

Early Literacy Learning

A PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT IMPERATIVE

UNIVERSITY OF PITTSBURGH

OFFICE OF CHILD DEVELOPMENT

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“One of the most important things that the...training does is to help providers to see that books are not just for story time anymore. They begin to understand the connection between early literacy and other developmental processes and come to realize that books can enhance every component of the early childhood curriculum.”

Early childhood educator



writers

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preface

Early Literacy Learning: A Professional Development Imperative



Professional educators, community-based literacy leaders and children’s advocates convened in the spring of 1999 to form a task force that would look at both the practice and policy affecting the way children in the Western Pennsylvania region learn to read. The **Early Literacy Task Force** meets monthly as a whole group and separately as smaller working groups around four issues: professional development, teacher preparation, volunteer policy work-

force, and advocacy. The hope is that by working together, across disciplinary boundaries, we can provide useful information and lessen the fragmentation of efforts that can occur in a field as broadly defined as “early literacy.”

The members of the professional development group collaboratively wrote **Early Literacy Learning: A Professional Development Imperative**. As anyone who has tried collaborative writing knows, it is not the most seamless or direct process for producing a document. What we discovered, however, is that while we see children in different settings and from different perspectives, we can rely on research, experience and conversation to discern the best practices and essential elements for programs that aim to help educators develop their own skills and understandings. This document addresses the interwoven questions of what children, birth to eight years old, need to know for healthy language and literacy development and what early literacy educators need to know to guide and encourage that development.

Our aim is to provide recommendations that will assist those responsible for early literacy education to set goals and to select or design effective professional development programs.

All professionals entrusted with student outcomes—teachers, caregivers, administrators, and community specialists—have a responsibility to reflect on their own practice, build on their own particular strengths, and continually refine the knowledge and skills necessary to promote the healthy language development and literacy accomplishments of young children. We hope that our discussions and research have produced a document that will foster other conversations and planning for the good of all the children in our care.

All professionals entrusted with student outcomes—teachers, caregivers, administrators, and community specialists—have a responsibility to reflect on their own practice, build on their own particular strengths, and continually refine the knowledge and skills necessary to promote the healthy language development and literacy accomplishments of young children.

Recommendation I: Context, Process, & Content

Recommendation II: Standards and Outcomes

Recommendation III: Areas of Preparation - Professional Development Components

Recommendation IV: Infant/Toddler/Preschool

Recommendation V: Kindergarten - Third Grade

introduction

Early Literacy Learning: A Professional Development Imperative

The building of a literacy foundation and subsequent skills necessary for children to become proficient readers and writers is the responsibility of all who interact with young children, birth to age eight, including parents, caretakers, and primary teachers, as well as those who work in community-based organizations that promote literacy learning.

Literacy learning can occur in many places: at home, in an early childhood program, at school, or riding on a bus. Children are alert to all the language around them, even before they sort it all out and become what we call literate. The purpose of this document is to give adults who help children learn to read and write information about how to find the best professional development approaches and resources. Whether an educator is working in a family support center or a public school, he or she needs a way to seek out and understand the best practices for encouraging and assisting young children to learn.

Research evidence is overwhelmingly clear: the early years of life are critical to developing the skills and habits of literacy.

Experiences with language, oral and written, provide the foundation that children need if they are to be successful in school. Parents have an important role to play in making their children lifelong readers. Preschool and childcare providers can offer valuable experiences that promote language and literacy learning. Likewise, the focus on providing a strong start in the primary grades speaks to the importance of early intervention for preventing reading failure.

We recognize that we need to do better in assisting all children to become literate. The aims of this document are to heighten the awareness of the importance of professional development as a means of improving the literacy and language performances of children and to provide specific ideas of what those working with children need to know and be able to do. This guide provides recommendations that will assist those responsible for early literacy education to set goals and to select or design effective professional development programs.



“Children start to accumulate the skills needed for reading early in life—building a pre-school language and literacy foundation—which includes opportunities for children to develop oral language skills, including phonological awareness, motivation to read, appreciation for literate forms, print awareness, and letter knowledge.”

