



**Pennsylvania
Partnerships
for Children**



PCCY
Public Citizens for
Children and Youth

U.S. Election 2008 – Early Education

“Investments in high-quality early education programs have the highest rate of return of any social investment.”

James Heckman, University of Chicago Economist and Nobel Laureate, Lessons from the Technology of Skill Formation, 2005

“The day-to-day reality of succeeding in an increasingly competitive marketplace demands skilled and educated workers. Investing in the academic success of our children directly contributes to the overall economic health of our nation.”

James E. Rohr, Chairman and Chief Executive Officer, PNC Financial Services Group, Inc., CED Trustee

Why It Matters

This month, thousands of Pennsylvania’s young children from birth through age four entered child care, Head Start, and pre-kindergarten classrooms to launch educational careers that will span well into adulthood. More than 128,000 children will start kindergarten this year in public schools across the Commonwealth.¹ Some will be ready to learn, but many others will not. School districts will spend hundreds of millions of dollars for remediation and special education costs on those “not ready” for school and throughout their academic careers.

Kids who start behind, stay behind.

High-quality early education can help make children school-ready.

A substantial body of research on brain development has helped us understand how children’s early experience from birth through five can significantly influence later cognitive, behavioral, educational, and economic outcomes for success in school and lifelong achievement.

Environmental, financial, health and nutrition factors, interrelated in complex ways, significantly influence a child’s early development and school readiness. Children in poverty, from single-parent homes, or who lack English proficiency will face additional challenges. Researchers compared language development in professional, middle income - working families, and families in poverty over a two and a half year period. They found that by age three, children in professional families had been exposed to 11.2 million words in a year. In contrast, children in middle-income families were exposed to 6.5 million words; while children in poverty, only 3.2 million. In addition, the amount and frequency of interaction between parents and children translated into

striking disparities in the children's later vocabulary growth rate, vocabulary use, and IQ test scores. ⁱⁱ

Kids who start behind, stay behind.

High-quality early education can support and enhance a child's learning and development.

The American Business Roundtable, an association of chief executive officers of leading U.S. companies with more than \$4.5 trillion in annual revenues and more than 10 million employees, issued a "Call to Action" and noted, "*In today's world, where education and skill levels determine future earnings, the economic and social costs to individuals, communities, and the nation of not taking action on early childhood education are far too great to ignore, especially when the benefits far outweigh the costs.*" ⁱⁱⁱ Readiness to learn is tied to education; education is tied to a skilled workforce. In a survey of 205 senior executives at Fortune 1,000 companies and other firms with more than 1,000 employees, four in five (81 percent) said public funding of voluntary pre-kindergarten for all children would improve America's workforce. ^{iv}

What happens or does not happen in early childhood can influence a lifetime of learning for every child, regardless of background or income. As a nation, we must commit to supporting our youngest children to ensure that each reaches school academically, emotionally and socially prepared.

What Works

Research into young children's development proves the benefits of high-quality early education are dramatic and lasting.

High-quality early education:

- Prepares kids for school. Children who enter kindergarten from high-quality programs have better reading, language, and social skills than their peers. ^v
- Increases school success. Children from high-quality programs get better test scores in later grades and are likelier to graduate from high school – itself a critical indicator of the adult's life chances. ^{vi}
- Reduces the likelihood that children will get in trouble as teens. Young children who receive enriching early childhood education experiences, such as nurse home visitors, quality child care, and quality preschool, are less likely to become delinquent as teens. ^{vii}
- Prepares children for success in adulthood. Children from high-quality early childhood education programs are likelier to mature into responsible citizens – likelier to be married, with higher educational attainment and better-paying jobs. ^{viii}
- Builds a foundation for a skilled workforce that helps Pennsylvania, this country, and its businesses remain economically competitive.

But what is high-quality early education? The National Institute for Early Education Research (NIEER) supports early childhood education initiatives by providing objective, nonpartisan information based on research. NIEER's Quality Standards Checklist – a 10

point scale – is a catalog of features of a high quality pre-K program, representing a set of minimum criteria needed to ensure effective pre-K programs, especially when serving disadvantaged children. These benchmarks were agreed upon as the core standards to operate quality pre-K programs by the nation’s leading researchers in the field. They include early learning standards, degreed teachers, small group sizes, low staff to child ratios, and on-site monitoring.

