

Invest in early childhood care and education

The knowledge and experiences students bring to kindergarten matters deeply; every person's capacity for future learning depends on past learning. Knowing this, high-quality early care and education is clearly a winning proposition for the children of Pennsylvania and their families, for our businesses and industries, for our k-12 public schools, and for all Pennsylvanians.

Pennsylvania is a relative newcomer to public investment in early childhood education; traditionally, Pennsylvanians have viewed early learning as a privately-funded, parental responsibility. In recent years, the Commonwealth has acknowledged the importance of early childhood education through the development of several integrated programs to increase the quality and quantity of early childhood education services. These services are overseen by the Office of Child Development and Early Learning (OCDEL), an innovative collaboration between the Pennsylvania Department of Education (PDE) and the Pennsylvania Department of Public Welfare (DPW). Over the last few years, OCDEL has overseen the expansion of the Keystone Stars child care quality rating program; subsidized childcare services; a supplemental assistance program for Head Start; data collection and analysis about program characteristics and student results; and Pre-K Counts, a public-private partnership to expand pre-kindergarten learning opportunities. PDE also has provided school districts with Accountability Block Grants that are used by many districts to provide pre-kindergarten or full-day kindergarten programs to young children. All of these programs have contributed to higher levels of readiness when students enter kindergarten, and early results suggest that these programs may be able to reduce the need for special education services for some students.

PSEA Recommendations

- Increase funding for high-quality early childhood education. High-quality early childhood education is a worthy investment and saves taxpayer money over the long-term; and the economic and social benefits far outweigh the up-front costs of early childhood education. There are few better investments than early childhood education. Since 2004-2005, the Commonwealth has made promising investments in the quality and quantity of early learning across the state, including investments in the Accountability Block Grant, Pre-K Counts, and Head Start Supplemental Assistance. The momentum built through these investments must be sustained.

- Spend resources on students most in need. When the funding for early childhood education is scarce, it is appropriate to provide public funding to those children who would benefit most from a high-quality early learning experience. However, public funds should cover the cost of early learning for all children who qualify. Currently this is not the case; for example, Head Start funds fail to cover one-third of eligible children.¹
- Insist that all early childhood education personnel are certified and earn a professional wage. The Pennsylvania Pre-K Counts program has taken a leadership role in strongly encouraging professional wages and benefits for participating teachers.

Investments in early childhood are down-payments on future success

There is a growing consensus that early childhood education is critical to economic growth. Many of our nation's economic competitors realize this; Belgium, France, Germany, Italy, and the United Kingdom already have universal or nearly universal preschool enrollment. More than 75 percent of Mexican children over the age of three are enrolled in early childhood education, as are 40 percent of young Chinese children. India also is in the process of expanding its early childhood programs.² These countries demonstrate their recognition that knowledge development breeds competitive advantage. American economic researchers and policymakers increasingly agree that investing in the intellectual and social development of children is one of the most promising ways to strengthen our nation's economy.³ Business leaders also believe that investing in early childhood education makes good sense. In a recent survey, 81 percent of business leaders said that public funding of voluntary pre-kindergarten programs would improve the nation's workforce.⁴

Furthermore, public and private returns on early childhood education far exceed the cost of supporting high-quality preschool programs. For example, the RAND Corporation reports that each dollar invested in high-quality early childhood education returns to society somewhere between \$1.80 and \$17, depending on the nature of the early childhood program.⁵

The rationale for high-quality early childhood education extends beyond economic arguments. High-quality early childhood education improves the social and academic lives of children. Some comprehensive preschool programs have demonstrated that at-risk students who attended preschool are less likely to engage in criminal behavior as teenagers or adults.⁶ Other studies have demonstrated that at-risk students who attend high-quality preschools are less likely to demonstrate antisocial behavior later in school; less likely to receive social services as adults; less likely to become parents as teenagers; and less likely to engage in high-risk health behaviors such as using "soft" drugs or smoking.⁷ In follow-up studies of one high-quality program, teachers rated at-risk children who participated in preschool as less obstinate, less impulsive, less

disruptive, and less likely to be involved in fights than a similar group of students who did not receive high-quality early childhood education services.⁸

A three-year independent study of 10,000 at-risk Pennsylvania pre-school children found:

- High-risk preschool children beat the odds and succeeded in Pre-K Counts by gaining early learning competencies; at-risk or delayed 3-year-olds at entry improved toward typical rates of development at exit; and
- Children in Pre-K Counts programs beat local and national norms to achieve success at kindergarten transition; and Pre-K Counts children dramatically reduced the historical special education placement rates in their school districts.⁹

