

Opinion

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In our view

Investing in kids

We begin this morning by noting there is no silver bullet to halt crime, especially violent crime, in Pennsylvania. With a population in excess of 12 million people, violent crime will happen.

But there is a proven way to greatly reduce crime. It's called education. And a host of new studies suggest the earlier students begin their education, the less likely they are to commit crimes.

That's one reason Gov. Ed Rendell began funding pre-kindergarten education and Head Start programs four years ago. Rendell's latest budget includes \$75 million for pre-K. Coupled with the \$56 million now set aside for pre-K and Head Start, the funding is designed to aid upwards of 60,000 Head Start and pre-K programs.

The money is designated for at-risk youths — those who live in poverty or isolation (which often includes children whose families do not speak English) and the disabled.

Studies show that those children who have a pre-K background have better vocabulary skills and are more prepared to read once they enter first grade.

A survey in Allegheny County found that students who had pre-K were held back only 1 percent of the time, and only 2 percent of those students were required to attend special education classes while 21 percent of those without the pre-K background were held back and 22 percent needed to be placed in special education classes.

Studies also show that money spent on pre-K pays dividends down the road. An analysis of Michigan's Perry Preschool Program found that every \$1 spent on children in pre-K saved \$17 in crime costs later.

That comes as no surprise to more than 230 police chiefs and sheriffs in Pennsylvania who are part of a national advocacy group called Fight Crime: Invest in Kids that is calling for increased funding for preschool programs.

The Journal of the American Medical Association reported that in a study of 1,500 children in Chicago,

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those who did not attend pre-K were 70 percent more likely to be arrested for a violent crime before the age of

18.

Bruce Clash, of the Pennsylvania office of Fight Crime: Invest in Kids, said police officers tell him they are now dealing with the children of children they arrested years ago, and that pre-K programs represent a way to break the cycle. The program he said, contains a strong parental education component as well.

Early childhood education programs leave a lasting impression. Students who have attended pre-K programs develop a sense of conscience, are more disciplined and have higher graduation rates.

So why has it taken so long for Pennsylvania to endorse this concept?

The Legislature has an opportunity to move the ball forward by including the governor's pre-K allocation in the upcoming budget.

Smart lawmakers will look to model Pennsylvania's program after those in Florida, Oklahoma, Georgia and Illinois, which have made pre-K universal.

Pre-K is not a silver bullet, but it may be the closest thing to one. Kids who start ahead stay ahead. That's a fact. The Legislature can begin to make that happen for all Pennsylvanians with this budget.