

MONTGOMERY COUNTY

Third Grade Reading

Why are third grade reading scores so important?

Third-grade reading proficiency is the first consistent indicator we have of a child's early literacy development. By the end of third-grade, children are expected to shift from "learning to read" to "reading to learn" as they progress to more challenging subjects. This makes third grade a key transition point for young students, and numerous studies have shown strong links between third-grade reading proficiency and future success in college and career.

Children who struggle with reading often continue to fall further behind their peers as they age, and many never catch up. Research from the Annie E. Casey Foundation has found that children who do not read proficiently by the end of third grade are four times more likely not to graduate from high school.¹ If children both fail to read proficiently and live in poverty for at least one year, they are six times more likely to drop out of high school than proficient readers. The achievement gap is even more pronounced for children of color. Nationally, Hispanic and black third-graders who did not read proficiently in third grade are twice as likely as similar white children not to graduate from high school.²

What are the barriers to developing early literacy?

The factors that impact children's early literacy skills are well known.

- Access to high-quality early learning - Participation in early childhood education is key to improved 3rd grade reading scores. A 2011 Center for Public Education study found that children who attended both pre-k and kindergarten had higher reading skills by third grade than those who only attended kindergarten, and the effect was even larger for children in poverty.³ However, in southeastern Pennsylvania, only 31% of children ages three and four have access to high quality pre-K.⁴ New Jersey's preschool programs serve only 19% of three-year-olds and 29% of four-year olds.
- Chronic absenteeism - Unsurprisingly, being in school is critical for developing literacy, even from an early age. In a study of 19 school districts in California, researchers for Attendance

¹ <http://www.aecf.org/m/resourcedoc/AECF-EarlyWarningConfirmed-2013.pdf>

² <http://www.aecf.org/m/resourcedoc/AECF-DoubleJeopardy-2012-Full.pdf>

³ <http://www.centerforpubliceducation.org/Main-Menu/Organizing-a-school/Starting-Out-Right-Pre-K-and-Kindergarten/Starting-Out-Right-Pre-K-and-Kindergarten-full-report.html>

⁴ <http://www.prekforpa.org/policy-makers/>

Works found that students who were kindergarten-ready but missed 10% or more days of school in kindergarten and first grade score 60 points lower than regularly attending students on 3rd grade exams.⁵ Reasons for absenteeism are often compounded for low-income families who are more likely to have health problems, a lack of reliable transportation, and conflicting parent work schedules.

- Summer learning – Many low-income children fall as much as two months behind in reading achievement over the summer as compared to their middle-income peers. Free reading programs at public libraries can improve participants' reading scores, and even having access to books can ameliorate the effects of a lack of summer learning.⁶
- Family Instability – Underlying all of the above factors, if a child faces family stressors like hunger, housing insecurity, or violence, they will struggle to learn and achieve literacy. This stress also affects children's cognitive development and can impair future learning. These stressors also make it more challenging for parents to regularly engage with their children, which is another key factor in encouraging literacy.

