

***Does Pre-K Counts not allow faith-based providers to participate?***

The proposal does *not* exclude faith-based providers. As drafted, faith-based preschools can participate if they have or obtain a private academic school license. However, it is true that many religious schools do not have this licensure as they register under the religious schools section of the education code. We understand that some faith-based providers may be concerned about obtaining the private academic school license but there is an easy resolution to this problem. The proposal could be amended to reference the religious schools sections of the education code as the floor for pre-k participation for this sector.

The overall premise of the proposal is that high quality pre-K can and should be delivered through a mixed delivery system of providers. Faith-based providers can participate and should be allowed to participate. But, it is critical to note that Pre-K Counts has a strong set of standards required for participation for *all* provider types regardless of their current regulatory base. These are built on the return on investment literature presented above and if we are serious about our public investments being made wisely and prudently, these regulations and standards need to equally apply to all provider types.

***Even if faith-based providers could participate, public aid for education cannot be granted to sectarian schools.***

The Pennsylvania state constitution contains a no-aid provision, which places specific restrictions on the use of state funds to aid sectarian or religiously affiliated entities.

The Supreme Court of Pennsylvania has held that the limitations of this provision “apply only when state funds flow to the sectarian school or institution.” State monies paid for the benefit of students enrolled in a program run by a religiously affiliated provider do not necessarily “flow to” or “reach the coffers of these church-affiliated schools.” Funds earmarked for the benefit of preschoolers attending pre-K programs can be paid or allocated so that they are directed solely to the cost of educating eligible children, and kept separate. Pre-K programs can meet this requirement if there are sufficient budgeting restrictions in the program guidelines, along with monitoring and auditing requirements which are proposed under Pre-K Counts. Rigorous guidelines can ensure that funds provided by the state can be directed to pay only the costs of the services and supplies that benefit the children who are enrolled rather than to promote religion.

Other states have sorted out how to handle the payment issue in a number of ways and faith-providers participate. In New York and New Jersey, faith-based providers – including Catholic institutions – have contracts with school districts to provide pre-K. In Illinois, the state with the statute that most resembles Pre-K Counts, faith-based providers, including Catholic programs, are funded via direct contracts with the state as well as through funding intermediaries such as school districts.

It is also worth noting from our brief research review that while many states allow faith-based providers to participate in their pre-K program, by and large states do not allow funds to be used for secular purposes. It is worthwhile to remind everyone that pre-K programs will operate on either a 2.5 or 5-hour day, allowing for direct religious instruction at other times.

### ***Won't Pre-K Counts funds only go to cities like Philadelphia or Pittsburgh?***

The purpose of this proposal is to fund high-quality pre-K for children at risk of education failure (based on identifiers including poverty, cultural isolation and disability). We all know that children at risk of education failure can be found in every community of the Commonwealth. Under this proposal, school districts and private providers across Pennsylvania would be eligible to compete for funding via an RFP process. Children in need, wherever they live, could be served. While high concentrations of children live under these adverse conditions in our urban centers, one in three children in Pennsylvania live in a low-income family and that includes half of the children who live in our rural communities.

### ***Why not just do an expansion to EITC instead of Pre-K Counts?***

We have always supported EITC and would not be opposed to its expansion. However, it is not a replacement for a high-quality pre-K financing strategy. There is broad and general agreement on the tremendous return on investment in high-quality pre-K. The key to achieving the great returns is that the investments must be made in *high-quality* programs. To illustrate: Each year the National Institute for Early Education Research (NIEER) grades public funded preschool programs based on a list of 10 quality indicators. In its 2006 State Preschool Yearbook, Pennsylvania's programs received a grade of 4 out of a possible 10. But, if we enact and implement Pre-K Counts, Pennsylvania's grade on the NIEER standards will jump to a 9. There are no standards associated with EITC that assures that level of program quality and therefore, the return on investment we know we can achieve.

Pre-K Counts is built upon a strong base, consisting of early learning standards and State Board of Education regulations regarding pre-K. The regulations address issues including length of day and year, age-appropriate standards-based curriculum, instruction, and assessments, group size, comprehensive services, and credentials for teachers in contracted community-based programs and for all paraprofessionals. The State Board has proposed revisions in the requirements for public school pre-K teachers. It is important to note that any successful applicant for Pre-K Counts will need to comply with *all* these rules assuring that we will realize the return on investment the research promises.

***Isn't Pre-K Counts too costly?***

Pre-K Counts is built on the research base that details the program parameters that must be in place to assure the predicted outcomes occur. The key elements are qualified teachers, small group size and low adult:child ratios. The cost to cover a qualified teacher and an aid in an optimal class size of 17 are significant and therefore, the cost per child has been set accordingly.

***Don't the benefits of pre-K fade out?***

The research suggests that some of the academic gains achieved via pre-K do diminish. But it is entirely unfair to suggest that the gains fade away completely. Any "fade" in academic performance (and any increase in performance) is experienced uniformly among those who do and do not participate in high-quality pre-K. However, the research shows that the academic edge gained by children who participate in high-quality pre-K remains intact.

***I have heard that public schools do not support pre-K.***

We have heard speculation that school districts and administrators perhaps do not support Pre-K Counts. Teachers, school administrators and school boards understand the many merits of high-quality pre-K. Much of the discussion and disagreement surrounding the proposal has been focused on the fact that Pre-K Counts would be funded via the Accountability Block Grant Program. ABG has been a very successful and popular program. As we all know, school districts enjoy flexibility in administering ABG funds on 11 research-based strategies all which have a positive impact on student achievement. We have been happy to advocate for continued growth in ABG to assist local school districts in advancing these strategies and we are once again happy to support growth in ABG. But, we need dedicated funding for pre-K. In the final analysis, we have no preference on whether the funding is located in ABG or elsewhere.

***Why not just give the money to school districts and let them decide?***

Unfortunately, ABG as an investment strategy for pre-K has not taken a strong enough foothold nor does ABG in its current form allow us to build the most robust pre-K program possible by utilizing the capital of community-based providers. For those reasons, we strongly support dedicated pre-K funding in the budget that allows public and private providers alike to provide high-quality pre-K to our young learners.