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Pre-kindergarten initiative promises big dividends

Gov. Rendell's informative and thought-provoking Pre K Counts Public Private Partnership Executive Leadership Council meeting in Harrisburg last month centered on the question: What is our long-term commitment to our commonwealth's children? Many believe that we are failing our children during their earliest and most critical years. Dr. Deborah Phillips of Georgetown University wrote that we are "disinvesting in young children" as a result of increased work hours and commute times, and decreased parent-children time and parental leave time after the birth or adoption of a child. The demands on contemporary parents (many of whom have no choice but to work outside the home) often leave families with less than optimal situations; children are cared for in environments that have basic health and safety regulations that aim only to keep children out of direct and obvious harm. Most often, regulations do not emphasize the need for environments that enhance early development. We need a shift in priorities.

Indication of a shift in how we prioritize children in Pennsylvania was clear at the Pre K Counts Leadership Council meeting. About 100 business, education, and civic leaders joined Gov. Rendell, Sen. Bob Casey, former Gov. Richard Schweiker, Dr. Steven Barnett (National Institute of Early Education Research), David Lawrence (The Early Childhood Initiative Foundation) and James Rohr (chairman and CEO, PNC Financial Services Group Inc.) to promote a better understanding of the need for enhanced and expanded pre-kindergarten

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A diverse group of presenters made a compelling case for the governor's proposed \$75-million investment in quality pre-kindergarten education. Sen. Casey referred to early childhood education as our "moral responsibility;" Dr. Barnett described preschool education as an investment in the future and highlighted the need for quality early education for both low income and middle income children; and Lawrence offered, "What we do to our children, they will do to us in the future."

At last, legislators are beginning to understand, and even preach, what psychologists and educators have known for many years: 1. Children who enter kindergarten "ready to learn" with competency in physical health, language skills, social-emotional development, and cognition are more successful in kindergarten and beyond; 2. Pre-

kindergarten education can serve as intervention for children who are at-risk due to biological and environmental vulnerabilities; and 3. Early intervention and prevention are effective ways to enhance development.

Luckily, the gap between research and policy is beginning to narrow. By the end of the Leadership Council meeting, it was clear that those who should be listening are now listening. When critics ask, "Why should the commonwealth fund this program at the cost of other important programs?" they have answers. Quality early childhood education is associated with reduced costs in the areas of schooling, delinquency and associated crime, healthcare (e.g., teen pregnancy and smoking), and social services. Quality preschool programs like the one proposed by Gov. Rendell have shown as much as a \$17 return on each \$1 invested. We need to think in terms of a prevention and early intervention model, rather than an (often too late) intervention-only model. Quality early childhood education and care should be viewed as a social good (rather than a private purchase), because it has the potential to affect society as a whole.

The governor's plan would allow more than double the number of children to benefit from state-funded pre-kindergarten in a single year. Bethlehem is one of 30 communities that participate in the Pre K Counts Public Private Partnership, which facilitates local pre-kindergarten partnerships between schools, Head Start, child-care centers, nursery schools, and early-intervention programs that involve more than 500 children. Our community understands that children and communities benefit from quality pre-kindergarten. The governor's proposed Pennsylvania Pre-K Counts initiative could bring even more benefits to thousands of children.

We must let our lawmakers know that Pennsylvania Pre-K Counts needs their support. We need to be leaders for our children; we can't let the state fall back into the bottom brackets of support for early childhood education.

Michelle Schmidt is an associate professor of psychology at Moravian College and has served on the board of the Children's Coalition of the Lehigh Valley.

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initiative could bring even more benefits to thousands of children."

MICHELLE SCHMIDT

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