

# From Building Blocks to Books

*Learning from Birth through 8 in Pennsylvania*



**Pennsylvania  
Partnerships for Children**

Suite 300, 20 North Market Square  
Harrisburg, PA 17101-1632  
717-236-5680 • 800-257-2030  
[www.papartnerships.org](http://www.papartnerships.org)

## Table of Contents

### Introduction

|                                    |   |
|------------------------------------|---|
| Milestones of Learning .....       | 2 |
| Early Learning Opportunities ..... | 3 |
| Principles of Policy .....         | 4 |
| State and Federal Spending .....   | 5 |

### Child Care

|  |    |
|--|----|
| Child Care in Pennsylvania .....         | 7  |
| Child Care Works .....                   | 11 |
| Why Child Care Quality Matters .....     | 11 |
| State of the States/Best Practices ..... | 12 |
| Situation Analysis .....                 | 13 |
| Policy Directions .....                  | 15 |

### Early Intervention

|  |    |
|--|----|
| Early Intervention in Pennsylvania ..... | 17 |
| Why Early Intervention Matters .....     | 20 |
| State of the States/Best Practices ..... | 21 |
| Situation Analysis .....                 | 21 |
| Policy Directions .....                  | 23 |

### Preschool

|  |    |
|--|----|
| Preschool in Pennsylvania .....          | 25 |
| Head Start .....                         | 25 |
| Private Nursery Schools .....            | 27 |
| K-4: Kindergarten for 4-Year-Olds .....  | 28 |
| Why Preschool Matters .....              | 28 |
| State of the States/Best Practices ..... | 29 |
| Situation Analysis .....                 | 30 |
| Policy Directions .....                  | 31 |

### Reading Readiness and Success

|   |    |
|---|----|
| Reading Readiness and Success in Pennsylvania ..... | 33 |
| Family Literacy .....                               | 33 |
| Parent Child Home Program .....                     | 34 |
| Read to Succeed .....                               | 35 |
| Reading Excellence Act .....                        | 36 |
| Family Supports .....                               | 36 |
| Why Reading Readiness and Success Matters .....     | 38 |
| State of the States/Best Practices .....            | 38 |
| Situation Analysis .....                            | 40 |
| Policy Directions .....                             | 41 |

### Kindergarten

|  |    |
|--|----|
| Kindergarten in Pennsylvania .....       | 43 |
| Why Kindergarten Matters .....           | 46 |
| State of the States/Best Practices ..... | 46 |
| Situation Analysis .....                 | 47 |
| Policy Directions .....                  | 49 |

### First through Third Grades

|   |    |
|---|----|
| The Primary Grades: First through Third<br>Grades in Pennsylvania ..... | 51 |
| Why the Primary Grades Matter .....                                     | 54 |
| State of the States/Best Practices .....                                | 54 |
| Situation Analysis .....  | 56 |
| Policy Directions .....   | 57 |

### Educational Enrichment

|   |    |
|---|----|
| Educational Enrichment in Pennsylvania .....              | 59 |
| After School/Youth Development .....                      | 59 |
| 21 <sup>st</sup> Century Community Learning Centers ..... | 60 |
| Classroom Plus .....                                      | 60 |
| Why Educational Enrichment Matters .....                  | 61 |
| State of the States/Best Practices .....                  | 62 |
| Situation Analysis .....                                  | 63 |
| Policy Directions .....                                   | 64 |

|                       |           |
|-----------------------|-----------|
| <b>Endnotes .....</b> | <b>65</b> |
|-----------------------|-----------|

# INTRODUCTION



Pennsylvania  
Partnerships for Children

## From Building Blocks to Books: Learning from Birth through 8 in Pennsylvania

### *Milestones of Learning:*

The infant reaching for the mobile dangling over the crib.

The toddler patting the bunny in the picture book.

The preschooler counting to 10.

The kindergartner writing her name.

The first grader sounding out a new word.

The third grader reading a book and learning something new about dinosaurs or dancers or baseball or volcanoes.

A classroom can't contain all the learning in the world. It is, instead, the place where education coalesces, the bridge between learning experiences of the past, present, and future. Longstanding tradition had placed the beginning of education at kindergarten, but we know now that tremendous amounts of learning occur from birth, when the young brain absorbs new experiences and builds the mental pathways of thought.

The first years of school, then, actually continue an educational process that began at birth, when children started building a catalog of basic knowledge to anchor learning for the school years – and lifetime – to follow. By the end of third grade, the path to success or failure in school has been charted for most children, much of it depending on the student's ability to read. "Learning to read and write is critical to a child's success in school and later in life... [T]he early childhood years – from birth through age eight – are the most important for literacy development," says the International Reading Association and the National Association for the Education of Young Children. In essence, students who do not learn efficient reading skills are blocked from every other subject in their schooling.

*From Building Blocks to Books: Learning from Birth through 8 in Pennsylvania* presents a first-ever, comprehensive look at learning opportunities for young children. It is a resource book, with details on funding, eligibility, and participation in programs targeted at young children, with the goal of safe, healthy, intellectually stimulating



development. One key indicator of program success should be that all children read at grade level by the end of third grade.

