

Pre-K helps kids succeed and saves school districts money

By: **ELIZABETH HAMMOND YONSON** (Tue, May/29/2007)

As educators and administrators, we know we can always do more for children under our tutelage because your children deserve the best we have to offer. One thing we know for sure is that high-quality pre-kindergarten helps boost the school readiness of our youngest learners — in Bucks County and all across Pennsylvania.

Because 90 percent of a child's brain development occurs before age 5, kids at this age are like little sponges; they love to learn! So helping very young children harness this quest for knowledge is a wonderful thing. They do not know they are getting ready for kindergarten, but oh, how they are. We can help our children get off to the right start through high-quality pre-K programs that foster a child's desire to learn.

Landmark research shows that children who are exposed to high-quality pre-K enter school more prepared and achieve greater success.

Furthermore, as a school superintendent, I can tell you that school unreadiness is expensive: Remediation costs a district money. Studies show that at least half of the eventual achievement gap already exists at kindergarten. Students who start behind are at a higher risk of staying behind, dropping out and getting into trouble with the law.

Now, in Gov. Rendell's proposed budget for the 2007-08 fiscal year, we have the opportunity to continue a very successful pilot program underway in three school districts in Bucks County — Morrisville, Bristol Borough and Bristol Township — as well as expand pre-K opportunities statewide.

Rendell's proposed state budget for the coming fiscal year includes \$75 million to create half- and full-day pre-K programs in school districts, Head Start, childcare centers and nursery schools across the state — enough to serve as many as 11,000 children 3 and 4 years of age. The funding would be made available to all Pennsylvania communities through an RFP process, with priority given to school districts and other providers who serve children at risk of education failure.

Approximately 16 percent of children up to age 4 in Bucks County live in low-income families. Almost 42 percent of the students in the Bristol Township School District are

eligible for the free and reduced lunch program; 43 percent of the students in the Morrisville School District are eligible; and in the Bristol Borough School District, that number climbs to 60 percent. Poverty is not just an inner-city issue!

One need only to look at the research to understand why this is such a good thing for our children. The Chicago Child-Parent Centers provide family support services and education to low-income pre-school children. Using data from the Chicago Longitudinal Study of 1,539 children, preschool participation was linked with significantly higher levels of school readiness and achievement, and lower rates of special education placement, grade retention, and juvenile delinquency. The study found that children who attended preschool were nearly 30 percent more likely to graduate from high school, 40 percent less likely to repeat a grade and 32 percent less likely to be arrested as a juvenile. Every dollar invested in the preschool program returned \$7.14 to the community at large.

Children who participate in pre-K programs enter kindergarten with better reading, math, language, cognitive and social skills than their peers who did not attend preschool. Clearly quality pre-kindergarten in Bucks County is helping to get our children off to the right start. Help us continue building this strong foundation by supporting the governor's pre-K initiative.

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