

PRESCHOOL



Pennsylvania
Partnerships for Children

At 3 and 4 years old, children seem to learn faster than the speed of light. Their ability to think logically, to communicate ideas and ask questions, grows stronger each day – if their formulating young minds get the encouragement that sparks neurological growth and lays the groundwork for future thought and learning. That’s the preschool ideal – enriching play, learning, and socialization experiences that prepare 3- and 4-year-olds for school.

But the ideal is elusive. Pennsylvania remains one of nine states that fails to invest in preschool, so quality options for parents – especially low-income parents – are slim. Lacking access to quality preschool, too many at-risk children start school at an unfair disadvantage, without the basic tools of learning that are critical to acquiring new knowledge and succeeding in school.

Preschool in Pennsylvania

Parents provide the first foundation of learning, and for most American preschoolers, that foundation can be strengthened with a rich array of quality preschool options such as Head Start, public schools, private schools, and child care. But for Pennsylvania children, the options are limited: Head Start, private preschools, or kindergarten for 4-year-olds, offered by some public school districts. For children in child care settings, the atmosphere may not provide a rich educational experience because state child care regulations address only health and safety needs.

Head Start

Head Start is the federal government’s comprehensive child development and school readiness

program for low-income children, ages birth to 5 – but in Pennsylvania and nationwide, the vast majority of enrollees are at the traditional preschool age of 4.

Eligible children come from families whose income is 100 percent of poverty or below, but in Pennsylvania, eligibility doesn’t guarantee enrollment. Even though federal funding grew to accommodate 80 percent more Pennsylvania children from 1989 to 2002, only 28,895 of the state’s 56,895 eligible children were served in 2002. Even more restricted is full-day, full-year Head Start, which 44 percent of all Head Start children needed in 1997-98, but was available to only 3,145 children, or 11 percent of Head Start enrollees.¹



The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families offers Head Start through direct grants to school districts, community action agencies, non-profit Head Start programs, county governments, child welfare providers, and other community-based organizations. Head Start services are delivered in classrooms, run according to federal rules establishing staffing, class size, and school years:

- Every classroom must be staffed by two teachers or a teacher and an aide.
- For 4- and 5-year-olds, class sizes must average between 17 and 20 children. For 3-year-olds, classes must average 15 to 17 children.
- Head Start classes must operate for four days a week, 128 to 160 days a year, or five days, 160 days a year. Classes must operate between three and a half and six hours a day.

Providers must also meet federal standards for health, education, parent involvement, nutrition, and facilities.

Resources for Professionals and Consumers

By 2003, half of the teachers in every Head Start classroom must have at least an associate's degree in early childhood development or a related field, or be credentialed by the Council for Professional Recognition, with 480 hours of experience with children and 120 hours of child care education. Teachers can receive training and professional development in early childhood through four-year colleges and universities, and the state's 19 community colleges.

Two regional universities, under contract with the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, offer training and technical assistance to Pennsylvania Head Start providers. The University of Maryland offers general programs covering all aspects of Head Start services, while Georgetown University, in Washington, D.C., trains in providing Head Start services for children with disabilities.

For parents and families, local Head Start programs can request training and technical assistance also

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Head Start

- **Definition:** Programs designed to increase the school readiness of young, low-income children, with services for 3- and 4-year-olds and their families.
- **Eligibility:** Children through 100 percent of poverty (\$17,650 for a family of four) or participating in the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families or Supplemental Security Income programs.
- **Participation:** 28,895 children, ages 3 and 4, enrolled in 2002, but another 28,000 children were eligible and unserved.
- **Availability:** Found through 59 programs statewide in 2002.
- **Oversight:** Head Start Bureau, Administration for Children and Families, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.²
- **Funding:** \$189.53 million in federal funds in 2001-02, plus a 20 percent local match.
- **More information:** Administration for Children and Families, www.acf.dhhs.gov/programs/acyf/, or the Pennsylvania Head Start Association, www.paheadstart.org; 717-526-4646.

available at the University of Maryland. Parents can access Head Start through local Head Start providers, sometimes listed in phone books' blue pages, or through the Pennsylvania Head Start Association, www.paheadstart.org.