In Pennsylvania, early learning programs are gaining bipartisan support from the governor's office and the legislature, and from citizens who fear the high price of sentencing another generation of children to educational exile. But words of support have not come together into a comprehensive, carefully constructed early learning approach, despite glaring warning signs of the danger ahead – particularly, the failure of one-quarter of Pennsylvania's fifth graders to achieve basic proficiency on the 2001 standardized reading test. If ever there were a wake-up call, that should have been it. The long-term impact will touch us all. Without action, Pennsylvania remains in danger of losing its competitive edge in the global marketplace because young children who can't read well won't learn to their full potential and are unlikely to enjoy a productive adulthood.

## Early Learning Opportunities

*From Building Blocks to Books* compiles learning opportunities – and learning gaps – that surround children in their formative years. The report covers:

- **Child Care:** Pennsylvania children receive child care in a realm of settings ranging from the informal to the regulated – from the grandparent who provides care one day a week, to the child care center operating under state oversight. Some is of very high quality, enriching the days of young children with the sights and sounds that exercise curious young minds. But quality isn't assured, and without exposure to educational activities while spending many of their daytime hours in child care, children lose valuable opportunities to learn.
- **Early Intervention:** Through Early Intervention, any young Pennsylvania child with marked developmental delays or disabilities can receive services tailored to maximize their learning abilities and help families manage their unique challenges – a prime example of upfront investments to reduce costs later.
- **Preschool:** Pennsylvania's status as one of nine states that fails to invest in preschool is another example of opportunity lost. Research clearly delineates the educational and societal advantages of quality preschool options, especially for at-risk

children who might otherwise not get the chance, but Pennsylvania continues to stall in making the investment.

- **Reading Readiness and Success:** State and federal investments in reading readiness and reading success have ballooned recently, as policymakers grasp the critical role that reading skills play in educational achievement. But investments are scattered among state agencies, without any coordinating mechanism to reduce overlap or plug service-delivery holes.
- **Kindergarten:** The first year of formal schooling sets the stage for the years that follow. For Pennsylvania's at-risk children, full-day kindergarten can be especially beneficial in lifting grades and achievement measures, but availability remains limited because the state doesn't fund it.
- **First through Third Grades:** Third graders who are good students, and especially those who are good readers, are firmly on the path to success and are less likely to need a costly – and often ineffective – game of catch-up later. Although the primary grades, as they're known, must be available for all children, the quality of their educational offerings varies widely, in part because of Pennsylvania's inequitable school funding system.
- **Educational Enrichment:** Children don't spend all their time in school, but educators and communities must consider the out-of-school hours for two reasons: because some children need extra tutoring help to manage academic challenges, and because structured after-school programs can offer safe, supervised learning and recreational activities while parents work.

Each early learning program or service can offer valuable educational opportunities in the prime learning years. Unfortunately, they don't fit together, jigsaw puzzle-style, to form a coherent picture. Instead, they often are disconnected and inconsistent. The disjointed approach contrasts with Pennsylvania's well-managed commitment to other issues of child well-being, such as health coverage – widely accepted as a wise investment because of the benefits it returns and the consequences it prevents. In early learning, despite the benefits of investments and the consequences of neglect, Pennsylvania has been slower to commit to improving quality and availability for all children and has failed to effectively meld its disparate early learning opportunities into a comprehensive system that results in children who achieve.

## Principles of Policy

Each program description in this book concludes with policy directions for improvements. But the policy directions share common threads that can be sewn together into an effective early learning approach:

- Invest up front to save money later and, more importantly, help assure children’s educational success.
- Partner with parents, to enhance their natural teaching abilities, educate them about their children’s developmental needs, and help them be their children’s most effective teachers.
- Target government resources first to the children most in need – low-income and at-risk children whose educational prospects may be hampered by a lack of learning opportunities that middle- and high-income children are more likely to encounter.
- Grow to scale. Pilot programs are effective ways to test new ideas, and small investments make differences in individual lives, but failure to fully implement an effective early learning approach creates about as much impact as pouring a teacup of water into the ocean.
- Implement research-based practices. Studies reveal the best methods for teaching reading and encouraging learning, but in Pennsylvania, scientific principles aren’t systematically applied to program development, or to teacher credentials and professional development. Other investments are not evaluated for their effectiveness, leaving no assurance that tax dollars are accomplishing their assigned job.
- Set program standards, regularly measure for success and make adjustments as warranted. Far too often, programs begin with a sound premise, but we fail to monitor them effectively and make midcourse adjustments to assure long-term impact.
- Take steps to more formally connect elementary schools to professionals and agencies serving at-risk children, giving students a continuum of learning and addressing their individual needs.

- Better coordinate early learning programs among state agencies, communities, schools, and other service providers, to maximize investments by properly utilizing existing resources, filling gaps where no resources exist, and best meeting the needs of children.