Burns, Griffin, & Snow, 1999, p. 7

one

Context, Process, & Content

Recommendation I: Professional development for teachers of literacy should address context, process, and content issues (National Staff Development Council Standards, <http://www.nsd.org>). Such professional development should build the capacity of teachers to use research-based teaching strategies appropriate to their instructional objectives and to their students. It is imperative that professional development builds the leadership capacity of both individuals and the organization to ensure the success of a comprehensive, sustainable, early literacy reform agenda.

The **Early Literacy Task Force** strongly recommends that all professional development activities be based on the following principles:

1. That the selection of experiences meets the needs of children and teachers in a particular context.
2. That professional development be systematic, more than the one-shot workshop, providing opportunities for ongoing study (chances to develop expertise with specific topics and techniques).
3. That varied approaches be used in developing a professional development program (e.g., technology, study groups, coaching).
4. That providers of professional development have the expertise relevant to the literacy topic being addressed. When new initiatives are identified, there must be appropriate professional development training to build understanding of those programs.
5. That any professional development experience have both formative (for program improvement) and summative (to assess outcomes) evaluation.

The guidelines identified in Pennsylvania’s Act 48 provide a means for schools, early childhood programs and educators to develop professional development programs. The Act can assist schools in determining quality professional development experiences (see page 13).

In addition to all these considerations of appropriate content, alignment with standards, and adherence to effective adult learning principles, the ultimate test of professional development activities in early literacy is whether the outcome improves children’s performance as emergent or early literacy learners. Consequently, programs should be evaluated according to whether or not they produce changes in children’s performance.

Additional references for those interested in professional development are cited in the “Resources” section on pages 14-15 of the document.

two

Standards and Outcomes

Recommendation II: Each agency/school district responsible for literacy development should identify standards as a means of setting goals and identifying outcomes for all children.

The Early Childhood Learning Continuum Indicators, developed by the Pennsylvania Department of Education (www.pde.state.pa.us) and the Pennsylvania Association of Intermediate Units, provide a continuum of benchmarks from pre-kindergarten through grade 3 that can be used by agencies to identify what students need to know and be able to do. This document is based upon the Pennsylvania Academic Standards for Reading, Writing, Speaking and Listening.

Given that the Pennsylvania standards are broadly defined, schools/agencies may wish to consult other resources to enhance their work in defining standards, designing curriculum, and implementing instructional efforts. Several resources are listed below.

- *Educational Resources Information Center (ERIC) Clearinghouse on Reading, English and Communication.* (<http://www.eric.ed.gov>)

The Educational Resources and Information Center (ERIC) is a national information system designed to provide ready access to an extensive body of education-related literature, and contains more than one million records of journal articles, research reports, curriculum and teaching guides, conference papers, and books. This clearinghouse is dedicated to providing educational materials, services and coursework to parents and teachers interested in language arts.

- *Learning to Read and Write: Developmentally Appropriate Practices for Young Children, 1998.* (IRA: <http://www.reading.org/positions>) (NAEYC: <http://www.naeyc.org/resources>)

This joint position statement of the International Reading Association (IRA) and the National Association of the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) is a concise summary of the current issues and a review of the research on young children's literacy development. It addresses the continuum of learning from birth through age eight and the teaching practices that support the achievement of benchmarks along that continuum.

- National Center on Education and the Economy (NCEE). *Reading and Writing Grade by Grade: Primary Literacy Standards for Kindergarten Through Third Grade.* (<http://www.ncee.org>)

These standards are an unprecedented set of grade-by-grade expectations in reading and writing for students in kindergarten through third grade.





“In addition, all teachers, even the most experienced, need high quality professional development. They need to be aware of new information in the fields of child development, cognitive psychology, and literacy education. And they need time to integrate changes into their instruction.”

Making a Difference Means Making It Different: Honoring Children’s Rights to Excellent Reading Instruction, A Position Statement of The International Reading Association, 2000, p. 5

They state what primary children should know and be able to do and how well they should be able to perform.

The standards also give teachers and parents a few examples of the kinds of reading and writing that children should be able to do in kindergarten through grade three.

- National Center on Education and the Economy (NCEE). *Speaking and Listening for Preschool Through Third Grade*. (<http://www.ncee.org/speaking>)

This book answers critical questions about talking and listening for early childhood educators and childcare providers. These standards for preschool through the third grade spell out the skills children need to learn in preschool, kindergarten, and first grade, and know by second and third grade.