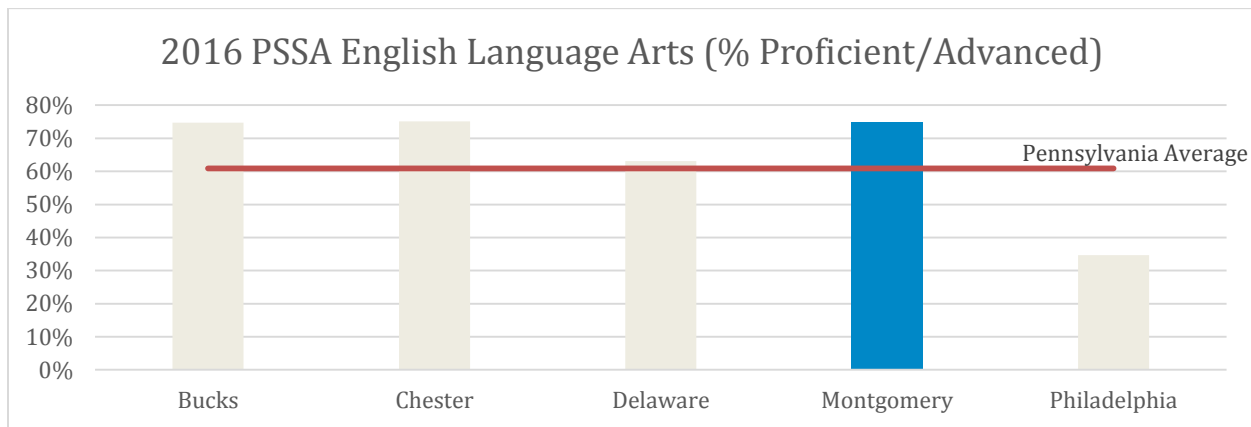
⁵ <http://www.attendanceworks.org/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2010/04/ASR-Mini-Report-Attendance-Readiness-and-Third-Grade-Outcomes-7-8-11.pdf>

⁶ <http://www.aecf.org/m/resourcedoc/AECF-EarlyWarningConfirmed-2013.pdf>

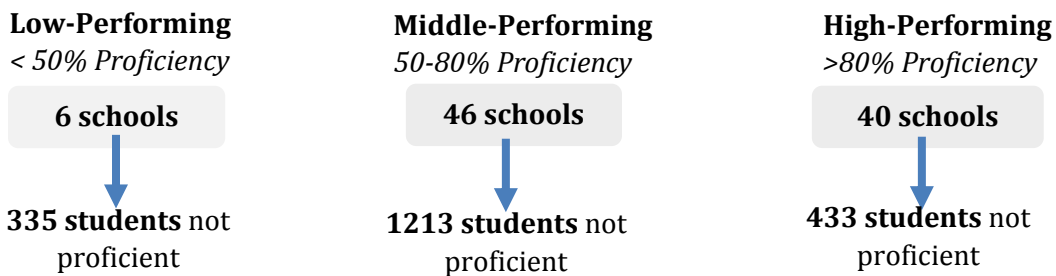
How does Montgomery County fare?

In 2016, **5,873 students, or 75% of Montgomery County third-graders scored proficient or advanced** in English Language Arts on the Pennsylvania System of School Assessment (PSSA). This proficiency rate exceeds the Pennsylvania average of 61% and is comparable to neighboring suburban counties.⁷

While the overall county performance exceeds the state proficiency rate, this average masks several communities that struggle with low proficiency. In all, **nearly 2,000 children in Montgomery County scored less than proficient** on their 3rd grade reading proficiency exam.

