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## **A seesaw in pre-K funding on violence**

### **Program expected to prevent crime later in life**

By Larry Miller

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Is pre-K the way to go in avoiding another 406 homicides in Philadelphia?

Apparently that's up for debate among a couple of politicians in Harrisburg.

House Republican leader Sam Smith drew the ire of Democratic state Rep. Dwight Evans last week over a statement Smith made about the effectiveness of pre-kindergarten programs in fighting crime.

Statements by Smith and Evans came days after a press conference last Tuesday during which District Attorney Lynne M. Abraham and Police Commissioner Sylvester Johnson called on legislators to support Gov. Ed Rendell's \$75 million proposal for additional funding for the Pennsylvania Pre-K Counts initiative as negotiations continue on the 2007-2008 state budget.

Smith was unavailable for comment yesterday. However, Stephen Miskin, press secretary for the House Republican leader, said the issue is about funding priorities.

"It's easy for crime fighters to ask for more money for this and for that, but the real question is, where that money is going to come from?" Miskin asked. "We're not opposed to pre-K, and if the local school districts want to invest in it that's fine and it's their choice. But we have to fund kindergarten to grade 12 first. It's great to say we need this and we need that but, how are we going to pay for it?"

According to a report issued by Fight Crime: Invest In Kids Pennsylvania, quality pre-kindergarten not only prepares children to succeed in school but also lowers crime later by socializing them.

On Wednesday, Smith commented that pre-K programs have not stopped or slowed crime in Philadelphia and that the report was not conclusive.

“Local school districts – if they choose – already can use state funds for pre-kindergarten through accountability block grants,” Smith said in a prepared statement. “ [Harrisburg must stop creating new education programs and imposing new state mandates](#) , until our schools fully succeed in their prime mission – the proficient education of children. Pre-K may have educational worth, but the argument that it prevents crime cannot be made with any certainty. Philadelphia has had district-wide Pre-K for more than a decade, and look at the [results](#).”

On Smith’s official Web site, his statement is linked to the Federal Bureau of Investigation’s Web site, which shows the FBI’s preliminary Uniform Crime Report for 2006, indicating that crime has increased nationwide.

Evans fired back at Smith.

“ Philadelphia has had full-day kindergarten, and not pre-K, for more than 10 years and as a result has not seen improvements in test scores in the elementary grades,” he said in a published report. “The Philadelphia School District offers pre-K to less than 5,000 students and approximately 10,000 children in Philadelphia are enrolled in Head Start using state and federal funds.”

According to the report [Preventing Crime in Philadelphia: Investing in Quality Pre-Kindergarten](#), thousands of Philadelphia children are at greater risk of becoming criminals due to inadequate funding for pre-K.

“Making sure at-risk children have access to quality pre-kindergarten programs is one of the most important steps we can take to cut future crime by keeping kids from becoming criminals,” Johnson said.

He also said that a study of the High/Scope Perry Preschool Program in Michigan found that at-risk kids excluded from the program were five times more likely to grow up to become chronic lawbreakers than those who attended the program.

Concerned about rising incidents of deadly violence in Philadelphia, Abraham said a significant drop in crime will not occur unless intervention is made before crimes occur. The best way to do that, she said, is to reach children as young as possible and prepare them to be able to relate to others without becoming violently aggressive.

“This is something that we have to deal with on the front end,” she said. “We want more than the legislators to support the governor’s proposal; we want the appropriation. We all agree that if you don’t front-load these kids on how to socialize and get along with others and not be so aggressive, we’re going to have problems. If we can help alleviate some of the conditions that some children see at home or on the streets or on television, then we’re ahead of the problem. I know Sam Smith and I don’t think his statement had any racial overtones. He’s disappointed in some of the results of kindergarten. There’s nothing racial about it. If there was anything untoward in what he said I would have said something in

response.”

According to a report supplied by Fight Crime: Invest in Kids, in Philadelphia approximately 9,000 children ages between ages 3 and 4 living below the poverty level are receiving quality early childhood services. But there are at least 15,000 3- and 4-year-olds living in poverty in the city, leaving about 6,000 eligible preschool age children with no access to quality pre-K.

The report goes on to say that the 230 law enforcement leaders who comprise Fight Crime: Invest in Kids Pennsylvania are determined to put dangerous criminals behind bars, but that those on the front lines know that just arresting and locking up criminals is not enough to win the fight against crime. Law enforcement leaders know from experience and from sound research that among the most powerful weapons to prevent crime and violence are quality early education programs that help kids get the right start in life, it says.

“We understand that legislators have funding priorities in the state budget,” Abraham said. “But there are few investments more thoroughly researched and proven to yield such a wide array of future benefits, including crime prevention and taxpayer savings, as quality pre-kindergarten.”

Abraham and Johnson are among the 230 members of Fight Crime: Invest in Kids Pennsylvania. The organization is part of the national organization Fight Crime: Invest in Kids, which has more than 3,000 law enforcement leaders as members.

Abraham said without quality pre-K programs, children who come from households where they aren't nurtured are at a disadvantage when they do start school.

“I'm not advocating taking control away from parents,” she said. “But let's face it, there are children who are brought into this world who don't get nurturing from their parents, and many criminals start out as juveniles. We're asking Harrisburg to invest on the front end because if we don't we'll surely have to pay for it on the other.”

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