



## Good Answers to Tough Questions

It may be a reporter, a local legislator or a community leader you are trying to engage but you will be asked tough questions when advocating for pre-K.

Remember to always respect the point of view of the person you are talking to and try to help them understand the positive impact pre-K will have on your community.

Let the following Q&A provide you with some guidance:

### 1. What is Pennsylvania Pre-K Counts?

- The Pennsylvania Pre K Counts program, established in the 2007-2008 school-year by the Department of Education, enables 3- and 4- year old children at risk of academic failure to voluntarily attend quality half- and full-day pre-K programs that meet the early learning standards and State Board of Education Pre-K regulations and are delivered through a diverse service delivery system in public schools, Head Start, child care centers and nursery schools. PA Pre-K Counts is designed for children who are between age 3 and until they enter kindergarten; and are at risk of school failure, either because of income (300% of the federal poverty level), language (English is not your first language), cultural or special needs issues.

### 2. There's a huge agenda in the governor's budget: lots of new and expanded initiatives competing for funding. Why pre-K? Can't this wait?

- High quality pre-K is a proven investment that yields dramatic returns beginning with reduced grade retention and special education placement in elementary school, improved standardized test scores, reduced juvenile crime, higher graduation rates and improved lifetime earnings.
- Preschoolers *cannot* wait. A four-year old only is a preschooler for *this* year – next year she will be a kindergartner and have missed the benefits of high-quality pre-K.

### 3. Three and four-years-old seems young to be in school. What's the rush?

- Children who start behind, stay behind. Those who enter school having attended high- quality pre-K enter school better prepared and experience improved academic success.
- Children with quality pre-K experiences enter kindergarten with better reading, language, math, cognitive, and social skills. (*Peisner-Feinberg, Burhcinal, Clifford, Culkin, Howes, Kagan, Yazejian, Byler, Rustici, and Zelazo. The Children of Cost, Quality and Outcomes Study Go to School, 2000.*)

### 4. Should this proposal be enacted, who can apply for this pot of money?

- Any school district, Head Start program, nursery school or child care center (Keystone Star 2 or above) that complies with early learning standards and the pre-K regulations advanced by the State Board of Education and provides pre-K to children at risk of education failure may apply.
- Funds will be awarded through a Request for Proposal (RFP) process. Programs serving low-income children, children with disabilities or those culturally disadvantaged will be given funding priority.

**5. Won't this set up a competition among current child care providers, Head Start programs and nursery schools against school districts? Will Pre-K Counts take jobs away from private preschools?**

- No, any provider that serves at-risk children and meets the standards and regulations can apply. In other states such as Illinois, New York and New Jersey, a large percentage of pre-K is delivered through community-based private providers.
- Some communities will end up with partnerships between each of these core stakeholder groups and building on each of their strengths.
- In some communities, public schools don't have the physical space to serve preschoolers and they will be happy to partner with private providers to assure their children enter kindergarten ready to learn.

**6. What are the benefits of pre-K?**

- Research shows that pre-K benefits students and communities. Children who attend high-quality pre-K enter school more prepared and achieve greater educational success, including fewer grade retentions, less remediation, higher standardized test scores and higher graduation rates. (National Research Council. From *Neurons to Neighborhoods: The Science of Early Childhood Development*. 2000.)
- Quality pre-K helps to prepare children for success in adulthood. Children who attend high-quality early education programs are likelier to mature into responsible citizens – likelier to be married, with higher education attainment and better paying jobs. (Early Learning, Later Success: The Abecedarian Study. University of North Carolina. 1999.)

**7. Isn't this program really about just helping poor children who live primarily in urban areas? How will other children across PA benefit?**

- This program is available to every community in Pennsylvania because every community has some percentage of children who are at-risk of education failure.
- All eligible programs may apply, but programs in school districts serving 30% or more children participating in the free or reduced lunch program, or individual programs focusing on services to at-risk children will receive priority in funding.
- Many people are mistaken when they think about children who live in poverty in Pennsylvania and they think this is only the case for children in cities. The truth is that 1 in 3 children in Pennsylvania lives in a low-income family struggling to make ends meet and all of those children would be eligible for this program. Oftentimes, the rate of childhood poverty is higher in PA's rural counties than in our urban centers.