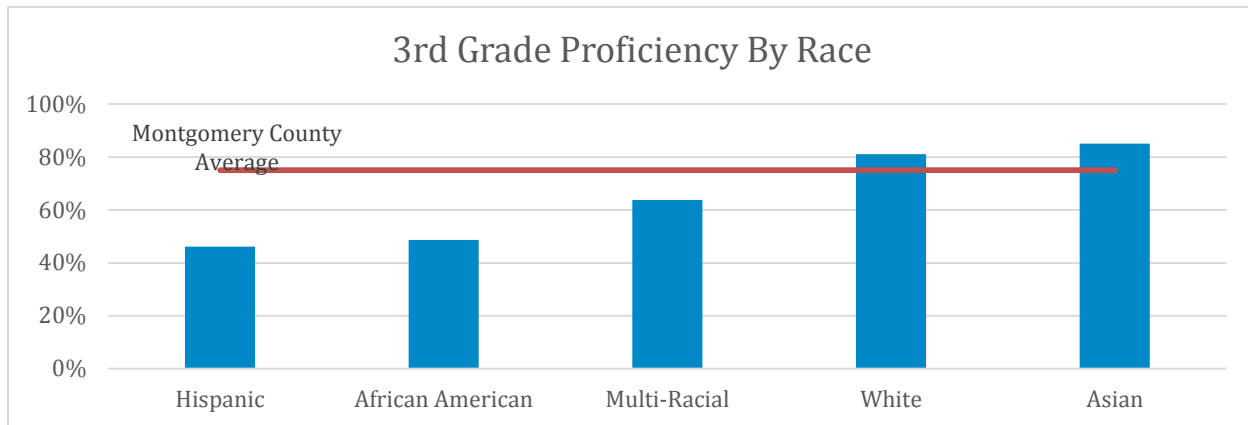


Montgomery County has 92 public elementary schools (including charter schools). There are 6 elementary schools where less than half of the students read at grade-level, **but the majority of students who are not proficient are in middle-performing schools in Montgomery County.**



⁷ Because of changing educational standards and exams, comparisons to the state average is the best way to normalize the assessment results rather than making comparisons over time.

The county average masks wide gaps in achievement by race. Around **50% of African American and Latinx students, respectively, are proficient or advanced**, compared to over 80% proficiency for their White and Asian peers.



Methodological note: This profile does not make year-to-year comparisons of proficiency levels. Since exams frequently change to meet new educational standards, proficiency in one year is not necessarily at the same standard in another year. In Pennsylvania, the PSSA was changed to meet stricter Common Core standards in the 2014-2015 school year. Even when exams do not change, the standard of proficiency may also shift. Benchmarking scores to the state average in the same-year makes a more direct comparison to see whether the county is meeting or exceeding the state average.

Youth Disconnection

Who are the disconnected youth?

Young adults aged 16-24 are at a critical turning point in their lives, deciding what to pursue in college and as a career and building relationships and experience that they will carry through their lives. However, 5.5 million (13%) of the nation's youth are "disconnected"—neither working nor in school. This disengagement has long-term consequences for the youth as limited education and work experience affect future earnings as well as physical and mental health in adulthood. Disconnected youth are more than twice as likely to live in poverty as those who are connected. According to the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), "people who experience long spells of youth disconnection have lower wages and marriage rates, higher incarceration and unemployment rates, worse health, less job satisfaction, and even less happiness as adults than people who did not experience youth disconnection."⁸

Youth disconnection also yields fiscal and economic impacts. Measure of America, an initiative of the Social Science Research Council for understanding well-being and opportunity in the US, estimates that the cost of incarceration, Medicaid, public assistance payments, and Supplemental Security Income payments for the nation's 5.5 million disconnected youth totals **\$26.8 billion** each year.⁹ In addition to these direct costs, youth disconnection inhibits the global competitiveness of our labor force, translating into lost earnings and diminished market productivity.

What factors lead to disconnection?

Several factors are strongly associated with higher rates of youth disconnection.

- Poverty - Nationally, nearly two in five disconnected youth live in households that have incomes below the federal poverty level.¹⁰ The staggering number of young people who neither attend school nor work and live in low-income families should not come as a surprise, as areas with a high incidence of poverty tend to be isolated from the economic and labor market opportunities that exist in more prosperous communities.
- High adult unemployment and low levels of education attainment - Communities with high levels of adult unemployment and low levels of adult educational attainment also house a disproportionate share of the nation's disconnected youth.¹¹ Proximity to college-educated adults with well-paying jobs is crucial for youth connection because adults with a higher

⁸ <http://www.oecd.org/employment/youthforum/44986030.pdf>

⁹ <http://ssrc-static.s3.amazonaws.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/06/MOA-Zeroing-In-Final.pdf>

¹⁰ http://ssrc-static.s3.amazonaws.com/moa/MOA-One_in_Seven09-14.pdf

¹¹ https://ssrc-static.s3.amazonaws.com/moa/MOA-One_in_Seven09-14.pdf

education degree and family-sustaining job not only can contribute to their children's success, but their presence in a community can also translate into connection opportunities for young people outside their household. For example, college-educated adults are more likely to participate in volunteering, which could lead to community opportunities for youth connection through mentoring programs or other forms of civic engagement.

