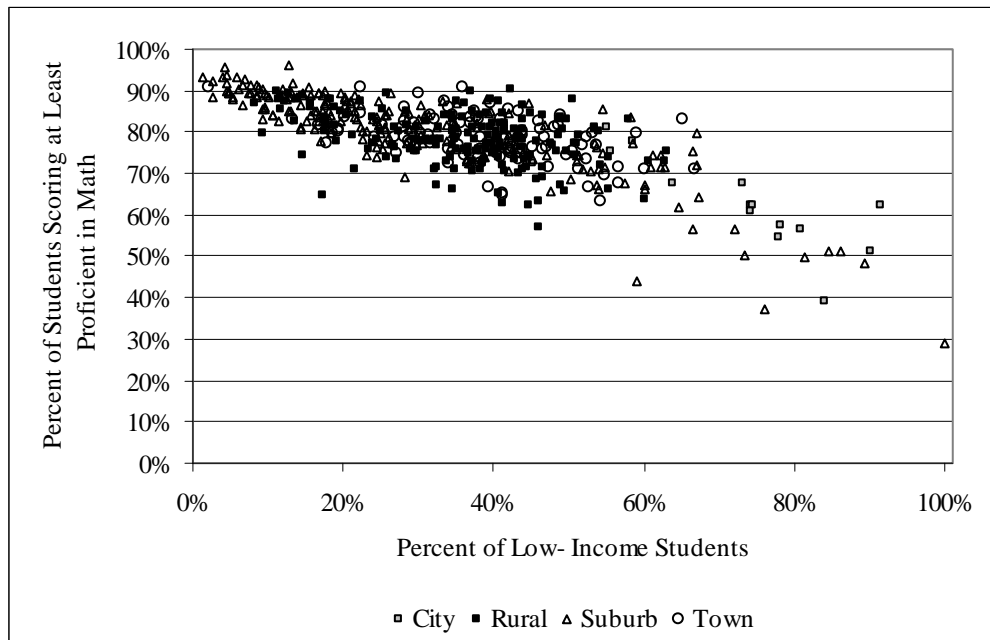
SOURCES: NCES, “Common Core of Data: New Urban-Centric Locale Codes;” and PDE, “2009-10 PSSA and AYP Results.”

Looking at the data on low-income students a different way, there is a clear and significant negative linear relationship between the percentage of these students within a district versus the percentage of district students who are proficient in math and reading. That is, districts having a high proportion of low-income students tend to have lower scores on the PSSAs than districts with a low proportion of these students. The scatter plots in Figures 9 and 10 exemplify the relationship between the percentage of district students that are low-income versus the percentage of students scoring at least proficient in math and reading. Every point on the scatter diagrams represents a school district in the Commonwealth. The different shapes on the scatter plot represent the locale of each district.

As stated before, since only 13.8 percent of students from the 82 high-performing districts compared to 37.7 percent of all school district students are from low income families, family income is a significant factor why the 82 districts do so well compared to other districts.<sup>72</sup>

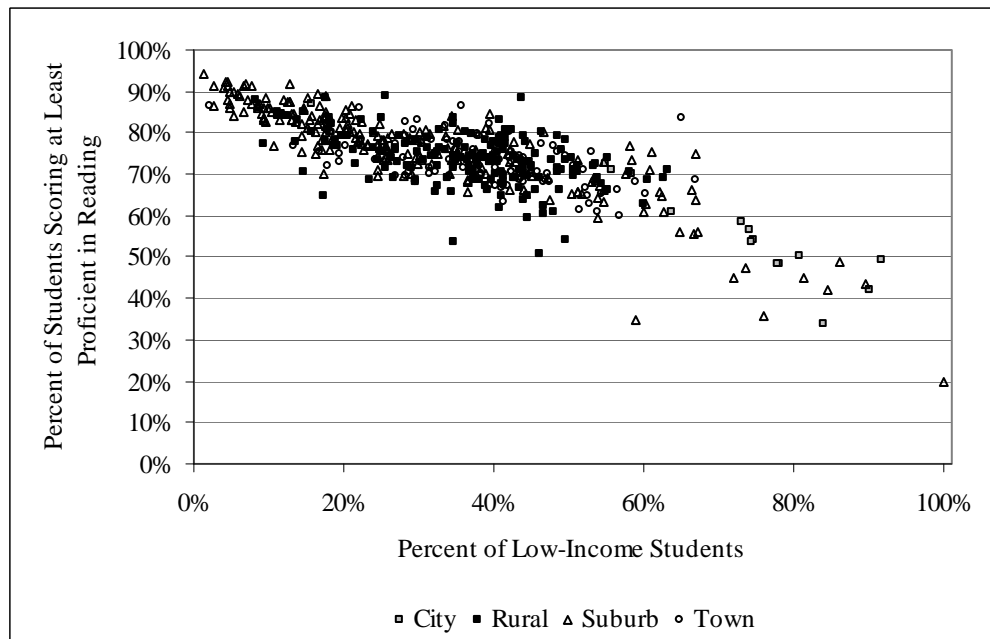
<sup>72</sup> Ibid.

