

State budget provides \$75M boost for preschool programs

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A new program will make preschool programs available to many needy York City families for the first time.

But some other York children might still find themselves on a waiting list, an indication of how sorely the program is needed, according to a city school grant writer.

The state's new "Pre-K Counts" program will fund new or existing early education programs, making them free to 3- and 4-year-olds whose parents sign them up for the classes. The program was approved yesterday as part of the \$27.2 billion state budget.

The York City School District applied for \$948,000 in grant money; Gov. Ed Rendell has set aside \$75 million for the new initiative.

But even that might not be enough to provide a preschool slot to every parent who has applied for one in York City, said Cathy Ash, who handles grants for the city schools.

Waiting list: Ash said there is a list of more than 500 children waiting to get into one of the accredited preschools in York City. She said "accredited" programs include those that offer some sort of school-preparation curriculum. Unlike those in some "Mom and Pop" daycares that might not offer educational programs, children learn skills such as counting and letters, shape and color recognition, Ash said.

Public and private groups are permitted to apply for the grants.

In York County, several groups that provide preschool services -- York's YMCA and YWCA, KinderCare Learning Centers, York Day Nursery, the Jewish Community Center, Crispus Attucks, the YWCA of Hanover and Delta Christian Academy -- applied for the grant and are competing against each other for the funds. However, the state could decide to award grants to all of the groups.

At a required meeting for groups that applied for the grant, the applicants discovered there would still be a backlog of about 250 children even if each agency were granted all of the

money it requested from the state, Ash said.

If the city school district receives what it applied for, its program could serve only 120 children: six classrooms (one in each elementary school) of 20 children each.

Ash said the program would target students who need the most help -- those identified as having "at-risk" factors such as poverty. Research has shown that the sooner at-risk children are enrolled in educational programs, the better they perform in the rest of their school career, she added.

Concerns: While people such as Ash are applauding the governor's investment in preschool programs, others have said they're concerned it will steal business from private agencies and initiate an expansion of public school systems to include preschool.

At a recent school board meeting, city school board member Tom Foust said he feared the city school district's program would take students away from other existing programs, such as the one at Crispus Attucks.

But Ash said preschool organizers from other agencies aren't concerned about the city school district's involvement in preschool services.

"Everyone was very supportive of the school district getting involved in this," she said. "When you look at the tremendous numbers of kids we have who need services, there's a desperate need for more accredited slots."

And the agencies whose programs are filled plan to refer parents to programs at other agencies, she said.

Bigger schools? The argument that school district programs will drive others out of business "doesn't wash," said Mike Race, spokesman for the state's Department of Education.

"These (grants) are available to anyone, even parochial schools, as long as they meet the state's requirements," he said. "This is not designated as 'public schools only.'"

But the head of the Commonwealth Foundation for Public Policy Alternatives said the pressure on private businesses isn't the biggest problem the nonprofit research group has with Pre-K Counts.

"This is going to strap homeowners with higher property taxes in the future," said Matt Brouillette, president of the foundation.

The state seed money to start the programs won't be able to keep up the cost of maintaining them, and taxpayers will eventually have to pay for preschool on a local level, he said.

He can foresee the state mandating all public schools to provide preschool, he said. School board members already complain about Harrisburg passing down "unfunded mandates,"

Brouillette said. "Well, here comes another one."

But Race said the grants are not tied to a rule that requires public schools to provide preschool. And the state isn't asking school districts to take over the cost of the programs in order to keep them up and running.

All agencies can apply for continuation grants from the state after the initial grants expire, he said.

Education funds in the 2007 Pennsylvania state budget

The state budget approved yesterday includes funding for at least two educational initiatives -- a \$75 million Pre-K Counts program and \$100 million for "Classrooms for the Future."

The preschool program makes grants available to private and public agencies to offer educational programming for 3- and 4-year-olds.

Only 4,000 children received pre-kindergarten through school-based programs paid for by the state's accountability block grants last year. Pre-K Counts, a new component of the block grants, will more than double that number, providing funding for more than 11,000 children.

Rendell has said the programs could save the state \$100 million on future special-education costs because students will perform better, and other government services because children who are better educated are more productive as adults and less likely to require public assistance.

Under "Classrooms for the Future," money is granted to school districts in an initiative to place laptop computers on the desk in every high school English, math, science and history class. It includes \$11 million for technology training for teachers

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