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Enrich childhood, and avoid jail

Leon A. King

is commissioner of the Philadelphia Prison System

Our jails are full, and the social and economic cost of incarceration is enormous.

The Pennsylvania General Assembly is now considering Gov. Rendell's proposed budget, which includes a \$75 million investment in prekindergarten for 11,000 at-risk children 3 and 4 years of age. Funding would be awarded through competitive grants to high-quality preschool programs in school districts, Head Start, child-care centers, and nursery schools. Programs throughout the state would be eligible to apply, with priority to those serving children at risk of educational failure. Rendell's initiative deserves support.

I have seen our prison population grow over the last four years, and with it, the need for innovative and well-coordinated programs and services for the reentry of ex-offenders.

I have joined community leaders and citizens in search of more effective crime-prevention strategies. Corrections will continue to play a critical role. But education - specifically early-childhood education - would be more effective.

With what we now know about the effect of preschool on future education and employment, we must help all children get a good start in life, so they never grow up to be criminals.

At the prison system, we are creating ways to identify programs that demonstrate successful treatment, skills-building and behavioral change. And we already have rigorous long-term studies that show the staggering benefits - including crime prevention - that come from investment in high-quality prekindergarten programs.

The landmark study is the High/Scope Perry Preschool Study (www.highscope.org). In 1962 it began comparing the progress of at-risk 3- and 4-year-olds who attended the program with a

similar group who did not.

Findings include:

Children who had not attended the program were five times more likely to be chronic lawbreakers by age 27 than were participants.

By age 40, those denied Perry services were four times more likely to be arrested for drug felonies, and more than twice as likely to become career offenders.

A similar study of Chicago's Child-Parent Centers compared at-risk kids in the program with comparable children who did not participate. The latter were 70 percent more likely to be arrested for a violent crime by age 18.

The Perry program cut crime, welfare, remedial education and other costs, saving taxpayers more than \$17 for every dollar invested.

I have watched men and women struggle to achieve their GED in jail. I am proud of them, proud of the teachers, social workers and correctional officers who have helped them. But children can learn more, learn faster, and without the added costs of incarceration.

Children learn more from birth through age 5 than at any other stage in their lives. When they start school behind, they remain behind, and are more likely to drop out. As Philadelphia struggles with truancy and dropout rates, we spend more money on adult basic education, literacy, special education, counseling, addiction treatment, job placement, and incarceration.

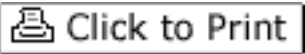
Investing in at-risk children today to prevent crime tomorrow is crucial to any effective long-term crime-prevention strategy. That's why Rendell's prekindergarten initiative is worth our support.

Leon A. King, a former solicitor with the civil-rights division of the city's law department, was appointed commissioner

of the Philadelphia Prison System in 2002.

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