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**Reading, Writing, and Remediation**

With the vast sums of dollars Pennsylvania and other states pour into education, one would think all students would have a grasp of basic subject matter and skills and could successfully enter college or the workforce. But that is clearly not the case. The National Center for Education Statistics found that one in four college freshmen enroll in a remedial math, writing, or reading course. Moreover, many businesses express concern about the inability of significant numbers of high school graduates to perform adequately.

The 2001-02 Pennsylvania System of School Assessment exams (PSSA) taken by 134,000 eleventh graders confirm what has been apparent for many years: despite some of the highest per-pupil expenditures in the country, a substantial share of Pennsylvania students are not prepared for the challenges that await them. More than 55,000 eleventh grade students (40%) scored below the proficient level. Of those students, 27,000 students achieved "Basic" status. This level of performance, according to Pennsylvania Department of Education standards, "indicates marginal academic performance including a partial understanding and limited display of academic skills".

More disturbing is that 20 percent of the test takers --roughly 28,000 students--are categorized as "Below Basic", which is defined as "reflecting inadequate academic performance and little understanding and minimal display of skills included in the Pennsylvania Academic Content Standards". Clearly, this group is not on a trajectory headed toward success. Being one year removed from the workforce or post-secondary study and not possessing basic academic skills sets these students up for failure.

Yet the education establishment churns on, demanding even more dollars to fund programs that are far removed from helping students acquire these basic skills. But new programs are not likely to solve the problem for those students performing below a proficient level and about to leave high school. Instead, either a college, business, or the public school system will have to incur costs to teach the student with the basic skills needed to function. To estimate the costs of remediation in Pennsylvania, we have created scenarios that take into account performance level and hypothetical length of time required for remediation.

Using the per-pupil instruction cost for high school students in Pennsylvania (\$6,321), we estimated the costs of upgrading the 55,000 under-performing students. This does not include the other costs associated with education. We have prepared two estimates--very conservative and conservative. In the very conservative estimate, we assume that it would take half a year to get the "Basic" group to proficient and one year to get the "Below Basic" to proficient. In the conservative estimate, we assume a year of remediation for the "Basic" group and two years for the "Below Basic". Using these assumptions, the very conservative cost of remediation is placed

at \$265 million. Under the conservative estimate, the remediation the combined costs would double to \$530 million.

Further, we need to take into account the issue of high school dropouts and their lack of basic skills needed for the workplace. Factoring in the costs for the remediation of 9<sup>th</sup>, 10<sup>th</sup>, and 11<sup>th</sup> grade dropouts (who probably did not take the 11<sup>th</sup> grade PSSA exam) adds another \$236 million. All together, it is estimated that the costs of remediation fall in a range of \$500 million to \$766 million.

**Remediation Costs**

Proficiency Level	Millions of Dollars
<i>Very Conservative Estimate</i>	
Basic	\$86
Below Basic	\$178
Dropouts	\$236
<b>Total</b>	<b>\$500</b>
<i>Conservative Estimate</i>	
Basic	\$172
Below Basic	\$357
Dropouts	\$236
<b>Total</b>	<b>\$766</b>

This range is quite close to the estimates produced by other analytical groups in Michigan and Alabama. Although they used slightly different methodologies, the cost of remediation in Michigan was put at \$601 million, while the total in Alabama was pegged at \$541 million. Though remediation costs are high nationwide, they are particularly egregious here since the level of expenditures and teacher salaries are so high.

The Pennsylvania Constitution states that the legislature "shall provide for the maintenance and support of a thorough and efficient system of public education to serve the needs of the Commonwealth". With 40 percent of the students nearing graduation without having achieved academic proficiency, the public school system as presently constituted is neither thorough nor efficient. It is a disservice to the children in the schools and the taxpayers that support the system to have such a large number of its students not ready for the challenges that face them. In order to get the system to that level, officials might want to start thinking about innovations with some promise (school choice, a "No Excuses" approach, and higher accountability for teachers and administrators) instead of the routine education-speak programs that have not worked.

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