



Pennsylvania Partnerships for Children

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David S. Feinberg
Chair of the Board

Good morning. My name is Joan Benso and I am President & CEO of Pennsylvania Partnerships for Children (PPC). PPC is a statewide, independent, non-partisan, data-driven child advocacy organization. We seek to improve the health, education and well-being of the Commonwealth's children. Our vision is by 2014, PPC will have helped Pennsylvania move into the position as one of the top 10 states in the nation to be a child and raise a child. I'd like to thank Chairmen Roebuck and Clymer for the opportunity to share PPC's thoughts on House Bill 2205, which makes a number of changes to the Commonwealth's Pre-K Counts Program.

Eight years ago, Pennsylvania had the distinction of being one of nine states that failed to provide dedicated state funding to support high-quality pre-K. In recent years, the Commonwealth has established programs that support high-quality pre-K including the Head Start Supplemental Assistance Program, Education Accountability Block Grant and Pre-K Counts.

Many studies show a positive return for children, schools and communities by investing in high-quality pre-K. The most notable is the ongoing long-term study of the Perry Preschool program. The latest review of the program shows that each dollar invested returned up to \$16 in crime, education and welfare savings, and higher earnings for participants and increased taxes paid.ⁱ Children who attend high-quality pre-K programs enter kindergarten with better language, reading, math and social skills.ⁱⁱ They have fewer grade retentions, less remediation, higher standardized test scores and higher graduation rates.ⁱⁱⁱ A recent study in Pennsylvania also showed school districts could recoup as much as 78% of pre-K spending in education savings and special education costs could be reduced statewide by at least 8% annually.^{iv}

These great results are not achieved without a strong commitment to high-quality. Simply put – quality matters. It is high-quality that produces the positive academic results for children and the tremendous return on investments. PPC strongly supported the creation of Pre-K Counts in 2007. We touted the potential returns on investment that Pre-K Counts could produce but we cautioned that quality was the key. We conditioned and still do condition our support for Pre-K Counts legislation on the assurance that the program must be high-quality and we believe that the state should not sacrifice quality for increased access to Pre-K Counts.

The National Institute for Early Education Research's (NIEER), under the guidance of a prominent research council, created a list of ten benchmarks that constitute high-quality for pre-K programs. The benchmarks include comprehensive early learning standards; degreed teachers who engage in continued professional development and specialize in early learning; maximum class-size and staff: child ratios; and health, vision and hearing screenings and at least one family support service. The benchmarks are used to rate state pre-K programs. When Pre-K Counts programs requirements are fully phased in, Pennsylvania will receive a 9.5 on the NIEER scale.

The strength of the statutory and regulatory base makes Pre-K Counts a high-quality program when measured against the NIEER benchmarks. And, because it is high-quality, the program is achieving great success. Evaluation data shows that 75 percent of the nearly 12,000 children at risk of education failure who entered Pre-K Counts programs in 62 counties completed the most recent school year with age-appropriate proficiency in literacy, numeracy and social skills.^v There is no question that the Commonwealth's investment in Pre-K Counts is producing great results for our youngest learners and quality is the key.

We must remind you that not all children who could benefit from high-quality publicly funded pre-K, and Pre-K Counts in particular, have access to it. There are about 295,000 3 and 4-year olds in Pennsylvania. Less than 18 percent of these children have access to high-quality publicly funded pre-K.^{vi} We define high-quality publicly funded pre-K as public school pre-K, Head Start and Pre-K Counts. If we dig a little deeper into the data, we find that more than 57 percent of all 3 and 4-year olds live in families with

incomes below 300 percent of the federal poverty level (this is the income ceiling for eligibility for Pre-K Counts). But only 30 percent of children in these families have access to high-quality publicly funded pre-K.^{vii} We must do more to help our youngest learners be ready for school and secure the gains promised by high-quality pre-K by increasing access to the program.

It is with these considerations in mind regarding high-quality pre-K that PPC examined HB 2205's proposed changes to Pre-K Counts. There are several provisions of the measure that don't raise red flags for us. A number of these provisions are consistent with recently IRRC-approved final regulations for Pre-K Counts. Examples include: verifying family income for participants; assuring that Pre-K providers engage in outreach and partnership with other early learning programs to target children for service; requiring 180 days of service; allowing families to voluntarily pay for all or part of the service; and more. Several provisions are also consistent with SB 1073 which we do not oppose.

On the whole, however, PPC opposes House Bill 2205 as presently drafted. We are very concerned with the potential impact of three specific provisions dealing with accreditation, authority for school districts to have their own early learning standards and authorizing co-pays without a legislative and regulatory process.

House Bill 2205 would exempt Pre-K Counts providers from complying with program guidelines as long as they are accredited by a national education accrediting agency. We are very concerned that this provision fails to protect the high-quality of Pre-K Counts programs. Pre-K Counts program guidelines are backed by nearly thirty years of research and analysis. They are rigorous and are designed to improve child outcomes.

