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'Pa. Pre-K Counts'

BY JOAN L. BENSO

— HARRISBURG.

As Gov. Ed Rendell and the Pennsylvania General Assembly begin the process of developing the annual state budget, we are reminded of the difficult choices that our elected representatives must make when it comes to allocating our precious tax dollars.

Everybody seems to want something.

The business community wants a better-prepared workforce. Parents want higher academic performance in our schools. Young Pennsylvanians want good jobs and vibrant, safe communities in which to raise a family.

It may surprise many to learn of an initiative that can accomplish all of the above, while significantly reducing the cost of welfare and other social service programs and special education.

It's called "Pennsylvania Pre-K Counts" and it's part of the governor's proposed budget for the next fiscal year.

Rendell's budget proposal includes a \$75 million investment to create half and full-day pre-school programs in school districts, Head Start, child-care centers and nursery schools across the state, serving as many as 11,000 children 3 and 4 years of age.

The funding would be made available to all Pennsylvania communities through an RFP process, with priority given to school districts and other providers who serve children at risk of education failure.

The programs would be voluntary and operate on a 180-day school calendar.

Any school district, Head Start program or nursery school that complies with pre-K program standards such as those advanced by the State Board of Education could apply, as well as child-care centers with a "STAR 2" rating or above.

Programs in school districts serving 30 percent or more children participating in the free or reduced lunch program, or individual programs focusing on services to at-risk children, would receive priority in funding.

The value of such programs is well-established. It's important to stimulate young minds as early as possible.

A growing number of studies show that children who participate in pre-kindergarten programs enter kindergarten with better reading, math, language cognitive and social skills.

They perform at a higher academic level, are less likely to require special-education services, are more likely to continue their education and will be better prepared to be successful adults.

Despite all these benefits, \$75 million is a lot of money, and some people may wonder how we can afford such a program. A better question may be, how we can afford not to fund such a program?

The cost-benefit analysis of the landmark "Perry Preschool Program" in Michigan revealed that for every \$1 spent, an estimated \$17 was saved in lower public expenditures for welfare, education and other services.

A 2006 Pennsylvania study concluded that school districts that invest in pre-K programs can recoup as much as 78 percent of their investment.

In fact, the same study said that some small school districts with very high special-education expenditures would recoup as much as \$1.16 for every dollar spent.

Moreover, in order to remain competitive on quality-of-life measures, Pennsylvania needs to keep pace with states where pre-K programs are either in development or already in place.

Four states – Georgia, Florida, Oklahoma and Illinois – have committed to universal pre-K programs.

Pennsylvania's neighbors – New York, New Jersey and West Virginia – are making significant commitments to pre-K programs, and a total of 31 states are committed to increasing pre-K funding in the coming fiscal year.

Vibrant and safe communities are dependent on good employment opportunities, which stem from a well-educated and motivated workforce, which results from high academic performance.

It all begins with quality pre-K programs that enable our kids to “hit the ground running” by the time they start school. It is time for Pennsylvania to make this investment for its future.

Joan L. Benso is president and CEO of Harrisburg-based Pennsylvania Partnerships for Children, which says its mission is to be a strong, effective and trusted voice for improving the health, education and well-being of the commonwealth's children.

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