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## For chefs and educators, ingredients are critical

If you were to ask a professional chef for the secret to producing an excellent entrée, he or she would tell you that the quality of the ingredients is as important as the recipe.

If you were to ask me as a professional educator for the secret to producing an excellent high school graduate, you might confuse me with the chef.

At the Bellefonte Area School District, our "recipe" is continuous improvement. The "ingredients" include the degree to which our students are ready to learn when they arrive on their first day of kindergarten.

As is the case with the chef, bringing me quality ingredients greatly enhances my ability to produce an excellent result.

Gov. Ed Rendell's proposed state budget for the coming fiscal year includes \$75 million to create half- and full-day preschool programs in school districts, Head Start, child care centers and nursery schools across the state -- enough to serve as many as 11,000 children ages 3 and 4.

I cannot emphasize strongly enough how important good-quality pre-K programs are in terms of preparing a youngster for a successful K-12 journey. This is particularly true for kids whose home life may not be conducive for the preparation required to succeed.

There are several excellent reasons to support a statewide pre-K initiative.

It is well established that the first few years of life are most vital for learning, as they correspond with the developing architecture of the human brain. Children who have the opportunity to begin "learning how to learn" -- before kindergarten -- are more likely to achieve success throughout their academic careers.

From an economic perspective, the return on high-quality pre-K programs is astounding. Decades-long analysis of a pre-K program in Michigan concludes that every dollar spent returns \$17 due to savings from welfare, education and lower crime, as well as taxes on earnings and higher incomes to the individuals who participated.

From a quality-of-life perspective, it means a happier and better-paid work force and the breaking of the cycle that feeds criminal activities. Our communities will be safer and more secure.

From a competitive standpoint, we need to keep pace with other states where pre-K programs are either in development or already in place.

Four states -- Georgia, Florida, Oklahoma and Illinois -- have committed to universal pre-K programs. Pennsylvania's neighbors -- New York, New Jersey and West Virginia -- are making significant commitments to pre-K programs, and a total of 31 states are committed to increasing pre-K funding in the coming fiscal year.

The funding would be made available to all Pennsylvania communities through an RFP, or request for proposal, process, with priority given to school districts and other providers that serve children at risk of education failure.

Programs in school districts serving 30 percent or more children participating in the free or reduced lunch program or individual programs focusing on services to at-risk children would receive priority in funding.

Thus, the initiative is weighted toward helping children who are most likely to need a boost in order to be ready to learn.

The programs would be voluntary and operate on a 180-day school calendar. Any school district, Head Start program or nursery school that complies with pre-K program standards such as those

advanced by the state Board of Education could apply.

Children who participate in pre-kindergarten programs enter kindergarten with better reading, math, language, cognitive and social skills. They perform at a higher academic level, are less likely to require special education services, are more likely to continue their education and will be better prepared to be successful adults.

As educators and administrators, we know we always can do more for the children under our tutelage because your children deserve the best we have to offer. Pre-kindergarten helps boost the school readiness of our youngest learners -- in Centre County and all across Pennsylvania. James T. Masullo Jr. is superintendent of the Bellefonte Area School District.