Finally, early childhood education is critical to closing student achievement gaps because disparities in student learning begin well before kindergarten. Students from advantaged families tend to arrive at school with substantially higher levels of school readiness, advanced social skills, and a more positive approach to learning. Conversely, students entering kindergarten from low-income families demonstrate knowledge in reading, mathematics, and general knowledge that is as much as 60 percent lower than students from wealthier families.¹⁰ Early intervention to close these gaps will save money in the long-term and increase opportunity for student success.¹¹ Both grade retention and special education referral rates are consistently and significantly lower among at-risk students who attended high quality pre-kindergarten programs than among those who did not.¹² Two states with widely available public preschool programs, Oklahoma and Georgia, have confirmed that students participating in the programs have made gains on almost every academic measure.¹³

Standards

Currently, in order to provide early childhood education, programs in Pennsylvania need to meet relatively few standards related to the quality of teaching and learning. Pennsylvania has developed a set of voluntary standards for early childhood education programs, and the National Association for the Education of Young Children has established a similar set of standards for early childhood education programs. A large body of research also defines characteristics of early childhood education programs that help all students achieve in school. Currently, many elements of high-quality early childhood education remain voluntary, particularly for providers other than the public school system.

Preparation, certification, and compensation

Currently, early learning teachers employed by public school systems must be fully certified in their teaching assignment area, and recipients of Pre-K Counts funds are required to move toward early childhood certification for all Pre-K Counts classroom teachers. Many other early learning settings are not required to hire fully certified early childhood education teachers. Advocates of high-quality early learning believe that all teachers should be properly certified. Low wages for early childhood professionals is a major reason for high turnover and low levels of experience in the field.¹⁴ State efforts to improve the quality of early childhood education programs must continue to emphasize consistent professional standards in the field; undergraduate preparation, early childhood certification, and adequate compensation, which are the cornerstones of teacher professionalism.

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¹ Fight Crime, Invest in Kids Pennsylvania. (2006). "Head Start and Pre-Kindergarten in Pennsylvania: An Investment in Crime Prevention." Harrisburg, PA: Fight Crime, Invest in Kids Pennsylvania.

² Levine, M.H. (2005). "Take a Giant Step: Investing in Preschool Education in Emerging Nations," Phi Delta Kappan. November, pp. 196-200.

³ Committee for Economic Development. (2006). "The Economic Promise of Investing in High-Quality Preschool: Using Early Education to Improve Economic Growth and the Fiscal Sustainability of the States and the Nation." Washington, DC: Committee for Economic Development.

⁴ Zogby, J., Bruce, J., Wittman, R., & Peck, C.W. (2005). "American Business Leaders' Views on Publicly Funded Pre-Kindergarten and the Advantages to the Economy." Commissioned by the Committee for Economic Development.

⁵ Karoly, L.A., Kilburn, M.R., & Cannon, J.S. (2005). "Early Childhood Interventions: Proven Results, Future Promise." Santa Monica, CA: RAND. www.rand.org/pubs/monographs/2005/RAND_MG341.pdf.

⁶ Reynolds, A.J., Temple, J.A., Robertson, D.L., & Mann, E.A. (2002). "Age 21 Cost Benefit Analysis of the Title I Chicago Child-Parent Centers," Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis, v 24, n 4 (Winter); Yoshikawa, H. (1995). "Long-Term Effects of Early Childhood Programs on Social Outcomes and Delinquency." The Future of Children, v 5, n 3, pp. 51-75; Lally, J.R. Mangione, P.L., & Honig A.S. (1988). The Syracuse University Family Development Research Project: "Long-range impact of an early intervention with low-income children and their families." In Parent Education as Early Childhood Intervention: Emerging Directions in Theory, Research and Practice. D.R. Powell, ed. Norwood, NJ: Ablex. Cited in Yoshikawa, 1995.

⁷ Reynolds, A.J., Temple, J.A., Robertson, D.L., & Mann, E.A., op.cit. Yoshikawa, op. cit.

⁸ Yoshikawa, H.. (1995). "Long-Term Effects of Early Childhood Programs on Social Outcomes and Delinquency." The Future of Children, v 5, n 3, pp. 51-75.

⁹ Early Childhood Partnerships. (2009). "Pre-K Counts in Pennsylvania for Youngsters' Early School Success: Authentic Outcomes for an Innovative Prevention and Promotion Initiative," SPECS Evaluation Team, University of Pittsburgh.

¹⁰ Lee, V. & Burkham, D. (2002). "Inequality at the Starting Gate: Social Background Differences in Achievement as Children Begin School." Washington, DC: Economic Policy Institute.

¹¹ Committee for Economic Development. (2006). "The Economic Promise of Investing in High-Quality Preschool: Using Early Education to Improve Economic Growth and the Fiscal Sustainability of the States and the Nation." Washington, DC: Committee for Economic Development.

¹² Barnett, S.W. (1995). "Long Term Outcomes of Early Childhood Programs." The Future of Children, v 5 n 3, pp. 25-50.

¹³ Committee for Economic Development. (2006). "The Economic Promise of Investing in High-Quality Preschool: Using Early Education to Improve Economic Growth and the Fiscal Sustainability of the States and the Nation." Washington, DC: Committee for Economic Development.

¹⁴ See, for example, http://www.policyalmanac.org/social_welfare/childcare.shtml.