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Pa. ranks low in preschool funding

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Pennsylvania ranks among the worst states in providing quality pre-kindergarten programs, while preschool programs in New Jersey serve as a model for success, a national study to be released today says.

The report, "The State of Preschool," by the National Institute for Early Education Research, looks at state funding for educating 3- and 4-year-olds, drawing on data from the 2001-02 school year.

Gov. Rendell is proposing that Pennsylvania spend \$15 million to supplement federal Head Start preschool program funding and enroll more children. That would be a first for Pennsylvania.

He also wants a \$5 million tax credit for the expansion of private preschool programs and includes preschool education on a menu of initiatives that school districts can pay for with his proposed \$250 million in education block grants.

"There's always room for improvement and [with Rendell's proposals] Pennsylvania is taking steps to improve our preschool programs," education department spokeswoman Bethany Yenner said.

The Republican-controlled state legislature has agreed to \$175 million in block grants but not to Rendell's proposed \$75 million addition. State Sen. Robert Thompson (R., Chester), the chairman of the Senate finance committee, said yesterday that "no one opposes more early childhood education; in fact, the Republicans came up with a lot of [Rendell's proposals] originally."

But Thompson said he would prefer that school districts choose where to spend education dollars, rather than mandating new programs. "Let's let the local districts decide what is the best approach," he said.

The national institute study says that Pennsylvania now has no state-funded preschool programs, though 30 school districts voluntarily provide services to about 2 percent of the state's 4-year-olds. The state ranks 33rd in the United States in access for 4-year-olds and 50th in access for 3-year-olds, the report said.

On a checklist of 10 quality standards for preschool programs, the report gives Pennsylvania a score of three, with positive marks for requiring a bachelors degree for preschool teachers, for providing them with ongoing education and for giving preschool students health screenings.

"We continue to trail the rest of the nation in the resources and the quality of the education for kids," said Diane McCormick, spokeswoman for the Pennsylvania Partnerships for Children, a child advocacy group.

The poor quality marks are disturbing, she said, because "these programs have to be based on pretty strict standards to have the quality that will allow students to do well in school... and Pennsylvania, for the little it does, is not anywhere near those standards."

New Jersey, by contrast, spent close to \$370,000 on preschool programs in 2001-02, the report said, providing services for more than 20 percent of 3- and 4-year-olds.

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