

PERFORMANCE AUDIT

Farrell Area School District Mercer County, Pennsylvania

January 2021



Commonwealth of Pennsylvania
Department of the Auditor General

Timothy L. DeFoor • Auditor General



**Commonwealth of Pennsylvania
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**TIMOTHY L. DEFOOR
AUDITOR GENERAL**

Dr. Lora A. Adams-King, Superintendent
Farrell Area School District
1600 Roemer Boulevard
Farrell, Pennsylvania 16121

Mr. Terry Harrison, Board President
Farrell Area School District
1600 Roemer Boulevard
Farrell, Pennsylvania 16121

Dear Dr. Adams-King and Mr. Harrison:

We have conducted a performance audit of the Farrell Area School District (District) for the period July 1, 2015 through June 30, 2019, except as otherwise indicated in the audit scope, objective, and methodology section of the report. We evaluated the District's performance in the following areas as further described in Appendix A of this report:

- Transportation Operations
- Bus Driver Requirements

We also evaluated the application of best practices in the area of school safety. Due to the sensitive nature of this issue and the need for the results of this review to be confidential, we did not include the full results in this report. However, we communicated the full results of our review of school safety to District officials, the Pennsylvania Department of Education, and other appropriate officials as deemed necessary.

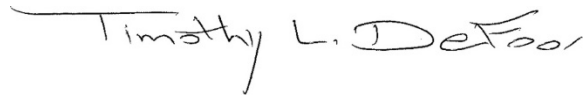
The audit was conducted pursuant to Sections 402 and 403 of The Fiscal Code (72 P.S. §§ 402 and 403), and in accordance with the Government Auditing Standards issued by the Comptroller General of the United States. Those standards require that we plan and perform the audit to obtain sufficient, appropriate evidence to provide a reasonable basis for our findings and conclusions based on our audit objectives. We believe that the evidence obtained provides a reasonable basis for our findings and conclusions based on our audit objectives.

We found that the District performed adequately in the areas of transportation operations and bus driver requirements. However, our audit identified a deficiency in the internal control system in the area of transportation operations that was not significant to the objective, but warranted the attention of those charged with governance. That deficiency was verbally communicated to those charged with governance for their consideration.

Dr. Lora A. Adams-King
Mr. Terry Harrison
Page 2

We appreciate the District's cooperation during the course of the audit.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Timothy L. DeFoor". The signature is written in a cursive style with a long horizontal line extending to the left of the first name.

Timothy L. DeFoor
Auditor General

January 25, 2021

cc: **FARRELL AREA SCHOOL DISTRICT** Board of School Directors

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Background Information

School Characteristics 2020-21 School Year*	
County	Mercer
Total Square Miles	3.214
Number of School Buildings	2
Total Teachers	68
Total Full or Part-Time Support Staff	50
Total Administrators	10
Total Enrollment for Most Recent School Year	635
Intermediate Unit Number	4
District Career and Technical School	Mercer County Career Center

* - Source: Information provided by the District administration and is unaudited.

Mission Statement*

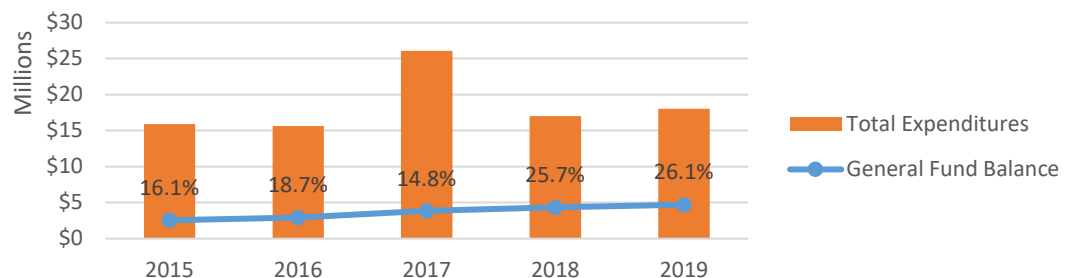
To work collaboratively within the community to foster a dynamic standards-based curriculum within a safe, educationally-managed environment. Facilitated by a caring professional staff, opportunities abound for all students to become actively engaged as productive, responsible life-long learners empowered to meet the global changes and needs of a culturally diverse society.

Financial Information

The following pages contain financial information about the Farrell Area School District obtained from annual financial data reported to the Pennsylvania Department of Education (PDE) and available on PDE's public website. This information was not audited and is presented for **informational purposes only**.

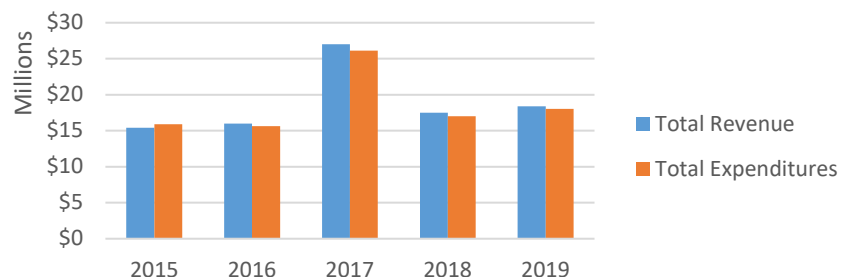
General Fund Balance as a Percentage of Total Expenditures

	General Fund Balance
2015	\$2,556,015
2016	\$2,927,006
2017	\$3,853,867
2018	\$4,366,020
2019	\$4,714,342



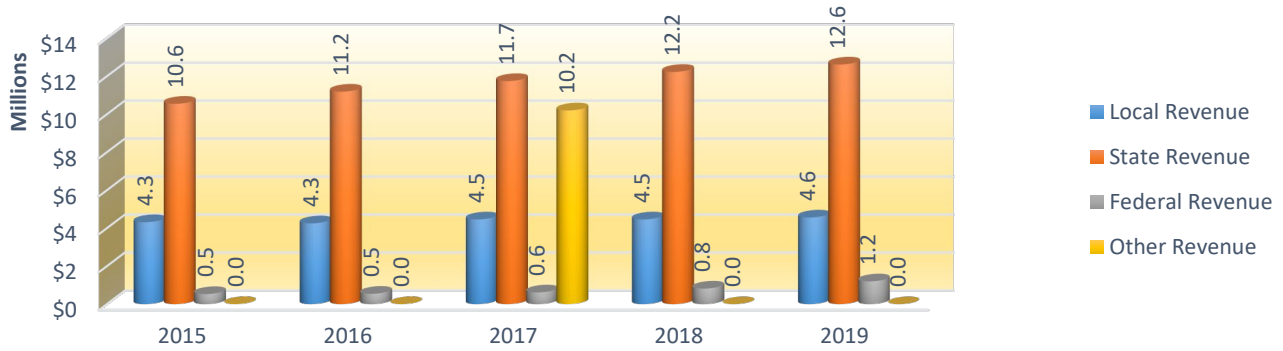
Revenues and Expenditures

	Total Revenue	Total Expenditures
2015	\$15,409,195	\$15,909,644
2016	\$15,998,201	\$15,627,210
2017	\$27,030,515	\$26,103,654
2018	\$17,513,389	\$17,001,232
2019	\$18,384,588	\$18,036,266

