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Editorial | Early Education

Give the OK for pre-k

You're never too young to learn. Just ask all those parents buying Baby Einstein products for their newborns.

Scientific studies have shown the value of early childhood education. Too frequently, however, the children who could most benefit from pre-kindergarten programs don't get them.

The programs aren't available, or they're too expensive, or their parents don't know they exist. Gov. Rendell wants to make pre-k classes available to 11,000 more children in Pennsylvania. A modest goal compared with the need, but still one that would cost \$75 million in new money in a tight budget year.

A lot of worthy goals are competing for bucks in Harrisburg right now. In terms of long-term impact for the dollar, the Pennsylvania Pre-K Counts is one of the best investments.

A landmark study for the High/Scope Educational Research Foundation shows a dollar spent on pre-school education saves about \$17 in expenditures down the road for remedial classes, welfare, and criminal-justice and other public services.

"Children who attend high-quality pre-kindergarten . . . are less likely to repeat a grade or require special-education services; are more likely to graduate high school and attend college; and have higher earnings," Rendell said.

Special-education expenditures alone could eventually go down \$68 million a year due to the impact of pre-school on students' ability to learn, according to the Pennsylvania Partnerships for Children advocacy group.

Pre-K Counts actually began three years ago as a pilot project in 30 school districts across Pennsylvania. The program was funded with both state money and contributions from such

sources as the William Penn Foundation and Heinz Endowments.

More children need the head start that Pre-K Counts can provide. Only 16 percent of Pennsylvania's 3- and 4-year-olds are enrolled in quality early-education programs. Fewer than 6,000 are enrolled in state-supported programs.

Any school district, Head Start, qualified child-care or day-care center, or licensed nursery school, could apply for a Pre-K Counts grant. If approved, they would have to maintain Pre-K Counts standards for staffing, curriculum, nutrition, etc. That's vital.

Some church groups with pre-school programs object to having government "dictate program content," saying it is a matter of religious freedom. Groups that feel strongly about that principle are free not to apply for the money.

If the state is going to bankroll a program, it has every right to set standards for effective spending.

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