



Pre-K counts: It's time for Pennsylvania to invest in preschoolers

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Parents get it. Businesses get it. Now it's time for the Legislature to get it.

What more and more people get is the growing importance, in the 21st century, of early-childhood education. While much of the school-reform movement of the past 20 years focused on tougher standards and accountability for grades K through 12, research shows that developing school readiness in 3- and 4-year-olds is crucial to keeping them on track as students later.

Unfortunately, Pennsylvania is coming late to supporting such learning. According to the state Department of Education, only 44 of the 501 school districts are using state funds to educate more than 4,000 preschoolers. Almost 90,000 of the state's 3- and 4-year-olds, only 31 percent, attend quality early-childhood programs with family dollars or public funding.

While that's progress, states like Georgia, Florida, Oklahoma and Illinois are on the way to providing preschool education for *all* children, with yearly allocations of \$280 million to \$400 million per state. New York, New Jersey and West Virginia spend far more annually on early learning than Pennsylvania's \$15.6 million -- try \$300 million, \$578 million and \$48 million, respectively.

National studies show that children in quality preschools arrive in kindergarten with better language, reading, math and social skills. They also have fewer grade retentions, less remediation and higher graduation rates. One Pennsylvania analysis said districts with pre-K programs recover much of the cost in savings from future education spending.

American business understands the value of preschool, from the standpoint of the need to educate all children and also as a way to reduce negative social costs. Federal Reserve Chairman Ben Bernanke said in a February speech, "Although education and the acquisition of skills is a lifelong process, starting early in life is crucial." He cited research sponsored by the Federal Reserve Bank of Minneapolis and the University of Minnesota that documented "the high returns that early-childhood programs can pay in terms of subsequent educational attainment and in lower rates of social problems, such as teenage pregnancy and welfare dependency."

That's why PNC Financial Services is investing \$100 million over 10 years in its Grow Up Great program for pre-schoolers. That's why the Pittsburgh school board voted two years ago to use all of its state Accountability Block Grants on education solely for pre-K programs.

Now it's time for the Legislature to get on board. Gov. Ed Rendell has proposed Pennsylvania Pre-K Counts, \$75 million that would enroll 11,000 children in quality pre-schools run by school districts, Head Start, nursery schools and child-care centers. The money would be available statewide, but focus on children who are at risk of school failure.

Although the Legislature has several major funding issues on its plate, this one is a no-brainer. Despite proven benefits, Pennsylvania is not competitive with other states in giving its children a pre-K foundation. Yet each year of delay costs taxpayers more for student remediation, special ed, adjudication and incarceration.

Parents, businesses and experts all agree: pre-K counts. It's up to the Legislature to make it count for more Pennsylvania children.

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