



The Onorato Plan for Pre-K–12 Education

Preparing the Next Generation of Pennsylvanians for the High-Skill Economy & As Leaders of a Strong Civic Society

Quality schools are vital for Pennsylvania's economic future and for the health of the Commonwealth's communities. Education is the lynchpin of the decisions that will drive Pennsylvania's progress: for businesses searching for the workforce that will fuel their growth, for adults choosing where to raise their family, and for industries that can only thrive in places rich in entrepreneurship and innovation. Dan Onorato understands that growing Pennsylvania's economy necessitates strong public schools, and he knows that if the state fails to live up to its responsibility the result will be ever-increasing local property taxes and even greater inequity – which are the last things that Pennsylvania can afford.

Education is essential to the economic security of Pennsylvania families, and the national recession has reinforced this reality – with unemployment rates for workers with the least education far greater than for those who have a college degree. This trend is likely to accelerate, with experts projecting that future job creation will favor positions that require college degrees and workforce certifications. In addition, the goal of getting more Pennsylvanians into jobs that pay a family-sustaining wage is interwoven with the need to increase educational attainment: workers with a college degree will earn over \$1 million more in their lifetime than their peers who drop out of high school. Meanwhile, high school dropouts create a burden on taxpayers, costing an average of nearly \$700 per year in government services above and beyond what they pay in taxes.

The good news is that Pennsylvania has become a national leader in increasing student achievement. A report by the independent nonpartisan Center on Education Policy concluded that Pennsylvania was the only state in the nation to boost reading and math scores at all grade levels and for all groups of students from 2002 to 2008 – proving that many of Pennsylvania's education reforms are working. Notably, many of the largest gains have been accomplished by school districts that faced the greatest academic challenges and which until 2002 had been severely under-funded.

But Pennsylvania still has a long way to go. Nearly a half-million elementary, middle and high school students are struggling to complete grade-level work in reading and math. While Maryland boasts the highest rate in the country for students succeeding in Advanced

Placement courses in high school – courses that prepare students for college and often enable them to earn college credit – Pennsylvania trails 26 states and falls below the national average. Overall, fewer than half of Pennsylvania ninth graders enroll in college by the time they turn 19.

A Proven Track Record

Dan Onorato knows the importance of education to economic development. As a member of Pittsburgh City Council representing the North Side, Onorato saw the positive impact of high-quality early childhood education on children from disadvantaged backgrounds. Onorato brought this commitment to ensuring that all children receive a good start in school to his role as Allegheny County Executive, where he has championed programs that increase literacy and that provide academic, after-school and social service support to the county's families.

A Vision for Pennsylvania's Future

As Governor, Dan Onorato will work to provide all Pennsylvania students with the high-quality education that is essential to success in our global economy. The Onorato Plan for Pre-K–12 Education includes:

1. Fulfilling the state's responsibility for adequate school funding – and keeping the burden off of local property taxes;
2. Providing high-quality early childhood care and education;
3. Creating an environment where students can learn;
4. Providing all children with the quality education they deserve; and
5. Ensuring that students graduate ready for success in college and the workforce.

Fulfilling the state's responsibility for adequate school funding – and keeping the burden off of local property taxes

Dan Onorato believes that having adequate resources with strong accountability for how they are invested is critical to increasing achievement in Pennsylvania's schools. Having fought against county property tax hikes as Allegheny County Executive, Onorato also understands that the local impact of the historic decline in the state share of school funding has been an ever-increasing burden on local property taxpayers. As Governor, Dan Onorato will:

- **Continue to implement the Legislature's Costing-Out Report.** Pennsylvania's first school funding formula in nearly two decades was enacted in 2008, and Onorato will continue to implement the formula until it is fully funded. Doing so will enable local communities to avoid unaffordable property tax hikes, while providing adequate and predictable resources to increase achievement in Pennsylvania classrooms. The school funding formula is also a good-government reform: it eliminates back-room dealing in favor of complete transparency in how and why the state allocates its education funding.
- **Maintain strict accountability for how new funds are invested.** Onorato will ensure that school districts have flexibility, but he will also hold them accountable for investing annual basic education subsidy increases that exceed inflation in the programs that are proven to increase student achievement.
- **Provide adequate resources for special education.** Investment in effective special education provides benefits to both the individual children and the entire state by ensuring that students with disabilities can graduate with the knowledge and skills needed to live independently, pursue further education, have a career and participate equally in community life. Children with special needs are entitled to a quality education in the

most inclusive possible learning environment. Onorato understands that children thrive in different settings based on their unique needs, and he supports the full continuum of special education providers. Onorato will work with a broad range of stakeholders to determine how the state should update its special education subsidies and accountability provisions.