Funding

Parents pay no fee for Head Start services. The federal government allocated \$189.53 million for Head Start to Pennsylvania in 2002, funneling the funds through the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. Pennsylvania does not supplement the federal allocation or devote funds to other preschool options for low-income children. Local grantees must provide a 20 percent match.

Private Nursery Schools

Private nursery schools are major providers of preschool education for Pennsylvania children, serving 32,000 children in 1999-2000. Settings range from single-classroom schools to multi-site chains.

Pennsylvania's private nursery schools can receive recognition in one of three ways:

- **Licensure by the State Board of Private Academic Schools.** Under the board's regulations, each nursery school class must have at least one teacher with an early childhood teaching certificate; a bachelor's degree with at least 24 credits in child development, early childhood, or elementary education; or a bachelor's degree and at least two years of nursery school teaching experience.



Early Head Start

Early Head Start provides child development and family support services similar to Head Start's, but for children under 3 years old and pregnant women. Services can include health and nutrition services, child care for working parents, and home visits that help parents build their parenting skills and enhance the in-home learning environment (see "Reading Readiness and Success").

Though about 82,000 Pennsylvania infants and toddlers qualified, only 2,428 received services through 25 Early Head Start programs – funded separately from Head Start, but sometimes administered by the same organization – in 2002. Pennsylvania's Early Head Start programs received \$19.3 million in 2002.

- Accreditation by the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) in lieu of state board licensure.
- Affiliation with a religious institution, where regulations do not pertain.

With one notable exception, the state's private preschool requirements don't live up to NAEYC's in many generally recognized quality standards.

- Both state- and NAEYC- licensed facilities have curriculum requirements, but unlike the state, NAEYC requires delivery through developmentally appropriate instructional practices, materials and equipment.

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Private Nursery Schools

- **Definition:** Preschool for 3- and 4-year-olds operated privately or by religious entities.
- **Participation:** About 32,000 children were enrolled in 1999-2000.
- **Availability:** Found through about 700 private nursery schools statewide in 1999-2000.
- **Oversight:** State Board of Private Academic Schools, Department of Education.³
- **Funding:** Private preschools charge tuition. A range of rates is unavailable.
- **More information:** State Board of Private Academic Schools, (717)783-5146.

- NAEYC's staffing requirements are about the same – no more than 10 children per adult – as the state standards of eight and a half 4-year-olds per adult and 10.5 5-year-olds. State standards also allow for classes of 22 3- to 7-year-olds and 25 5-year-olds with better-trained or more staff.
- NAEYC requires certification of compliance with local building codes, sanitation, water quality, and fire protection, while the state – applying a model used in public schools – assumes compliance with local building codes, fire regulations, and other health and safety standards.
- NAEYC requires that providers work closely with parents and families, developing close relationships, communicating openly, and making parents feel welcome in the program.

The exception: Pennsylvania's private preschool teachers must have a bachelor's degree and some early childhood training, while NAEYC teachers need only an associate's degree in child development.

Milder state standards don't necessarily mean a poor-quality preschool experience, because individual providers can choose adherence to higher standards, but the state has an opportunity to assure higher quality across the board during a planned regulation revision process in 2002. Designed as a thorough review of regulations last updated in 1991, the process could incorporate the stricter of NAEYC's

or Head Start's standards, particularly in curriculum, health and safety – assuring more private preschool students a quality learning experience.

K-4: Kindergarten for 4-Year-Olds

In Pennsylvania, public schools may offer kindergarten to all 4-year-olds in their districts, and 30 public school districts did so in 1999-2000. Together, they provided kindergarten for 2,550 4-year-olds, and all on a half-day basis.

Districts that offer K-4, as it's often called, usually coordinate their programs with their kindergarten and elementary curricula, offering a continuum of education and preparing children for the school years to come. Although they can use their state basic education dollars, districts get no additional funds for K-4.

