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Editorial | Stalled Education Reforms

Study haul for senators

Many Pennsylvania senators seem to be baffled over why Gov. Rendell is so stuck on preschool and other early-childhood initiatives.

If the senators who are blocking the governor's education, economic and tax reform proposals would only do a little homework, they'd understand.

Rendell's education proposals include starting the first state-funded preschool program in Pennsylvania history, offering full-day kindergarten to all public schools, reducing class sizes in kindergarten through the third grade, and improving teacher training.

No thanks, says a Senate more bent on scoring political points than on helping the state's youngest citizens have better prospects in adulthood.

Rendell didn't go to sleep one night and dream up these ways to improve early-childhood education. He is stuck on them because research through the years has shown them to work.

Enterprising, or even slightly interested, legislators could find studies to dispel their puzzlement - if they wanted to. Since it's unclear they're willing to make that effort, here is a primer for legislators.

The benefits of preschool

In 1962, Ypsilanti, Mich., researchers tracked 123 low-income 3- and 4-year-old children in two groups. One group was put in an intensive preschool program at Perry Elementary School. The other children did not get that chance. The High/Scope Perry Preschool Study followed the progress of those youngsters through the age of 27.

The study showed that children in the preschool program and taught by certified teachers required less special schooling later, were more likely to graduate high school, and were three times as likely to earn more than \$24,000 annually. They also required fewer social services and were dramatically less likely to commit crimes.

The Chicago Longitudinal Study, which began in 1980, showed that a quality preschool program saved or returned to the public \$7.14 per dollar invested by increasing economic potential and, therefore, tax revenue, and by reducing the public cost for remedial education and contacts with the criminal justice system.

The benefits of full-day kindergarten

Five studies in the 1990s show that full-day kindergarten improves the learning skills of children and lays a foundation for the first grade. A bonus benefit: It also makes it easier for millions of single parents get and hold jobs.

The benefits of smaller class sizes

The most convincing evidence resulted from a decision by the Tennessee legislature in 1985 to study 6,000 children in kindergarten through the third grade. Over a four-year period, the researchers found that children in smaller classes dramatically outperformed students in larger classes on achievement tests. Even better results were found for urban minority children.

From 1996 to 2001, University of Wisconsin research found that when the state reduced the student-teacher ratio to 15-1, students in low-income households scored significantly higher than those in larger classes in math, language arts and total scores.

The benefits of quality teachers

In preschool particularly, at least eight studies show that teachers with bachelor's degrees in early childhood education produced better outcomes for their students than did teachers without that credential.

Republican Majority Leader David "Chip" Brightbill, (R., Lebanon), and the Senate threw a crumb to children by proposing \$12.5 million in new funding for tutoring. By contrast, the state House of Representatives, led by Speaker John Perzel, (R., Phila.), offered a real compromise when it approved a \$250 million down payment on the governor's \$560 million first-year education program.

Senators need to consider the facts and work with Rendell for real educational progress. They need to have the stature, intellect and courage to invest in Pennsylvania's future.