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Pre-K: Modest investment produces great returns

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Pennsylvania, like the rest of the nation, is competing in an economy that is transforming into one based on knowledge and skills. And the work force appears ill-prepared to compete as more than 20 percent of U. S. workers are unable to read at the most basic level or complete simple addition.

The foundation for these fundamental skills is found in the early school years. Yet, across the commonwealth, thousands of children in kindergarten are 18 months behind their classmates in academic skills. And few of them catch up, which can lead to disruptive behaviors, high dropout rates, poverty and crime.

Statistics show that 20 percent of ninth graders in Pennsylvania will fail to graduate. It is clear the pool of qualified candidates for jobs in the knowledge economy falls short, and this trend will continue.

The solution starts with making certain that children enter kindergarten ready to learn. One way to accomplish this is equal access to quality early childhood education.

Gov. Ed Rendell's proposed state budget for 2008 fiscal year includes \$75 million to create half- and full-day pre-K programs in school districts, Head Start programs, child care centers and nursery schools across the state — enough to serve an additional 11,000 children ages 3 and 4. The funding would be made available to all Pennsylvania communities, with priority given to school districts and other providers who serve at-risk children.

For every \$1 spent on quality early education, society reaps as much as \$17 in long-term savings, according to a cost/benefit analysis of the Perry Preschool Study, a research project that spanned 40 years. If we improve early education now, the research shows we won't have to spend nearly as much money later on special education, remedial job training, correctional facilities and other costs that are a drain on Pennsylvania's economic growth.

With PNC Grow Up Great, we have made a 10-year, \$100 million investment in school readiness to benefit children, communities, the work force, and the economy. We are not alone in our need to employ the best and brightest in order to succeed. In the new PNC Study of Early Childhood Education, we found 30 percent of business executives say the quality of the new generation entering the work force is worse compared with five years ago.

Should Pennsylvania implement the governor's proposal, we would be joining other states that have taken the lead in enhancing pre-school education. Some states, such as Oklahoma, Georgia, Vermont and Florida, have nearly 50 percent or more of their 4-year olds enrolled in quality early childhood education. Pennsylvania must act now, knowing that we currently rank 30th for access to preschool programs among the 38 states that fund preschool.

Now is the time for our Legislature to support funding that will increase access to quality preschool programs in communities with the greatest needs. Our youngest residents — our future generation — depend on it.

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