- Unstable living environments – In a study of disconnected youth by Civic Enterprises, fewer than half of disconnected youth surveyed lived with their parents and many lack stable housing.¹² Youth who were in the foster care system are particularly vulnerable to disconnection as there may be a lack of family, school, or governmental support once they age out of the system.¹³
- Lack of job opportunities – Although more than half of disconnected youth are looking for full-time work, they struggle to find stable jobs. Even if they have completed high school or some college training, many cite a lack of work experience, family responsibilities, and transportation as challenges to finding work. In addition, the cost of returning to school for vocational training or other job training is prohibitive for low-income disconnected youth.¹⁴

¹² Opportunity Road, Civic Enterprises, 2012.

http://www.civicerprises.net/medialibrary/docs/opportunity_road.pdf

¹³ https://ncfy.acf.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/docs/18790-Youth_Who_Are_Disconnected_and_Those_Who_Then_Reconnect.pdf

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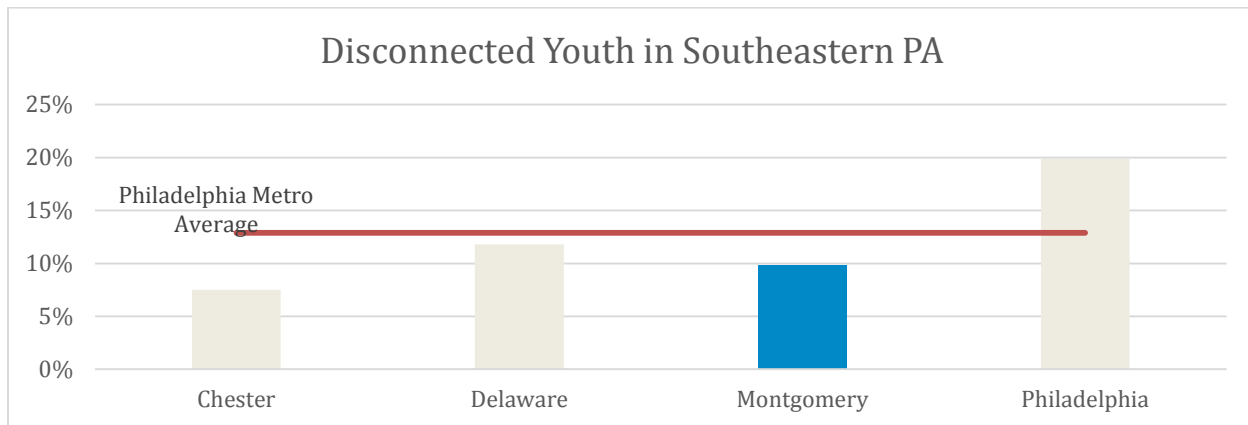
¹⁴ Opportunity Road, Civic Enterprises, 2012.

