



**Pennsylvania Partnerships for Children
House Education Committee Testimony
Joan L. Benso, President and CEO
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Good Morning, Chairman Roebuck and Chairman Stairs and members of the House Education Committee. I am Joan Benso, President and CEO of Pennsylvania Partnerships for Children. PPC is a strong, effective, and trusted voice for improving the health, education, and well-being of the Commonwealth's children. Our vision is that by 2014, PPC will have helped Pennsylvania move into position as one of the top 10 states in the nation to be a child and to raise a child.

I appreciate the opportunity to testify today about House Bill 1057. I will focus my comments on the portion of the legislation that establishes Pre-K Counts - the proposal to invest \$75 million in high-quality pre-K in the FY 2007-2008 budget. Four years ago, Pennsylvania had the unfortunate distinction of being one of only nine states making no investment in pre-kindergarten education. Thankfully, that is no longer the case.

We now have a real opportunity to improve upon these initial investments and advance pre-K opportunities for Pennsylvania's youngest learners as the legislature considers the 2007-08 budget. I take pride in the fact that PPC's policy recommendations are grounded in sound research and analysis. Based on our review of the literature, it is very clear that research overwhelmingly supports high-quality pre-K as an education strategy.

High quality pre-K programs for 3- and 4-year-olds give children better preparation for school and greater success in school:

- ◆ They enter kindergarten with better language, reading, math, cognitive, and social skills.ⁱ
- ◆ They have fewer grade retentions, less remediation, higher standardized test scores, and higher graduation rates.ⁱⁱ
- ◆ Pennsylvania results mirror broader national studies. School districts investing in pre-K recoup as much as 78% in education cost savings and some districts with high special education costs recoup as much as 116%.ⁱⁱⁱ 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.^{iv}

And high-quality pre-K programs give children greater success later in life. They are more likely to mature into more responsible citizens who are married, have higher educational attainment, and hold better paying jobs.^v

Numerous studies reveal the cost-benefit of high-quality pre-K, including a recent analysis of the Perry Preschool Program in Michigan, where each dollar spent saved an estimated \$17 in reduced expenditures for education, welfare, criminal justice, and other public spending on program graduates through age 40.^{vi}

You will note that I continually reference “high-quality pre-K.” That is because quality really matters with pre-K. If we want to achieve the great returns on investment in pre-K described above, funds must be directed to high-quality pre-K.

Pre-K Counts is high-quality pre-K. It is built upon a strong base, consisting of early learning standards and State Board of Education regulations regarding pre-K. The regulations address issues including length of day and year, age appropriate standards-based curriculum, instruction, and assessments, group size, comprehensive services, and credentials for teachers in contracted community-based programs and for all paraprofessionals. The State Board has proposed revisions in the requirements for public school pre-K teachers. It is important to note that any successful applicant for Pre-K Counts will need to comply with *all* these rules assuring that we will realize the return on investment the research promises.

Each year the National Institute for Early Education Research (NIEER) grades public funded preschool programs based on a list of 10 quality indicators. In its 2006 State Preschool Yearbook released just last week, Pennsylvania’s programs received a grade of 4 out of a possible 10.^{vii} But, if we enact and implement Pre-K Counts, Pennsylvania’s grade on the NIEER standards will jump to a 9+.

The purpose of Pre-K Counts is to fund high-quality pre-K for children at risk of education failure (based on identifiers including poverty, cultural isolation and disability). We all know that children at risk of education failure can be found in every community of the Commonwealth. These children benefit the most from high-quality pre-K.

Under Pre-K Counts, children in need, wherever they live, could be served and reap the many benefits of pre-K. While high concentrations of at-risk children live in our urban centers, one in three children in Pennsylvania lives in a low-income family and that includes half of the children who live in our rural communities.

Under this proposal, school districts and private providers across Pennsylvania would be eligible to compete for funding via an RFP process. While funding would come from the state, key decisions on program structure would be made at the local community level. School districts, child care providers, Head Start providers and licensed nursery schools will have the flexibility to design programs to meet the needs of their community and the children who they will serve.

Communities that submit applications that demonstrate local partnerships will be favorably reviewed. Linking school districts with other providers makes a lot of sense and allows communities to take the best of both worlds to offer the best pre-K opportunities to our youngest learners. For example, in some communities, schools may lack the physical capacity to offer pre-K and some private providers may lack fully qualified teachers to teach pre-K. This presents a great opportunity to utilize the

physical space of private providers and highly qualified teachers from the school district to serve children in the community.

The biggest local decision will be in the hands of parents, because the proposal embraces voluntary pre-K. Parents will have the option to send their children to high quality pre-K, perhaps offered by one or more different providers to suit their needs and the needs of their children.

Accountability is another key ingredient of Pre-K Counts. Accountability is built into many facets of the proposal. First of all, funds are directed to students, not infrastructure or bureaucracy. Again, of great importance, funds are directed to students who benefit most from high-quality pre-K – students at risk of education failure. Accountability also takes the form of rigorous financial oversight and student evaluation. All pre-K programs that receive funding under Pre-K Counts would be required to utilize an assessment system to track student progress and make sure that programs are in fact delivering high-quality pre-K.