Why Preschool Matters

Low-income children, surrounded by poverty and instability, often miss the enriching learning experiences that prepare their more advantaged peers for school. They may spend only 25 hours of their preschool years on reading, compared to middle-class children who start first grade with 1,000 to 1,700 hours of reading behind them.⁴

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K-4: Kindergarten for 4-Year-Olds

- **Definition:** Kindergarten for 4-year-olds, also known as K-4, operated by public schools.
- **Eligibility:** All 4-year-olds in school districts that offer it.
- **Participation:** 2,550 children, aged 4, enrolled in 1999-2000.
- **Availability:** Offered by 30 Pennsylvania school districts in 1999-2000.
- **Oversight:** Office of Elementary and Secondary Education, Pennsylvania Department of Education.
- **Funding:** School districts may use basic education funding, but the state does not earmark funds specifically for K-4.

They also start school with just half the vocabulary of middle-class children, and in most cases, the gap doesn't dissipate through the school years.⁵

For at-risk children, quality preschool can be a ticket to school readiness. Since 1997, the federal Head Start Bureau has been studying Head Start children, following them — so far — through kindergarten, and initial results confirm the benefits: Head Start children are ready for school, with strong letter and number skills. Families are also involved with their children's education, with 66 percent reading to their children three or more times a week, and up to 90 percent teaching letters, numbers, or songs.⁶

Other research into young children's development proves that the benefits of quality preschool are dramatic and lasting:

- **Prime time for learning:** With attentive care, enrichment, and exposure to books, the minds of young children develop and build the mental scaffolding that will process thoughts and ideas for years to come.⁷
- **Ready for school:** Children who enter kindergarten from quality preschool have better reading, language, and social skills than those who didn't get preschool.⁸
- **School success:** Children from quality preschool get better test scores in later grades and are likelier to graduate from high school — itself a critical indicator of the adult's life chances.⁹
- **Avoiding trouble:** Young children who received enriching early childhood education experiences, such as nurse home visitors, quality child care, and quality preschool, are less likely to become delinquent as teens.¹⁰
- **Better citizens:** Children from quality preschool are likelier to mature into responsible citizens — likelier to be married, with higher educational attainments and better-paying jobs.¹¹

State of the States/Best Practices

Nationwide, 41 states and the District of Columbia — not including Pennsylvania — invest in Head Start or preschool, so more low-income children can enter kindergarten ready to learn. Many states that are investing have also taken steps to provide a quality experience. For instance, 20 states and the District of Columbia require preschool teachers to have

Signs of Success:

Allegheny County's Early Childhood Initiative

Quality preschool can be the great leveler — bringing children who might otherwise fail in school up to a place where they are much likelier to succeed. Dramatic results from a study of the Early Childhood Initiative, Allegheny County's quality preschool effort for at-risk children, show how:¹²