http://www.civicerprises.net/medialibrary/docs/opportunity_road.pdf

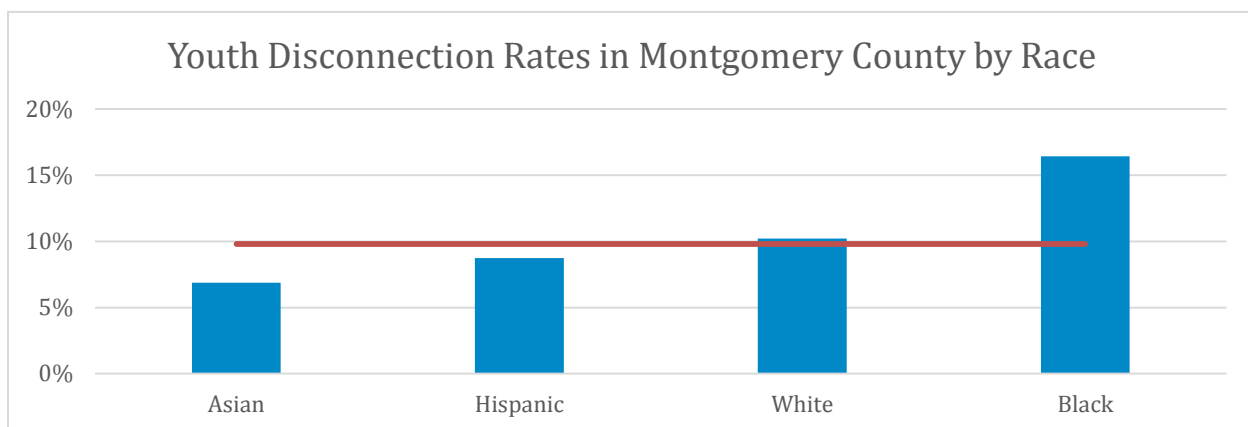
How does Montgomery County fare?

In the Greater Philadelphia region, more than **93,300 youth were disconnected in 2017**, representing **one in eight (12.9%)** of the region’s youth.¹⁵

In Montgomery County, 8,900 youth (10%) are disconnected.



Although the disconnection rate is lower than the Philadelphia metro average, this masks the fact that young people of color are more likely to be disconnected than their white peers. **In Montgomery County, around 16% of African American youth are disconnected.** This trend is mirrored in Greater Philadelphia where around one in five African American (22%) and Latinx (18%) youth are disconnected.



¹⁵ Disconnected youth data are from the American Community Survey microdata, and includes young people aged 16-24 who have not been enrolled in school in the past 3 months, who are not in the labor force, or who are unemployed.

Self-Sufficient Families

Earning enough income to meet basic needs without public or private assistance¹⁶ is one of the key factors for families to break out of the cycle of intergenerational poverty. However, most workers in low-wage jobs do not earn enough to cover basic expenses such as food, housing, and transportation. According to the National Low Income Housing Coalition, there are no states where a full-time minimum wage worker can afford a 2-bedroom apartment at fair market rent, and only 12 counties in the nation where they could afford a 1-bedroom apartment.¹⁷ Parents making low wages face additional challenges in making ends meet. For example, at an average annual cost of \$8,800, private childcare is one of the largest household expenses for low and even middle-class families.¹⁸

There are a few ways to measure how much money is enough. The federal poverty line is a basic, widely used measure, and one that is consistently measured across communities and over time. For a family of four, the 2017 poverty level is \$24,600. While the federal poverty level has some limitations (e.g. it does not vary based on regional costs of living), this profile uses it as a proxy for self-sufficiency.¹⁹ We consider households with income above 200% of poverty to be self-sufficiency since many government programs limit eligibility at that level. In the Philadelphia metro area, 1.6 million residents, or 28%, live below 200% of the poverty line.