**Figure 9**  
**Percent of District Students Testing at Least Proficient in Math on 2009-10 PSSA Versus Percent of Low-Income Students**



SOURCES: PDE, “Low-Income Schools Designated for Teacher Loan Cancellation (Loan Forgiveness);” PDE, “2009-2010 PSSA and AYP Results;” and NCES, “Common Core of Data: New Urban-Centric Locale Codes.”

**Figure 10**  
**Percent of District Students Testing at Least Proficient in Reading on 2009-10 PSSA Versus Percent of Low-Income Students**



SOURCES: See Figure 8.

### Overall District Wealth

In addition to the percentage of students who are low-income, ELL or have an IEP, another factor that impacts student achievement is wealth of a community. In general, one would expect a district with more resources to have higher PSSA test scores because they can use available resources to provide more educational opportunities for their students.

Educators generally use the Market Value/Personal Income (MV/PI) Aid Ratio, often referred to as the “Aid Ratio” as a measure of the overall wealth of a district.<sup>73</sup> The complete methodology used to calculate this ratio is included in Appendix D of this report, but in general, the closer the Aid Ratio is to one (maximum value), the poorer the district is overall. The closer the Aid Ratio is to zero, the wealthier the district. Since this Aid Ratio is used in the calculation of state aid each district receives, there is a cut-off at the low end of the Aid Ratio so all districts that would normally have an aid ratio between zero and 0.15 have an aid ratio listed of 0.15. This cut-off is to ensure all districts receive at least some state support.

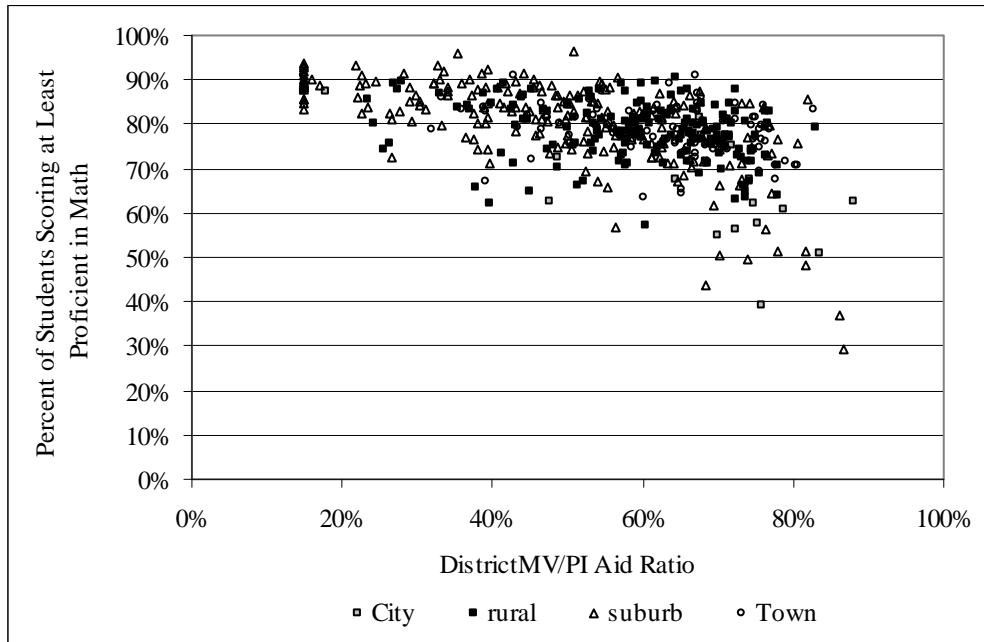
Not surprising, the 82 highly-successful districts within the Costing Out Study had an average Aid Ratio of 0.383 compared to the average of all districts at 0.555.<sup>74</sup> This indicates the 82 districts are “wealthier” districts than the average district. When we plot the Aid Ratio against the math and reading PSSA scores in Figures 13 and 14, a negative linear correlation is present, but the correlation is slightly less pronounced than other scatter plots within this report. As Figure 13 and 14 suggest, nearly all of the wealthier districts perform well. The districts with the minimum aid ratio of 0.15 all have proficiency levels above 80 percent for both math and reading. What is more interesting in Figure 13 and 14 is poorer districts tend to score lower on the PSSAs than wealthier districts (some much lower), but not all of them do poorly. Several districts with high Aid Ratios (poorer districts) do rather well on PSSA exams. This finding may indicate the lack of wealth does not necessarily predict a lack of success. There are other factors involved, such as the wealth of student families, which make a more substantial difference than just the overall wealth of a district.