A simple internet search turns up 15 or so national education accrediting bodies. Are their accreditation standards driven by improving student achievement and child outcomes? Are they on par with Pre-K Counts? Would 75 percent of children enrolled in a program accredited by the body have ended the most recent school year with age appropriate skills and behaviors? PPC has no confidence that we can confidently

answer yes to these questions. Furthermore, how would the Commonwealth review these accreditation standards when they are revised by their national bodies?

It is also important to note that national accreditation bodies such as Middle States and the National Association for the Education of Young Children would require their accredited programs to comply with the state requirements in place to become and remain accredited. We see no rationale to exempt providers from program guidelines just because they are accredited by some national organization. Pre-K Counts is successful; we know it is working. From PPC's point of view, there isn't a good reason to take a chance on reducing its success by opening up the door to exempt providers from program requirements. We run the risk of diminishing the positive results we are achieving in Pre-K Counts. That doesn't seem to be prudent fiscal policy.

We are also concerned that House Bill 2205 would allow a Pre-K Counts provider to align its curriculum with early learning standards established by the Department of Education or those established by a school district. School districts don't have the authority to develop academic standards in grades K-12. Neither do they have the option to pick and choose from Pennsylvania's academic standards. Pennsylvania's early learning standards are research-based and aligned with the Commonwealth's K-12 academic standards, creating a pre-K through 12th grade continuum.

Pre-K Counts is a voluntary program. Providers are fully informed of program guidelines and willingly participate by responding to a request for proposals. The Commonwealth does not mandate provider participation in the program. Those who choose to participate should be required to the program's statute, regulations and guidance.

Regardless of whether a child is receiving Pre-K Counts through a public school, Head Start, licensed nursery school, or regulated child care center, we need to ensure that the program is consistent. Otherwise, there is no assurance that the nearly 12,000 children currently enrolled in Pre-K Counts across the Commonwealth are on an equal path to school readiness.

Our third objection to House Bill 2205 deals with its provisions authorizing a study by the Legislative Budget and Finance Committee (LB & FC) on whether the program

should charge fees and co-pays. We believe that Pre-K Counts is a part of the public education continuum and parents should not have to pay for the education of their children – regardless of their age. However, we do not oppose a study to examine the issue. What we do oppose is the bill’s language that requires the Department of Education to automatically implement co-pays effective with the 2011-12 school year if recommended by the study. The bill seems to take you, the members of the General Assembly, out of the equation and eliminate any opportunity for legislative input. It also ignores the regulatory process that has been used for many programs that have cost-sharing with families. We share the frustration of some that LB&FC studies – which are chock full of helpful information to guide policy – sometimes fail to be considered by anyone. We think that the General Assembly, especially the appropriate committees, should always play an oversight role when and LB & FC study is released.

Pre-K Counts is a very successful high-quality program that is achieving great results for children, schools and communities across the state. Our opposition to House Bill 2205 is based on our opinion that it isn’t prudent fiscal policy to change the program in any way that could decrease its quality and likely decrease the positive results the program has already achieved. Let’s remember what is at stake – the school readiness of 3 and 4-year olds who are at risk of education failure. We owe it to them and their families and to the taxpayers who fund Pre-K Counts to maintain the quality and consistency of the program.

Thank you.

i Schweinhart, L. J., Montie, J., Xiang, Z., Barnett, W. S., Belfield, C. R., & Nores, M. (2005). Lifetime effects: The High/Scope Perry Preschool study through age 40. (Monographs of the High/Scope Educational Research Foundation. Ypsilanti, MI: High/Scope Press.

ii Peisner-Feinberg, E.S., Burchinal, M.R. Clifford, R.M., Culkin, M.L., Howes, C., Kagan, S.L., Yazejian, N., Byler, P., Rustici, J., & Zelazo, J (2000). The children of the cost, quality and outcomes study go to school: Technical report. Chapel Hill; University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, Frank Porter Graham Child Development Center.

iii National Research Council and Institute of Medicine (2000) From neurons to neighborhoods: The science of early childhood development. Committee on Integrating the Science of Early Childhood Development. Jack P. Shonkoff and Deborah A. Phillips, eds. Board on Children, Youth, and Families, Commission on Behavioral and Social Sciences and Education. Washington, D.C.: National Academy Press.

iv Pennsylvania Build Initiative. (2006). Invest now or pay more later: Early childhood education promises savings to Pennsylvania school districts.

v Office of Child Development and Early Learning. (2009). Pennsylvania Pre-K Counts: End of year report 2008-2009. Harrisburg, PA: Pennsylvania Departments of Education and Public Welfare.

vi School readiness in Pennsylvania. Harrisburg, PA: Pennsylvania Partnerships for Children. (2009).

vii Ibid.