## Helping Children Enter the World of Learning

Young children love to learn. To them, the world is fresh, and each day offers so many new things to do – chase a butterfly, build a cardboard playhouse, learn a letter. While the desire to learn still burns, the window of opportunity is wide open for parents, teachers, and policymakers to fill children’s days with opportunities to explore.

In Pennsylvania, some of the pieces are there, and some are not. Those that we have are often disassembled, like a puzzle in a box. In short, some children get, and some don’t. The unfairness manifests itself all too clearly by the time children complete third grade. Children who started well – because their parents and their communities provided strong learning opportunities – are likeliest to keep learning. Children who somehow fell behind, who didn’t get to enjoy their prime learning years because somebody – a parent or a policymaker – did not make learning a top priority, are likeliest to straggle and, ultimately, fail.

Every child should be marked for success from the start. Pennsylvania has the resources to do it. With careful planning and strategic investments, Pennsylvania can tie together its disparate early learning opportunities, so that every young child, in every neighborhood and every family circumstance, grows in a world filled with the wonders of learning. ■

## State and Federal Spending on Early Learning Opportunities in Pennsylvania

Not counting basic and special education, where spending is not broken down by grade, Pennsylvania invests about 2.5 percent of its annual state/federal budget (\$34.4 billion in 2001-02, and \$35.6 billion proposed for 2002-03) on early learning opportunities.

|  | <b>2001-02</b><br>(in millions) | <b>Governor's proposed<br/>budget 2002-03</b><br>(in millions) |
|--|---------------------------------|--|
| Child Care (birth-8)*  | \$ 328.110                      | \$ 349.663   |
| TEACH  | \$ 1.500                        | \$ 1.750   |
| Keystone Stars   | \$ 0.000                        | \$ 6.000   |
| PHEAA Loan Forgiveness   | \$ 0.100                        | \$ 0.000   |
| Child Care Startup (DCED)  | \$ 10.500                       | \$ 10.000  |
| Child Care Capacity (DPW)  | \$ 3.000                        | \$ 6.000   |
| Child Care Health and Safety (DPW)   | \$ 3.000                        | \$ 5.000   |
| Child Care Quality (DPW)   | \$ 3.000                        | \$ 5.000   |
| Child Care Planning (DPW)  | \$ 1.000                        | \$ 4.000   |
| Cyberstart   | \$ 10.000                       | \$ 10.000  |
| Early Intervention Birth-2   | \$ 87.600                       | \$ 97.800  |
| Early Intervention 3-6   | \$ 103.655                      | \$ 104.032   |
| Head Start   | \$ 209.346                      | \$ 220.600   |
| Family Literacy  | \$ 19.707                       | \$ 19.707  |
| Parent Child Home Program  | \$ 3.000                        | \$ 3.000   |
| Read to Succeed  | \$ 25.000                       | \$ 15.000  |
| Reading Excellence Act   | \$ 10.000                       | \$ 0.000   |
| Reading First  | \$ 0.000                        | \$ 28.000  |
| Family Centers   | \$ 10.055                       | \$ 10.055  |
| I Am Your Child  | \$ 0.993                        | \$ 4.008   |
| 21 <sup>st</sup> Century Community Learning Centers  | \$ 15.153                       | \$ 26.697  |
| Classroom Plus   | \$ 23.600                       | \$ 23.600  |
| K-Second Grade Screening***  | \$ 0.000                        | \$ 1.800   |
| <b>SUBTOTAL</b>  | <b>\$868.319</b>                | <b>\$951.712</b>   |
| Percent of state/federal budget devoted to early learning opportunities <i>without basic and special education</i> | 2.52%                           | 2.67%  |
| Basic Education (K-12)**   | \$ 3,959.885                    | \$ 3,999.484   |
| Special Education (K-12)   | \$ 1,226.553                    | \$ 1,279.712   |
| <b>TOTAL SPENDING</b>  | <b>\$6,054.757</b>              | <b>\$6,230.908</b>   |
| Percent of state/federal budget devoted to early learning opportunities <i>plus basic and special education</i>    | 17.60%                          | 17.50%   |

\* Based on a Department of Public Welfare survey of children from birth through age 8 in child care.

\*\* Pennsylvania does not account for education spending by grade.

\*\*\* Funding to develop a reading assessment tool.

# ENDNOTES

## Introduction

<sup>1</sup> International Reading Association and National Association for the Education of Young Children. *Learning to Read and Write: Developmentally Appropriate Practices for Young Children*, 1998.

<sup>2</sup> The National Center to Improve the Tools of Educators, *What Reading Research Tells Us About Children with Diverse Learning Needs*, 1996.



## Pennsylvania Partnerships for Children

Suite 300, 20 North Market Square  
Harrisburg, PA 17101-1632

717-236-5680 • 800-257-2030

[www.papartnerships.org](http://www.papartnerships.org)

## June 2002

### Mission Statement

Pennsylvania Partnerships for Children is a strong, effective and trusted voice for improving the health, early education and well-being of the Commonwealth's children.

**Funding** generously provided by the Howard Heinz Endowment, with additional research, data collection, and analysis by Pennsylvania KIDS COUNT and State Fiscal Analysis Initiative staff.