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<sup>73</sup> PDE, “Financial Data Elements.”

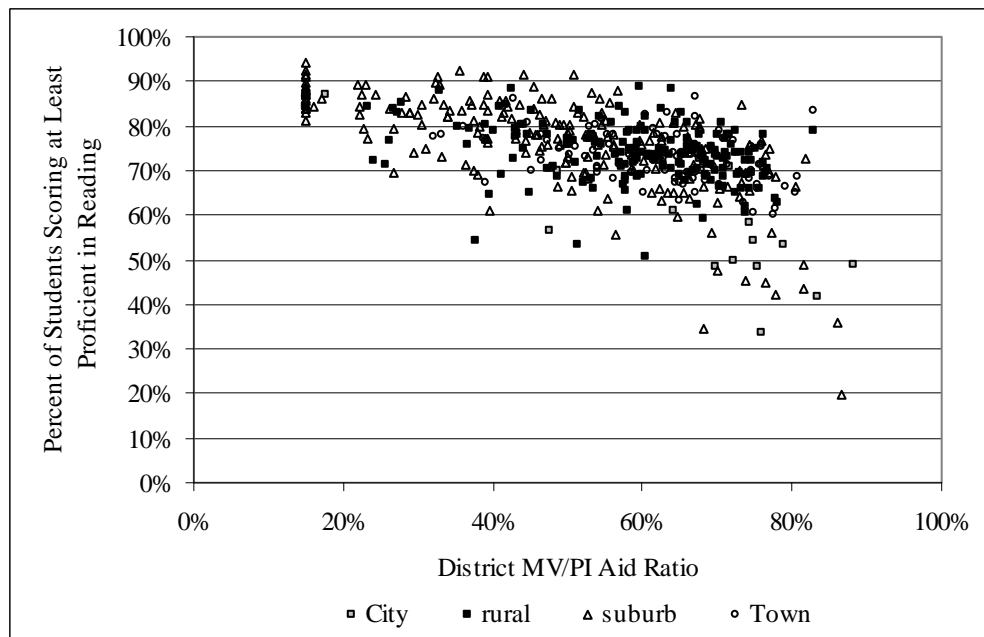
<sup>74</sup> Ibid.

**Figure 13**  
**Percent of District Students at Least Proficient in Math on 2009-10 PSSA**  
**Versus District MV/PI Aid Ratio**



SOURCES: PDE, “Financial Data Elements;” PDE, “2009-2010 PSSA and AYP Results;” and NCES, “Common Core of Data: New Urban-Centric Locale Codes.”

**Figure 14**  
**Percent of District Students at Least Proficient in Reading on 2009-10 PSSA**  
**Versus District MV/PI Aid Ratio**



SOURCES: See Figure 13.

## CONCLUSION

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Senate Resolution 243 directed “the Joint State Government Commission to conduct a study of the 82 school districts found to be successful schools in the APA costing-out study and to issue a report ...of their best practices and other factors that are believed to help contribute to this recognized efficiency and success.”<sup>75</sup> Below is a summary of the results of this study.

### **BEST PRACTICES OF HIGH-PERFORMING, LOW-SPENDING SCHOOL DISTRICTS**

In reviewing the survey responses, Commission staff compiled a list of best practices and other factors employed by the high-performing and low-spending districts in the Commonwealth. The districts reported that these measures have directly resulted in higher student achievement and/or reducing costs to taxpayers.

