



## THE EXPRESS-TIMES

### Morganelli brings focus to early education

Thursday, April 26, 2007

**By RUSS FLANAGAN**  
The Express-Times

BETHLEHEM | More than a dozen pre-kindergarten children got a rare treat Wednesday morning as District Attorney John Morganelli stopped by their classroom to read them a story.

The book "Officer Buckle and Gloria" by Peggy Rathman is a story of teamwork involving a police officer and his dog.

The kids followed the plot, but they likely didn't understand Morganelli's message that delivering quality pre-kindergarten education to "at-risk" 3- and 4-year-olds can prevent them from growing up and joining street gangs or committing other violent crimes.

At-risk kids are defined as those who come from broken homes, low-income families, have parents who abuse drugs or alcohol, or are neglected or abused.

"When you invest in these kids early, you save on the back end," Morganelli said from the Bethlehem Area School District's SPARK Early Childhood Center, adding that better-educated children are less likely to wind up in prison or in gangs.

"I want to lock up the bad people but I also want to save these kids from that lifestyle," he said.

In addition to raising awareness of what he said are the crime-prevention benefits of quality pre-kindergarten education, Morganelli also lobbied legislative support for the Pennsylvania Pre-K Counts initiative.

Bruce Clash, state director of Fight Crime: Invest in Kids Pennsylvania, said the initiative, if approved in Gov. Ed Rendell's budget, would allocate \$75 million in competitive grants that would allow 11,000 3- and 4-year-olds to attend pre-kindergarten programs next school year.

Clash said research shows that at-risk children are five times more likely than their counterparts to commit crimes when they get older. Likewise, 60 percent of those pre-kindergartners who are "highly disruptive" and act out violently by biting or kicking will end up committing crimes later in life, he said.

Clash said it's cheaper for taxpayers to put up money for quality pre-kindergarten than it is for building and maintaining prisons, which comprised 6 percent of last year's state budget, or \$1.63 billion.

"Pay now or pay a lot later for failure," Clash said.

Clash acknowledged that because the pre-kindergarten program is new, its funding is itself at risk of being axed out of this year's budget.

"We're fighting to keep it in the budget," he said. "It's certainly got a big target on it."

Reporter Russ Flanagan can be reached at 610-258-7171 or by e-mail at [rflanagan@express-times.com](mailto:rflanagan@express-times.com).

© 2007 The Express Times

© 2007 NJ.com All Rights Reserved.