- National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) and the International Reading Association (IRA). *Standards for the English Language Arts*. (<http://www.ncte.org/standards>)

These standards, a joint effort of NCTE and IRA, offer guidance for the opportunities and resources students should have in order to develop the language skills they need. They encourage the development of curriculum and instruction that make productive use of the emerging literacy abilities that children bring to school.

- *Starting Out Right: A Guide to Promoting Students’ Reading Success, 1999*. (<http://www.nap.edu>)

This easy to read document summarizes the research presented in *Preventing Reading Difficulties in Young Children* and would be of interest to parents, pediatricians, child care providers, policy makers, tutors, and teachers.

three

Areas of Preparation — Professional Development Components

Recommendation III: Professional development for those responsible for literacy education of children birth through eight years of age should be comprehensive and address one or more of the essential topics identified below.

- Alphabet code: phonics, decoding
- Assessment
- Child development
- Children's literature
- Conversation
- Family's role in literacy development
- Fluent, automatic reading of text
- Language development
- Motivation
- Phonemic awareness, letter knowledge, and concepts of print
- Play
- Reading in the context of relationships
- Safe, caring, literacy-rich environments
- Spelling and handwriting
- Text comprehension
- Vocabulary
- Written expression



Certainly not all of these areas will be addressed concurrently; rather, an agency, school or district, given its particular population and needs, will identify what topics are essential for its staff. Likewise, professionals who work with children at different ages need to identify their priorities relative to this list. A needs assessment, based on the above topics, will enable them to identify priorities and plan accordingly.



“Ongoing professional development is essential for teachers to stay current in an ever-expanding research base and to continually improve their teaching skills and the learning outcomes for children.”

Learning to Read and Write: Developmentally Appropriate Practices for Young Children, by Susan B. Neuman, Carol Copple, and Sue Bredecamp. National Association for the Education of Young Children, 2000, p. 17-18

These essential topics for professional development cannot stand alone; they are best addressed in a larger context of a professional learning community committed to a comprehensive literacy reform initiative that includes collaborative planning, shared decision making, reflective practice, coaching and mentoring, and monitoring of student progress.

Many of the topics identified above come from the document, *Every Child Reading: A Professional Development Guide, 2000*. In that text, there is further elaboration and a list of activities that will enable teachers to become knowledgeable about each specific topic. Both providers of professional development and agencies interested in improving the competence of their staff should use this list to reflect and build on what they are currently doing relative to professional development.

Given the importance of improving literacy performance of students in this region, and the clear cut message from research findings, the topics listed above are essential and critical and must be addressed by every school, child care provider, and professional development provider in Southwestern Pennsylvania — if we are to make a difference in children’s literacy.



four

Infant/Toddler/Preschool

Recommendation IV: Infant/Toddler/Preschool educators should have a knowledge base about the following elements and be able to plan and implement activities that demonstrate their ability to apply knowledge to practice.

- oral language development
- relationships as important motivators
- symbolic and representational play as precursors to reading development
- appropriate and diverse literature for different developmental levels
- information about young children's use of their senses and movement for learning
- creating a safe and caring learning environment that promotes rich literacy experiences
- providing rich conceptual experiences that promote growth in vocabulary and reasoning skills
- lexical development, from early referential (naming) abilities to relational and abstract terms and finer-shaded meanings
- early development of listening comprehension skills, and the kinds of syntactic and prose structures that pre-school children may not yet have mastered
- information about young children's sense of story
- information about young children's sensitivity to the sounds of language
- information about young children's understanding of concepts of print, and the developmental patterns of emergent reading and writing
- information about young children's development of concepts of space, including directionality
- fine motor development
- instilling motivation to read



(Adapted from Burns, Griffin, and Snow, *Preventing Reading Difficulties in Young Children*, p. 332)



“Preschool teachers represent an important—and largely under-utilized—resource in promoting literacy through promoting the acquisition of rich language and beginning literacy concepts and skills.... Central to achieving the goal of primary prevention of reading difficulties is the preschool teacher’s knowledge base and experience, as well as the support provided to the teacher....”

