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Best Rx: Early-childhood aid

By **MARY GRAHAM & MADDY MALIS**

IN THE next few weeks, members of the legislature have an opportunity to do right by Janice Smith, a divorced mother of three young children, and thousands of other working families in Pennsylvania - if they approve Gov. Rendell's early-childhood-education budget proposals.

The governor's budget includes \$75 million to establish Pennsylvania Pre-K Counts, which would provide more than 11,000 3- and 4-year-olds with quality pre-kindergarten, preparing them for success in school and in life while saving money on future special education services and other costs.

Rendell's plan also allocates \$86 million to expand Keystone STARS, a successful child-care quality improvement initiative and to increase the Child Care Works subsidy program, which provides more than 220,000 working parents with reliable access to child care, helping them keep work and move along the path toward economic self-sufficiency.

Janice Smith knows these programs work. Three years after separating from her husband, she has a job that pays \$36,000 a year and is in line for promotion. Her 7-year-old son did well in school this year and, though it took some time, she now has a quality child care program for her two preschool daughters.

Smith didn't think she could afford \$1,360 a month for child care until she learned about the subsidy program. Working families with incomes up to 200 percent above the federal poverty level are eligible. More than 45,000 children from Southeastern Pennsylvania receive subsidies, although there's a waiting list of up to six months in Philadelphia and some parts of the suburbs. Realizing that the subsidy could secure her economic stability, Smith put her children's names on the waiting list.

She's pleased with her decision not only for financial reasons, but also because of the educational benefit to her children. Research shows the critical importance of early learning to children's educational, social and emotional development. A National Research Council study

(Neurons to Neighborhoods) found that children who attend high-quality early education enter school more prepared and achieve greater educational success, including fewer retentions, less remediation, higher test scores and graduation rates.

There is powerful scientific evidence that in addition to providing quality early learning experiences to our youngest children, the governor's early education proposals also can save a lot of money in the long run.

The landmark High/Scope Perry Preschool study compared a randomly-selected group that participated in high quality early education at ages 3 and 4 with a group that didn't. Both groups were followed until 40.

The group exposed to preschool not only showed greater academic achievement but was more likely to be employed and less likely to be on public assistance or to be arrested. Researchers concluded that for every \$1 spent, the public saved an estimated \$17 in future costs, primarily in special education and criminal justice.

That statistic should grab the attention of the legislature since per capita spending for prisons from the state's general revenues increased 452 percent from 1980 to 2000, compared to an 86 percent increase in higher education spending. It's time to reverse our priorities by making the commitment to invest, generously, at the start of each child's life.

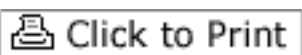
As they debate and vote on a new state budget, lawmakers should approve the early learning initiatives, which meet the immediate needs of our youngest citizens while serving the state's economic interests by saving millions of dollars over time.

Watching, waiting and expecting lawmakers to do the right thing will be Janice Smith and thousands of other working parents who understand the value of a quality early learning and see its benefits daily.*

Mary Graham, executive director of Children's Village Child Care Center, and Maddy Malis, CEO of Federation Early Learning Services, head the Southeastern Pennsylvania Early Childhood Coalition.

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