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## Budget's early childhood investments will pay off

By Jane R. Ervin

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It's a great day for young children in Pennsylvania because the governor and the state Legislature have passed significant funding to address the needs of young children across the commonwealth.

11,000 more children will get to attend pre-school before attending kindergarten. That means that disadvantaged children will have a better chance to be ready to learn when they get to kindergarten, just like their more fortunate peers.

More funding will be available for all-day kindergarten. This means that almost 65 percent of Pennsylvania's children will be able to take advantage of a full day of education, increasing their readiness for first grade.

More children will be cared for in a high quality, successful child-care settings, allowing more low-income moms and dads to go to work or school.

More child-care centers will be able to improve the quality of the education and care they provide to our youngest citizens through the Keystone STARS program -- a measure of quality education in childcare.

Why is all this early childhood education so important? Many studies have shown that if a young child is actively engaged in learning from his earliest years, his chance of being successful in school is greatly enhanced. In fact, a long term study done near Detroit in the 1960s has shown that every \$1 invested in disadvantaged and poor young children and their families returns \$17 in savings through reduced crime, less need for special education, higher high school graduation rates and higher employment rates.

In the Lehigh Valley, we know the costs associated with kids who don't succeed in school. Our high school drop-out rate is high and too many kids who become involved with the juvenile detention system.



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Both Lehigh and Northampton counties have built new juvenile detention centers within the last 10 years to accommodate the increase in juvenile crime.

Our state government could no longer ignore this and other compelling data about the importance of quality early childhood education. Just six years ago, Pennsylvania was the ninth-worst state in terms of state spending on young children. Since then, we have been playing catch-up. As of the 2005-06 budget, Pennsylvania ranked 30th in access to pre-school for 4-year-olds. The new state budget will continue the upward trend of making pre-school more accessible for Pennsylvania's youngsters.

In the Lehigh Valley, numerous child care providers, nursery schools, Head Start programs and public schools applied in a collaborative fashion to create new opportunities for 4-year-olds. While the details are yet to be ironed out, this newly passed budget means that the opportunities for young children in the Lehigh Valley have never been brighter. Collectively we expect to provide pre-school classes for 500 more kids across the Lehigh Valley.

Investing in pre-K makes sense in many fiscally responsible ways -- reducing crime and juvenile delinquency, preparing an educated work force, reducing the costs of remedial and special education, increasing the high school graduation rates. It all begins in those early years when a young child's brain is developing and he or she is learning so much about their world.

The business community knows it, the educators know it, the police know it, county government knows it and those of us in the field of early childhood education certainly know it. We see the positive results every day.

Fortunately, the legislators and governor of Pennsylvania also see the wisdom of investing in young children. Sometimes doing the right thing takes a little longer. Personally, I applaud the result!

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