



PRESCHOOL

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Gov. Ed Rendell has rightly put a heavy focus on improving the educational performance of Pennsylvania's public schools in the first months of his administration.

That's a priority he shares with recent governors, and one might well ask if any governor is ever going to get it right. Will the day come when we finally can say that every school is truly a house of learning and every child is exposed to a quality education?

It hasn't helped that every governor has come into office with a different notion of how to achieve this goal. And a lot of time and effort were especially lost over the last eight years with the debates over educational vouchers and school choice.

Unfortunately, that could well happen again. State House Republicans, led by Rep. Elinor Z. Taylor of Chester, are seeking to convert Rendell's early childhood initiative into a grant program for parents.

Most states have long since moved beyond debating how to take advantage of children's intensely formative years prior to kindergarten. Pennsylvania is one of only nine that haven't invested resources in preschool programs.

The value of such investments has been sufficiently demonstrated as to convince not only educators, but also large elements of the business community, that early childhood education is an investment worth making in the country's human resources.

Rendell's proposed Early Childhood Investment Fund comes with a first-year cost of \$309 million, which would begin with full-day preschool programs for 4-year olds in about 100 school districts where 35 percent of the children qualify for free and reduced-price lunches. In three years, the program cost would rise to \$687 million.

Under Taylor's bill, eligible low-income parents would be able to spend the money as they see fit, including full- or part-time programs at private, parochial and public providers.

One has to wonder -- even if one can get beyond the usual church-state objections to this plan --

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whether its scatter-gun approach would really deliver on the substantial funds earmarked for developing young minds. The Rendell initiative would establish high teaching standards, and its results would be easily monitored.

For too many years, education policy in this state has been politicized, to the detriment of students, especially those who could have benefited from a coherent strategy to overcome the toughest challenges to learning. The last thing we need is another ideologically driven debate that sidetracks the core issue of delivering quality early childhood preparation and education where today failure is all too commonplace.

Rendell's initiative in this regard goes to the heart of the problem and should not become another victim of the school-choice debate.

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