



## At-risk children may get state aid

**Lawmakers consider proposals to expand preschool education**

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**BY JAN MURPHY**  
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Harrisburg preschooler Tyshawn White made his teacher smile last week.

He stood next to the message board in the Marshall Elementary School classroom and pointed to the words as he read them: "We are going to Lake Tobias."

To teacher Missy Schrader, it was another sign the opportunity Harrisburg began providing for children this school year is making a difference.

"It was just amazing," said Schrader. "They are coming very far from the beginning of the year when the kids couldn't tell you their last name or count."

She is excited that in the fall, the school district, with the help of Head Start and the Kellogg Foundation, will make preschool available to many more children than the 180 served this year.

Many lawmakers want to expand similar preschool opportunities across the state.

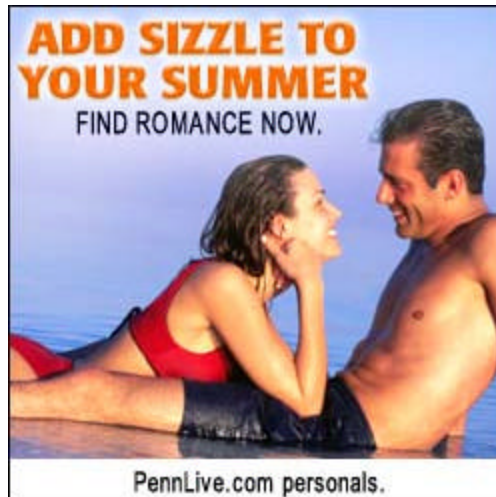
Republicans and Democrats alike are coming out in support of state-funded preschool for at-risk children. They cite studies that say such programs can reduce crime, increase graduation rates and lower special education enrollment.

Legislators agree preschool should not be mandatory. But that's where the agreement stops.

Lawmakers are weighing three plans:

- Gov. Ed Rendell's proposal would direct \$120 million next year to districts where more than 35 percent of students are eligible for free and reduced lunch. Spending would grow to \$267 million over three years.
- A preschool voucher plan would provide grants to low-income families regardless of where they live. The plan, introduced in the House by Rep. Elinor Taylor, R-Chester, would offer up to \$6 per hour for each hour of preschool attendance. No cost estimate is available.
- Another proposal uses \$15 million in state money to supplement the federal aid to Head Start

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programs. It would provide full-day, full-year Head Start services to more of the 27,000 children now served in half-day programs for part of the year. Leadership sources in the GOP-controlled House say they are open to all proposals. Senate Republicans favor preschool choice and the proposal to expand Head Start, said an aide to Senate Majority Leader David "Chip" Brightbill, R-Lebanon County.

Rendell plans to use revenue from slot machines at racetracks and a higher state income tax to pay for education reforms. Lawmakers are wrestling with how the slots money should be divided. Sources say this week's expected Senate vote on the slots could shape the preschool discussion.

Joan Benso, president and CEO of the Pennsylvania Partnership for Children, is relieved state lawmakers are working on the issue.

"I am heartened by the level of interest and commitment I feel in both the administration and the Legislature to get started to make sure our 4-year-olds are ready to learn," she said.

#### **Governor's plan:**

Rendell campaigned on the issue of making high-quality preschool available to anyone who wants it. Budget realities prompted him to scale back those plans for now.

His plan proposes giving \$5,885 per child per year to poorer school districts to provide full-day preschool to all 4-year-olds.

In the midstate, the only eligible school districts would be Harrisburg, Lebanon and Steelton-Highspire.

Districts would be required to use at least 10 percent of the state preschool funds to subcontract with community preschool providers, assuming any are available.

The district program and community providers would have to meet standards that the Department of Education has yet to develop, and would require teachers to hold a bachelor's degree and have education in early childhood.

Critics, however, say Rendell's proposal fails to take into account those parents who don't want their child enrolled in a full-day program run by the government.

"Every child is different and has different needs," said Sen. Mary Jo White, R-Butler, who plans to introduce a preschool voucher bill in the Senate. "I just think these should be parental choices."

Preschool voucher proponents say Rendell's plan excludes low-income children living in areas where there may not be a high concentration of poverty. They fear it could force the closure of preschools excluded from district-run programs.