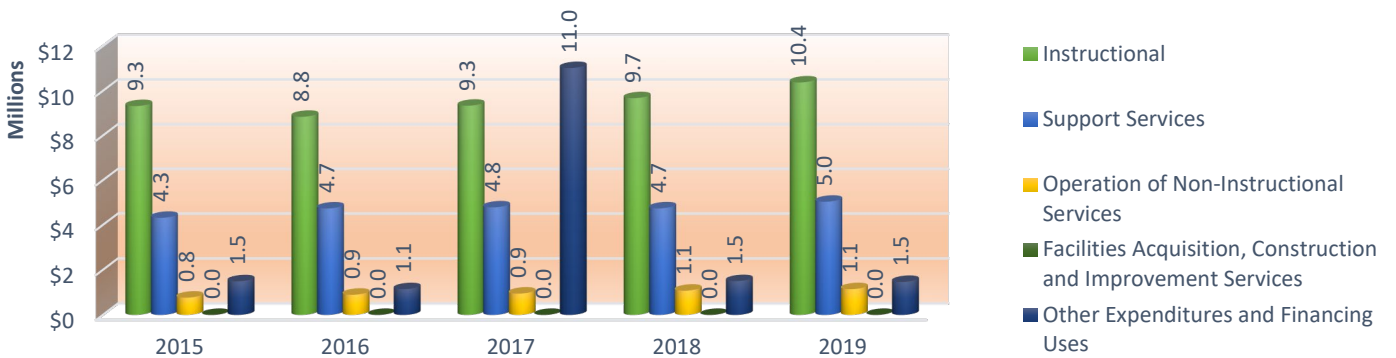


Financial Information Continued

Revenues by Source

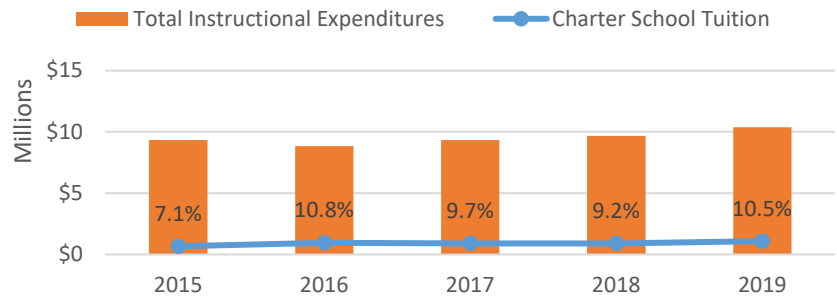


Expenditures by Function

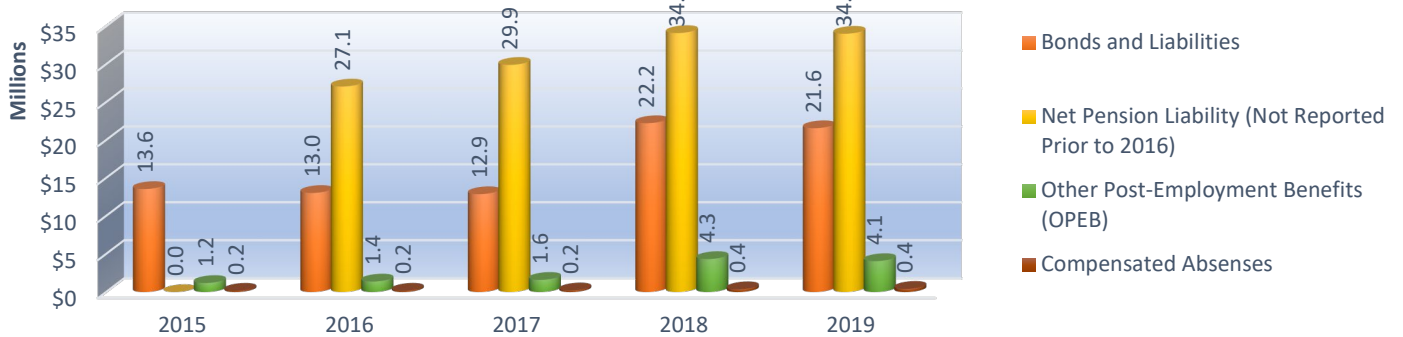


Charter Tuition as a Percentage of Instructional Expenditures

	Charter School Tuition	Total Instructional Expenditures
2015	\$666,585	\$9,323,016
2016	\$957,659	\$8,843,298
2017	\$905,334	\$9,339,140
2018	\$888,619	\$9,676,256
2019	\$1,086,358	\$10,380,847



Long-Term Debt

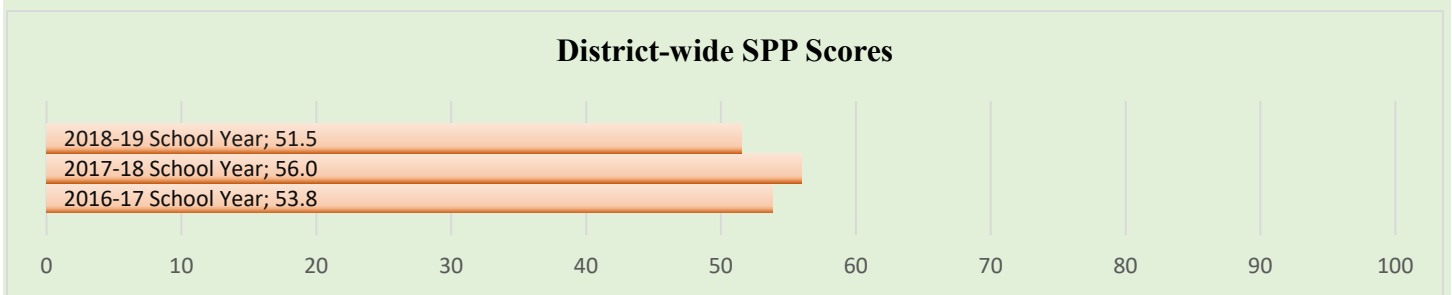


Academic Information

The graphs on the following pages present the District-wide School Performance Profile (SPP) scores, Pennsylvania System of School Assessment (PSSA) scores, Keystone Exam results, and 4-Year Cohort Graduation Rates for the District obtained from PDE's data files for the 2016-17, 2017-18, and 2018-19 school years.¹ The District's individual school building scores are presented in Appendix B. These scores are provided in this audit report for **informational purposes only**, and they were not audited by our Department.