Best practices that help districts achieve a high-performing education include the use of:

- **Full-day kindergarten**, especially for students from lower income families and those with special needs;
- **Tutoring assistance** for students who demonstrate they need extra help in certain academic areas;
- **Increased instructional time** including extended school day and summer programs for children who are identified as need additional assistance;
- **Providing for teacher education and professional development programs;**
- **Monitoring individual student achievement** including the use of programs like 4Sight Benchmark Assessments, RtII, and DIBELS;
- **Providing dual enrollment and other unique learning opportunities;** and
- **Reducing classroom size or adding teacher aides to classrooms in lower grades**, especially in schools with a large population of students who may need extra attention in order to excel academically.

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<sup>75</sup> SR 243 of 2010, pg. 3, lines 14-20.

Best practices that help districts maintain a low-cost include:

- **Conducting a cost-benefit analysis of participating in joint purchasing agreements with the IUs and other school districts.** In many cases, bulk purchases can result in significant savings. In a few cases, some districts have found it more cost effective to provide services in-house. For example, a few districts survey stated they could provide a more cost-effective service for special education students and therefore have pulled special education students out of IU classrooms.
- **Maintaining an efficient administrative structure.** The 25 high-performing, low-spending districts had fewer administrators per student than the average district. The average administrator to student ratio is 1 to 263 for the high-performing, low-spending districts and the 1 to 239 for all districts.<sup>76</sup> However, one superintendent noted that as the state and federal governments increase the mandates and regulations on districts, there is pressure for districts to increase administrative personnel.
- **Creating an environment in which employees are treated professionally and other techniques are employed with the goal of reducing staff turnover.** At a minimum, having a reduced staff turnover rate decreases the cost of advertising for hiring and training new employees.
- **Conducting a cost/benefit analysis on having the district self-fund various employee benefits such as medical, prescription and dental insurance as well as workers compensation and unemployment insurance.** In some cases, self-funding these benefits reduces costs. In other cases, it is more cost-effective for a district to purchase these benefits through private companies.
- **Conducting a cost/benefit analysis on whether it is more cost-effective to contract out various auxiliary services such as student transportation, cafeteria operations, and technology support.** As is the case with employee benefits, there are circumstances in which it would be more cost-effective for districts to contract out for auxiliary services. There are also circumstances in which districts could operate most efficiently by providing these services in-house.

## **OTHER FACTORS IMPACTING THE QUALITY AND COST OF EDUCATION IN HIGH-PERFORMING, LOW-SPENDING DISTRICTS**

There are numerous other factors impacting the quality and cost of education within a school district. Unfortunately, in many cases, district administrators have little control over these factors in spite of the significant impact on student achievement and educational costs.

Below are some of the other factors mentioned by the superintendents and/or identified through an analysis of other data. Many of these other factors are strongly interrelated, but all

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<sup>76</sup> PDE, "Professional and Support Personnel Data and Statistics (2009-10).

impact education somewhat differently. It should be noted that all of the other factors listed below were discussed in more depth in the Data Analysis Chapter of this report. The factors include:

- **Active parent and community involvement:** By far, this was the most important other factor impacting student achievement and educational costs. If parents and the community are active participants in the educational system, high student achievement can be obtained using fewer district resources. In other words, non-monetary support of a district by the parents and community can have a huge impact on the district's bottom line.
- **Existence of an education foundation:** One byproduct of a community actively involved in public education is the existence of an education foundation.
- **Poverty:** There is a linear, inverse relationship between the percentage of low-income students and the math and reading PSSA scores. In general, the larger the district's lower-income student population, the poorer the district performs on the PSSAs. On the 2009-10 PSSA exams, only 63.7 percent of economically disadvantaged students were proficient in math compared to 84.2 percent of non-economically disadvantaged students. Likewise, only 56.5 percent of economically disadvantaged students were proficient in reading compared to 81.8 percent of non-economically disadvantaged students.<sup>77</sup>
- **ELL Students:** The more ELL students a district educates, the more tax dollars it spends to educate them. On average, ELL students perform at a lower level than non-ELL students on the PSSA, especially on the reading portion of the exam. On the 2009-10 PSSA exams, only 43.4 percent of ELL students were proficient in math compared to 77.0 percent of non-ELL students. Likewise, only 25.1 percent of ELL students were proficient in reading compared to 73.0 percent of non-ELL students.<sup>78</sup>
- **Students with IEPs:** Students with IEPs represent a significant challenge for districts across the Commonwealth. Districts with a large percentage of students with disabilities normally devote significant tax dollars to educate these students. On average, students with IEPs perform below non-IEP students. On the 2009-10 PSSA exams, only 45.7 percent of students with IEPs were proficient in math compared to 81.2 percent of students without IEPs. Likewise, only 33.7 percent of students with IEPs were proficient in reading compared to 78.9 percent of students without IEPs.<sup>79</sup>
- **Locale:** Districts in urban environments tend to score lower on PSSAs than districts from non-urban areas. Even if we review scores from just non-economically disadvantaged students, urban districts still struggle to obtain the same results on the PSSAs as non-urban districts. In addition to poverty and a higher than average percentage of ELL students and students with IEPs within urban areas, there are other

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<sup>77</sup> PDE, "2009-2010 PSSA and AYP Results."

