



## Ready or Not: School Readiness

About 122,000 children start kindergarten each year in Pennsylvania, and many don't have the academic, social and emotional skills they need to learn. The result is young people with poor academic performance, prone to truancy, a higher likelihood of dropping out, and fewer skills to offer employers.

Pennsylvania is one of nine states that fail to fund preschool, so its children have fewer opportunities for quality early learning than other children nationwide. Though Pennsylvania has not made the investment, some of its prime economic competitors – North Carolina, New York, Ohio, and Illinois – see the value and make the investment for their children.

**The goal: Pennsylvania should strive to give every young child access to a voluntary, high-quality preschool program and help every child enter school ready to learn.**

### The Problem is Real

Every year, 122,000 Pennsylvania children start kindergarten.<sup>1</sup> Some come ready to learn. Many do not. Those who are not ready start school already behind, finding it difficult to progress through school without additional attention and help. Without a strong foundation of learning, these children often fall farther and farther behind, until catching up is impossible.

The result is young people with weak academic skills and poor performance, truancy, higher likelihood of dropping out and fewer skills to offer employers. Ultimately, it leads to young people ill-prepared to compete for family-sustaining jobs, acquire advanced workplace skills, or contribute to the community.

Scientific research on brain development confirms the importance of the early years to success in school and to lifelong achieve-

ment. Yet, the early years are also a period of tremendous risk. A child's early development can be negatively influenced by a variety of interrelated factors: poor prenatal health care and low birth weight, non-nurturing home environment, inadequate nutrition, lack of economic security, lack of personal safety, inadequate access to basic health care, inadequate child care opportunities for low-income families, and inadequate preschool opportunities.<sup>2</sup>

The challenge is ensuring that each child reaches school academically, emotionally and socially prepared. But kindergarten teachers estimate that one child in three enters the classroom without the basic tools of learning.<sup>3</sup> Forty-six percent of kindergarten teachers reported that half or more of their students have specific problems when entering kindergarten, including inadequate academic skills, difficulty following direc-

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tions or working independently, and disorganized home environments.<sup>4</sup>

This problem is particularly acute for children who face risks, such as poverty, single-parent homes or lack of English proficiency. But it can affect any child, regardless of background or income. In 1998, 25 percent of children from families without any risk factors entered kindergarten lacking the oral language and early literacy skills crucial to learning.<sup>5</sup>

More should be done on the state level to provide children access to quality programs that stimulate positive learning and the developmental skills necessary for school readiness. The words “access” and “quality” are key. Pennsylvania is slipping on both counts.

- Pennsylvania is one of nine states that fail to invest in preschool.<sup>6</sup>
- Only half of the 60,000 needy young children who qualify for Head Start in Pennsylvania participate in this successful, federally funded preschool program.<sup>7</sup>

## The Solution is Clear

Research into young children’s development proves that the benefits of quality preschool are dramatic and lasting. With attentive care, enrichment, and exposure to books, young children build the mental scaffolding that will process thoughts and ideas for years to come.<sup>8</sup> Quality preschool:

**Prepares kids for school.** Children who enter kindergarten from quality preschool have better reading, language, and social skills than those who didn’t get preschool.<sup>9</sup> The kids who start behind stay behind.

**Increases 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.<sup>10</sup>

**Reduces the likelihood that children will get in trouble as teens.** Young children who received enriching early childhood education experiences,

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## Leveraging the Child Care Connection.

With more than 65 percent of all available parents working outside the home, the role child care can play in preparing children to transition to school is increasingly important. While Pennsylvania has increased its investment in child care programs through Child Care Works, the state’s subsidized child care program, affordable, quality care remains out of reach for many Pennsylvania families.

Many of Pennsylvania’s child care programs are failing to get kids ready for school. One national study shows 83 percent of Pennsylvania child care facilities are providing “minimal” to “poor” opportunities for early learning.<sup>18</sup>

A recent study conducted by the Education Policy & Issues Center criticized Pennsylvania for failing to provide enough quality educa-

tion for younger children.<sup>19</sup> The report noted that only 68 of more than 800 child care centers in southwestern Pennsylvania are accredited.