Starting Out Right: A Guide to Promoting Children’s Reading Success, by the National Research Council, 1999, p. 58



five

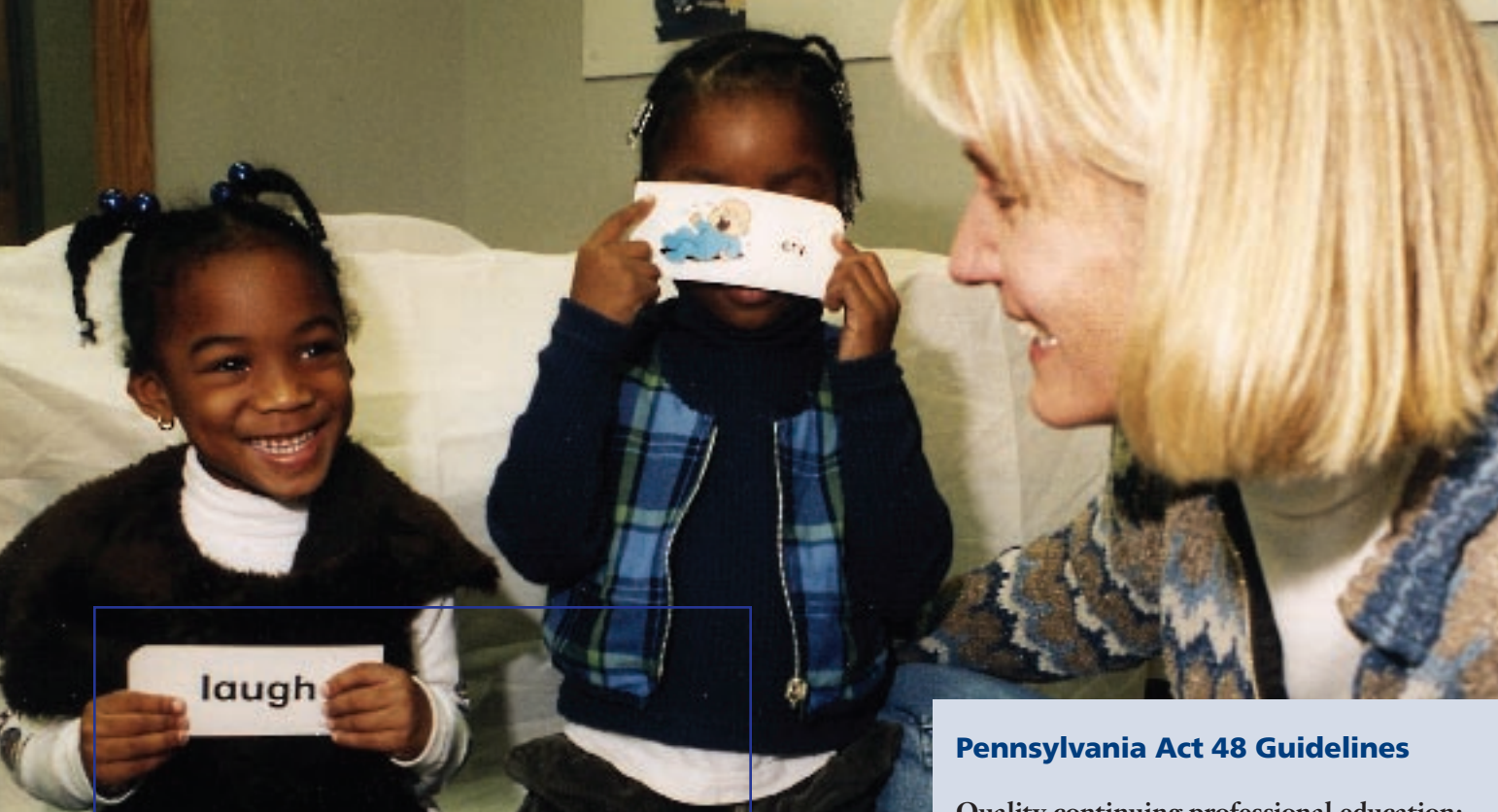
Kindergarten - Third Grade

Recommendation V: Kindergarten to third-grade level teachers should have a knowledge base about the following elements and be able to plan and implement activities that demonstrate their ability to apply their knowledge to practice.