What is a SPP score?

A SPP score serves as a benchmark for schools to reflect on successes, achievements, and yearly growth. PDE issues a SPP score annually using a 0-100 scale for all school buildings in the Commonwealth, which is calculated based on standardized testing (i.e., PSSA and Keystone exam scores), student improvement, advance course offerings, and attendance and graduation rates. Generally speaking, a SPP score of 70 or above is considered to be a passing rate.²



¹ PDE is the sole source of academic data presented in this report. All academic data was obtained from PDE's publicly available website.

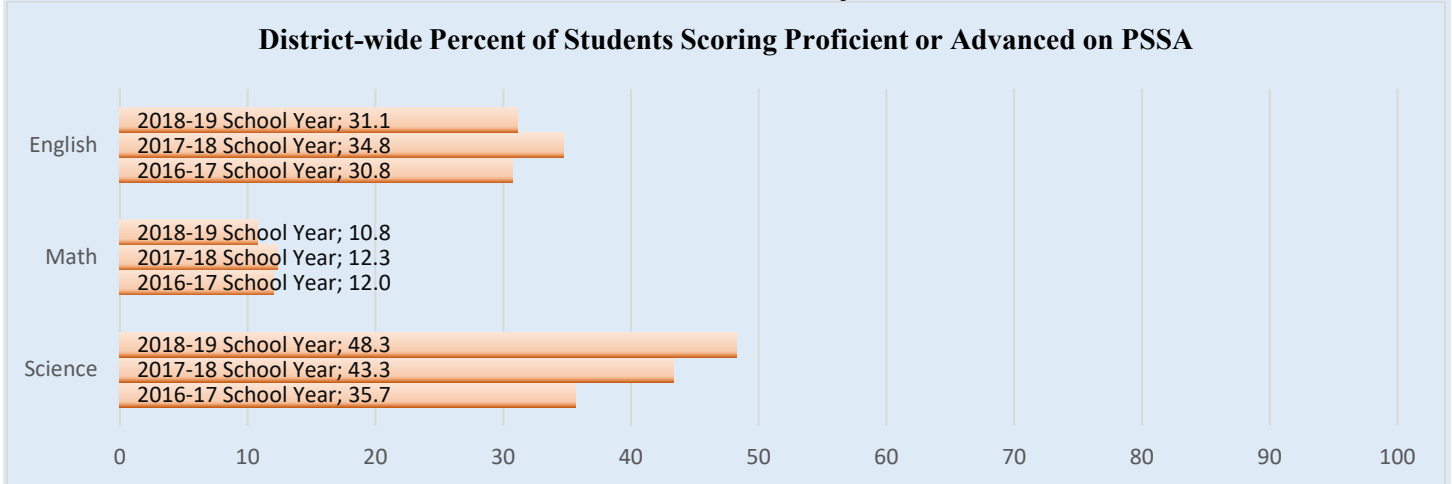
² PDE started issuing a SPP score for all public school buildings beginning with the 2012-13 school year. For the 2014-15 school year, PDE only issued SPP scores for high schools taking the Keystone Exams as scores for elementary and middle scores were put on hold due to changes with PSSA testing. PDE resumed issuing a SPP score for all schools for the 2015-16 school year.

Academic Information Continued

What is the PSSA?

The PSSA is an annual, standardized test given across the Commonwealth to students in grades 3 through 8 in core subject areas, including English, Math and Science. The PSSAs help Pennsylvania meet federal and state requirements and inform instructional practices, as well as provide educators, stakeholders, and policymakers with important information about the state's students and schools.

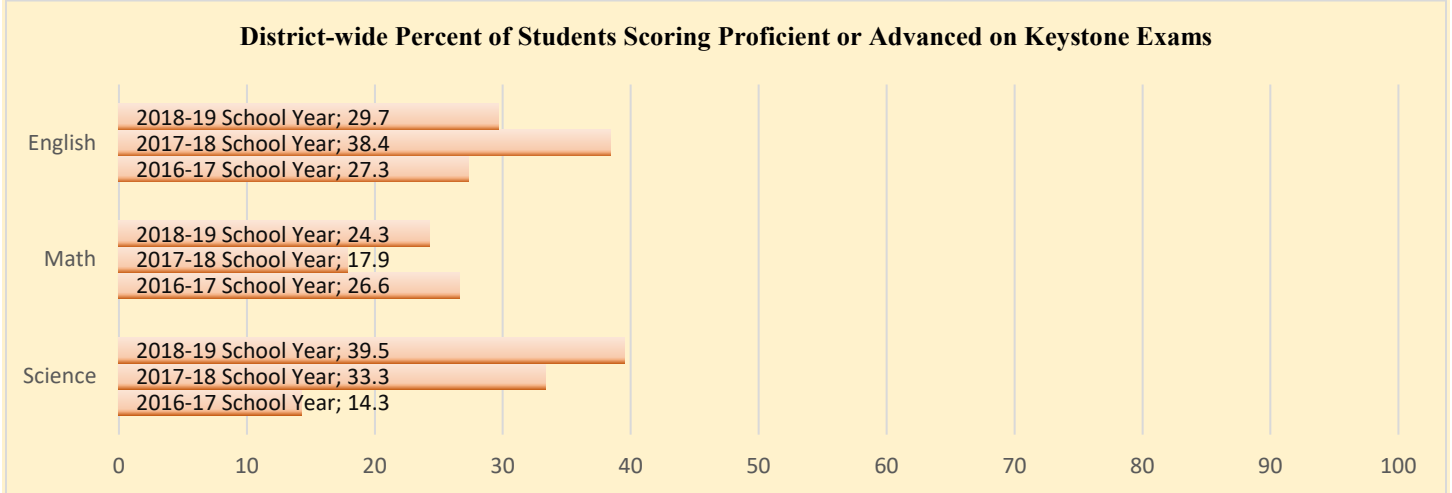
The 2014-15 school year marked the first year that PSSA testing was aligned to the more rigorous PA Core Standards. The state uses a grading system with scoring ranges that place an individual student's performance into one of four performance levels: Below Basic, Basic, Proficient, and Advanced. The state's goal is for students to score Proficient or Advanced on the exam in each subject area.



