

Investing in Pre-Kindergarten Benefits all Pennsylvanians: Not Just Kids

For more than 35 years the folks at “Sesame Street” have been on to something. They know that the preschool age is a critical time during a child’s life. At this stage, billions of brain neurons are developing rapidly and forming connections that will determine a child’s ability to learn throughout his or her life.

High-quality pre-kindergarten can increase a child’s school readiness. According to the National Academy of Sciences, investing in early childhood education has a positive effect on language development and school achievement.

According to the National Research Council’s groundbreaking *Neurons to Neighborhoods*, children who attend high-quality pre-K enter school more prepared and achieve greater education success, including fewer grade retentions, less remediation, higher standardized test scores and even higher graduation rates.

In a study that followed Chicago preschool children for 15 years, the participants were found to have had a higher rate of high school completion and more years of completed education than those who attended less intensive preschools or no preschool at all. Furthermore, fewer preschool participants in the Chicago program had been arrested for juvenile crimes, fewer needed special education or remediation, and they had lower rates of grade retention.

Research in Pennsylvania proves the same. In the 2002 Early Childhood Initiative (ECI), Allegheny County’s high-quality pre-K program for at-risk children, fewer than two percent of students were placed in special education or held back a grade when they entered school – in districts averaging special education and grade retention rates exceeding 20 percent.

In the age of No Child Left Behind, which mandates that all children must be proficient in reading and math by 2014, Pennsylvania doesn’t have time to waste. In 2005, 31 percent of third graders in Pennsylvania were below proficient in reading, and 17 percent in math.

The most recent cost benefit analysis of the “Perry Preschool Program” in Michigan has revealed that for every \$1 spent, an estimated \$17 was saved in lower public expenditures for welfare, education and other services. Neglecting school readiness creates the need for more costly interventions in special education, welfare and criminal justice.

What this means to our communities tomorrow is more kids being arrested; fewer kids graduating; fewer young adults engaged in their communities; more money spent on welfare and the justice system and fewer young adults paying taxes and becoming productive members of society.

We have an opportunity to help shape the future by embracing Gov. Rendell's proposed budget that includes a \$75 million investment to create half and full-day pre-kindergarten programs in Head Start, child care centers and nursery schools across the state, serving as many as 11,000 children 3 and 4 years of age. The programs would be voluntary and operate on a 180-day school calendar. The funding would be made available to all Pennsylvania communities through an RFP process, with priority given to school districts and other providers who serve children at-risk of education failure. (Programs serving 30 percent or more children participating in the free or reduced lunch program, or providers focusing on services to at-risk children, would receive priority in funding.)

A 2006 Pennsylvania study concluded that school districts who invest in pre-K programs can recoup as much as 78 percent of their investment. In fact, the same study said that some small school districts with very high special education expenditures would recoup as much as \$1.16 for every dollar spent.

Moreover, in order to remain competitive on quality-of-life measures, Pennsylvania needs to keep pace with states where pre-K programs are either in development or already in place. These states include Illinois, New York, Florida, Georgia and Oklahoma, and more states are sure to follow suit.

Enhanced student achievement, economic competitiveness and positive benefits to our communities begin with quality pre-K programs. Fully investing in child development by nurturing kids and giving them all of the necessary building blocks today will pay off for tomorrows to come.