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## Editorial | Lessons for life

**Education budget talks should end up with a strong, full childhood program.**

Here's an early education for children: Some state legislators are willing to sabotage opportunities for you by killing Gov. Rendell's plan to boost education for the youngest students.

Rendell and legislative leaders may still be able to pull Pennsylvania out from the basement of states that badly neglect early childhood education. That would take a lot of political ballet in the coming weeks.

To its shame, Pennsylvania is one of only nine states that does not support preschool or early childhood education. The gap leaves some 60,000 disadvantaged children far behind better-off peers whose family situations can afford the skills a good preschool can teach. Studies show that academic success later on can depend upon good preparation for kindergarten.

The neglect carries other consequences - none of them good.

The state could lose federal dollars if children have not gained reading and math proficiency by 2014, as required by President Bush's federal education reforms.

Outside of the classroom, the neglect will leave Pennsylvania with a shortage of skilled workers down the road. That's why business groups have made a priority of creating a state-funded, quality preschool program. Businesses felt the pinch during the roaring 1990s, when the pool of qualified job candidates fell short.

Rendell, by vetoing the education portion of the budget the legislature hastily approved in March, has provided another opportunity to change that dynamic. He would begin by upping the state's dismal share of school funding from 34 percent to 50 percent. Erasing the huge disparities in funding among districts statewide would be helped by shifting education funding to increased income taxes.

He would create the first state-funded preschool program. It would complement federal Head Start and expand eligibility, ultimately, to middle-class youngsters. Elements that make Head Start a success would be kept, including accountability standards, qualified teachers, parental involvement, and health and nutrition services.

Preschool would be strictly voluntary, countering hyperbole that suggests Rendell wants to impose mandatory pre-K, as though sheriffs would drag little kids to class.

The governor's plan also features full-day kindergarten for districts that want it, and smaller class sizes in early grades. Smaller classes would help children retain preschool skills.

Staff would get more training, failing students would get more tutoring.

Considering all the payoffs, you'd think the legislature would see the three-year, \$1.3 billion program as a smart investment. You'd be wrong.

A Republican preschool plan would use vouchers to cover children, based on family income. There would be co-pay requirements that could force poor families to choose between preschool and cheaper, inferior child care. That's a choice parents shouldn't have to make.

The GOP plan lacks professional standards for teachers, accountability measures, and health and nutrition services. That is to say, it lacks the ingredients needed to reverse Pennsylvania's wretched record.

But if filling minds doesn't persuade lawmakers, they ought to think about filling the state's treasury. The governor's education proposals are a key component of his economic stimulus agenda for all of Pennsylvania.

If it ends up with Rendell huddling in a room with legislative leaders, the state is best served by early childhood education that teaches youngsters more than how elected officials can let them down.

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