Some Harrisburg preschools are on edge about that already, since the city schools are expanding their preschool programs this fall.

"We are very concerned," said Marcia Reeves, executive director of the Pride of the Neighborhood Academies.

Carolyn Dillon Carter, director of Strawberry Gardens in Harrisburg, said she isn't too worried. She expects to be one of the centers Harrisburg schools tap to provide services to preschoolers. She said she would open centers in suburban districts if her business suffers.

Faith-based preschools could participate in a district-run program. But they would have to strip religious themes from their curriculum, which some predict few religious preschools would do.

"We wouldn't," said Rabbi Allen Saks of Yeshiva Academy of Harrisburg. "We cater to those who want a Jewish education."

### **Preschool choice:**

Private preschool providers say they'd welcome the voucher approach to expanding access to preschool.

Parents could receive grants to enroll children in programs that run two hours a day a few days a week. Or they could enter full-day programs for 180 days.

"If we are trying to provide parents with full-day daycare, that's one thing," White said. "But if we are truly looking at stimulating intellectual growth and development in very young children, I think a half-day program is probably sufficient for a vast number of children."

Eligibility and grant amounts would be based on federal poverty guidelines, under Taylor's preschool choice measure. A family of four with an income of \$27,150 could receive a maximum voucher of \$42 a day per child, which is more than most midstate preschools charge. Families could use the grants at any preschool.

The voucher plan, unlike Rendell's, would make preschool available to children regardless of where they live and specifically targets poor children, Taylor said.

"I think when money's tight, we should look at where to put the money where it does the most good," Taylor said.

Opponents argue this could lead to "paying for a lot of glorified day care," said Joe Bard of the Pennsylvania Association of Rural and Small Schools. They concede, however, it would be easier to control the cost of a voucher program than it would the Rendell plan.

Rendell's plan directs money to facilities with certified teachers, said Rep. Phyllis Mundy, D-Luzerne, sponsor of a bill incorporating the governor's proposal.

"I don't understand how anybody would believe it's more cost-effective to hand out vouchers and let anybody go wherever they want, and then have the state try to chase these people around to make sure the standards are high. It sounds like an administrative nightmare to me," Mundy said.

There's also the concern that a preschool voucher might open the door for K-12 vouchers, which former Gov. Tom Ridge tried unsuccessfully to get approved.

"There would be absolutely no reason to just have them in pre-K and not have them in K-12," said Tim Allwein, a spokesman for the Pennsylvania School Boards Association.

### **Helping Head Start:**

Supplementing the federal Head Start program is the approach put forth by Sen. James Rhoades, R-Schuylkill. Head Start is targeted to serve the poorest families.

"If the goal is to provide high quality preschool service to the most needy segment of Pennsylvania's

population, Head Start appears to be an efficient way to achieve that goal," said David Broderic, an aide to Rhoades.

Pennsylvania Head Start would love the state to supplement the \$200 million it receives in federal funds, but interim director Daniel Lembo said it is not the final answer.

The program only serves 51 percent of the state's income-eligible children, and "there are so many families out there, families making \$5 to \$100 over our income eligibility, that would benefit from a Head Start-like program," he said.

So while supportive of Rhoades' proposal, Lembo said he also likes the Rendell plan because it ensures high standards for programs with qualified teachers.

Some Head Start centers wouldn't qualify for preschool funds in Rendell's plan, because Head Start does not require bachelor's degrees for its teachers, said Benso of the Pennsylvania Partnership for Children. Head Start is moving toward requiring half its teachers to hold associate degrees in early childhood or related fields by next year.

Benso wants to see preschool programs with high academic standards taught by certified teachers. She hopes districts would make at least partial use of existing preschools. She thinks the Rendell proposal contains the key ingredients, but she sees merit in all three plans.

"It would be a sad day if we did something called pre-K but didn't do it the right way," Benso said.

Schrader sees the advances her preschoolers had made. They know their letter sounds. They recognize words like the day of the week by looking at the first and second letters.

Harrisburg's kindergarten teachers are excited about the fall, Schrader said.

"I think they are looking forward to having our children in their classroom next year because they know they have a nice head start," she said.

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