



Pre-K Today

PENNSYLVANIA

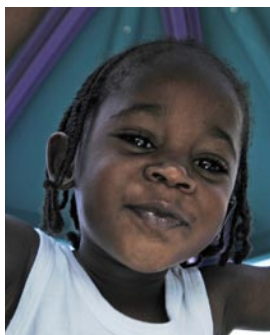
Four years ago, Pennsylvania had the unfortunate distinction of being one of only nine states making no investment in pre-kindergarten education. Thankfully, that is no longer the case, as school districts have begun investing Education Accountability Block Grant (ABG) funds in pre-K and as the state has begun augmenting the federal Head Start program. Today we have a real opportunity to improve upon these initial investments and advance pre-K opportunities for Pennsylvania's youngest learners as the legislature considers the Governor's 2007-08 budget.

Pre-K Today is a campaign launched by a broad-based statewide coalition to support Pennsylvania's proposed \$75 million investment in pre-kindergarten. If passed, the initiative would provide 11,000 3- and 4-year-olds high-quality pre-K programs across the Commonwealth in diverse settings beginning in the 2007-08 school year.

Why Pre-K?

During the past decade, we have learned much about how children's brains develop, including how vital the first few years are for learning.¹ High-quality pre-K programs for 3- and 4-year-olds give children better preparation for school and greater success in school:

- They enter kindergarten with better language, reading, math, cognitive, and social skills.²
- They have fewer grade retentions, less remediation, higher standardized test scores, and higher graduation rates.³
- Pennsylvania results mirror broader national studies. School districts investing in pre-K recoup as much as 78% in education cost savings and some districts with high special education costs recoup as much as 116%.⁴ High-risk 4-year-olds in Allegheny County's Early Childhood Initiative showed special education and grade retentions rates of less than 1% and 2% respectively in districts where other students were referred for special education and retained at rates of 21% and 23% respectively.⁵ And high-quality pre-K programs give children greater success later in life. They are more likely to mature into more responsible citizens who are married, have higher educational attainment, and hold better paying jobs.⁶



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Finally, pre-K is a wise investment. As James Heckman, the 2000 Nobel Laureate in Economics, states: “learning . . . is most effective when it begins at a young age and continues through adulthood.

The returns to human capital investments are greatest for the young.”⁷ In its own cost-benefit analysis, the Federal Reserve Bank of Minneapolis concludes that dollars invested in early childhood development “yield extraordinary public returns” and that the benefits “far exceed their costs.”⁸ Numerous studies reveal the cost-benefit of high-quality pre-K, including a recent analysis of the Perry Preschool Program in Michigan, where each dollar spent saved an estimated \$17 in reduced expenditures for education, welfare, criminal justice, and other public spending on program graduates through age 40.⁹

Our children need pre-K, and our Commonwealth will benefit from providing it.

How Are We Doing?

Pennsylvania has been investing state funds in pre-K for only three years through the ABG and the Head Start State Supplemental appropriation. School districts may spend Block Grant funds on any of 11 school improvement strategies including pre-K. During the current year, 45 districts (five more than last year) are spending \$15.6 million to serve about 4,300 children (an increase of about 700 over last year). The state’s \$40 million Head Start appropriation is serving about 5,800 students this year. In addition, some school districts use federal Title I money and other funding sources, including their own local taxes, to serve almost 7,700 other preschoolers, and the federal Head Start program serves about 32,300 of the poorest children in the state. All told, about 49,000 3- and 4-year-olds are enrolled in Head Start or public school pre-K and K4 programs. This amounts to 16% of the Commonwealth’s nearly 299,000 3- and 4-year-olds. We still have a long way to go to make high quality programs available to all young children who need them and whose parents want them.

Each year the National Institute for Early Education Research (NIEER) grades public funded preschool programs based on a list of 10 quality indicators. In its 2006 State Preschool Yearbook, Pennsylvania’s programs

received a grade of 4 out of a possible 10.¹⁰ During the past year, the state also has moved to assure that public funds for pre-K programs are spent only on programs of high quality. The Office of Child Development and Early Learning, in conjunction with experts and practitioners, has developed a set of early learning standards. The State Board of Education has approved the first-ever regulations for pre-K programs covering length of day and year, age appropriate standards-based curriculum, instruction, and assessments, group size, comprehensive services, and credentials for teachers in contracted community-based programs and for all paraprofessionals. The State Board has proposed revisions in the requirements for public school pre-K and early elementary grades teachers; those regulations are still under consideration. When fully approved and implemented these requirements will boost Pennsylvania’s grade on the NIEER standards to a 9.0.

What Has the Governor Proposed?

In his budget for 2007-08, Governor Rendell has proposed a dedicated state funding stream to support pre-K programs. It would provide \$75 million for a new, targeted pre-K program within the ABG to provide either half- or full-day programs to about 11,000 3- and 4-year-olds – more than doubling the number of preschoolers currently served by state funds. These new funds would be distributed through competitive grants to school districts, Head Start programs, child care providers, and nursery schools that meet the requirements of the new State Board regulations and comply with the Pennsylvania early learning standards. While funds would be available statewide, priority would be given to those communities in which at least 30% of school children are eligible for free or reduced price lunch and to providers in other communities that will serve a concentration of children at-risk of school failure.