- information about language development as it relates to literacy
- information about the relationship between early literacy behavior and conventional reading
- information about the features of an alphabetic writing system and other writing systems
- information about both phonology and morphology in relation to spelling
- information about comprehension and its dependence on other aspects of reading and language skills
- information about phonological awareness, orthographic awareness, and writing development
- procedures for ongoing, in-class assessment of children's reading abilities
- information on how to interpret and modify instruction using multiple assessment measures
- information about the learning and curricular needs of diverse learners
- utilization of a knowledge base in settings in which children are learning to read in a language other than English
- utilization of a knowledge base in settings in which non-English-speaking or limited-English-speaking students are in an English as a second language program and learn to read in English
- information on the design features and requirements of a reading curriculum
- information about applying research judiciously to practice, updating research knowledge, and influencing research agendas, including teacher-researcher collaborations
- maintaining and promoting motivation to read and positive attitudes toward reading



(Adapted from Burns, Griffin, and Snow, *Preventing Reading Difficulties in Young Children*, pp. 330-331)



“...studies have shown that even modest training programs can have important influences on childcare providers’ attitudes and behaviors.”

Access for All: Closing the Book Gap for Children in Early Education, Susan B. Neuman et al., International Reading Association, 2001, p. 6

Conclusion

Although there are many factors that affect the literacy learning of children, there is strong evidence that quality teaching is imperative if children are to become successful readers and writers. All involved with children, birth through eight, need to have the knowledge and skills that will enable them to provide critical learning experiences. In this document we have made recommendations that highlight the importance of systemic, intensive, and ongoing professional development. We have also provided lists of resources, both local and national, that should be helpful to those looking for ways to improve their professional development programs and also to those who provide such services or programs. We believe the recommendations also have implications for those who can influence policy related to professional development; in other words, what legislators, school administrators, and agency directors can do to assure that those working with young children are the very best.

Pennsylvania Act 48 Guidelines

Quality continuing professional education:

- is related to attainment of the Pennsylvania academic standards and high-quality instruction;
- is planned to address the needs of a school entity and its professional employees;
- has clear, concise, written content- and skill-based competencies;
- includes content and instructional methods that are appropriate for the intended competencies to be mastered;
- is planned and conducted by personnel who have an academic degree or other education and experience appropriate to the subject matter being taught;
- is research-based, data-driven and contributes to measurable increases in student achievement;
- provides sufficient support and resources to enable individuals to master new skills;
- contributes to building learning communities and continuous improvement;
- requires that participants demonstrate attainment of the competencies; and
- is evaluated by the participants.

development

Professional Development Resources and References

Bowman, B.T., Donovan, S., & Burns, M.S., eds. *Eager to Learn: Educating Our Preschoolers*. Washington, DC: National Research Council, 2001. (<http://www.nap.edu/books>)

The Committee on Early Childhood Pedagogy of the National Research Council has prepared a report that focuses primarily on research and practice related to the understanding of early childhood pedagogy. It provides a distillation of the knowledge base for practice in early childhood education programs, the training of teachers and child care professionals, and future research directions. Of particular interest are the chapters on curriculum and pedagogy which include literacy, assessment, and the preparation of early childhood professionals.

Gusky, T.R. *Results-Oriented Professional Development: In Search of an Optimal Mix of Effective Practices*. Naperville, Illinois: North Central Regional Educational Laboratory. (<http://www.ncrel.org>)

This article considers what research says about the effectiveness of professional development. In particular it considers the mixed messages reformers are getting from research and how we might make sense of those messages. A set of guidelines for professional development is drawn from the research on individual and organizational change to help educators translate the research into practice. Finally, the article examines the potential impact of implementing these guidelines.

International Reading Association. *Standards for Reading Professionals, Revised*. Newark, DE: Author, 1998. (<http://www.reading.org>)

This booklet describes what reading professionals should know and be able to do. It describes the literacy process and the teaching proficiencies professionals should possess to effectively apply that knowledge. The standards apply to individuals of all ages and levels and are provided for ten distinct roles performed by three categories of literacy professionals.

Learning First Alliance. *Every Child Reading: A Professional Development Guide*. Baltimore, MD: Author, 2000. (www.learningfirst.org/readingguide.html)

As a companion to *Every Child Reading: An Action Plan*, the purpose of this document is to assist planners of professional development for reading and language arts education to set goals, select or design viable programs,

and allocate resources wisely. This document contains an excellent list of what literacy teachers should know and be able to do.

Lyons, C.A. & Pinnell, G. S. *Systems for Change in Literacy Education: A Guide to Professional Development*. New Hampshire: Heinemann Publishers, 2001.