- **Ensure that taxpayer funds are being used efficiently.** As Allegheny County Executive, Onorato has reformed local government by improving service delivery, cutting waste and eliminating inefficiency and fragmentation. Bringing that experience to the education arena, Onorato will:
 - *Enact real charter school reform.* Onorato believes that charter schools can serve an important function as “laboratories of innovation” and that they are an established component of Pennsylvania’s educational landscape, but they must also be held to stricter academic and financial standards than under current law. Onorato will champion reforms that achieve these goals and that do not pit charter schools and school districts against one another, and he will also call for a more rational system of cyber charter school funding and accountability.
 - *Encourage shared services to become standard operating procedure.* Past pilot projects prove that school districts can save money and improve services by collaborating on areas like procurement, back-office finance operations and technology. Onorato will work to make voluntary shared services the norm, so that functions that can easily be combined are not unnecessarily duplicated across 500 school districts at a significant cost to taxpayers.
 - *Aggregate the state’s purchasing power of school employee health insurance.* Expert reports show that Pennsylvania taxpayers could save hundreds of millions of dollars a year while protecting the health benefits that teachers and other school employees currently receive. Onorato supports regional and statewide approaches to pooling health benefits, as long as they protect employee rights and save the taxpayers money. Onorato also recognizes that some school districts may be large enough that their participation in a statewide system is not necessary.
- **Take a balanced approach to school choice.** Onorato supports the Educational Improvement Tax Credit – which funds scholarships for low-income families and innovative public school programs – and he will ensure that funding for the EITC never comes at the expense of resources for public education.
- **Champion the state’s education needs in Washington, D.C.** Onorato will be a strong advocate for Pennsylvania in the reauthorization of the Elementary & Secondary Education Act – including in the level and method of funding it provides for schools – and he will call for the federal government to live up to its responsibility to appropriately fund special education.

Providing high-quality early childhood care and education

Every dollar invested in early childhood education generates between \$7 and \$17 in long-term benefits and savings to taxpayers. That is why economists have concluded that quality early childhood education is a powerful economic development tool. As Governor, Dan Onorato will:

- **Increase the number of children enrolled in high-quality pre-kindergarten.** Onorato will expand the number of slots in Pennsylvania’s landmark Pre-Kindergarten Counts

program – where thousands of families are currently on waiting lists – with the goal of doubling the number of children in high-quality pre-k by 2020. He will sustain support for the Head Start Supplemental Assistance Program, and seek additional federal resources to grow Head Start. Onorato will also continue to support high-quality community child care providers' inclusion in Pennsylvania's pre-k system, including the Keystone Babies program for infants and toddlers, and he will ensure that children with special needs are supported in inclusive settings.

- **Improve outreach to the neediest families.** Onorato will focus on ensuring that state-funded pre-k programs provide effective outreach and recruitment to the families of low-income children and other children at risk of academic failure.
- **Increase the availability of subsidized child care.** Child care is essential for parents to be able to join the workforce and earn a living, and Onorato will work to expand the number of parents and children who are served.
- **Promoting high-quality community child care.** Onorato supports expansion of Keystone STARS – the voluntary program for community child care providers to demonstrate and improve their effectiveness – as well as efforts to advance the needs of the child care workforce that quality early childhood care and education relies on. Onorato will ensure that programs truly address the needs of Pennsylvania families.
- **Expand nurse-family partnerships.** Parents are a child's first teacher, and research shows that the most at-risk families need assistance during pregnancy and early in a child's life. Onorato supports the proven Nurse-Family Partnership program to assist these families and improve children's ability to be successful.
- **Give early childhood issues the high profile they deserve.** Onorato supports the state's Office of Child Development & Early Learning strategy that unites early childhood programs to improve their effectiveness, as well as the Early Learning Network to promote strong accountability, and he will build on existing public-private partnerships that raise resources and awareness around early childhood issues.

Creating an environment where students can learn

In order to succeed in school, children need a safe and nurturing learning environment.

As Governor, Dan Onorato will:

- **Improve student engagement.** Students learn best when they are exposed to a wide range of subjects and activities and are given the chance to develop diverse interests. Onorato will promote the use of available state resources to fund courses like art, music and foreign languages, as well as provide support for extracurricular activities and after-school programs – including through the creation of a Statewide After-School Coordinating Council. Onorato will also support school and community libraries, which provide essential access to resources and learning tools.
- **Ensure that schools are safe places to learn and to teach.** School safety is a basic right, and Onorato will ensure that it is a high priority for the state. He supports:
 - Appointing a high-level official responsible for school safety who reports directly to the Secretary of Education and whose job includes monitoring conditions in schools, implementing school safety programs and evaluating the impact of safety initiatives;
 - Providing school districts with technical assistance, training and equipment so that they can improve school safety and reduce violence;

