

## 2023 PSSA Scores Highlight the Need for Educational Opportunity

### SUMMARY

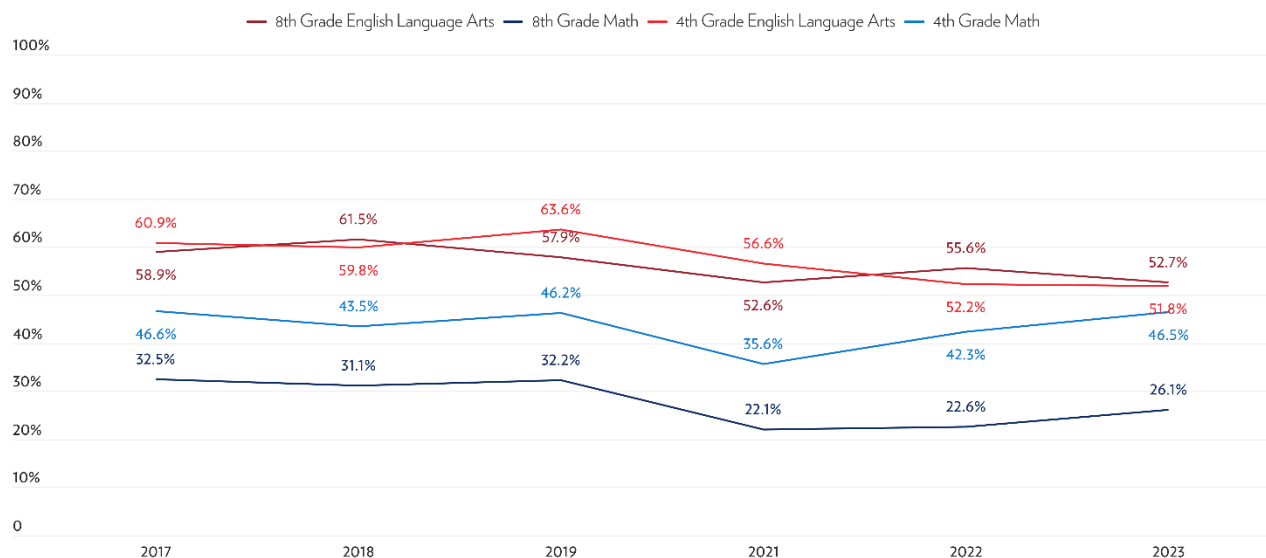
The Pennsylvania Department of Education (PDE) released [Pennsylvania System of School Assessment \(PSSA\) scores](#) from spring 2023. Test results show that fourth- and eighth-grade students [struggle to reach proficiency](#) in both reading and math. Proficiency rates across grades and subjects have yet to rebound to pre-pandemic levels in 2019. Only a smaller percentage of students in the lowest-performing schools are at grade level for reading and math.<sup>1</sup>

### MATH

- More than half of Pennsylvania’s fourth graders and nearly 75 percent of eighth graders cannot perform math at grade level.
- Fourth graders slightly improved, with 46.5 percent scoring proficient or above in math (compared to last year’s 42 percent.)
- Only 26.1 percent of eighth graders achieved proficiency or better in math (up from 22 percent last year).
- These modest gains are insufficient and lag below [pre-pandemic test scores](#) from 2019.

### PSSA Proficiency Rates

*Pennsylvania student performance remains significantly below pre-pandemic levels.*



Source: Pennsylvania Department of Education, PSSA Results, <https://www.education.pa.gov/DataAndReporting/Assessments/Pages/PSSA-Results.aspx>.

Note: There was no PSSA testing in 2020

## ENGLISH LANGUAGE ARTS

- About half of Pennsylvania’s fourth and eighth graders cannot read proficiently at grade level.
- The scores for Pennsylvania fourth and eighth graders declined in English Language Arts (ELA).
- The ELA scores for fourth graders dipped slightly to 51.8 percent proficiency (compared with 52.2 percent last year.)
- The ELA scores for eighth graders are also down, with only 52.7 percent scoring proficient or better. (In 2022, 55.6 percent of eighth graders were proficient.)