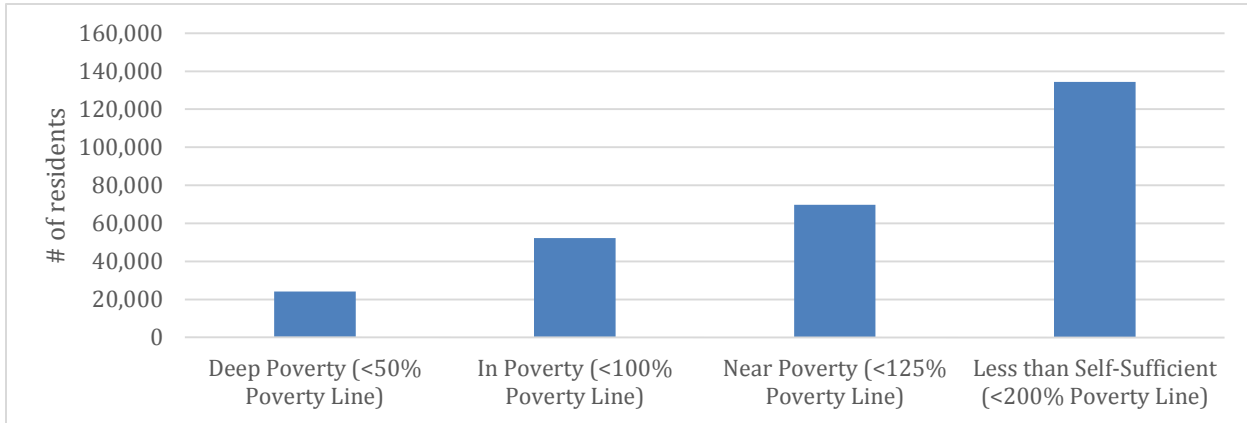
¹⁶ Public assistance refers to government programs while private assistance includes informal assistance such as free babysitting from friends and families or shared housing.

¹⁷ <http://nlihc.org/oor>

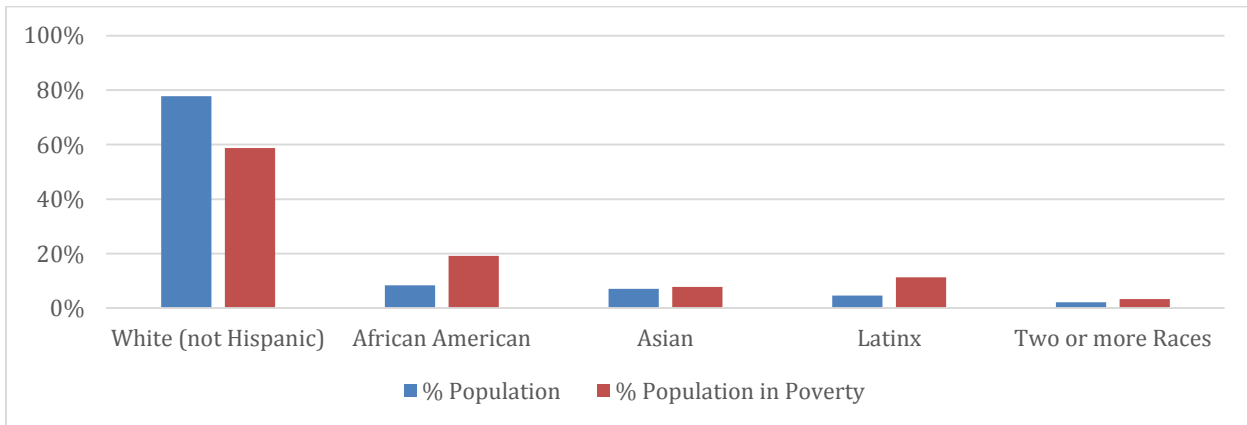
¹⁸ <https://firstfocus.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/06/FirstFocus-EarlyEd-Pre-KforEveryChild.pdf>

¹⁹ Methodological note: To address some of the limitations of the federal poverty line, researchers at MIT and the University of Washington have developed living wages and self-sufficiency standards, respectively. Both of these measures calculate the minimum wages needed for a family to make ends meet taking into account the age of children in the family and typical expenses not only including food, housing, and transportation, but also medical needs, taxes, and other necessities like clothing. The living wage is typically two to three times higher than the poverty line, depending on location.

In Montgomery County, 134,418 residents (17%) live below 200% of the poverty line.



People of color disproportionately have inadequate income. **Of the 52,330 individuals in Montgomery County in poverty, over 10,000 are black (19% of those in poverty), and nearly 6,000 are Latinx (11% of those in poverty).**²⁰



²⁰ While data is not available by race for the 200% poverty level, we expect a similar pattern as compared to the breakdown of individuals and families at the poverty level.