Systems for Change offers specific suggestions for planning and implementing a literacy professional development program. It provides a framework for conceptualizing professional development programs, along with guidelines, descriptions, and examples for using this framework to create a comprehensive K-6 professional development literacy program. The Spiral of Learning presented on p. 12 is a useful model for thinking about professional development as ongoing learning.

Moats, L.C. *Teaching Reading IS Rocket Science: What Expert Teachers of Reading Should Know and Be Able to Do*. Washington, DC: American Federation of Teachers, 1999. (<http://www.aft.org>)

This paper, prepared for the American Federation of Teachers, explains what research says about effective reading instruction. It discusses the current state of teacher preparation in reading and describes the knowledge base and essential skills that teacher candidates and practicing teachers must master if they are to be successful in teaching all children to read well.

National Association for the Education of Young Children. *A Conceptual Framework for Early Childhood Professional Development. (A Position Statement of the National Association for the Education of Young Children)*. Washington, DC: Author, 1993. (<http://www.naeyc.org>)

This comprehensive document addresses the need for quality standards in early childhood education programs and the principles of effective professional development.

National Staff Development Council. *Standards for Staff Development, Revised*. Oxford, OH: Author, 2001. (<http://www.nsd.org>)

Twelve standards define what is necessary if staff development is to impact student achievement. Each standard is accompanied by a two-page discussion that includes a rationale, case study, discussion questions, etc. These standards are organized into Context, Process, and Content areas.

Neuman, S.B. & Dickinson, D. K., eds. *Handbook of Early Literacy Research*. New York: Guilford Publications, 2001.

This volume brings together leading authorities to report on current findings, integrate insights from different disciplinary perspectives, and explore ways to provide children with the strongest possible literacy foundations in the first six years of life. The Handbook addresses questions about emergent literacy, various strands of knowledge and skills that emerge as children become literate, roles played by peers and families, and approaches to instructional assessment.

Pennsylvania Department of Education. *Pennsylvania Literacy Framework*. Harrisburg, PA: Author, 2001.

This newly released document provides a literacy framework (K-12) that addresses four stages of literacy learning: Early Literacy (birth through kindergarten), Expanding Literacy, Enhancing Literacy, and Lifelong Learning. The document provides information about current research on literacy and practical ideas about instruction of reading, writing, listening, and speaking. The document, published by the Pennsylvania Department of Education, is an excellent resource for those looking for ways to implement the Pennsylvania Academic Standards of Reading, Writing, Speaking and Listening.

Snow, C. E., Burns, M.S., & Griffin, P., eds. *Preventing Reading Difficulties in Young Children*. Washington, DC: National Research Council, 1998. (<http://www.nap.edu>)

This book explores how to prevent reading difficulties and includes recommendations that identify children at risk, outlines effective instruction for preschool and early grades, and discusses the many levels of implications for parents, teachers, schools communities, media, and government. It explores in detail how to foster literacy from birth through kindergarten and through the primary grades, including the valuation of philosophies, systems, and materials commonly used to teach reading.

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Local Resources

To download a free copy of *Early Literacy Learning: A Professional Development Imperative*, visit the following Web sites:

Allegheny Intermediate Unit	http://www.aiu3.net
Beginning With Books	http://mybwb.org
Carlow College Division of Education	http://www.carlow.edu/academic/edudivision.html
Carnegie Library of Pittsburgh	http://www.carnegielibrary.org
Collaboratives For Learning	http://www.pa-edresources.net
Office of Child Development	http://www.pitt.edu/~ocdweb
School Performance Network	http://www.schoolperformance.net

Other websites containing information on early childhood are listed below:

Children's Hospital of Pittsburgh	http://www.chp.edu
Education Policy and Issues Center	http://www.epi-center.org
Education Policy and Leadership Center	http://eplc.org
Mon Valley Education Consortium	http://www.mvec.org
Pathways	http://www.pathways-eep.org
Pennsylvania Partnerships For Children	http://www.papartnerships.org
PA Department of Education	http://www.pde.state.pa.us
PA Library Association	http://www2.sis.pitt.edu/~pala/
PA Coalition for Public Education	http://www.pcpe.org
PA Parent Information Resource Center	http://www.pa.pirc.org