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Pennsylvania should join other states, recognize the value of pre-K funding

Joan Benso, president and CEO of Pennsylvania Partnerships for Children, speaks enthusiastically about the dramatic differences she has witnessed since 1979 in this state's emphasis on funding for preschool programs. "When a governor leads on kids' issues," Ms. Benso has said about Gov. Ed Rendell, it can make a tremendous difference in state budget funding for education in general and preschool programs in particular.

A report released Wednesday by the National Institute for Early Education Research at Rutgers University highlighted the growing movement nationwide toward state funding for pre-kindergarten programs. Though local and federal funds also contribute to the effort, state governments are working harder than the local and federal governments to make this happen.

Report writer Steven Barnett told the Associated Press for a story Wednesday that the federal No Child Left Behind act might be providing the most impetus for the pre-K movement throughout the country. A primary goal of NCLB is to eliminate achievement gaps between low-income and wealthier students, but studies have persuaded school districts that achievement gaps begin before children enter school.

"Schools are quite aware if we start off behind ? we will have a very difficult time making this up by the time we're responsible for the test scores," Mr. Barnett said. And, though Ms. Benso spoke had spoken during an earlier meeting with this Editorial Board, her views meshed perfectly with those of Mr. Barnett. Pre-K funding is the single largest initiative now before the General Assembly for its budgetary consideration, Ms. Benso said, and it also is "the best investment in Pennsylvania kids."

Pre-K is defined by school districts as children age 3 until the age that schools permit the enrollment of kindergarteners in their districts. There are 300,000 children ages 3 and 4 in Pennsylvania, according to Ms. Benso, and currently, 4,300 of them are enrolled in 45 school districts' pre-kindergarten programs.

Nationwide trends also show that though most pre-K programs traditionally have focused on low-income families ? that's one in three children ages 3 or 4 in this state ? there is a push in a growing number of states for pre-K funding across-the-board, no matter the income level. Florida, Georgia and Oklahoma offer pre-K to all 4-year-olds, and other states also are considering it.

Gov. Rendell's proposed 2007-08 budget earmarks \$75 million for pre-K education. This year already, Community Services for Children Inc., which runs Head Start pre-K programs in Lehigh and Northampton counties, made great gains with a \$1.7 million grant from this state's Pre-K Counts program. The state Legislature should show its recognition of the importance of pre-K with full funding of the governor's request.

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