Studies have shown that investments in high-quality early education replace larger public sector expenditures on special education, welfare, and juvenile justices:

- According to a study conducted in Pennsylvania, school districts investing in pre-K could recoup as much as 78% of their spending in pre-K in education savings. Providing targeted preschool programs could reduce special education expenditures in the state by at least 8 percent annually (\$68 million).^{ix}
- High-risk 4-year-olds in Allegheny County’s Early Childhood Initiative showed special education and grade retentions rates of less than 1% and 2% respectively in districts where other students were referred for special education and retained at rates of 21% and 23% respectively.^x
- The most recent cost benefit analysis of the “Perry Preschool Program” in Michigan has revealed that for every \$1 spent, an estimated \$16 was saved in lower public expenditures for welfare, education and other services.^{xi}

There are also indications that workforce performance of parents is enhanced through improved productivity and employee stability when young children are in stable, high-quality early education settings. Safe, reliable child care keeps low-income, working families working. Research has shown that low-income mothers whose children had participated in high-quality child care experienced more stable employment and higher earnings.^{xii}

The facts and the research clearly indicate that it makes far more sense to “frontload” the system to assure success, rather than “backload” it to compensate for failure.

Where Are We Now?

In the last two years, early childhood education has gained significant attention both here in Pennsylvania and in Washington. Pennsylvania has proven itself a national leader in its early childhood education investments and system building. These strategic investments have focused the eyes of the country’s leading early childhood and policy experts on our efforts. Some of the investments have been undertaken with state resources alone, while others have leveraged state with federal resources to build and support programs for the Commonwealth’s youngest and most at-risk citizens.

Pre-Kindergarten

Pennsylvania has left behind a reputation as one of only nine states in this country not funding a dedicated pre-K program to assume a leadership role in the design and support of publicly funded high quality pre-K.

However, just 20% of the Commonwealth’s three-and four-year olds have access to high-quality, publicly funded pre-K that stimulates positive

learning and fosters the development of skills necessary for school readiness.

Since FY 2004/2005, the state Head Start Supplemental Assistance program has expanded service to Pennsylvania's most needy three, four, and five year olds. Using state Accountability Block Grant, some school districts have chosen to create pre-K programs from the block grant's list of 11 research-based improvement strategies.

Pennsylvania Pre-K Counts was established in 2007. The Commonwealth has not only provided an influx of new dollars for pre-kindergarten education, but it also stands to make rapid improvement in the quality of pre-K programs for its three- and four-year-olds. Pennsylvania Pre-K Count's program standards coupled with the State Board of Education's new pre-K regulations will boost Pennsylvania's score on the National Institute for Early Education Research's (NIEER) 10-point quality checklist from a four to a nine plus.

- With a FY 2008-2009 budget of \$86.4 million, Pennsylvania Pre-K Counts will serve nearly 12,000 children in full and half-day programs – *however, this is fewer than 4% of Pennsylvania's three- and four-year olds.*
- Pennsylvania Pre-K Counts is provided by public schools, child care programs, licensed nursery, and Head Start centers. The 146 grantees worked with 179 partners to open 845 PA Pre-K Counts classrooms in 2007.
- Nearly 70 percent of children participating in the first year of Pennsylvania Pre-K Counts achieved age-appropriate skills and behaviors after participating in the program. The data also shows a 58 percent increase in the number of children meeting targets for language and literacy skills.

While Pennsylvania faces the challenge of responding to the needs of its youngest learners, the federal government takes take one step forward, and then moves two steps back.

Federal Head Start Reauthorization in 2007 made some major changes to the 40-year-old program that provides high-quality pre-K and comprehensive services to the country's neediest children and their families. The legislation *authorizes* the program at substantial new resource levels, expands access to the program, invests in quality, and improves collaboration with state initiatives. Yet Congress failed to provide Head Start with needed catch-up funding in the Fiscal Year 2008 supplemental appropriations process. The omnibus appropriations bill included \$6.88 billion in funding for Head Start, which is \$480 million less than the authorized level and less than the 2007 Head Start funding level before adjusting for inflation. This has decreased the number of eligible children served. However, a number of bills introduced 110th Congress would provide additional resources and guidance for early childhood education. These bills include HR 2859, Pre-K Act (Rep. Mazie Hirono, D-HI); S. 1823, Ready to Learn Act (Sen. Hillary Clinton, D-NY; and S 1375/HR 2859, Prepare All Kids Act (Sen. Robert Casey, D-PA, and Rep. Carolyn Maloney, D-NY). These proposals would provide grants

to states to support voluntary, high-quality preschool and to enhance the quality of the preschool programs in the states. The federal government has an opportunity to build on this forward momentum by collaborating with the states, increasing its commitments in Head Start, and enacting proposed legislation and ultimately be active partners in shaping the educational and economic future of our young children and the country.