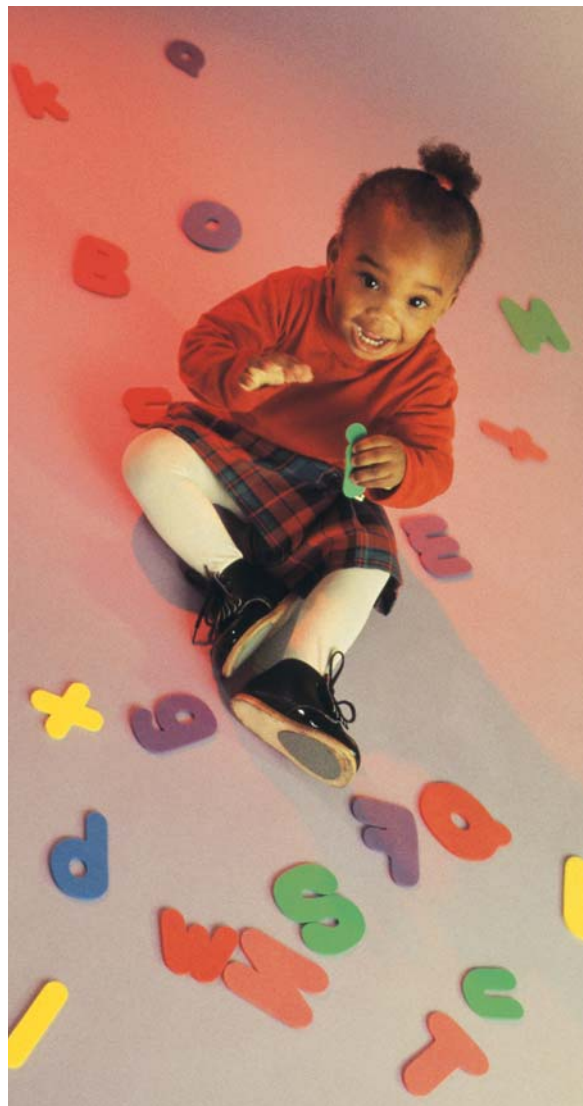
- 86 percent of the 1,000 children entering ECI were at high risk of falling behind due to shortcomings in overall thinking, language, social, and school-readiness skills. After three years in ECI, they not only avoided declines but improved at an increased rate. About 14 percent of the children were already showing serious delays that would have qualified them for special education, but three years in ECI moved them into the normal range of development, motor, language, social, and thinking skills.
- 18 percent of ECI entrants merited a poor mental health diagnosis, but they showed normal social skills and development patterns three years later.
- 78 percent of ECI children entered school with 11 of the most important "building block" skills for school success, based on Pennsylvania academic standards.
- Of the participating children who entered kindergarten and first grade during the study, only 2 percent were held back a grade — in districts averaging retention rates of 23 percent. Similarly, only 1 percent of ECI children were referred to special education, compared to average rates of 21 percent in their districts.
- At the end of kindergarten and first grade, ECI children performed at average to above-average levels on standardized tests.



bachelor's degrees, and 27 states have adopted or are drafting curriculum standards.

States are taking creative approaches to funding and to program implementation, thinking outside traditional boundaries to give children a quality preschool experience:

- **Targeting at-risk children:** Twenty percent of funds raised for children through a California cigarette tax (see “Funding,” below) goes to a school readiness initiative in low-performing schools. New Jersey is implementing court-ordered preschool investments in the poorest school districts. Connecticut’s School Readiness Initiative funds full-day, full-year preschool



programs in low-income school districts and helps providers attain accreditation and improve their facilities.

- **Broadened risk factors:** Illinois and Kansas allocate funds for preschool based on a combination of risk factors, such as children living in poverty, at risk of abuse and neglect, and with teen parents.
- **Community involvement:** Since 1993, the Community Partnerships for Children in Massachusetts has drawn from and built on community resources to increase preschool access and affordability. Community partnerships, including Head Start, school districts, and child care agencies, collaborate to provide comprehensive child care, early learning, behavioral health services, and family supports.
- **Funding:** In California, voters approved a 50-cents-per-pack cigarette tax to fund child care, health services and preschool. South Carolina combines \$30 million in state funds and \$7 million in private contributions for a school readiness initiative. Kansas and Kentucky both devoted about \$2 million of their tobacco settlement funds to quality early education services.

Situation Analysis

Pennsylvania needs a richer array of preschool options, particularly for children who are low-income and risk educational failure, and for those whose families live above poverty but who struggle to afford quality educational experiences for their 3- and 4-year-olds.

But Pennsylvania remains one of nine states that fails to invest in preschool. Federal Head Start funding assures services for only half of all eligible children – eligibility being determined at a bare level of 100 percent of poverty. Unlike Pennsylvania, states including Massachusetts, Ohio, Michigan, and others extend Head Start to families living above poverty but below true economic independence. In

New Jersey, state courts have mandated preschool services to boost school readiness in the 28 school districts with the highest poverty rates.

In early 2002, President Bush proposed a series of Head Start reforms for the nation, including stricter training and education requirements for Head Start teachers, \$45 million to develop research-based curricula, and additional testing of Head Start students – but no extra money to enroll more children in new Head Start slots.

