

# Editorials

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April 17, 2007

## Rendell's pre-K plan worth consideration

The Issue: State Rep. John Perzel reintroduced a measure to hire 10,000 more policemen statewide to combat crime.

Our Opinion: Police are important, but a prekindergarten program may be a better long-term approach.

When it comes to social ills such as crime and violence, all too often more money is spent dealing with symptoms than causes.

Last week, state Rep. John Perzel reintroduced legislation that would add 10,000 patrolmen to forces throughout the state at a cost of \$225 million.

Perzel introduced the measure last year, but it did not clear the Senate.

The Philadelphia Republican is primarily concerned with curbing the escalating crime in the City of Brotherly Love, which would get 1,345 of the additional patrolmen, but police departments across the state undoubtedly would welcome the additional manpower as well.

Beefed-up police forces would provide a greater street presence, something for which residents, particularly in urban areas, have been clamoring. But until the causes of crime and violence — lack of education, poverty and hopelessness — are addressed, the need for more policemen will continue to increase.

What if a similar amount of money were spent attacking the root causes of crime?

And what if statistics showed a return on that expenditure of \$17 for every \$1 invested?

What if that money were used to help provide prekindergarten classes for all of the state's nearly 300,000 youngsters who are 3 and 4 years old? What would happen?

According to Joan Benso, president of Pennsylvania Partnerships for Children, if that were to happen academic achievement would improve, young adults would be better prepared for the work force and communities would become safer places to live.

In addition, the cost of welfare and other social service programs would be reduced significantly, she said.

The problem, of course, is that lawmakers are not likely to allocate \$225 million for prekindergarten classes for every 3- and 4-year-old in the state, especially if they are reluctant to provide that much for 10,000 more policemen.

But they might agree to allocate \$75 million. That's the amount Gov. Ed Rendell has called for in his proposed budget. It would fund pre-kindergarten classes for 11,000 youngsters who face the greatest risk of falling hopelessly behind educationally.

Benso, who supports the governor's proposal, said a growing number of studies show that children who participate in prekindergarten programs enter kindergarten with better reading, math, language and social skills.

Those studies also show that students who have attended prekindergarten classes do better in grade school and high school than those who didn't, Benso said.

There also is an economic reason for investing the \$75 million in prekindergarten classes. Benso said that for every dollar spent on a similar program in Michigan, an estimated \$17 savings in lower public expenditures for welfare, special education and other social services was recorded.

That alone should be reason enough for lawmakers to give the proposal serious consideration.

Benso said most states that compete economically with Pennsylvania, such as Georgia, Florida, New Jersey, Illinois and West Virginia, already have made significant commitments to prekindergarten programs. Pennsylvania can't afford not to do the same.

Although more police on the streets may seem to make sense when combating crime, a long-term strategy is needed. A large part of that strategy should be providing youngsters with an excellent educational foundation on which they can build successful lives.

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Posted by readingeagle at April 17, 2007 07:15 AM

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