



# OPPORTUNITY KNOCKS: Assessing Delaware's Education System

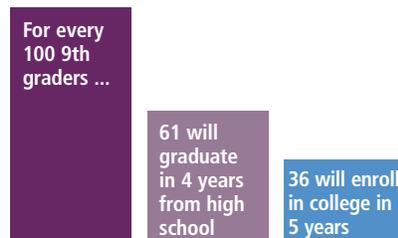
Our vision is that all of Delaware's students will graduate fully prepared for college and the workplace — that our education system will become a model of excellence by 2012. Indeed, our goal is to be among the top 10 states in student achievement. To build effectively toward this vision, we need to understand where we stand today.

This report assesses 10 aspects of Delaware's education system, focusing on *student performance* and the *system conditions* that make top performance possible. It was developed over a 10-month period by a talented team of researchers and education specialists who conducted extensive national and state research, interviewed more than 80 stakeholders — representing education, business, government and civic leadership — and conducted a series of focus groups with parents, students and teachers. Additionally, some of the nation's leading education practitioners met in January 2005 to provide their counsel on best practices here and nationally.

## WHY THIS MATTERS

More than ever, education is the ticket to success in work, citizenship and a satisfying life. Workers with only a high school diploma can expect to make only about \$29,000 a year; college graduates can expect to make about \$47,000 a year. In fact, about two-thirds of jobs in Delaware already require some post-secondary education, and that number will rise in the years ahead. But for every 100 high school freshman in

### Few Are Ready for College



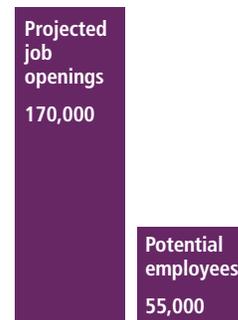
Source: Education Commission of the States, 2003.

Delaware's public schools, only 61 will graduate from high school on time and only 36 will enroll in college within five years. The percentages are much lower for African American and Hispanic students.

This work also is about equity. All students have a right to an excellent education. There is no greater return on investment than improving the likelihood that a child will be educated well enough to fully engage in and contribute to the growth and health of his or her community.

Moreover, not only does quality education benefit individuals, but it also is essential for our state's future prosperity. By 2010, labor projections show that Delaware will have 170,000 job openings but only 55,000 workers to fill them. Unless we educate more students for tomorrow's jobs and attract new workers into the state, the future well-being of our communities and health of our economy are at risk.

### Pending Shortfall of Workers, 2010



Source: Delaware Department of Labor, 2001.

## A MIXED PICTURE

As the following pages describe more fully, Delaware's performance is uneven. Our record in elementary achievement is very encouraging, especially in reading. But performance declines as students move into the upper grades, an alarming trend. And we need to create a stronger culture of success in our schools, one that sparks student learning, strengthens school leadership and instruction, and engages parents and the community.