Academic Information Continued

What is the Keystone Exam?

The Keystone Exam measures student proficiency at the end of specific courses, such as Algebra I, Literature, and Biology. The Keystone Exam was intended to be a graduation requirement starting with the class of 2017, but that requirement has been put on hold until the 2020-21 school year.³ In the meantime, the exam is still given as a standardized assessment and results are included in the calculation of SPP scores. The Keystone Exam is scored using the same four performance levels as the PSSAs, and the goal is to score Proficient or Advanced for each course requiring the test.

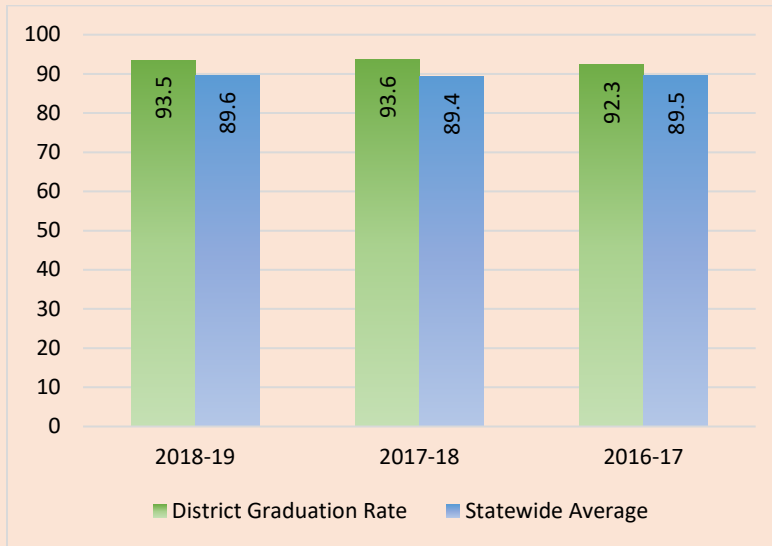


³ Act 158 of 2018, effective October 24, 2018, amended the Public School Code to further delay the use of Keystone Exams as a graduation requirement until the 2021-22 school year. See 24 P.S. § 1-121(b)(1). Please refer to the following link regarding further guidance to local education agencies (LEAs) on Keystone end-of-course exams (Keystone Exams) in the context of the pandemic of 2020: <https://www.education.pa.gov/Schools/safeschools/emergencyplanning/COVID-19/Pages/Keystone-Exams.aspx>

Academic Information Continued

What is a 4-Year Cohort Graduation Rate?

PDE collects enrollment and graduate data for all Pennsylvania public schools, which is used to calculate graduation rates. Cohort graduation rates are a calculation of the percentage of students who have graduated with a regular high school diploma within a designated number of years since the student first entered high school. The rate is determined for a cohort of students who have all entered high school for the first time during the same school year. Data specific to the 4-year cohort graduation rate is presented in the graph below.⁴



⁴ PDE also calculates 5-year and 6-year cohort graduation rates. Please visit PDE's website for additional information:
<http://www.education.pa.gov/Data-and-Statistics/Pages/Cohort-Graduation-Rate.aspx>.

Findings

For the audited period, our audit of the Farrell Area School District resulted in no findings.

Status of Prior Audit Findings and Observations

Our prior audit of the Farrell Area School District (District) released on April 28, 2016, resulted in three findings, as shown below. As part of our current audit, we determined the status of corrective action taken by the District to implement our prior audit recommendations. We interviewed District personnel and performed audit procedures as detailed in each status section below.

Auditor General Performance Audit Report Released on April 28, 2016

Prior Finding No. 1: Weaknesses in School Board Minutes and Noncompliance with Sunshine Act and Board Policy

Prior Finding Summary: During our prior audit, our review found the Board Secretary did not present and include in the board minutes the District's expenditures for discussion and approval prior to payment. In addition, the District failed to comply with provisions of the Sunshine Act related to executive sessions.

Prior Recommendations: We recommended that the District should:

1. Ensure the Board of School Directors (Board) reviews and approves monthly expenditures.
2. Adhere to the provisions in accordance with the Sunshine Act, specifically related to stating the purpose of each session.

Current Status: We found that the District implemented our prior recommendations. The District's Board reviews and approves monthly expenditures and the Board enacted a policy to this effect. In addition, the District has taken appropriate steps to announce and document the purpose of their executive sessions in board minutes.

Prior Finding No. 2: The District Failed to Maintain Supporting Documentation Required for its State Social Security and Medicare Subsidies Totaling \$1,287,765

Prior Finding Summary: During our prior audit, our review found the District could not provide documentation supporting the District's total wages reported for the 2010-11, 2011-12, and 2012-13 school years. As a result, we could not verify the accuracy of the District's state reimbursement totaling \$1,287,765. The District failed to maintain paper copies of their payroll records and could not access them electronically after switching payroll system in March 2013. The District's failure to ensure that documentation were retained for audit not only was in noncompliance with the Public School Code (PSC) but also with Board Policy No. 800, which governs the retention of records. Without this documentation, we could not determine whether the reimbursements received by the District were appropriate.

Prior Recommendations: We recommended that the District should:

1. Retain all documentation supporting Social Security and Medicare reports submitted for reimbursement in accordance with the PSC and the District's board policy.

Current Status: We found that since our prior audit, the District has followed the prior recommendations to maintain supporting documentation for Social Security and Medicare reports used for submission for reimbursement by following the PSC and their own District policy.

Prior Finding No. 3: The District Failed to Maintain Supporting Documentation Required for its State Transportation Subsidies Totaling \$642,354

Prior Finding Summary: During our prior audit, our review found the District could not provide documentation that supported the \$642,354 the District received from July 1, 2010 through June 30, 2014 for transportation subsidy. The District could not provide the necessary documentation to support the transportation data that was reported. The District's failure to implement appropriate controls over the retention of records for the audit was in noncompliance with the PSC and Board Policy No. 800. Failure to retain this documentation resulted in the auditors being unable to determine whether the amount that the District received for pupil transportation reimbursement was appropriate.

Prior Recommendations: We recommended that the District should:

1. Retain all documentation supporting transportation reports submitted for reimbursement in accordance with the PSC and the District's board policy.