Turnover rates for teachers, a key indicator of program quality, exceeds 30 percent, and for aides, 50 percent. Statistics show a steady decline in the number of professionals with early childhood education degrees.<sup>20</sup> Many in the field see a link between these issues and the gross inadequacy of pay for early childhood educators. In Pennsylvania, the average annual teacher’s salary is \$16,556. As *Education Week* has noted, “The United States pays as much to parking-lot attendants and dry-cleaning workers as it does to early childhood educators.”<sup>21</sup>

In recent years, Pennsylvania has

expanded its investment in Child Care Works, and Pennsylvania’s licensing standards are among the nation’s best. Child-to-staff ratios are adequate, but high turnover makes it difficult for child care programs to maintain licensing standards and training. To address these concerns, Pennsylvania should:

- Build on the new Keystone Stars system, implemented in the 2002-03 state budget, to link improved quality in child care with financial incentives and higher public recognition of quality by attaining a “star rating.”
- Improve the education and retention of child care teachers by expanding TEACH, which provides scholarship opportunities for child care providers.

such as nurse home visitors, quality child care, and quality preschool, are less likely to become delinquent as teens.<sup>11</sup>

**Prepares children for success in adulthood.**

Children from quality preschool are likelier to mature into responsible citizens – likelier to be married, with higher educational attainments and better-paying jobs.<sup>12</sup>

**Builds a foundation for a skilled workforce that helps Pennsylvania and its businesses remain economically competitive.**

Pennsylvania’s leading employers support preschool investments because they equip young learners with the skills for school success and, after graduation, workplace competence. With at least 40 percent of today’s workforce in Pennsylvania retiring over the next 20 years, many to be replaced by the generation that has not yet entered school, the implications to our state and its economic strength are profound.<sup>13</sup>

There are economic benefits, as well. Children who have had the benefit of school readiness services are less likely to require costly, specialized services during the school years. Studies have shown that investments in high-quality preschool avert larger public sector expenditures on special education, welfare, juvenile justice and other related “deep end” investments:

A Rand Corporation study found that a \$1 investment in quality early childhood education saved \$2 in special education, welfare, incarceration and other intervention costs down the road.<sup>14</sup>

The facts and the research clearly indicate that it makes far more sense to “frontload” the system to assure success, rather than “backload” it to compensate for failure.

**The Support is Strong**

Law enforcement, parents and the general public all recognize the importance and effectiveness of early childhood education programs.

*Pennsylvanians think preschool is the right idea to assure that kids are school-ready.*

- According to a KRC Research Poll conducted for Pennsylvania Partnerships for Children, “80 percent of Pennsylvanians think the state

should guarantee that every child is able to attend preschool so they are ready when they enter school.”

*Law enforcement officials strongly support expansion of educational child care programs as potent crime prevention tools.*

- Nearly nine U.S. police chiefs in 10 believe that expanding educational child care programs like Head Start will “greatly reduce youth crime and violence.”<sup>15</sup>
- The same percentage believes “if America does not make greater investments in after-school and educational child care programs to help children and youth now, we will pay far more later in crime, welfare, and other costs.”<sup>16</sup>

*Business supports school readiness investments for their workforce development benefits.*

- As a group of statewide business organizations united for school readiness investments said, “To ensure that Pennsylvania will have a competitive economy now and in the future, our children must enter school ready to learn so that they can achieve academically and have strong opportunities in the workforce as adults.”<sup>17</sup>

**The Objective Is Achievable**

Pennsylvania should invest in preschool to assure that every child enters school ready to learn by the end of the decade. Efforts should be built on a set of high performance standards to ensure that programs are instilling the academic and social skills children need to start school ready to learn. Principles guiding Pennsylvania’s preschool investment should be flexible, allowing communities to meet their own needs, while adhering to a research base to ensure their effectiveness:

- Parents are the first and most important teachers of children and should be enabled to make the best choices for their children in the early years.
- To ensure that children are school ready, they should have access to high quality preschool education, parents who understand child development, and access to health and other

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social services.

- Children birth through age 5 should receive preschool services in a diverse array of settings.
- The needs of families with parents employed outside the home should be considered in developing preschool services.
- To ensure that children are school ready, highly competent professionals should deliver all preschool services.
- Children and families will benefit the most from a Pennsylvania preschool initiative that is housed in the Department of Education under

the auspices of the Deputy Secretary for Elementary and Secondary Education. To assure the success of the initiative, an interagency coordinating body should provide oversight with leadership from the governor's office.

- Building upon the resources already in place in communities, the preschool initiative should be based on a model of local or regional planning and coordination.
- Financing preschool services should be a partnership among government, parents, business, and philanthropy.

## The Time is Now

Throughout this country's history, education has been the vehicle for advancing citizens' economic and social status. Education empowers people to overcome poverty, bad environments and deprivation, to dream and attain their dreams, to contribute to a thriving workplace by vigorously applying their skills and talents, and to contribute to their community, state and nation. The foundation for that full, rich education is built in the critical early years.

## Notes

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