# INDICATORS OF PROGRESS: A FRAMEWORK FOR EVALUATING DELAWARE'S SUCCESS

## STUDENT PERFORMANCE

Category	Status 2005	Overall Rating
HIGH SCHOOL	<p><b>GRADUATION</b></p> <p>Only about two-thirds of Delaware's students and disproportionately fewer minority students graduate in four years, well below most of our neighboring states, placing us 39th nationally. Our average performance on the SAT is substantially lower than that of our peers. But we are improving access to high-quality courses, scores on the Delaware State Testing Program (DSTP) have risen steadily for all groups of students and nearly three out of four students take the SAT.</p>	
MIDDLE SCHOOL	<p><b>READING</b></p> <p>Based on the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), only 31 percent of our 8th graders are proficient in reading, which is close to the bottom tier of states (30th). Although DSTP scores have moved in the right direction, our minority, disabled and limited English students remain 20–40 points behind the state averages.</p>	
	<p><b>MATHEMATICS</b></p> <p>Just 26 percent of our 8th graders are proficient in math (33rd nationally), according to NAEP. On the DSTP, achievement gaps remain very large and average middle school math scores are 28 points lower than elementary scores. But only nine states made more progress on NAEP in the past 13 years, and DSTP scores have been rising steadily for all groups.</p>	
ELEMENTARY SCHOOL	<p><b>READING</b></p> <p>One-third (33 percent) of our students are proficient on the NAEP reading test (16th nationally), and we have made more gains than any state since 1992. We are improving faster in elementary school reading than in any other level or subject. Achievement gaps are closing, and if we can continue to accelerate progress, we soon can be among the best in the nation.</p>	
	<p><b>MATHEMATICS</b></p> <p>Thirty-one percent of our students are proficient on the NAEP math test, placing us 28th nationally and well behind our neighbors. Progress has been slower than in reading, but DSTP scores are up (especially in grade 5) and achievement gaps across student groups are closing.</p>	
EARLY CHILDHOOD AND KINDERGARTEN	<p><b>READINESS</b></p> <p>Our Early Childhood Assistance Program (ECAP) makes preschool available for all 4-year-olds in poverty, and about a quarter of our 4-year-olds are now enrolled in either Head Start or ECAP. We have no state program for 3-year-olds. Although access is rising, only 23 percent of our kindergarteners are in full-day programs, compared to more than 60 percent nationally. But several districts serving large numbers of low-income children sponsor voluntary full-day kindergarten programs, and the state has funded a \$1 million pilot program to increase access to this educational opportunity in the years ahead.</p>	

# SYSTEM CONDITIONS

The color of the arrow describes current performance.

- = Delaware is among the top 10 states, our goal
- = Delaware is rated 11–30
- = Delaware is rated 31–50

The direction of the arrow describes whether the performance is improving, declining or staying the same.

Category	Status 2005	Overall Rating
<p><b>TEACHER QUALITY</b></p>	<p><b>Among in-school factors, teacher quality has the strongest connection to increased student performance, and we have substantial work ahead to find, keep and support the best teachers.</b> We rank 27th on a national index of teacher quality. We have relatively high teacher salaries and the highest percentage of National Board–certified teachers in the region. However, we hire our teachers late; more than two-thirds are not hired until August, which limits our ability to compete with other states that hire in the spring. Also, nearly half of all new teachers leave in their first five years, suggesting the need to improve mentoring and school conditions. But the state and many school districts are working together to improve recruitment and retention.</p>	
<p><b>LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT</b></p>	<p><b>With two-thirds of our superintendents and principals eligible to retire in the next five to seven years, we have the opportunity to strengthen and diversify our pipeline of great leaders, an essential component of great schools.</b> Today, as our student population becomes increasingly diverse, the vast majority of our district- and school-level leadership does not reflect this shift. Among promising developments is a major grant from the Wallace Foundation to strengthen our education leadership programs. Given the changing nature of what defines leadership in today's schools, Delaware could set the standard for the nation if we get it right.</p>	<p>N/A*</p>
<p><b>STANDARDS AND ACCOUNTABILITY</b></p>	<p><b>Our system of standards is ranked 12th best in the nation, and we've long been a leader in this area, but improvements are needed.</b> High expectations and sound data must drive all decisions. But in a review of our standards, national advisers clearly indicate that our state standards would be strengthened by more specificity and a better framework for the last two years of high school. Also, while our annual tests are turned around quickly, because they are only administered annually they are not as useful to informing and driving student performance as they could be.</p>	
<p><b>SCHOOL FINANCE</b></p>	<p><b>Although our education spending is 7th highest in the nation (\$9,072 per student), the system is complex, making it difficult to evaluate which investments are working better than others.</b> Furthermore, our "unit count" system, which links specific staff positions to student enrollment numbers, is so tightly structured that school principals may not have the flexibility to allocate their resources toward their greatest needs. Finally, given rapid rural and beach development in the past 20 years, many believe it is time for a property reassessment.</p>	
<p><b>SCHOOL CHOICE</b></p>	<p><b>Choice and flexibility are essential, and we are a national and regional leader.</b> We have more kinds of options than any other state in the mid-Atlantic region, including open enrollment, and we rank 3rd nationally in the percentage of students in charter schools. Although school choice is readily available, the opportunity to establish new schools is underutilized, many existing charters have waiting lists, and many parents do not fully know about all the options available.</p>	
<p><b>FAMILY AND COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT</b></p>	<p><b>If we want to make sure that every child succeeds, we need to involve parents and families from the start.</b> Although comparable national data are limited, Delaware appears to share the same challenges facing other states: a decline in parent engagement after elementary school; lack of adequate data to measure the level and variety of participation; and the need to involve more business leaders, clergy and other community members in supporting students. Broad-based engagement will provide the stability to allow school reform efforts to endure and to ensure that schools reflect community priorities.</p>	<p>N/A*</p>