Current Status: We found that since our prior audit, the District has followed the prior recommendations to retain supporting documentation used for submission to PDE for the purpose of subsidy reimbursement.

Appendix A: Audit Scope, Objectives, and Methodology

School performance audits allow the Pennsylvania Department of the Auditor General to determine whether state funds, including school subsidies, are being used according to the purposes and guidelines that govern the use of those funds. Additionally, our audits examine the appropriateness of certain administrative and operational practices at each local education agency (LEA). The results of these audits are shared with LEA management, the Governor, the Pennsylvania Department of Education (PDE), and other concerned entities.

Our audit, conducted under authority of Sections 402 and 403 of The Fiscal Code,⁵ is not a substitute for the local annual financial audit required by the Public School Code of 1949, as amended. We conducted our audit in accordance with *Government Auditing Standards* issued by the Comptroller General of the United States. Those standards require that we plan and perform the audit to obtain sufficient, appropriate evidence to provide a reasonable basis for our findings and conclusions based on our audit objectives. We believe that the evidence obtained provides a reasonable basis for our findings and conclusions based on our audit.

Our audit focused on the District's effectiveness and/or compliance with applicable statutory provisions and related regulations in the areas of Transportation Operations, Bus Driver Requirements, and School Safety, including fire and security drills. The audit objectives supporting these areas of focus are explained in the context of our methodology to achieve the objectives in the next section. Overall, our audit covered the period July 1, 2015 through June 30, 2019. The scope of each individual objective is also detailed in the next section.

The District's management is responsible for establishing and maintaining effective internal control to provide reasonable assurance that the District's objectives will be achieved.⁶ *Standards for Internal Control in the Federal Government* (also known as and hereafter referred to as the Green Book), issued by the Comptroller General of the United States, provides a framework for management to establish and maintain an effective internal control system. The Department of the Auditor General used the Green Book as the internal control analysis framework during the conduct of our audit.⁷ The Green Book's standards are organized into five components of internal control. In an effective system of internal control, these five components work together in an integrated manner to help an entity achieve its objectives. Each of the five components of internal control contains principles, which are the requirements an entity should follow in establishing an effective system of internal control. We illustrate the five components and their underlying principles in Figure 1 on the following page.

⁵ 72 P.S. §§ 402 and 403.

⁶ District objectives can be broadly classified into one or more of the following areas: effectiveness of operations; reliability of reporting for internal and external use; and compliance with applicable laws and regulations, more specifically in the District, referring to certain relevant state laws, regulations, contracts, and administrative procedures.

⁷ Even though the Green Book was written for the federal government, it explicitly states that it may also be adopted by state, local, and quasi-government entities, as well as not-for-profit organizations, as a framework for establishing and maintaining an effective internal control system. The Green Book is assessable at <https://www.gao.gov/products/GAO-14-704G>

Figure 1: Green Book Hierarchical Framework of Internal Control Standards

Principle	Description
Control Environment	
1	Demonstrate commitment to integrity and ethical values
2	Exercise oversight responsibility
3	Establish structure, responsibility, and authority
4	Demonstrate commitment to competence
5	Enforce accountability
Risk Assessment	
6	Define objectives and risk tolerances
7	Identify, analyze, and respond to risks
8	Assess fraud risk
9	Identify, analyze, and respond to change

Principle	Description
Control Activities	
10	Design control activities
11	Design activities for the information system
12	Implement control activities
Information and Communication	
13	Use quality information
14	Communicate internally
15	Communicate externally
Monitoring	
16	Perform monitoring activities
17	Evaluate issues and remediate deficiencies

In compliance with generally accepted government auditing standards, we must determine whether internal control is significant to our audit objectives. We base our determination of significance on whether an entity’s internal control impacts our audit conclusion(s). If some, but not all, internal control components are significant to the audit objectives, we must identify those internal control components and underlying principles that are significant to the audit objectives.

In planning our audit, we obtained a general understanding of the District’s control environment. In performing our audit, we obtained an understanding of the District’s internal control sufficient to identify and assess the internal control significant within the context of the audit objectives. Figure 2 represents a summary of the internal control components and underlying principles that we identified as significant to the overall control environment and the specific audit objectives (denoted by an “X”).

Figure 2 – Internal Control Components and Principles Identified as Significant

Principle →	Internal Control Significant ?	Control Environment					Risk Assessment				Control Activities			Information and Communication			Monitoring	
		1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17
General/overall	Yes	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X		X
Transportation	Yes				X			X	X		X		X	X	X	X	X	
Bus Drivers	Yes										X		X			X	X	
Safe Schools	No																	

With respect to the principles identified, we evaluated the internal control(s) deemed significant within the context of our audit objectives and assessed those controls to the extent necessary to address our audit objectives. The results of our evaluation and assessment of the District's internal control for each objective is discussed in the following section.

Objectives/Scope/Methodology

In order to properly plan our audit and to guide us in selecting objectives, we reviewed pertinent laws and regulations, the District's annual financial reports, annual General Fund budgets, and the independent audit reports of the District's basic financial statements for the July 1, 2015 through June 30, 2019 fiscal years. We conducted analytical procedures on the District's state revenues and the transportation reimbursement data. We reviewed the prior audit report and we researched current events that possibly affected District operations. We also determined if the District had key personnel or software vendor changes since the prior audit.

Performance audits draw conclusions based on an evaluation of sufficient, appropriate evidence. Evidence is measured against criteria, such as laws, regulations, third-party studies, and best business practices. Our audit focused on the District's effectiveness in four areas as described below. As we conducted our audit procedures, we sought to determine answers to the following questions, which served as our audit objectives.

Transportation Operations

- Did the District ensure compliance with applicable laws and regulations governing transportation operations, and did the District receive the correct transportation reimbursement from the Commonwealth?⁸
 - ✓ To address this objective, we assessed the District's internal controls for obtaining, processing, and reviewing transportation data to PDE. We selected all eight vehicles used to transport students during the 2018-19 school year. We obtained monthly mileage reports, school calendars, and student rosters for each vehicle selected and re-calculated the weighted averages to see if the District correctly reported totals to PDE. We reconciled one month's data for each vehicle reported to PDE with data noted on the average calculation worksheet.

Conclusion: The results of our procedures did not identify any reportable issues; however, we did identify internal control deficiencies that were not significant to our objective but warranted the attention of those charged with governance. These deficiencies were verbally communicated to those charged with governance for their consideration.

⁸ See 24 P.S. §25-2541(a).

