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May 3, 2007

Let's not miss opportunity to help at-risk children



"We know that quality early education can make a measurable difference in a child's development."

JOHN REYNOLDS



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Rarely has there been a clearer consensus on matters of social and educational policy than the understanding that early childhood is profoundly significant in developing a child's capacity to succeed in school and beyond. Furthermore, anyone who cares is painfully aware of the gap between advantaged and disadvantaged children as they enter school. Whether they come from rural, urban or suburban communities, children who start behind, stay behind.

The budget under review by the state Legislature features ambitious proposals regarding taxes, transportation and health care, but it is the Pennsylvania Pre-K Counts proposal that might very well hold the greatest

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significance for the commonwealth's future. It would invest \$75 million to create half- and full-day pre-kindergarten programs in 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 programs would be voluntary and funding would go through an RFP process. Priority would be given to school districts and other providers who serve at-risk children. Programs serving 30 percent or more children in the free or reduced lunch program, or providers focusing on services to at-risk children would receive priority.

Studies show that children who participate in quality pre-kindergarten programs not only enter school with better reading, math, and language skills but are also better prepared for paying attention, following directions, and getting along with others. Children who attend high-quality pre-kindergarten also perform at a higher academic level after entering school, are less likely to require special-education services, and are more likely to graduate from high school and attend college. These successes also lower demands for future public services and produce the rewards of productive, tax-paying adults. Preliminary estimates indicate that Pennsylvania taxpayers will get back about \$1.68 for every dollar invested in preschool programs (counting educational savings, increased earnings of school graduates, and savings on public assistance and corrections) and that quality pre-kindergarten programs could save the citizens of the state \$100 million in future special education costs alone.

Quality pre-K programs will also make the state a more attractive place for young, productive families. In order to remain competitive on quality-of-life measures, Pennsylvania needs to keep pace with states where pre-K programs are in development or already in place. Four states -- Georgia, Florida, Oklahoma and Illinois -- have committed to universal pre-K programs. New York, New Jersey and West Virginia are making significant commitments, and 31 states are committed to increasing pre-K funding in the coming fiscal year.

The program would be voluntary. Parents would remain in control. It is also important to note that the program provides opportunities for public-private partnerships, cooperation between public education and current private providers. Such partnerships can build on each other's strengths and communities where public schools don't have the physical space to serve preschoolers (such as Allentown) can allow participation by any provider that serves at-risk children and meets the standards. In Illinois, New York and New Jersey, a large percentage of pre-K is already delivered through community-based private providers.

Just four years ago, Pennsylvania was one of only nine states that did not invest any state revenues in the type of pre-kindergarten education. Some progress has been made under Governor Rendell through early childhood initiatives such as the Accountability Block Grants, Keystone STARS and the Head Start Supplemental Assistance program. Still, less than a third of Pennsylvania's 3 and 4 year olds receive the benefits of quality early education programs. Particularly important here is that many children in our most at risk communities have very limited access to the benefits of such experiences. This is compelling because we know that quality early

education can make a measurable difference in a child's development. Indeed, such a program is likely to be the best opportunity for at-risk children to enter school at a level approaching that of those for whom the benefits of quality preschool might already be available. We have an opportunity to do something. As I see it, a failure would be a moral one that also puts the commonwealth's future at risk.

John Reynolds is chair of the Children's Coalition of the Lehigh Valley and a professor of political science at Moravian College.

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