\* Nationally comparable indicators are not yet available for these categories.

# WE CAN SET THE PACE

Delaware has been a leader in educational reform over the past two decades. We have made great progress. Yet we still have substantial work to do. The rest of the nation — and much of the world — is working hard to prepare their children for an increasingly competitive world of college and work.

To move to the top tier of states, we need to fundamentally re-examine our core systems — how we recruit and retain our teachers and leaders, how we measure student performance and use that data to increase learning, and how we spend our public education dollars, among other priorities. Tinkering at the edges of reform, starting a new program here or there, simply will not move us to where we need to be.

## OUR STRENGTHS

We have many assets that will help us move from the middle tier of states to the top:

- Our small size, with only 200 public schools and 119,000 students
- An economy that has consistently outperformed national trends
- A willingness to act boldly over the years
- The commitment of a broad cross-section of public, private and civic leaders
- Accessible and supportive leadership from both political parties
- High state funding levels and a generous philanthropic base

But real progress will require parents and politicians, business and labor, teachers and principals to pull together to identify and remove roadblocks. Schools cannot accomplish everything on behalf of society.

## WHAT WE CAN GAIN

Some say that our progress to date is sufficient, that performance is improving and generally keeping pace with other states. *But what can we gain if we make our state one of the finest?* The potential rewards include growth in good jobs for our young people as businesses seeking a highly qualified workforce deepen their recruitment efforts within Delaware. Moreover, the success of our schools eventually will draw more businesses into the state because their employees will welcome the opportunity to relocate here. Our children will have the skills to compete internationally — not just with students from Boston, but with students from Beijing and Bangalore.

Finally, let us not forget Will Rogers' argument for striving: "Even if you are on the right track, you'll get run over if you just sit there." Just to stay even with the rest of the nation is not enough. We have a choice: to move forward slowly or to accelerate progress and reach our vision. If success can be achieved anywhere, we can do it in Delaware. Instead of keeping pace with the nation, let us *set* the pace.

## ABOUT THE RODEL FOUNDATION

Founded in 1999, our mission is to help Delaware create one of the finest public school systems in the nation by 2012. We carry out our mission in four ways:

- Broker national best practices by bringing in outside experts to help strengthen state and local policies.
- Catalyze action through research and discussion.
- Implement direct services, such as leadership institutes, that have the potential to inform public policy.
- Partner in systemic reform through leveraged investments, especially in sustainable, district-led initiatives.

The board of directors includes William D. Budinger, president; Donald V. Budinger, vice president; Paul H. Harrell, Jr., treasurer; Susan Budinger, secretary; Stephanie Fitzgerald, *ex officio*; D. Wayne Holden; Connie Bond Stuart; and Kristen Williams.

Members of the foundation's Advisory Council include The Honorable Pierre S. du Pont, co-chair; U. S. Senator Tom Carper, co-chair; Raye Jones Avery; Robert Buccini; William D. Budinger; Stephanie Fitzgerald; and Jack Markell.

The president and CEO is Paul A. Herdman, Ed.D.