Bus Driver Requirements

- Did the District ensure that all bus drivers transporting District students are board approved and had the required driver's license, physical exam, training, background checks, and clearances⁹ as outlined in applicable laws?¹⁰ Also, did the District adequately monitor driver records to ensure compliance with the ongoing five-year clearance requirements and ensure it obtained updated licenses and health physical records as applicable throughout the school year?
 - ✓ To address this objective, we assessed the District's internal controls for maintaining and reviewing required bus driver qualification documents and procedures for determining who transported students. We determined if all drivers were approved by the District's Board of School Directors. We selected all ten drivers transporting District students as of October 13, 2020, and we reviewed documentation to ensure the District complied with the requirements for those drivers. We also determined if the District had monitoring procedures to ensure that all drivers had updated clearances, licenses, and physicals.

Conclusion: The results of our procedures did not identify any significant internal control deficiencies required to be reported. In addition, our procedures related to this objective did not disclose any reportable issues.

School Safety

- Did the District comply with requirements in the Public School Code and the Emergency Management Code related to emergency management plans, bullying prevention, and memorandums of understanding with local law enforcement?¹¹ Also, did the District follow best practices related to physical building security and providing a safe school environment?
 - ✓ To address this objective, we reviewed a variety of documentations including safety plans, training schedules, risk and vulnerability assessments, anti-bullying policies, school climate surveys, after action reports, and memorandums of understanding with local law enforcement.

Conclusion: Due to the sensitive nature of school safety, the results of our review for this portion of the objective are not described in our audit report, but they were shared with District officials, PDE's Office of Safe Schools, and other appropriate law enforcement agencies deemed necessary.

⁹ Auditors reviewed the required state, federal, and child abuse background clearances that the District obtained from the most reliable sources available, including the FBI, the Pennsylvania State Police, and the Department of Human Services. However, due to the sensitive and confidential nature of this information, we were unable to assess the reliability or completeness of these third-party databases.

¹⁰ PSC 24 P.S. § 1-111, CPSL 23 Pa.C.S. § 6344(a.1), PSC (Educator Discipline) 24 P.S. § 2070.1a *et seq.*, State Vehicle Code 75 Pa.C.S. §§ 1508.1 and 1509, and State Board of Education's regulations 22 Pa. Code Chapter 8.

¹¹ Safe Schools Act 24 P.S. § 13-1301-A *et seq.*, Emergency Management Services Code 35 Pa.C.S. § 7701.

- Did the District comply with the fire and security drill requirements of Section 1517 of the Public School Code?¹² Also, did the District accurately report the dates of drills to PDE and maintain supporting documentation to evidence the drills conducted and reported to PDE?
 - ✓ To address this objective we reviewed the fire and emergency drills for the two school buildings to determine whether drills were conducted as required for the for the 2018-19 and 2019-20 school years. We determined if a security drill was held within the first 90 days of the school year for each building in the District and if monthly fire drills were conducted in accordance with requirements. We also obtained the *Accuracy Certification Statement* that the District filed with PDE and compared the dates reported to the supporting documentation.

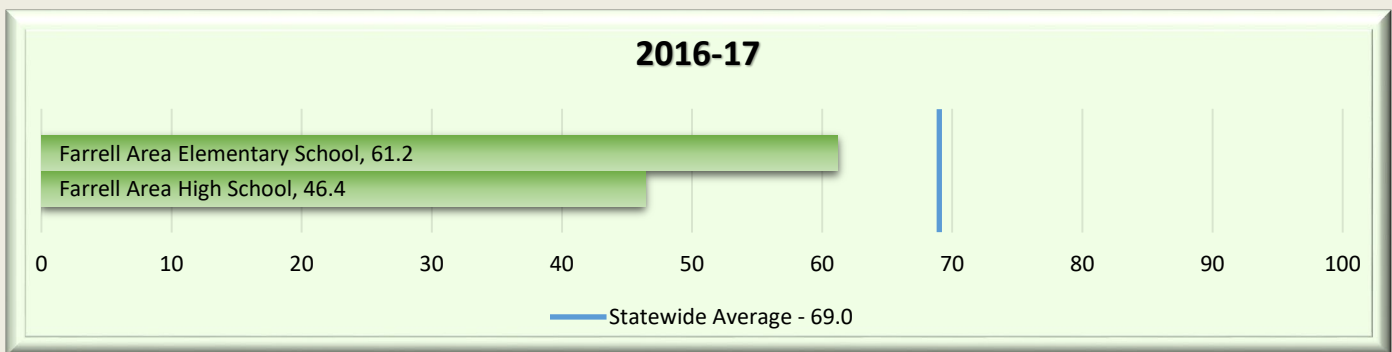
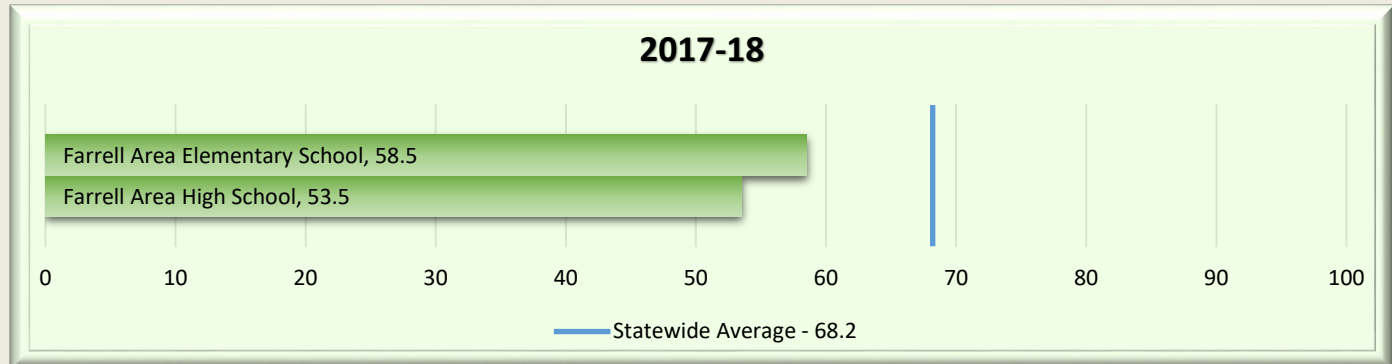
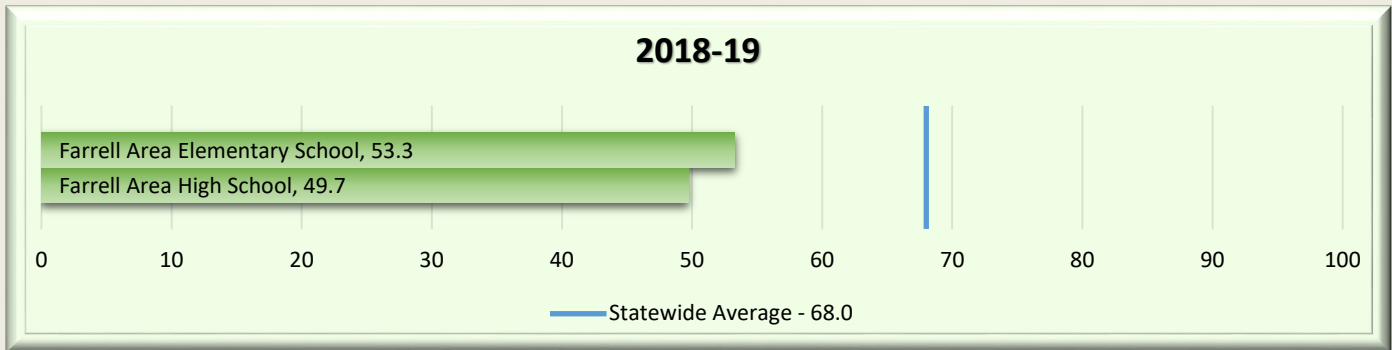
Conclusion: The results of our procedures for this portion of the school safety objective did not disclose any reportable issues.

