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## Critics: Fix system we have first. New programs can wait.

By: Kathy Ruff

Gov. Rendell's proposed budget contains a \$100 million expansion to the state's educational Accountability Block Grant program.

But those funds are restricted - \$75 million to funding specifically for a new program, Pennsylvania Pre-K Counts, and \$25 million to launch or expand investments into full-time kindergarten programs.

"The goal is to get students prepared as early as possible," says Nicole M. Rob, spokeswoman for the Pennsylvania Department of Education. "By investing in them earlier, you are saving in the long run. I believe every dollar you invest now is \$17 saved later."

Pennsylvania Pre-K Counts will provide access to many at-risk children to make early childhood education programs accessible to them.

Why is that so important?

"Pennsylvania's investment in quality pre-kindergarten programs could save Pennsylvania \$100 million in future special education costs," says Rob. "Additional future tax savings are possible because children who are better educated are more productive as adults, likely to be healthier, pay more taxes and less likely to require public assistance."

Long-term studies show a direct correlation between quality early childhood education and long-term performance, she says. "Research suggests that pre-school may indeed have long-term educational and economic benefits," says Carole Vinograd Bausell, assistant director of the Editorial Project in Education Research Center, Bethesda, Md. "Intensive pre-school interventions targeting disadvantaged children have been shown to yield significant gains that may last well into adulthood." A report prepared by the center, *Quality Counts 2007*, asserts that children who attended well-known pre-school programs were more likely to stay out of special education, not repeat a grade, complete high school and, as adults, to be employed and have higher earnings.

"It's more pragmatic to invest in children early in life than it is to face the possibility of expensive interventions later down the road after children have failed to achieve," says Bausell. "We think that it's increasingly becoming apparent that we have to look at the readiness of children at each stage to enter the next educational level. So if we begin by making sure children are ready to start school, they have a greater chance of success once they are in school, and pre-school and kindergarten are important ways of ensuring readiness."

Over time, that success trickles into the economy as evidenced by "Early Intervention on a Large Scale," a commentary included in the *Quality Counts 2007* report.

"Persuasive economic research indicates that there is a far more promising approach to economic development with government assistance," says the report authored by Rob Grunewald, associate economist at the Federal Reserve Bank of Minneapolis, and Arthur J. Rolnick, senior vice president and director of research at the Federal Reserve Bank of Minneapolis. "It rests not on an externally oriented strategy of offering subsidies to attract private companies, but rather on government support of those much closer to home—quite literally: our youngest children. This research shows that by investing in early-childhood education, governments - in partnership with private firms and nonprofit foundations - can reap extraordinarily high economic returns, benefits that are low-risk and long-lived."

The authors go on to proclaim that investing in early-childhood education is more likely to create a vibrant economy and a better return on the investment than using public funds to lure a sports team by building a new stadium, to attract an automaker by providing tax breaks or other such economic development initiatives.

That vibrancy is demonstrated through not only private gains in the form of higher wages later in life, but also through the broader economy because those participants develop greater learning skills that result in better citizens and more productive workers who contribute productively to their local economies.

"Without support during these early years, a child is more likely to drop out of school, depend on welfare benefits, and commit crime - thereby imposing significant costs on society," says the report.

"Compared with the billions of dollars spent each year on high-risk economic-development schemes, an investment in early-childhood programs is a far better and far more secure economic-development tool."

According to Rutgers' National Institute for Early Education Research, all but a dozen states now offer some sort of state-

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financed pre-school education. But funding levels in 2005 for such programs varied dramatically, ranging from more than \$9,000 per pupil in New Jersey to \$721 per pupil in Maryland. Pennsylvania spent less than \$3,000 per pupil.

"The evidence is overwhelming and indisputable that pre-K schooling for youngsters has a substantial positive impact on the entirety of their academic career," says Marilyn Zilli, executive director for the Senate Education Committee, chaired by Sen. Raphael J. Musto (D-Luzerne).

"The skills they learn sustain them through the balance of their careers and are building blocks for other skills they have to acquire," she says.

Despite the evidence on the value of such investments, Gov. Rendell's proposed new educational funding has met with some resistance.

"We are looking very closely at any proposed spending increases this year because of the tightness of the state budget," says David Broderic, executive director of the Senate Education Committee, chaired by Sen. James J. Rhoades (D-Schuylkill).

"Since 2003, we have increased spending on public education programs by \$1.8 billion. In this tight budget year, and given that we have increased spending in public education so dramatically since 2003, we are skeptical in some ways about any new initiatives in public education this year."

Broderic notes that last fiscal year, 58 percent of the Accountability Block Grant program funds were spent on full-day kindergarten programs and only 6 percent was used for pre-kindergarten.

"We have a real question about the inflexibility of the governor's proposal and whether we are forcing schools to do something that they have heretofore not really chosen to do," says Broderic. "It's too early to tell, but one of the things that members of our caucus have been clear about, at least initially, is we really have to be fiscally responsible in a year when we don't have a lot of spare money to spend at the state level and we have really got to analyze any spending increases very carefully. If it's not essential, if it's for a program that maybe doesn't make sense and it's for a program that school districts, in this case, have not embraced when they had the choice to embrace it - it's programs like that that may meet with some skepticism."

In light of the \$1.8 billion increase in public spending for education since 2003, the committee may choose to spend scarce resources differently.

Republican leader, Rep. Sam Smith (R-Jefferson), also disagrees with the governor's proposed pre-K spending and has introduced "Thinking Smart. Spending Wisely," an education funding package aimed at allowing school districts the ability to decide what tools they need to educate children.

"It is time to stop creating new education programs and imposing new state mandates," Smith said in a press release. "Our schools must first be encouraged to succeed in their prime mission - the proficient education of children."

Smith believes that access to funding should not be restricted to certain schools for certain projects.

"He is saying the districts need more money to do the mission we've asked them to undertake without restrictions and with the flexibility where each individual thinks it needs to use it best because they are not all alike," says Paula Hess, Ph.D., senior advisor to Rep. Smith. "We have been supportive of pre-K programs. The problem is, we are in a fiscal year where you have to prioritize. You need to put it into the system that's already out there, not into a new population of students that the public schools, in particular, are not currently required to educate. Before we start putting money into a whole new system, we need to get the system we have already got working properly."

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