Child Care

In fiscal year 2008-2009, the Commonwealth will spend an estimated \$790.4 million in state and federal funds to provide and increase the quality of child care for Pennsylvania's children. Federal funds used to support child care services include the Child Care and Development Block Grant (CCDBG), the Social Services Block Grant (SSBG) and Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF) Block Grant. Unfortunately, the CCDBG has been virtually level funded since FY 2002, requiring states to pick up the slack or leave thousands of low-income, working families struggling to work and care for their children. Federal dollars are crucial to extending the many benefits of quality, affordable child care to all Pennsylvania families.

With more than 65 percent of parents working outside the home, the role child care plays in preparing children to make the transition to school is increasingly important. Just as parents need child care as a critical work support, children need care that meets their developmental needs. High-quality, affordable, child care still remains out of reach for many Pennsylvania families. High-quality child care is expensive and can represent a significant portion of a family's expenses at all income levels.

- The cost of child care for two children at a private facility in Pennsylvania costs more than \$18,000 a year, over 80 percent of the median single parent income. ^{xiii}

Families seeking child care subsidy continue to encounter a waiting list. Over the last four years, Pennsylvania has consistently expanded its investment in Child Care Works, the state's child care subsidy program, but has been unable to make significant inroads into reducing the waiting list. In fiscal year 2007-2008, subsidized child care waiting lists climbed to as many as 15,000 children. These numbers may actually reflect an artificially low estimate of need. Many families need child care on an immediate basis and oftentimes will not go through the application process to wait for services.

While Pennsylvania has significantly increased its investment in early care and education in the last five years, the federal resources have remained nearly unchanged. Congress must do more to help provide sufficient resources to keep parents working and support safe, accessible, and affordable care for their children. This investment benefits our economy today and into the future.

However, safe, accessible, and affordable care are just pieces of the equation. Research demonstrates that the early learning environment and the interactions between adults and children have profound impact on children's development and learning. Pennsylvania's Keystone STARS is a nationally recognized child care quality recognition and improvement system. This voluntary program consists of a set of performance standards that reflect research-based practices to improve outcomes for children, a

recognition system awarding a number of stars (1-4) as programs achieve the quality standards, and a system of financial and technical support. End of year 2007-2008 figures document the commitment of Pennsylvania's child care community in program improvement: 76% percent of the child care centers, 59% percent of the regulated group day care homes and 33% percent of family day care homes are participating in the program.

Research on the Keystone STARS program shows that it is making a difference. Child care centers participating in Keystone STARS in 2006 had higher quality than the Pennsylvania average for child care centers and are showing higher quality now than at the inception of the STARS program in 2002. Results clearly indicate that Keystone STARS helps child care programs improve their overall quality. Further, Keystone STARS is reversing the negative trend in child care quality that was evident in the late 1990's.

By leveraging the quality set-aside in CCDBG with state funding Pennsylvania has been able to effect this change. Unfortunately, quality improvement takes both time and money. *Only 13% of the estimated 223,740 children served by programs participating in STARS were attending programs meeting the highest standards as defined by STAR 3 and 4 criteria.*

The Time is Now

In this election season, those seeking public office have a tremendous opportunity to provide and support an educational foundation for Pennsylvania's youngest citizens that will enhance their abilities to become lifelong learners, successful adults, and contributing citizens to the Commonwealth's and the nation's future.

Pennsylvania has made significant investments in child care services and other programs to aid in the early care and education of its children. The success of the Commonwealth's efforts is heavily dependent on federal funding of key programs including Head Start, CCDBG, SSBG, and TANF. Without sufficient federal funds to partner with state funds, the state as a whole will not realize all of the social, academic, and economic benefits of quality affordable early care and education.

Never before have we had the opportunity to further the partnership between the states and the federal government as reflected in the bills already before Congress -- Pre-K Act; Ready to Learn Act; Prepare All Kids Act, and Starting Early, Starting Right Act which would strengthen quality and increase access to child care along with necessary changes to the Child Care and Development Block Grant (CCDBG).

Those seeking federal elected office must commit to providing the necessary resources to make sure children enter school active, curious, eager and ready to learn. While children will be the direct beneficiaries of this investment, many others – families, employers, and all of Pennsylvania's citizens – will benefit as well.

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- ⁱ Public, Private and Nonpublic Schools Enrollments By Grade and Total Projected Through 2012-13. (7/30/2007). Retrieved August 17, 2008 from <http://www.pde.state.pa.us/k12statistics/lib/k12statistics/9697Act1213ProjEnro.xls>.
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- ^{vi} Ibid.
- ^{vii} Reynolds, A. J., et al., "Effects of a School-Based, Early Childhood Intervention on Adult Health and Well-being: A 19-Year Follow-up of Low-Income Families," *Arch Pediatr Adolesc Med*. 2007;161(8):730-739. Retrieved on 8/17/2008 from <http://archpedi.ama-assn.org/cgi/content/full/161/8/730>.
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