The lack of funding continues to block at-risk and low-income children from quality preschool. Pennsylvania Partnerships for Children estimates the annual cost of providing preschool for 37,781 eligible 4-year olds – children under 200 percent of poverty and not served by Head Start – at \$188.9 million, and the estimated annual cost to serve 53,994 eligible 3-year-olds at \$270 million.

Even foot-in-the-door funding – not enough to meet the need, but enough to get started – has not materialized in the state budget, no matter how strong the state fiscal picture had been in recent years. All four legislative caucus leaders have expressed their support, and pending bills in the state House and Senate would create a state investment in quality preschool – but still, lawmakers have taken no action.

In his 2002-03 budget address, Governor Mark Schweiker did not propose funding but, instead, created an Early Childhood Care and Education Task Force to explore school readiness options and prepare recommendations for his successor to make sure children are healthy, safe, and ready for school.

In fact, all major candidates seeking the governor's office, and hoping to take the oath of office in 2003, have stated their support for a preschool investment. The depth of that commitment to preschool and to a mix of other children's issues depends on the success of Pennsylvanians in convincing the gubernatorial candidates to make preschool a top priority of the new administration. Businesspeople, media, educators, academics, preschool and human services providers, and many other citizens – citizens from all corners who see the community benefits of preschool investments – have sought preschool funding in recent years. In a gubernatorial election year, they continue to force the issue into the public policy arena.

POLICY DIRECTIONS

Today's children are the citizens of the future. Their ability to lead full lives — contributing to the workplace, the economy, and their communities — depends on a strong foundation of learning built early in life. Pennsylvania should finally take the plunge and invest in preschool, before the state falls farther behind in the national and global economic competition sweepstakes.

With a five-year plan, Pennsylvania could implement universally available preschool for all 3- and 4-year olds. State dollars should target those most in need, beginning with a \$25 million investment in model programs in communities with large numbers of low-income children who are falling behind in school.

To be effective, a state-supported preschool initiative should:

- Provide access to quality preschool education for children, involving parents in helping their children learn and connecting children and families with health care and other social services.
- Recognize the critical role of parents in the lives of young children — as children's first teachers, as consumers of preschool services shopping from a variety of providers and settings, and as employees whose work schedules often require full-day/full-year services.
- Be staffed by highly qualified and appropriately compensated professionals, with early childhood education degrees. It should provide continuing professional development for staff.
- Emphasize the importance of preschool in helping children succeed in the primary grades by falling under the Deputy Secretary of Elementary and Secondary Education in the Pennsylvania Department of Education. At the local level, school districts should have operational responsibility for the program and for managing state funding. Programs should use research-based, developmentally appropriate curricula.
- Be rooted in the community, with local preschool planning panels within school districts that include providers, parents, businesses, early childhood professionals, and religious and civic leaders. Panels should conduct a community needs assessment, survey providers, offer technical assistance, advise the district on use of state funds, and prepare a two-year local preschool plan.
- Be a shared responsibility of government, parents, business, and philanthropy. Today, the missing link is government.

ENDNOTES

Preschool

- ¹ Pennsylvania Head Start Association, *Report on Full Day/Full Year Head Start Services*, 1999.
- ² U.S. PL 106-1998.
- ³ Private Academic Schools Act of 1988 (24 PS § 6701-6722).
- ⁴ McGill-Franzen, *Shaping the Preschool Agenda*, 1993.
- ⁵ Nagy and Herman, *Limitations of Vocabulary Instruction*, 1984.
- ⁶ National Research Council, *From Neurons to Neighborhoods: The Science of Early Childhood Development*, 2000.
- ⁷ *Ibid.*
- ⁸ University of North Carolina, *Cost, Quality and Outcomes Go to School*, 1999.
- ⁹ National Research Council. *Op. cit.*
- ¹⁰ Arthur Reynolds, Study of the Chicago Child-Parent Centers, *Journal of the American Medical Association*, 2001.
- ¹¹ University of North Carolina, *Early Learning, Later Success: The Abecedarian Study*, 1999.
- ¹² UCLID Center, University of Pittsburgh and Children's Hospital of Pittsburgh, *Evaluation of Allegheny County Early Childhood Initiative*, March 2002.



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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.

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