<sup>78</sup> Ibid.

<sup>79</sup> Ibid.

social factors present in urban areas not present elsewhere. Since these other social factors are difficult to quantify, staff were unable to determine how much these other factors impacted student achievement.

- **Overall District Wealth:** The PDE calculates the MV/PI Aid Ratio as a measurement of a school districts overall wealth. The ratio value can range from 0.15 to 1.0, with a lower value indicating a wealthier district. Staff found that districts with low MV/PI Aid Ratios have higher student achievement. Districts with high Aid Ratios tend to score lower on the PSSAs than wealthier districts (some much lower), but not all of them do poorly. Several districts with high Aid Ratios (poorer districts) score well on PSSA exams. This finding may indicate that lack of wealth does not predict a lack of success, but it is a contributing factor to a district’s overall student achievement.
- **School Board Members:** Several surveyed districts noted that having experienced school board members was a strong asset in helping their district become high-performing and low-cost. While staff could not find any definitive data on this assertion, school board members play an active role in district activities and therefore could impact student achievement both positively and negatively.

## FINAL THOUGHTS

The primary purpose of this report was to examine the successful schools model within the Costing Out Study and determine specifically why districts listed as successful and low-spending are thriving. Additionally, SR 243 stated “[t]hat the final report serve as the basis for future deliberations by the Senate on the Commonwealth’s basic education funding levels and components.”<sup>80</sup> As the Commission concludes this report, below are some additional points for consideration.

1. Adequacy and equity in school funding continue to be unresolved issues. This report may serve as a guide to the General Assembly to help target funding more effectively to support best practices being employed by high-performing and low-spending districts.
2. The goal of the federal No Child Left Behind Act of 100 percent proficiency in reading and mathematics by 2014 is unattainable even under perfect circumstances. Districts continue to increase spending in an effort to meet proficiency standards set by NCLB. The General Assembly may want to consider communicating with Pennsylvania’s Congressional delegation to urge them to work to revise this standard in the re-authorization of federal education law.
3. Many of the high-performing and low-spending districts indicated that Educational Accountability Block Grants have contributed greatly to their success in educating students. The General Assembly may want to consider maintaining and enhancing this

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<sup>80</sup> SR 243 of 2010, pg. 3-4.



state grant program to provide districts with the flexibility they need to target these dollars where they can be most effective.

4. The education of students from lower income families, ELL students and students with IEPs is a serious challenge for all school districts regardless of their geographic location or wealth. The General Assembly may want to consider a specific follow-up study of those school districts which are successfully educating these sub-groups of students to identify best practices capable of replication across the Commonwealth.
5. The study revealed, not surprisingly, the significance of parental and community involvement in student achievement and, in some cases, cost reduction. The General Assembly may want to consider investing in tools to further encourage parents and community members (including the business community) to get involved in their schools.

While this report does address all questions contained in SR 243, staff understand that this report may open the door to new questions and concerns. It is our hope that this report serve as a bridge between the Costing Out Study and future research in the field of public education in the Commonwealth.

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THE GENERAL ASSEMBLY OF PENNSYLVANIA

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SENATE RESOLUTION

No. 243 Session of  
2010

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INTRODUCED BY PICCOLA, DINNIMAN, BROWNE, M. WHITE, TOMLINSON,  
FOLMER, ARGALL, WARD, ERICKSON, PILEGGI, GORDNER, BOSCOLA,  
STACK, WAUGH, RAFFERTY, EARLL, D. WHITE, ORIE AND SCARNATI,  
FEBRUARY 8, 2010

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SENATOR PICCOLA, EDUCATION, AS AMENDED, MARCH 16, 2010

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A RESOLUTION

1 Directing the Joint State Government Commission to conduct a  
2 study of efficiency in public school funding and directing  
3 the State Board of Education to provide documents and  
4 assistance to the Joint State Government Commission in its  
5 conduct of this study.