**8. Research seems to be clear in detailing that pre-K can help disadvantaged kids, but middle-class kids have parents who probably went to college and read to their kids at home, so why should taxpayers foot the bill for them to go to preschool?**

- Research has found that high-quality preschool programs DO make a difference for children from middle-income families as well as for low-income children. The most rigorous study of a universal preschool program to date finds that ALL children benefit regardless of income. This study of Oklahoma's universal prekindergarten program, which examined scores from three tests taken by approximately 4,700 prekindergarten and kindergarten students in Tulsa in September 2003, found that the benefits of early education DID extend to middle-income children. (Gormley, W.T. and Gayer, T. (2004). *The effects of universal pre-k on cognitive development*. Washington, DC: Public Policy Institute, Georgetown University.)

**9. Doesn't the positive impact of pre-K "fade-out" sometime in elementary school?**

- Over the years various opponents have suggested that preschool education programs produce few long-term benefits—that is, that any positive effects of these programs "fade out" and eventually disappear over time. This claim is not the case.
- Research on the effects of preschool participation on children's achievement test scores is variable. Some studies see effects decline over time, others find them steady, and yet others suggest that gains could even snowball. (Barnett, W. S. (1998). Long-term effects on cognitive development and school success. In W. S.

Barnett & S. S. Boocock (Eds.), *Early care and education for children in poverty: Promises, programs, and long-term results* (pp. 11-44). Albany, NY: SUNY Press.

## **10. Have there been any studies in PA that show the impact of pre-K?**

- High-risk 4-year-olds in Allegheny County's Early Childhood Initiative showed special education and grade retention rates of less than 1% and 2% respectively in districts where other students were referred for special education and retained at rates of 21% and 23%, respectively. (UCLID Center at the University of Pittsburgh and Children's Hospital of Pittsburgh: Allegheny County Early Childhood Initiative Evaluation, March 2002.)
- School districts investing funds in pre-K could recoup as much as 78% in education cost savings and some districts with high special education costs recoup as much as 116%. (Pennsylvania BUILD Initiative. Invest Now or Pay More Later: Early Childhood Education Promises Savings to Pennsylvania School Districts, 2006.)

## **11. The governor has some education initiatives in the budget aimed at middle and high school students, too. Shouldn't we focus our resources on older kids so we can help them stay in school and graduate?**

- There has been significant attention in Pennsylvania and around the nation recently about the alarmingly high rates of high school drop-outs and other students who finish high school and are not adequately prepared to graduate. This is an important agenda to focus on and the Governor suggests others strong proposals in this area.
- If we fail to get kids off to a good start in their education, we are constantly playing catch up and for some kids we simply never catch up.
- 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 higher graduation rates. (National Research Council. From Neurons to Neighborhoods: The Science of Early Childhood Development. 2000.)

## **12. What's the pre-K trend across the country? Is PA ahead of or behind other states?**

- Just a few short years ago Pennsylvania was one of nine states that did NOT invest in pre-kindergarten. Today, through Head Start and Accountability Block Grant investments, we've made great strides in valuing early education.
- BUT, there are still many other states that lead the country in pre-K investments. For example,
  - Illinois' "Preschool for All" program - funded through an Early Childhood Block Grant - began July 1, 2006. The state's investment in preschool services for 3- and 4-year-olds is \$283,246,505. The pre-K expansion will now serve all 3 and 4-year-olds whose parents choose to participate over the course of the next few years.
  - New York State Gov. Spitzer pledges to make state-funded preschool education available to all the state's 4-year-olds by the time his administration ends. The state's current investment in pre-K is roughly \$198 million.
  - Preschool also is universally available on a voluntary basis in Georgia and Oklahoma where the states spend \$276 million and \$79 million, respectively. Florida began a new voluntary pre-kindergarten initiative in the fall of 2005 at a cost of approximately \$387 million.