¹² Public School Code (Fire and Security Drills) 24 P.S. § 15-1517.

Appendix B: Academic Detail

Benchmarks noted in the following graphs represent the statewide average of all public school buildings in the Commonwealth that received a score in the category and year noted.¹³ Please note that if one of the District's schools did not receive a score in a particular category and year presented below, the school will not be listed in the corresponding graph.¹⁴

SPP School Scores Compared to Statewide Averages

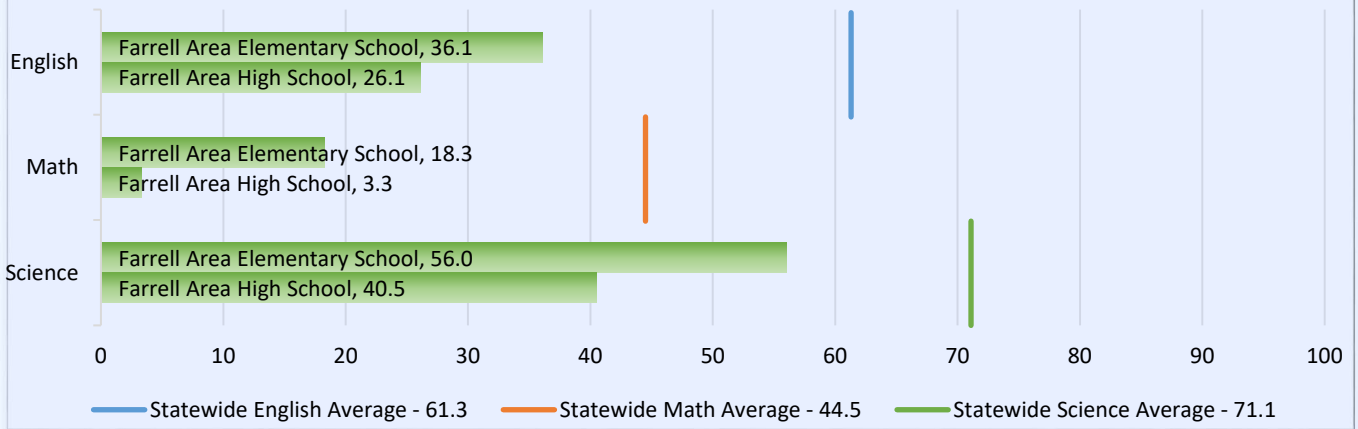


¹³ Statewide averages were calculated by our Department based on individual school building scores for all public schools in the Commonwealth, including district schools, charters schools, and cyber charter schools.

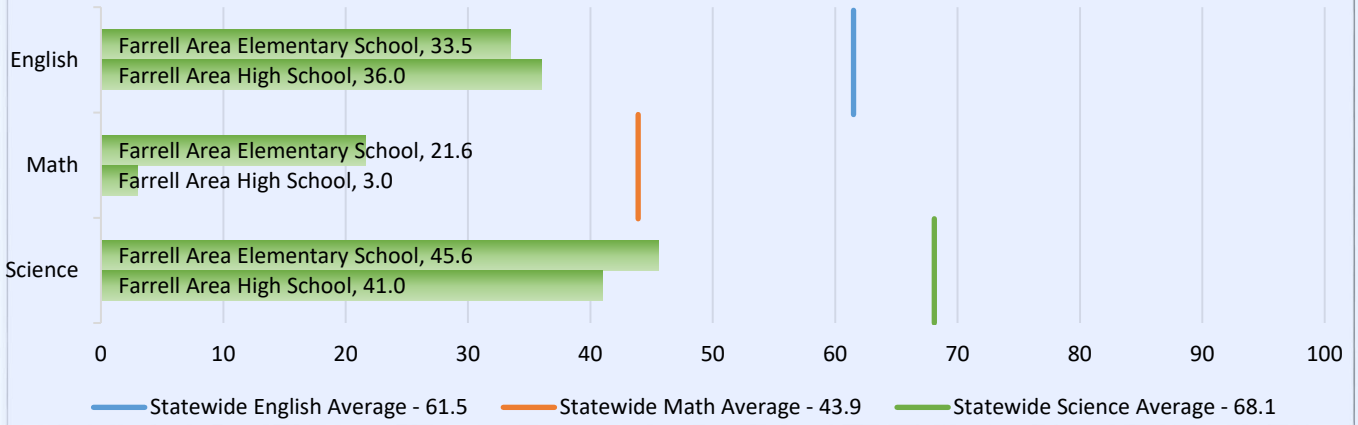
¹⁴ PDE's data does not provide any further information regarding the reason a score was not published for a specific school. However, readers can refer to PDE's website for general information regarding the issuance of academic scores.