6 WHEREAS, The General Assembly authorized a Statewide costing-  
7 out study for public education funding under Act 114 of 2006;  
8 and

9 WHEREAS, The State Board of Education was delegated the  
10 authority to hire a consultant to perform this study; and

11 WHEREAS, The State Board of Education contracted with  
12 Augenblick, Palaich and Associates (APA) of Denver, Colorado, to  
13 conduct the study; and

14 WHEREAS, This study's legislative intent was to examine  
15 issues of adequacy and equity in public school funding and to  
16 determine the basic cost per pupil to provide an education that  
17 will permit a student to meet the Commonwealth's academic  
18 standards and assessments; and

1       WHEREAS, Act 114 specifically requires the study to examine  
2 "exemplary school districts that are high-performing and low-  
3 spending school districts," but Act 114 does not explicitly  
4 mandate other methodologies to be applied in the study; and

5       WHEREAS, The study conducted by APA subsequently used three  
6 methodologies: a "Successful Schools" approach that was  
7 consistent with the explicit requirements of Act 114, but also  
8 two additional methodologies referred to as "Professional  
9 Judgment" panels and "Evidence-Based" research that were not  
10 required under law; and

11       WHEREAS, The final report issued to the Commonwealth by APA  
12 used a combination of all three of these methodologies to  
13 recommend specific dollar amounts for the basic cost per pupil,  
14 plus additional weights and other modifications that increase  
15 the basic cost per pupil; and

16       WHEREAS, The final report does not provide any indication as  
17 to how the three methodologies were combined or compared against  
18 one another, nor does it provide any other information detailing  
19 how the specific recommended numbers in its findings were  
20 actually calculated in the study; and

21       WHEREAS, Both the State Board of Education and APA testified  
22 to the Education Committee of the Senate on December 8, 2009,  
23 that the specific methodology applied to derive the final  
24 funding recommendation cannot be disclosed to the General  
25 Assembly because APA believes it is proprietary information; and

26       WHEREAS, The results of this study call for an additional  
27 target of \$4.61 billion annually of taxpayer funds for public  
28 school funding, or a 26.8% increase, but APA testified that it  
29 cannot provide the quantitative numbers used to justify this  
30 target; and

1       WHEREAS, The "Successful Schools" approach used by APA in the  
2 study was the only methodology that was explicitly authorized in  
3 Act 114 because it focused on high-performing and low-spending  
4 school districts; and

5       WHEREAS, The Commonwealth should focus its attention toward  
6 the most efficient use of the dollars already available for  
7 public schools; and

8       WHEREAS, The Commonwealth should build upon the work already  
9 conducted in the original costing-out study by examining the  
10 schools identified in the report under the "Successful Schools"  
11 methodology to learn their best practices and other factors that  
12 have resulted in their identification as a high-performing, low-  
13 spending school district; therefore be it

14       RESOLVED, That the Senate direct the Joint State Government  
15 Commission to conduct a study of the 82 school districts found  
16 to be successful schools in the APA costing-out study and to  
17 issue a report to the chairman of the Education Committee of the  
18 Senate of their best practices and other factors that are  
19 believed to help contribute to this recognized efficiency and  
20 success; and be it further

21       RESOLVED, That the Senate direct the State Board of Education  
22 to cooperate fully with the Joint State Government Commission in  
23 providing documentation from the original costing-out study and  
24 other assistance as the Joint State Government Commission  
25 requests; and be it further

26       RESOLVED, That the report from the Joint State Government  
27 Commission be submitted to the ~~chairman~~ SENATE AND TO THE  
28 CHAIRMAN AND MINORITY CHAIRMAN of the Education Committee of the  
29 Senate no later than November 1, 2010; and be it further

30       RESOLVED, That the final report serve as the basis for future

1 deliberations by the Senate on the Commonwealth's basic  
2 education funding levels and components.



**GENERAL ASSEMBLY OF THE COMMONWEALTH OF PENNSYLVANIA  
JOINT STATE GOVERNMENT COMMISSION  
ROOM 108 - FLANACE BUILDING  
Harrisburg 17120**

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FAX 717-787-7020

**FLORINDO J. FABRIZIO**  
Chairman

**JOHN C. RAFFERTY, JR.**  
Vice Chairman

**EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE**

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**ADMINISTRATIVE STAFF:**

**DAVID S. JOHN, JR.**  
Acting Executive Director  
**STEPHEN F. REHRER**  
Counsel

[Insert Name]  
Superintendent  
[Insert Name] School District  
[Address Line 1]  
[Address Line 2]

September 17, 2010

Dear [Insert Name]:

On March 22, 2010 the State Senate adopted Senate Resolution 243 (enclosed) directing the Joint State Government Commission to conduct a study of school districts found to be successful schools in the Costing Out study released in December 2007.