- Improving state laws on school safety reporting and ensuring that the information school districts submit is accurate;
- Continued implementation of Pennsylvania’s anti-bullying law in support of effective school policies and programs to prevent bullying and cyber-bullying; and
- Establishing school environment and safety standards under the State Board of Education’s leadership.
- **Address students’ social and health service needs.** A child who comes to school hungry, who is suffering from a medical problem or who is unable to sleep at night because of a family’s living conditions is unlikely to learn to his or her fullest potential – yet schools cannot be expected to solve all of these problems on their own. Onorato will work to address the needs of the whole child through:
 - Better coordinating public- and private-sector programs that provide services to families so that schools can draw on available services and, where possible, serve as the location for one-stop family resource centers;
 - Replicating the success of the Harlem Children’s Zone initiative. Onorato will pursue federal funding to establish Promise Neighborhoods as proposed by President Obama, which take a holistic approach to serving communities of low-income families from before a child is born through when he or she graduates from high school;
 - Recognizing the vital role of school nurses and other school health personnel; and
 - Improving nutrition standards for the food served in school cafeterias and encouraging schools to implement cost-effective strategies to serve breakfast.
- **Encourage parental involvement.** Schools work best when parents are engaged in their children’s education. Onorato will provide school districts with model policies and programs to encourage parental engagement.

Providing all children with the quality education they deserve

Increasing achievement in Pennsylvania requires paying extra attention to the students and the schools that need the most support. As Governor, Dan Onorato will:

- **Focus on the specific needs of at-risk and historically under-performing students.** Onorato will ensure that the state and school districts actively pursue strategies to educate all students, including:
 - *Championing efforts to close the achievement gap.* Despite significant student achievement gains, Pennsylvania still faces a sizeable achievement gap that puts African-American, Latino and other minority students at a disadvantage. Many of the strategies in this policy paper will reduce that gap, and Onorato will ensure that the achievement gap is a high and public priority for his Administration.
 - *Improving services for English language learners.* Onorato will improve local capacity to deliver effective instruction for students who are trying to learn English, including through quality content standards, instructional materials and support, teacher preparation programs and professional development.
 - *Addressing the needs of students with disabilities.* Onorato will provide the resources, technical assistance and tools to enable schools to educate all students in the least restrictive environment possible. In addition, Onorato will ensure that his Administration fulfills the requirements of the *Gaskin* settlement and that it

takes an inclusive and collaborative approach to stakeholder engagement. Onorato will also enhance state, regional and local programs supporting parent training to be strong self-advocates for their children who are eligible for special education.

- **Turn around struggling schools and school districts.** Onorato will ensure that schools facing severe academic challenges receive strong support from the state in order to implement meaningful turn-around plans. Assisting school turn-around is one of the most important functions of the state Department of Education, and Onorato will focus on providing effective leadership and assistance to schools and districts in need of help. Turn-around strategies must be based on what research shows works and must be successfully implemented in a reasonable time frame so that students are given every opportunity to succeed.
- **Encourage quality teaching in every school.** Onorato recognizes that the most critical element of schools is the relationship between students and their teacher. Onorato will ensure that teacher preparation programs are designed to train new teachers for the real-world challenges that await them, including through extensive field work, in-depth subject knowledge, meaningful child development education and a focus on the unique needs of at-risk students, and that these programs are followed by intensive induction programs once a new teacher is hired. He will also advance strategies to recruit and retain teachers and education support professionals in high-need schools and specialized fields. In addition, Onorato will support innovative efforts to address teacher evaluation and compensation within the collective bargaining process.
- **Recognize the importance of school and district leadership.** Effective superintendents, principals and other administrators are essential to increasing student achievement. Hiring and retaining leaders is also one of the greatest challenges faced by school districts – a challenge that will only accelerate as a wave of retirements occurs over the next five to 10 years. Onorato will create a Leadership Excellence Incentive Fund to encourage voluntary local pilot projects that explore approaches to hiring, structuring and compensation for school leadership positions, so that the state can identify best practices in school and district management.

Ensuring that students graduate ready for success in college and the workforce

Preparing students for lifelong success starts on the first day of pre-kindergarten and lasts until a student earns their high school diploma. It requires educational experiences that are academically rigorous and also relevant to the students' own interests and the workforce opportunities that await them after high school. As Governor, Dan Onorato will:

- **Create an agenda for imagination, innovation and entrepreneurship – from elementary through high school.** Strong reading and math skills are essential for good jobs, but they are just the beginning; today's economy puts a premium on people who can think creatively and solve problems adeptly. Onorato will convene a blue-ribbon panel of education stakeholders and private-sector leaders to recommend ways to integrate the development of these skills into the daily classroom activities that students and teachers engage in, beginning with the early elementary years.
- **Reinvigorate the 12th grade experience.** By the time students reach the last year of high school, their readiness for college or the workforce varies widely. Onorato will call for schools to dramatically expand the range of options available to high school seniors.

