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## Investing with interest

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**Casey, intrigued by preschool's connection to adult success, introduces bill on early education.**

**The connection between preschool and jail may not seem obvious.**

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The connection between preschool and jail may not seem obvious.

But the growing body of research that shows children who start their formal learning earlier turn into productive citizens and stay out of jail has piqued the interest of U.S. Sen. Bob Casey.

Mr. Casey, D-Pa., wants the federal government further in on the push for more preschool education.

He has introduced a bill, S. 1374, the Prepare All Kids Act of 2007, to set aside \$5 billion a year starting in the federal fiscal year that begins Oct. 1 to aid states that want to boost preschools. An additional \$1 billion would be added each fiscal year through the one ending Sept. 30, 2012. States would have to match federal grants with an equal amount of money.

Mr. Casey moderated a forum Wednesday at the United Way of Lackawanna County to publicize his bill.

Since 2003, Pennsylvania, under Gov. Ed Rendell, has expanded early childhood education funding. In the past

four years, Mr. Rendell succeeded in getting several hundred million dollars to local school districts to start all-day kindergarten classes and expand preschool education. But only 44 school districts statewide have preschool education programs and only one-third of the state's 3- and 4-year-olds — about 90,000 — are in quality early childhood programs, according to Pre-K Counts, a state Department of Education program.

Mr. Rendell wants \$75 million for the program in the upcoming state budget. About 700 preschool-age children in Lackawanna County would benefit, according to the United Way, which funds a program, Success by 6, dedicated to improving preschools.

The federal money would supplement that.

Mr. Casey's bill would fund preschools that:

- ‡ Ensure high quality pre-school teaching by requiring teachers to have bachelor's degrees.

- ‡ Limit classroom size to 20 students and child-to-teacher ratios to no more than 10 to 1.

- ‡ Are in states that monitor their quality.

- ‡ Require a six-hour school day.

- ‡ Target children who live in families with incomes at or below 200 percent of the federal poverty level, about \$41,300 for a family of four in 2007.

The money would be separate from the \$6.1 billion that goes to federally funded Head Start programs, which already focus on increasing the math and reading skills of preschoolers.

“We need to get more money into this system,” said Diane Halstead, associate director of Pre K Counts, who attended the forum.

Anne Salerno, the Scranton School District's federal Title I programs administrator, said the city school district has had preschool programs since 1965, which helps explain why none of its schools is falling behind in improving quality under the federal No Child Left Behind Act, despite 60 percent of its student population coming from low-income households.

Mr. Casey said it might take him several years before he can convince Congress to enact his legislation.

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