

For Immediate Release

Contact: Pam Golden
Allegheny Conference on
Community Development and Affiliates
(412) 392-4555, Ext. 4528
pgolden@allegHENYconference.org

Region's Ability to Sustain Highly Skilled Workforce in Jeopardy

(Pittsburgh, PA – November 15, 2005) Though there are slight increases in the average proficiency in reading and math skills of fifth graders, our region's ability to sustain a highly skilled workforce remains in jeopardy due to underperforming schools, according to two reports compiled by the Pennsylvania Economy League of Southwestern Pennsylvania, the research affiliate of the Allegheny Conference on Community Development.

There are only 21 schools out of 355 in the region where 90 percent or more of fifth graders are proficient in both reading and mathematics, according to the Fifth Grade Reading and Math Proficiency Report.

The document also shows that the average proficiency in reading is 68 percent, an increase of 2 percent over last year; and the average proficiency in math is 72 percent, 6 percent higher than 2004.

However, this year, 30 percent of fifth graders were not able to read at grade level, and 30 percent were not able to do math at grade level. That means more than 8,000 children are failing to meet state proficiency levels in reading and/or mathematics every year.

"The people who will fill the jobs of the future are in our elementary and middle schools today," said Murry Gerber, Chair of the Conference's Education Goals Committee. "Our 2005 fifth grade report card shows that one-third of our fifth graders are not reading or doing math at grade level. We've made some progress, but we are not on pace to meet the demand for skilled workers."

The 2005 Report Card also highlights some school districts, such as South Fayette, that have adopted the Conference's goal that every 10 year old is proficient by the year 2010, and are on track to achieve that objective.

Five years ago, only 67 percent of the fifth graders in the South Fayette School District were proficient in both reading and math. Today, South Fayette is first in the state in math, with 97 percent of the students testing proficient (71 percent of these are in the advanced category), and third in the state in reading, with 91 percent of the students testing proficient (41 percent in the advanced category).

South Fayette Superintendent Linda Hippert said, "Excellence can only be achieved when everyone is committed to a common goal. Our board members, students, parents, teachers, administrators, support staff, and our community have embraced the Allegheny Conference's goal of having all fifth grade students proficient in math and reading by 2010. In the South Fayette School District, we are very proud of our students' 2005 results in reading and math achievement. This year's test scores show that we are well on the way to meeting that goal."

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Another report compiled by the Pennsylvania Economy League titled “Jobs of the Future” shows that highly skilled workers must be proficient in reading and math to compete for future jobs.

The analysis suggests:

- There will be jobs for people with only a high school degree, but more than one-half of the region’s 11th graders are not proficient in math, and more than one-third of them are not proficient in reading.
- More than 80 percent of the job openings will require only a high school diploma or a two-year degree.
- The Center for Workforce Information and Analysis estimates that, on average, nearly 85 percent of the future openings in the region will be replacement jobs, i.e. openings due to retirements, promotions, etc.

Unfortunately, some employers are already experiencing difficulty finding skilled workers.

“As an employer, my biggest challenge to growing my company is finding people with the skills and interest to work in precision manufacturing. I know we are not the only company facing this challenge,” said Jeff Kelly, President, Hamill Manufacturing. “We need workers who are at least proficient at the 10th-grade level in reading and the 11th-grade level for math – basic math for our machinists includes geometry and trigonometry. Sadly, we’ve had to reject many applicants, including recent high school grads, because they cannot read or do math at the requisite levels.”

The Conference hopes that the community will study the report card, and try to learn from districts such as South Fayette and others that are doing a stellar job in educating tomorrow’s workforce.

“Our goal at the Conference is to improve the competitiveness of southwestern Pennsylvania in our growing global economy,” said Martin G. McGuinn, Chairman, Allegheny Conference. “We can only do this by keeping and growing a skilled workforce. The foundation for success begins with our early classroom days – learning to read and do math, and doing those things well.”

Both reports were released Wednesday, November 9 at the Conference’s Annual Meeting at the Carnegie Museum Music Hall. The complete Report Card can be accessed on line at www.schoolgrades.info.

Allegheny Conference on Community Development and Affiliates

The Allegheny Conference on Community Development and its Affiliates – Pittsburgh Regional Alliance; Greater Pittsburgh Chamber of Commerce; and Pennsylvania Economy League of Southwestern Pennsylvania – work together to stimulate growth in the region’s economy and improve its quality of life.

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