Specifically, the Commission has been asked to identify the "best practices" and "other factors" that contributed to some lower-spending districts being deemed high-performing in the Costing Out study. Senate Resolution 243 indicates that this report should be used as the basis for future deliberations by the Senate on basic education funding levels.

The Commission has worked with Senate staff and representatives of professional education organizations to identify possible best practices and other factors contributing to the success of these districts. In order to determine the extent to which these practices are being implemented and these factors are in place, the Commission is preparing a survey to send to the superintendents of twenty-five (25) school districts that are lower-spending and deemed high-performing in the Costing Out study.

Your district has been selected as one of the districts in our survey. Within the next two weeks, we will be mailing you a follow-up letter with information about the survey, including several options for completing it and returning it to our office.

The information the Commission is able to secure from the representative sample of districts will be analyzed and used as the basis of our report to the Senate.

Although you and your colleagues receive numerous surveys, questionnaires and other inquiries, the implications of this particular study are significant and require us to acquire the most complete information possible. Your assistance in completing the survey and providing the information will ensure that the analysis the Commission provides to the Senate will be thorough, accurate and useful.

If you have any questions regarding this study or the forthcoming survey, please do not hesitate to contact me at [djohn@legis.state.pa.us](mailto:djohn@legis.state.pa.us) or (717) 783-9376.

Sincerely,

Enclosure

David S. John, Jr.  
Acting Executive Director  
Joint State Government Commission



GENERAL ASSEMBLY OF THE COMMONWEALTH OF PENNSYLVANIA  
**JOINT STATE GOVERNMENT COMMISSION**  
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**ADMINISTRATIVE STAFF:**  
 DAVID S. JOHN, JR  
 Acting Executive Director  
 STEPHEN F. REHRER  
 Counsel

[Insert Name]  
 Superintendent  
 [Insert Name] School District  
 [Address Line 1]  
 [Address Line 2]

September 28, 2010

Dear [Insert Name]:

In my previous letter I referenced the study being conducted by the Joint State Government Commission pursuant to Senate Resolution 243 of 2010. This study seeks to identify the best practices and other factors resulting in your school district being considered a "high performing and low spending" district.

Enclosed please find a survey prepared by Commission staff with questions aimed at helping us to acquire the data necessary to report to the Senate as required under SR243. We understand and appreciate the numerous duties you have as a school district administrator, but we would deeply appreciate your taking time to complete this survey as it will assist us in providing a thorough and accurate final report to the Senate.

You may respond to this survey in one of these ways, whichever is most convenient:

**Mail:** (enclosed postage-paid envelope)

**E-mail:** [jntst02@legis.state.pa.us](mailto:jntst02@legis.state.pa.us)

**Phone:** 717-787-4397

**Fax:** 717-783-9380

The Commission must submit a final report to the Senate by November 1st; therefore, we would request that you send your responses to our office no later than October 15th.

Thank you in advance for your assistance with this project.

Sincerely,

Enclosure

David S. John, Jr.  
 Acting Executive Director  
 Joint State Government Commission



District Name: \_\_\_\_\_

## **SUCCESSFUL SCHOOL DISTRICT SURVEY (2010 Senate Resolution 243)**

**1. What are some of your best practices that have helped you improve student performance?**

Please make sure you list all your best practices including, but not limited to:

- pre-school and/or K4 programs;
- early intervention services;
- full-day kindergarten;
- reduced class sizes in K-3;
- smaller or larger schools;
- math and literacy coaching;
- tutoring assistance;
- increased instructional time (extended school day, summer school, and/or after school programs);
- monitoring individual student achievement;
- social and emotional wellness and school safety programs;
- dual enrollment opportunities;
- career development model such as Career Pathway or Career Academy;
- professional teacher education and development; and
- faculty mentoring programs.

Of the best practices you listed, please provide some details on these programs including how many students they impact.

**2. What other factors have helped your district maintain a high level of student performance with lower-than-average costs?**

These factors could include, but are not limited to:

- active parent and community involvement including PTO & PTA participation;
- the existence of an educational foundation operating within your district;
- certain socio-economic characteristics of your community that, in your opinion, affect education;
- experience of administrators and school board members; and
- specific administrative structure of your school district at the central office and building levels.