While we have made excellent headway with early care and education efforts in Pennsylvania, the time for a dedicated pre-K funding stream has clearly come. Other states are eclipsing our efforts. Four states have charted a path toward universal pre-K: Georgia, Florida, and Oklahoma for 4-year-olds and Illinois for 3- and 4-year-olds.^{viii}

- ◆ Georgia began its program in 1995 and currently uses over \$300 million in lottery funds to support it.
- ◆ A referendum in Florida amended the state Constitution to establish universal pre-K, currently funded at about \$400 million.
- ◆ Beginning with pilot projects in 1980, Oklahoma now spends about \$209 million on its pre-K program.
- ◆ Illinois enacted a state statute just last year that commits to universal pre-K over the next few years and currently has state appropriation of \$283 million.

Other neighboring and competitor states also are making significant commitments to pre-K.^{ix}

- ◆ New York adopted legislation in 1997 establishing a blueprint for voluntary pre-K in all of the state's school districts and now spends in excess of \$300 million per year. Governor Spitzer is now calling for the program to be made universal. And, the state budget they just enacted includes an additional \$100 million.
- ◆ In New Jersey, the courts in 1998 ordered state support for pre-K in the 30 poorest school districts. State funding for pre-K in those districts totals over \$578 million. Plans are being discussed to expand the program into other districts.
- ◆ The West Virginia legislature has passed legislation requiring that pre-K be offered to all 4-year-olds by 2012; it is currently offered universally in 5 of the state's 55 counties at a state cost of almost \$48 million.
- ◆ North Carolina established a pre-K initiative in 2001 that currently is funded at almost \$85 million.

Pre-kindergarten programs and state support for them both are growing rapidly, and while it is difficult to get consistent up-to-date data on every state, one thing is clear – the trend is upward as the governors of 31 states – including Pennsylvania – proposed to increase state support for pre-K in fiscal year 2007.^x

Some have suggested the Commonwealth should not join these states in investing dedicated funds for pre-K for our youngest learners. They recommend investing additional funds in the Education Improvement Tax Credit in lieu of investing in Pre-K Counts. PPC has always supported EITC and would not be opposed to its expansion. However, it is not a replacement for a high-quality pre-K financing strategy. There is broad and general agreement on the tremendous return on investment in high-quality pre-K. There are no standards associated with EITC that assures that level of program quality nor is there any evidence of comparable child based outcomes since the programs inception six years ago. Therefore, this alternative fails to assure that we will realize the return on investment the literature promises.

PPC strongly supports Pre-K Counts for the many reasons outlined above. We are proud to be an organizing partner of the *Pre-K Today* campaign. This broad-based statewide effort was launched to support the proposed \$75 million investment in Pre-K Counts. No doubt, you have heard from the campaign both in Harrisburg and in your local district. The campaign has about 600 organizational members from around the Commonwealth.

We estimate that Pre-K Today partners have made well over 600 visits with members of the General Assembly and have hosted a number of local events. These contacts reveal that members of the General Assembly clearly understand the research and the many benefits of investing in high-quality pre-K. Newspapers from Erie to Pottsville, from Scranton to Pittsburgh and many others in between have already editorialized in support of the pre-K proposal and urged the General Assembly to take action.

Pennsylvania has abandoned its distinction of being one of only nine states not providing state support for pre-K. But in order to keep pace we need to do more. If we fail to, our children are seriously disadvantaged and ultimately the Commonwealth loses as we fail to adequately prepare children to enter school ready to learn – the very children that will be our workforce tomorrow.

As the General Assembly considers the Governor's proposal and develops the ultimate 2007-08 state budget, many issues will be considered and debated. Some will be particularly controversial and contentious. And there will be debate about the form of others, including this one. But the General Assembly has a unique opportunity this spring to make a real difference for thousands of Pennsylvania's youngest learners. And that difference – high-quality, state-supported, voluntary pre-K – will pay handsome dividends as an education strategy for the children who benefit directly and as an investment strategy for the schools, communities, and the Commonwealth itself that will reap the long-term rewards of a wise investment. It is actually quite simple, our children need pre-K, and our Commonwealth will benefit from providing it.

Thank you for allowing me to appear before you today to discuss this proposal that will serve as a key ingredient to make Pennsylvania one of the top 10 states in the nation to be a child and to raise a child.

ⁱ Peisner-Feinberg et al. *The Children of Cost, Quality and Outcomes Study Go to School*, 2000.

ⁱⁱ National Research Council. *Op cit.*

ⁱⁱⁱ Pennsylvania BUILD Initiative. *Invest Now or Pay More Later: Early Childhood Education Promises Savings to Pennsylvania School Districts*, 2006.

^{iv} UCLID Center. *Allegheny County Early Childhood Initiative Evaluation*, 2002, p. 42.

^v University of North Carolina. *Early Learning, Later Success: The Abecedarian Study*, 1999.

^{vi} Schweinhart, et al. *The High Scope/Perry Preschool Study Through Age 40*, 2005.

^{vii} Barnett, S., et al. *The State of Preschool: 2006 State Preschool Yearbook*. New Brunswick, NJ: National Institute for Early Education Research, 2007.

^{ix} Strategies for Children. *The Momentum Grows: Universal Pre-Kindergarten in Other States*, 2006.