**PSSA Advanced or Proficient Percentage
School Scores Compared to Statewide Averages**

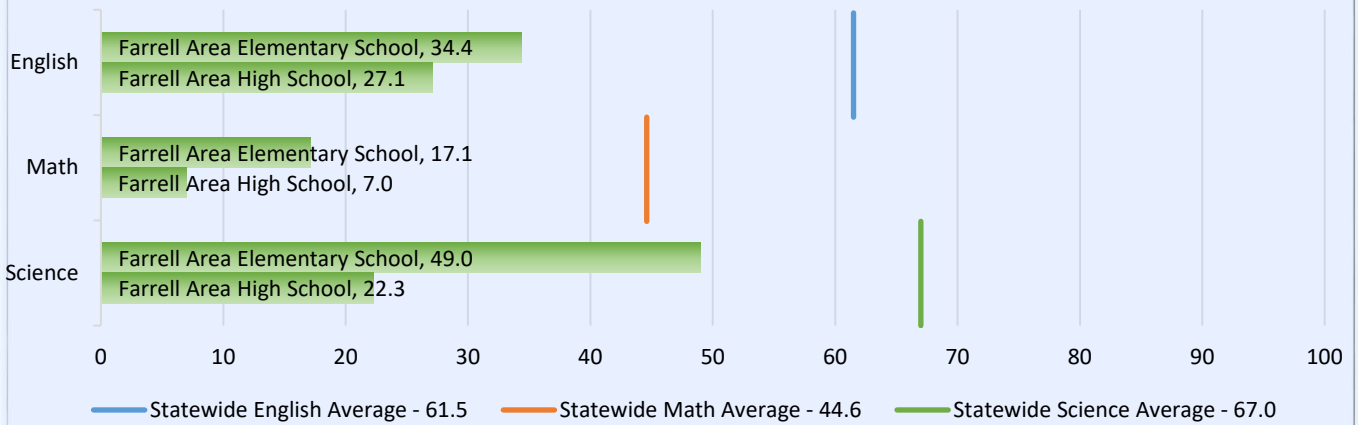
2018-19



2017-18

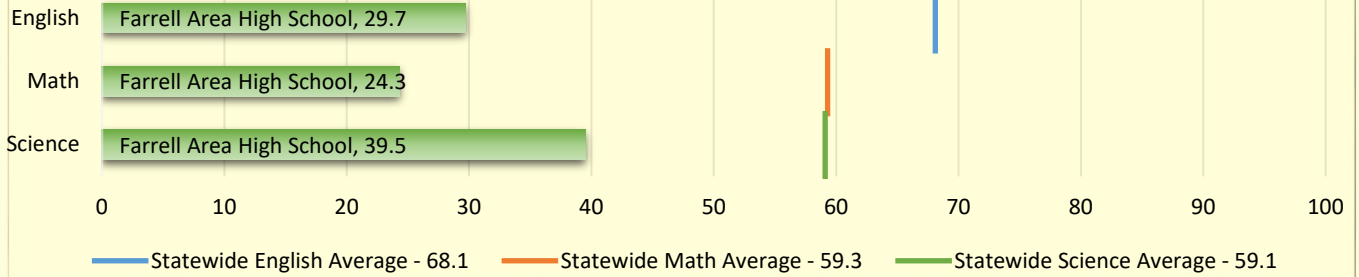


2016-17

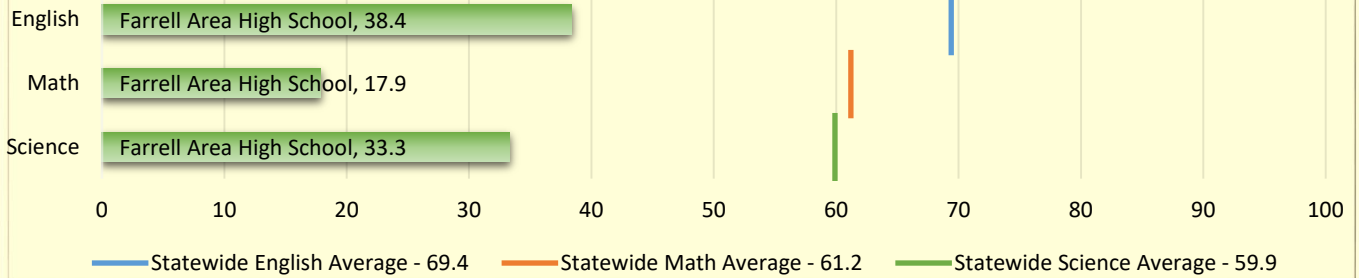


Keystone Advanced or Proficient Percentage School Scores Compared to Statewide Averages

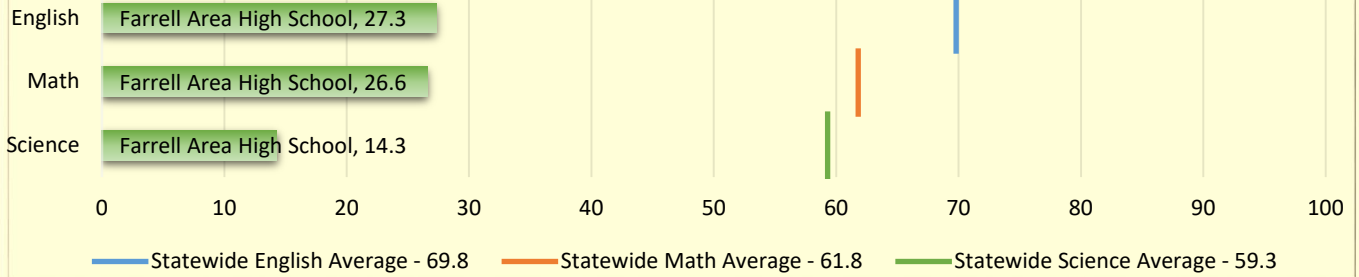
2018-19



2017-18



2016-17



Distribution List

This report was initially distributed to the Superintendent of the District, the Board of School Directors, and the following stakeholders:

The Honorable Tom W. Wolf
Governor
Commonwealth of Pennsylvania
Harrisburg, PA 17120

The Honorable Noe Ortega
Acting Secretary of Education
1010 Harristown Building #2
333 Market Street
Harrisburg, PA 17126

The Honorable Stacy Garrity
State Treasurer
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Mrs. Danielle Mariano
Director
Bureau of Budget and Fiscal Management
Pennsylvania Department of Education
4th Floor, 333 Market Street
Harrisburg, PA 17126

Dr. David Wazeter
Research Manager
Pennsylvania State Education Association
400 North Third Street - Box 1724
Harrisburg, PA 17105

Mr. Nathan Mains
Executive Director
Pennsylvania School Boards Association
400 Bent Creek Boulevard
Mechanicsburg, PA 17050

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