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****BUDGET REACTION****

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Amazing State Budget For Kids, Says Pennsylvania Partnerships for Children
Pennsylvania Leads the Nation in Expanded Children's Health Insurance Program
Funding for Education Dramatically Increased

(HARRISBURG), Feb. 8, 2006 – Gov. Edward G. Rendell's proposed budget for FY 2006-07 shows a strong commitment to investing in children, despite recent federal trends to slash spending to programs that aid the most vulnerable children, Pennsylvania Partnerships for Children (PPC) President and CEO Joan L. Benso said today. PPC is a nonprofit organization that advocates for the health, education and well-being of the Commonwealth's children. "This is an amazing budget for children," Benso said. "What a tremendous win for kids."

In his proposed FY 2006/07 budget, Gov. Rendell outlined funding increases in education, health and welfare programs including basic and special education funding, Education Accountability Block Grant, CHIP, Project 720 – the state's high school reform initiative, Head Start and child care.

Gov. Rendell proposed to offer CHIP to every uninsured child in Pennsylvania, regardless of income eligibility. Children under 350 percent of poverty will be eligible for CHIP free of charge, while children in families above 350 percent of poverty (\$70,000 for a family of four) will be able to buy into the program at low cost. Currently, CHIP income eligibility is \$47,000 for a family of four.

Benso said health insurance is a critical component to keeping kids healthy. "Children with health coverage are less likely to miss school and more likely to be immunized, get regular check-ups and get prompt treatment for common childhood ailments such as ear infections and asthma," she said. "Pennsylvania once again leads the nation in supporting children's health coverage with this expansion. This is a dramatic step that few states have even considered."

The Education Accountability Block Grant, which distributed its first appropriation of \$200 million in FY 2004-05, has been increased to \$250 million. For 2005-06, the most popular use of the block grant funds was to establish, expand or maintain full-day kindergarten, for which 318 districts spent about 58.6 percent of all block grant funds. "While the block grant has had a tremendous impact on Pennsylvania's kindergarteners, we still have a way to go to meet the needs of all children," Benso said. With block grant funding the number of children attending full day kindergarten increased to 51 percent

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last year, but the national average rose to 65 percent. The increased funding will make it likely that more school districts will move to fund full-day kindergarten, as well as pre-K.

Under the new budget proposal, investments in Project 720 and dual enrollment will grow, thereby providing more opportunities for high school students to successfully transition to adulthood. Project 720 makes grants to school districts to increase the rigor of the high school curriculum, establishes smaller learning environments, improves counseling services and supports dual enrollment efforts which allow school districts to enter into agreements with higher education institutions to offer college-level courses and credits to high school students.

Project 720 funding grows to \$9 million which will enable 30 additional high schools to better meet the needs of their students. The investment in dual enrollment is increasing from \$5 to \$7 million which will allow 3,000 more students to participate in college-level courses.

“One in five ninth graders in Pennsylvania today will fail to graduate from high school in four years, leaving them ill prepared for the future. We must advance strategies designed to assure that our youth are Ready By 21™, ready for college, ready for work, ready for life,” Benso said. “Increasing investments in basic and special education along with building on our base in Project 720 and dual enrollment will help to clear some key roadblocks for Pennsylvania’s youth.”

A \$15 million increase in Head Start funding – taking the appropriation to \$45 million – will allow more low-income eligible preschool children to be served. “That means that an additional 1,540 at-risk kids will get the benefit of pre-kindergarten through Head Start,” Benso said, but she added that only 66.5 percent of eligible children are currently enrolled in Head Start due to the lack of available funding and the recent federal budget cuts to Head Start.

A significant increase in the child care investment will help fund the Keystone STARS program - an initiative to improve, support and recognize quality child care programs - as well as subsidized child care. However, there is still a waiting list for subsidized child care and the list continues to grow. “Parents need child care as a critical work support as they move toward self sufficiency and children deserve care that meets their developmental needs – less than 5 percent of the slots in child care in Pennsylvania today are high quality,” Benso said.

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