## PSSA SCORES FOR STUDENTS IN LOW-ACHIEVING SCHOOLS

- PDE annually publishes a list of [low-achieving schools](#), which the department defines as the bottom 15 percent of public schools based on standardized test scores.
- The combined PSSA scores for students in grades three through eight attending these schools are significantly lower than the state averages.
- Only one in nine students in low-achieving schools is proficient in math (11.4 percent).
- About one in four students in low-achieving schools demonstrated ELA proficiency (24.5 percent).

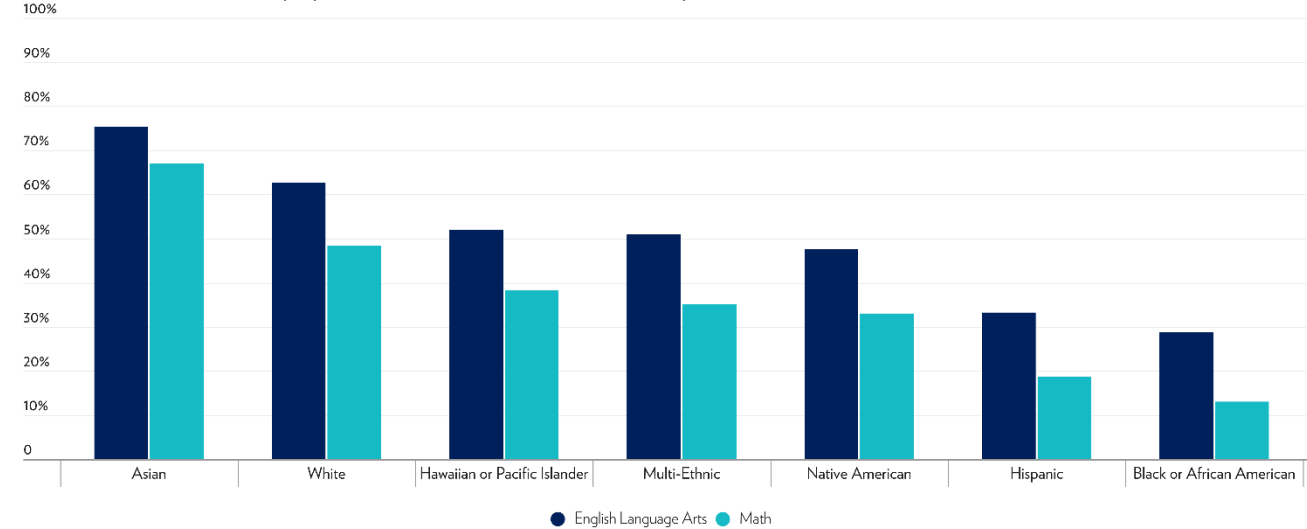
## EDUCATION FUNDING INCREASES HAVE NOT IMPROVED PERFORMANCE

- This decline in performance has occurred despite dramatic increases in public school funding.
- The 2023–24 Pennsylvania state budget [increases state support of public schools](#) to nearly \$15.5 billion.<sup>2</sup> State support of public schools has [increased by \\$5.4 billion \(or 53.8 percent\)](#) since 2014–15.
  - In the past three fiscal years ([2021–22](#), [2022–23](#), and [2023–24](#)), Gov. Josh Shapiro and his predecessor, former Gov. Tom Wolf, alongside several state lawmakers celebrated “record increases” in public school funding.
- Total [school district revenue](#) from all sources (local, state, and federal) increased to \$35.78 billion in 2021–22, up \$9.8 billion (37.6 percent) since 2013.<sup>3</sup>
  - These spending increases occurred even as enrollment declined.
  - Pennsylvania per-pupil public school funding increased to \$21,263 in the 2021–22 school year, ranking among the highest-spending states.
- These increases have failed to close the achievement gap. Pennsylvania’s most vulnerable children continue to fall further behind.
- PSSA test scores show that Hispanic and Black students lag far behind their White and Asian counterparts in ELA and math proficiency.
- For students in grades three through eight, 75 percent of Asian and 63 percent of White are proficient in ELA, while only 33 percent of Hispanic and 29 percent of Black students are proficient.

