

PITTSBURGH TRIBUNE-REVIEW

Nonprofit analyzes ways to keep Pittsburgh kids from crime

By Kacie Axsom
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Thousands of 3- and 4-year-olds in Pittsburgh are at greater risk of eventually becoming criminals because not enough money is being spent on pre-kindergarten programs, according to a report released Thursday by a group urging the Legislature to fund such programs.

Nearly half of the 4,200 preschoolers from low-income families in Pittsburgh do not have access to quality pre-kindergarten programming, according to Fight Crime: Invest in Kids Pennsylvania, a nonprofit organization of law enforcement officials.

Gov. Ed Rendell is proposing to spend \$75 million on the Pennsylvania Pre-K Counts initiative for at-risk children and their families.

"The intention is to provide pre-k education to as many Pennsylvania children as possible," said Chuck Ardo, spokesman for the governor.

Fight Crime analyzes research about successful ways to keep kids from becoming criminals, according to a fact sheet distributed by the group.

House Minority Policy Chairman Mike Turzai, a Bradford Woods Republican, doesn't think putting at-risk kids in pre-k would reduce their potential for involvement in crime later.

"This governor wants money for anything and everything. The taxpayers' wallets are not a bottomless pit," Turzai said.

But, argues state Rep. Joe Preston, D-East Liberty, "The pre-k issues in the urban and rural areas are especially tantamount with adults being less educated. Anything we can do to bring Pennsylvania up to a higher standard is important."

Everything is still on the table, said Barbara Fellencer, communications director for State

Rep. Dwight Evans, D-Philadelphia, chairman of the House Appropriations Committee.

"Dwight has always been interested in education, and I know he very strongly supports early education programs," she said.

The proposed funding would assist 11,000 preschool-aged children in the state, and about 391 in Pittsburgh.

Pittsburgh Public Schools, along with community partners, have applied for \$2.4 million from the Pre-K Counts program.

Area law enforcement officials spoke about the report and initiative at a news conference yesterday at Small World Early Learning and Development Center II, Downtown.

"Quality pre-k programming is most effective in the fight against crime," said Pittsburgh police Deputy Chief Paul Donaldson. Preschool particularly helps children from disadvantaged backgrounds get a good start in life, he said.

A majority of Pennsylvanians surveyed support the \$75 million proposal. In a statewide random telephone sample of 700 registered voters, 62 percent supported the proposal, while 30 percent opposed it. Susquehanna Polling and Research conducted the poll from April 29 through May 3.

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