Students who need traditional academic support will receive it, and students should also have access to Advanced Placement and/or International Baccalaureate courses and other opportunities to earn college credit; real-world internships with a classroom support component; community service-learning projects; and high-quality Career & Technical Education.

- **Expand programs that increase college attendance.** Onorato will launch a state-led public-private partnership education and marketing campaign that learns from and supports the success of initiatives like Project GRAD to educate middle school students and their parents about career opportunities and what courses and other steps students need to take throughout high school in order to attend and afford college. Onorato will also ensure that school districts are using a portion of the additional state investment from continued implementation of the Legislature’s Costing-Out Report to:
 - Focus on programs that ensure a successful transition from middle to high school, including through intensive student support;
 - Ensure that schools have adequate and well-trained staff to help students enroll in rigorous coursework, apply to and visit colleges, access financial aid, and engage community and corporate support; and
 - Fund partnerships with area colleges and universities that include interactions between professors and high school students and campus visits by high school students.
- **Expand high-quality Career & Technical Education programs.** Career & Technical Education – formerly known as vocational education – can offer students a direct pathway from school to high-demand skilled careers that pay a family-sustaining wage. Onorato will expand opportunities for high school students to pursue Career & Technical Education programs that are aligned with regional workforce needs and that include a solid academic component. Onorato will engage business and labor representatives in ensuring that the technical skills these programs teach will prepare students for real-world jobs, and he will create partnerships with businesses and unions so that students can be taught using their state-of-the-art equipment.
- **Implement the recently enacted high school graduation requirements.** Last year, Pennsylvania enacted regulations for high school graduation requirements that will take effect with the Class of 2015. Onorato will work to implement the new rules through an inclusive and transparent process that ensures public and educator confidence in the final system. He will also emphasize the importance of ensuring that students receive individualized help as early as possible if they are struggling, including by making more teaching tools available in Pennsylvania classrooms.
- **Prevent students from dropping out of school.** Onorato will ensure that schools implement a robust strategy for keeping students in school, including:
 - Creation of early warning systems to better use data starting in elementary and middle school to quickly identify students who are at risk of dropping out due to their attendance rates, grades or other factors – and then linking those students to immediate assistance;
 - Extra help for students – through additional classroom time, individual tutoring or other programs – as soon as they start falling behind, so that academic problems can be resolved long before a student considers dropping out of school;

- Expand effective Career & Technical Education programs and other means of engaging students and increasing the real-world relevance of their academic experience; and
- Restoration of funding for alternative education programs as soon as it is fiscally possible and support for effective alternative education programming – with improved credentialing and appropriate monitoring by the Department of Education – in order to provide academic, social and behavior services to students who do not succeed in the traditional classroom environment.
- **Spearhead a statewide Dropout Recovery Initiative.** It is not enough to just prevent future dropouts; the state must also re-engage young adults who have already left school without a diploma. Onorato will convene a Dropout Recovery Cabinet made up of the Governor’s Office and the Secretaries of Education, Labor & Industry, Public Welfare, and Community & Economic Development, and in close collaboration with the Workforce Investment Board, to develop a comprehensive strategy to target the 120,000 young adults age 16 to 24 who have already dropped out. These Pennsylvanians will cost taxpayers over \$80 million per year in welfare payments, criminal justice expenditures and other services if they are not re-engaged. Onorato’s Dropout Recovery Initiative will include alternative pathways for these former students to earn a high school diploma, attend higher education and receive job training.
- **Create a stronger link between schools and employers.** Many of the strategies discussed in this policy paper call for better alignment between pre-K–12 education and the private sector. In addition, employers must be directly engaged in Pennsylvania’s education system, such as by aligning Career & Technical Education to regional employment opportunities that pay a family-sustaining wage; establishing partnerships between schools and science-based companies to connect teachers to real-world applications of the material they are teaching; and mentorship programs and other initiatives that help students understand the relevance of what they are learning to fields that interest them.

DAN ONORATO: GROWING PENNSYLVANIA’S ECONOMY BY EDUCATING A WORLD-CLASS WORKFORCE

Dan Onorato’s Plan for Pre-K–12 Education will ensure that Pennsylvania students are well-prepared for the high-skill, high-tech world that awaits them. As Governor, Dan Onorato will focus on the programs that are proven to boost student achievement and he will continue Pennsylvania’s investment in fulfilling the Legislature’s Costing-Out Report: helping students learn while easing the burden on local property taxes.