**3. What are some of the best cost-saving practices your district utilizes?**

These factors could include, but are not limited to:

- online learning opportunities;
- collaborative educational programs including Intermediate Unit or similar programs;
- collaborative group purchasing programs; and
- innovative ways of using classroom space and district facilities.

**4. What is the average number of students in your Kindergarten through 3<sup>rd</sup> grade classes?**

(Note: We are looking for number of students per class, not the number of students per staff member.)

**5. What is the counselor-to-student ratio in your district?**

Please include all guidance, career and similar counselors when computing this ratio.

**6. Do you believe that your district's facilities (and classrooms in particular) are adequate for your needs?**

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## APPENDIX C

### Definitions of NCES Locales

- **City: Large** - Territory inside an urbanized area and inside a principal city with population of 250,000 or more.
- **City: Midsize** - Territory inside an urbanized area and inside a principal city with population less than 250,000 and greater than or equal to 100,000.
- **City: Small** - Territory inside an urbanized area and inside a principal city with population less than 100,000.
- **Suburb: Large** - Territory outside a principal city and inside an urbanized area with population of 250,000 or more.
- **Suburb: Midsize** - Territory outside a principal city and inside an urbanized area with population less than 250,000 and greater than or equal to 100,000.
- **Suburb: Small** - Territory outside a principal city and inside an urbanized area with population less than 100,000.
- **Town: Fringe** - Territory inside an urban cluster that is less than or equal to 10 miles from an urbanized area.
- **Town: Distant** - Territory inside an urban cluster that is more than 10 miles and less than or equal to 35 miles from an urbanized area.
- **Town: Remote** - Territory inside an urban cluster that is more than 35 miles from an urbanized area.
- **Rural: Fringe** - Census-defined rural territory that is less than or equal to 5 miles from an urbanized area, as well as rural territory that is less than or equal to 2.5 miles from an urban cluster.
- **Rural: Distant** - Census-defined rural territory that is more than 5 miles but less than or equal to 25 miles from an urbanized area, as well as rural territory that is more than 2.5 miles but less than or equal to 10 miles from an urban cluster.
- **Rural: Remote** - Census-defined rural territory that is more than 25 miles from an urbanized area and is also more than 10 miles from an urban cluster.<sup>81</sup>

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<sup>81</sup> NCES. Common Core of Data: New Urban-Centric Locale Codes.

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## APPENDIX D

### Aid Ratio Calculation Methodology

*Market Value Aid Ratio (MV AR):*

$$1 - \left( \frac{\text{School District Market Value} / \text{SD WADM}}{\text{State Total Market Value} / \text{State Total WADM}} * 0.5 \right)$$

*Personal Income Aid Ratio (PI AR):*

$$1 - \left( \frac{\text{School District Personal Income} / \text{SD WADM}}{\text{State Total Personal Income} / \text{State Total WADM}} * 0.5 \right)$$

*Market Value/Personal Income Aid Ratio (MV/PI AR):*

$$(0.6 * \text{MV AR}) + (0.4 * \text{PI AR})$$

- a. MV/WADM and PI/WADM calculations are truncated to nearest dollar
- b. District divided by State calculations are truncated at four decimals
- c. When multiplying by 0.5, truncate at four decimals
- d. For MV/PI AR, when multiplying by 0.6 or 0.4, truncate at four decimals

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*Market Value (MV):* Sales value of taxable real estate as certified by the State Tax Equalization Board. The 2007 market value is used in the calculation of the market value aid ratio for payable year 2010-2011. Note: 'State Total' market value includes Clean & Green.

*Personal Income (PI):* Personal income, excluding out-of-state income, reported on PA-40 income tax form. Data is certified by the Department of Revenue. The 2008 personal income is used in the calculation of the personal income aid ratio for payable year 2010-2011. Note: 'State Total' personal income includes out-of-state income.

*Weighted Average Daily Membership (WADM):* Calculated by weighting half-time kindergarten ADM at 0.5, full-time kindergarten and elementary ADM at 1.0, and secondary ADM at 1.36. The 2008-2009 WADM is used in the calculation of the aid ratios for payable year 2010-2011.

August 2010

**Note:** Page was copied directly from PDE website: Aid Ratio Calculation Methodology [http://www.pde.state.pa.us/portal/server.pt/community/financial\\_data\\_elements/7672](http://www.pde.state.pa.us/portal/server.pt/community/financial_data_elements/7672) (accessed December 16, 2010).