This proposal is particularly important for two reasons. First, it will more than double the number of children served in state-funded pre-K in a single year. Second, by establishing a dedicated funding stream, it will send a message about the Commonwealth’s commitment to pre-K and encourage schools and other providers to expand high-quality pre-K offerings for young children.

What Are Other States Doing?

Four states have charted a path toward universal pre-K: Georgia, Florida, and Oklahoma for 4-year-olds and Illinois for 3- and 4-year-olds.¹¹

- Georgia began its program in 1995 and currently uses over \$300 million in lottery funds to support it.
- A referendum in Florida amended the state Constitution to establish universal pre-K, currently funded at about \$400 million.
- Beginning with pilot projects in 1980, Oklahoma now spends about \$209 million on its pre-K program.
- Illinois enacted a statute last year to make voluntary, high-quality pre-K universally available in the coming years. The program already has over \$280 million in funding and growth is planned to include all children whose parents choose to enroll them.

Other neighboring and competitor states also are making significant commitments to pre-K.¹²

- New York adopted legislation in 1997 establishing a blueprint for voluntary pre-K in all of the state's school districts and now spends in excess of \$300 million per year.
- In New Jersey, the courts in 1998 ordered state support for pre-K in the 30 poorest school districts. State funding for pre-K in those districts totals over \$578 million.
- The West Virginia legislature has passed legislation requiring that pre-K be offered to all 4-year-olds by 2012; it is currently offered universally in 5 of the state's 55 counties at a state cost of almost \$48 million.
- North Carolina established a pre-K initiative in 2001 that currently is funded at almost \$85 million.

Pre-kindergarten programs and state support for them both are growing rapidly, and it is difficult to get consistent up-to-date data on every state. But one thing is clear – the trend is upward:

- 31 states – including Pennsylvania – committed to increasing state support for pre-K in fiscal year 2007.¹³
- While the former Governor vetoed legislation expanding early childhood education last August, the new Governor of Massachusetts has made pre-K a central element of his education plans.¹⁴
- In North Carolina, the Governor has proposed a 50% expansion in the number of students served by the More at Four early childhood program.¹⁵
- California adopted legislation last year to increase pre-K enrollments in neighborhoods served by low-performing schools and appropriated \$50 million for the first year of that expansion. The Governor proposed adding another \$100 million over the next two years.¹⁶
- Despite a very tight budget, Michigan's Governor has proposed spending \$200 million to open 26,000 full-day prekindergarten slots for 4-year-olds in low-income neighborhoods.¹⁷

Pennsylvania has abandoned its distinction of being one of only nine states not providing state support for pre-K. But in order to keep pace with neighboring and competitor states and those that would be our competitors, we need to do more.

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Endnotes

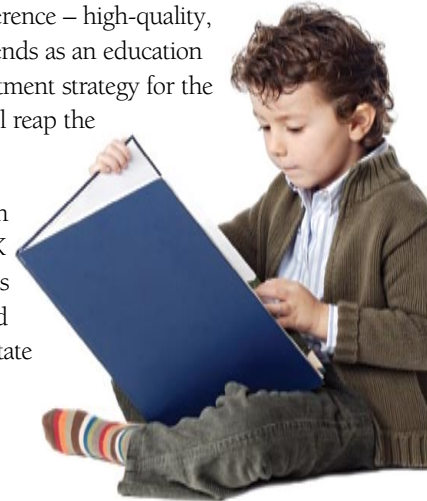
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What Must We Do?

As the General Assembly considers the Governor's proposal and develops the ultimate 2007-08 state budget, many issues will be considered and debated. Some will be particularly controversial and contentious. And there will be debate about the form of others. But the General Assembly has a unique opportunity this spring to make a real difference for thousands of Pennsylvania's youngest learners. And that difference – high-quality, state-supported, voluntary pre-K – will pay handsome dividends as an education strategy for the children who benefit directly and as an investment strategy for the schools, communities, and the Commonwealth itself that will reap the long-term rewards of a wise investment.

Pre-K Today supports the Governor's \$75 million proposal in the 2007-08 budget to create Pre-K Counts. If enacted, Pre-K Counts will provide approximately 11,000 3- and 4-year-olds with voluntary, high-quality pre-K delivered through a mixed service delivery system in which all providers comply with State Board of Education pre-K regulations and the state's early learning standards.

In the blink of an eye today's 3- and 4-year-olds will be five tomorrow and hugging their parents good-bye in the kindergarten classroom on the first day of school. Let's not wait another day to move forward on investments that have been unequivocally proven to secure better academic outcomes for young children and provide economic and social benefits to the community at large.



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Pre-K Today has received funding from Pre-K Now which collaborates with state advocates and policymakers to lead a movement for high quality, voluntary pre-kindergarten for all three and four year olds. The following funders contribute to making this important work possible: The Pew Charitable Trusts, the David and Lucile Packard Foundation, RGK Foundation, CityBridge Foundation and the Schumann Fund for New Jersey.