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Investing in child's early years pay off well in the long run

In contrast to other states, Pennsylvania is late to focusing on early childhood education. Now that the Rendell Administration has identified it as a priority, much-needed improvements are in the offing.

According to IssuesPA, which describes itself as a non-partisan effort to identify issues of greatest importance to Pennsylvanians, high quality pre-school and developmentally-appropriate childcare programs in Pennsylvania could contribute to productivity and economic competitiveness in three ways: (1) Businesses will gain access to a larger and more productive workforce. (2) More children will be ready to learn. (3) Taxpayers will experience lower long-term government costs.

That is put into a proper perspective in the following piece from the Harrisburg Patriot News:

As the Rendell administration and the legislative leadership finally get down to the nitty-gritty of trying to fashion a budget for the coming fiscal year, you have to wonder how much time will be spent weighing the relative value of the myriad programs to be funded.

- Are all of them needed?
- Which ones deliver results and which don't?
- Is anyone being held accountable?
- Are there investments and efficiencies that can be made today that will deliver good results well into the future?

Legislative hearings should cover this ground, but when was the last time a government program was abolished for being ineffective?

One measure of failure is the 44,000 inmates in the state's prison system, each housed and fed at an annual cost in excess of \$30,000. These represent individual failures, to be sure. But what happened to the taxpayers' investment in their education and training to become productive members of society? It apparently didn't get the job done, so \$45 million is being spent annually trying to get it right the second time, while they are in prison.

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Here's a thought: Why don't we strive to do a better job of educating "at-risk children" -- and indeed all children -- the first time through?

More specifically, why isn't it a state law that early childhood education be provided to every 3- and 4-year-old?

The evidence is clear that structured learning early in life results in youngsters entering kindergarten who are better equipped mentally and socially to do significantly better all the way through to graduation. A Michigan study found that every \$1 spent on early childhood education delivered \$17 in reduced spending on education, welfare, criminal justice and other government programs through age 40.

Results from Pennsylvania schools suggest similar gains.

Before Gov. Ed Rendell made early-childhood education one of his signature issues, Pennsylvania was one of only nine states that was not putting state money into this critical stage in child learning. Today, 49,000 three- and four-year olds are enrolled in either Head Start or public school pre-kindergarten programs. But that's only 16 percent of Pennsylvania children that age.

We need to do better, and the governor has proposed spending an additional \$75 million on the program to enroll an additional 11,000 children. He also proposes an additional \$25 million to expand full-day kindergarten, now offered to only half of the children in that grade.

Quality pre-kindergarten education doesn't come cheap. But the payback in terms of building children's success in school and in life is huge. If we are truly serious about addressing some of the underlying problems in society, this is where it has to begin.

Many other states recognize that fact and are finding the resources to do it. Pennsylvania must do no less. Moving from providing 16 percent of 3- and 4-year-olds with the advantage of a quality education program to 100 percent within the next few years should be an objective of the highest priority.

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