

PRE-K ADVOCATES RALLY IN SUPPORT OF GOVERNOR'S EARLY CHILDHOOD BUDGET

By Jeff Cox

As part of Early Childhood Action Day, over 500 of pre-K advocates representing several different groups rallied today in the Capitol Rotunda in support of Governor Rendell's early childhood budget initiatives. These initiatives include \$75 million for the new "Pre-K Counts" program and \$86 million in new spending for the child care system.

"We have come to Pennsylvania's Capitol today to tell our elected officials that it is time for politicians to start investing in early childhood education," said Rev. Sharon Easterling, Executive Director of the Delaware Valley Association for the Education of Young Children and co-chair of Quality Early Education through Salaries and Training (QUEST). She told the advocates, "We have come to say that it is time for politicians to move beyond the rhetoric of saying that children are a priority and to start demonstrating with their actions that children are a priority."

Tom Lamb, Senior Vice President of PNC Bank, told the crowd he was not only representing PNC Bank but "the business community statewide." He said, "As business leaders, we all know the importance of developing a skilled workforce." He pointed out that many of the students who do graduate from high school do not have the skills they need to transition to postsecondary education or the workforce without remediation.

Lamb cited statistics showing that nearly 50% are not proficient in math and nearly 35% are not proficient in reading on the 11th Grade PSSA. He explained PNC has "placed special emphasis on providing children the tools and experience they need through our Grow Up Great project, a ten-year \$100 million investment in preparing 2.8 million children for school and life in the communities in which we operate." He added, "For PNC, investing the Grow Up Great makes sound business sense." According to Lamb, "The Commonwealth has a unique opportunity this spring to make a real difference for thousands of Pennsylvania's youngest learners", adding, "And that difference – high quality, state-supported, voluntary pre-K – will pay handsome dividends as an education strategy for our children, schools, communities and the Commonwealth."

Megan Kampf, Assistant District Attorney in Chester County, citing her experience as a prosecutor in the child abuse unit, said in talking to colleagues on both sides of the fence about what can be done to stem the ever swelling tide of crime it is consistently the same refrain, "education is the key!" She told the rally participants she believes programs like Pre-K Counts can help stem the tide by reducing the risk of child abuse by offering a safe and secure place for children to grow and develop and giving children a chance to thrive in the classroom at an early age, and early intervention for those with special needs. Kampf said, "I believe every child deserves to be in a loving and safe environment that helps them grow and blossom into fine, productive citizens of this Commonwealth." She added, "I believe Pre-K Counts will go along way to achieve that goal."

Rev. Easterling told the crowd, "Unfortunately, there is significant opposition – specifically to Pre-K Counts – from the religious community." She said as a minister of the Gospel, she could not "let these attacks go unanswered." According to Rev. Easterling, high quality, voluntary preschool programs that are available to all families who want or need them is family friendly and high quality, voluntary preschool programs is a fiscally prudent policy.

Citing a biblical passage in which Christ says, "If anyone causes one of these children to stumble, it would be better for them if a large millstone were hung around their neck and they were drowned in the depths of the sea", Rev. Easterling said, "Now I don't know about you but I would say that having the ability to help a child read on grade level and not doing it is causing a little one to stumble; having the resources to reduce special education placement rates from 25% down to 1% and not doing it is causing a little one to stumble; knowing how to double a child's chances of graduating from high school and avoiding criminal activity and not doing it is causing a little one to stumble." She concluded, "Folks – let's be clear – having a budget proposal to begin to fund Pre-K and strengthen the child care system and not funding it – is causing our little ones to stumble and woe to all of us if we continue to let that happen!"

Yvonne Thompson-Friend, Executive Director of Childspace CDI, lauded Governor Rendell and his administration as "champions for expanding resources for early education." Focusing on the Child Care Works portion of the Governor's proposal, Thompson-Friend said it proposes "critical funding for tiered reimbursement to help with increased costs of providing quality care for children whose families are income eligible." She also pointed out the proposal includes a cost of living increase of 3%. She said, "Every legislator knows that the cost of running these businesses has gone up at least 3%". Thompson-Friend said in discussions with providers she found that in the past year, costs have skyrocketed, including increases of 10% for rent and utilities; 17% for materials and supplies; 4.5% for salaries; 47.5% for health insurance; 4% for workers compensation and liability insurance; and 58% for training and education. She pointed out, "Parents cannot afford to absorb the entire burden of these increases." Thompson-Friend told the crowd, "Let's take the opportunity to raise our collective voices so legislators will hear that we are serious."

Megan Brunner, a parent of a child in Head Start, cited examples that show the advancements that her son has made since beginning preschool. She said, "I know that when Jaylen starts kindergarten I will know he will be already be socialized and accustomed to routine and structure." Brunner pointed out there are families who do not qualify for Head Start or have the money for pre-K. She told the rally, "Pennsylvania Pre-K Counts will provide these children, children who otherwise wouldn't have access to quality preschool, with the experiences they need to succeed when they enter kindergarten."

Harriet Dichter, Deputy Secretary of Public Welfare for Child Development and Early Learning, thanked the participants for their support of the Governor's efforts. She told them they will need to be persistent in their efforts.

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