- Math scores are even more concerning, with just 13 percent of Black and 19 percent of Hispanic students proficient. Meanwhile, their White (48 percent) and Asian (67 percent) counterparts demonstrate higher math proficiency levels.
- In Pennsylvania, only one in eight Black students and one in five Hispanic students can perform basic math.

## 2023 PSSA Proficiency by Group

*Pennsylvania student performance varies significantly by ethnic group, with proficiency for Black students at less than half of their Asian and White counterparts.*



Source: Pennsylvania Department of Education, PSSA Results. <https://www.education.pa.gov/DataAndReporting/Assessments/Pages/PSSA-Results.aspx>.

## SOLUTION: LIFELINE SCHOLARSHIP/PASS PROGRAM

- This lack of progress despite increased education funding indicates that Pennsylvania should consider adopting funding that follows students and empowers parents.
- **Lifeline Scholarships**, referred to as the Pennsylvania Award for Student Success (PASS) in the current budget impasse, would provide alternative educational options for students living in the boundaries of low-achieving schools.
- The Lifeline Scholarship/PASS Program provides funding for children trapped in failing schools at significantly less than the **\$21,263 Pennsylvania spends per student** in public schools.<sup>4</sup>
- This program creates Educational Opportunity Accounts (EOAs) for students without taking funding from public schools, enabling students attending low-achieving public schools to attend private schools, which have, on average, **higher graduation rates** and higher college attendance.
  - **Studies continue to show** how educational choice benefits the public, including improvements to academic achievement and educational attainment.<sup>5</sup>
  - Pennsylvania is falling behind other states. Seven states added new private choice programs in 2023 alone. Meanwhile, EOAs, referred to as Education Savings Accounts (ESAs), are available

13 states: Arizona, Arkansas, Florida, Indiana, Iowa, Mississippi, Montana, New Hampshire, North Carolina, South Carolina, Tennessee, Utah, and West Virginia.<sup>6</sup>

- Students trapped in low-achieving public schools deserve access to educational options when their assigned public schools fail to meet their needs.

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<sup>1</sup> Pennsylvania Department of Education, PSSA Results (2023), accessed November 10, 2023, <https://www.education.pa.gov/DataAndReporting/Assessments/Pages/PSSA-Results.aspx>.

<sup>2</sup> Pennsylvania Department of Education, Education Budget, "2023–24 Enacted Summary of the State Education Appropriations," August 2023, <https://www.education.pa.gov/Teachers%20-%20Administrators/School%20Finances/Education%20Budget/Pages/default.aspx>.

<sup>3</sup> Pennsylvania Department of Education, Annual Financial Report (AFR) Data: Summary-Level, "Revenue Data for: School Districts, Career and Technology Centers, and Charter Schools (Revenue Data 2021–22)," accessed November 20, 2023, <https://www.education.pa.gov/Teachers%20-%20Administrators/School%20Finances/Finances/AFR%20Data%20Summary/Pages/AFR-Data-Summary-Level.aspx>.

<sup>4</sup> Commonwealth Foundation, "Pa. Education Funding Spikes Again," June 1, 2023, <https://www.commonwealthfoundation.org/research/pa-education-funding-spikes/>.

<sup>5</sup> EdChoice, "The 123s of School Choice (2023 Edition)," October 5, 2023, <https://www.edchoice.org/research-library/?report=the-123s-of-school-choice-3/>.

<sup>6</sup> Marc LeBlond and Ed Tarnowski, Educational Freedom and Choice Hits Escape Velocity: End-of-Session Wrap-Up," EdChoice, September 22, 2023 [update], <https://www.edchoice.org/engage/educational-freedom-and-choice-hits-escape-velocity-end-of-session-wrap/>; EdChoice, "School Choice Facts & Statistics," accessed November 27, 2023, <https://www.edchoice.org/school-choice/fast-facts/>.