

# A Smart Choice for a Solid Start: *The Case for Pre-k in PA*



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What do Gov. Tom Corbett, former Gov. Ed Rendell and more than 125 Democratic and Republican members of the Pennsylvania General Assembly have in common?

Give up? They all have been strong supporters of high-quality pre-k for Pennsylvania's 3- and 4-year olds. Unfortunately, lean economic times and competing budget priorities haven't allowed their support to go deep enough.

Children only have one chance to be preschoolers and benefit from early learning opportunities. They don't get a do-over when the economy fully recovers or policymakers agree that it's their turn to be at the top of the budget priority list. Today in Pennsylvania, there are only enough public funds to make pre-k available to help fewer than 20 percent of 3- and 4-year-olds access high-quality programs. As a result, many families cannot find or afford high-quality pre-k essential to their children's success.

Most brain development has occurred by the time a child reaches kindergarten, but not every child is provided with the stimulating environments and nurturing interactions that can develop those young minds to their fullest potential. High-quality pre-k for every 3- and 4-year-old in Pennsylvania is a proven solution that can help ensure every child is ready to succeed.

We know that high-quality pre-k works. It benefits students, strengthens our schools, saves us money and helps build a more successful Pennsylvania. This truly once-in-a-lifetime opportunity helps create a solid foundation for the rest of a child's education – from kindergarten to high school graduation and beyond.

## The Benefits of High-quality Pre-k

Here in Pennsylvania, 4-year-olds in publicly supported pre-k made dramatic gains in academic and social proficiency in 2012-13.<sup>i</sup>

A growing body of research shows why those gains matter. Investing in high-quality pre-kindergarten for 3- and 4-year-olds has a long-term ripple effect that positively benefits children by:

- *Significantly improving early literacy, language and math skills as children enter kindergarten.*<sup>ii</sup>
- *Cutting special education placements by nearly half through second grade.*<sup>iii</sup>
- *Reducing grade repetition by as much as a third through eighth grade.*<sup>iv</sup>
- *Increasing the likelihood of high school graduation and college enrollment, which in turn leads to stronger employment opportunities and lifetime earning potential.*<sup>v</sup>

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High-quality pre-k also can help young learners build the social and emotional skills that send them to kindergarten ready to learn and take advantage of the educational benefits of the classroom. This solid start fuels academic success in later years, preparing the child to celebrate the delights of learning with future classmates and teachers.

Take, for example, the young boy enrolled in York's Crispus Attucks Early Learning Center. His challenging behavior fueled his removal from another program, but Crispus Attucks staff welcomed him because they knew the difference a high-quality program could make in addressing his disruptive behavior.

Seven months after the highly trained, accredited staff at the center began working with the boy, he is succeeding very well.

**“When children receive the help they need at centers such as ours, then they don’t need extra help when they get to school. We’ve already dealt with behavioral issues before they get to the public schools,” said Crispus Attucks Center Director Carol Heagy.**

Conversely, she notes, “if children don’t get the help they need in high-quality early learning centers, when they get to kindergarten they have real issues, and then the school districts have to start from scratch.”

## When Every Child Has the Opportunity to Learn, Communities Benefit

Other benefits of high-quality pre-k go far beyond the classroom, positively impacting taxpayers, communities and the commonwealth’s economy:

- *Every dollar spent on pre-k returns, up to \$17 in later savings and benefits.*<sup>vi</sup>
- *Pennsylvania school districts investing in pre-k could recoup as much as 78 percent of their pre-k investments in other education savings.*<sup>vii</sup>
- *Pre-k can fuel stronger employment rates and higher earnings in adulthood.*<sup>viii</sup>
- *Pre-k creates crime-related savings of between \$2 and \$11 per dollar invested.*<sup>ix</sup>

As the widespread benefits of high-quality pre-k become better known, a statewide chorus of influential, varied and even surprising voices is rising in support of stronger investments in it.

Business leaders increasingly recognize that few investments make as much research-based sense as high-quality early learning programs. They’re a smart choice in difficult economic times because they provide an immediate boost to our economy and build stronger communities in the long-term. Business leaders often cite quality early childhood programs as a way to attract skilled workers to Pennsylvania now (by offering proven programs for their children) and develop the future employees Pennsylvania needs to compete.<sup>x</sup>

Delaware County business executive Philip A. Peterson saw the impact of high-quality pre-kindergarten when he helped the 3-year-old son of a colleague – a single, working mom – enroll in a high-quality preschool.

“Before attending, the little boy didn’t speak except in unintelligible, single words,” recalls Peterson, a partner at AON Hewitt. “One month after starting preschool, he was speaking in comprehensible phrases and sentences. This child continues to make progress in school today and is a happy, confident kid.”

Military leaders call access to high-quality pre-k a national security issue, noting a strong foundation of early learning is critical to ensuring military readiness.

**“Whether it’s improving young people’s educational trajectory or keeping them on the right side of the law, quality early education has shown it can provide the foundation on which to build real success,” said U.S. Army Lt. Gen. (Ret.) Dennis Benchoff, of Lancaster.**

Law enforcement officials cite research showing high-quality pre-k can reduce disruptive, problem behaviors in early childhood that, if left unaddressed, can lead to anti-social and delinquent behavior – and even violent crime – later in life.

**“No child is destined from birth to end up in jail. We would all much rather see kids in graduation gowns and caps than handcuffs and prison jumpsuits,” said Chester County District Attorney Thomas Hogan.**

## Pre-k Support Crosses Party Lines

Just as support for publicly funded pre-k programs has grown among business and military leaders and law enforcement officials, it also has grown on a state and national scale among elected leaders and voters – and the support stretches across political parties. High-quality pre-k is not solely a “red state” or “blue state” priority. When it comes to giving children a great start in life, the nation is increasingly “purple.” Here in

Pennsylvania, Republican Gov. Tom Corbett has recognized the need for stronger pre-k investments, as did his predecessor, Democratic Gov. Ed Rendell. This support also extends across the General Assembly, where more than 125 members of the House and Senate – half of the entire legislature – belong to the bi-partisan Early Childhood Education Caucus.

A recent non-partisan poll conducted by Public Opinion Strategies and Hart Research found that 86 percent of voters agree that ensuring our children get a good start in life is an important national priority, second only to increasing jobs and economic growth. Seven in 10 voiced support for a federal plan to help their states and local communities drive innovation in this field and provide better early learning opportunities for the children who need it most.



Pennsylvania voters also express strong, bipartisan support for investing more into high-quality pre-k. A statewide poll of more than 600 likely voters conducted in November 2013 shows 63 percent of Pennsylvanians support increasing funding for pre-k and 58 percent of those polled saying they favor increased funding even if it increased their taxes.

Support for expanding access to high-quality pre-k is strong across party lines in the commonwealth. The poll found that in both major parties (and among independents), a majority of likely voters favors giving every 3- and 4-year-old access to high-quality pre-k.

This broad voter support of high-quality pre-k rests on two strongly held values: voters recognize the importance of ensuring all children arrive at kindergarten ready to learn, and they recognize the positive outcomes generated by high-quality pre-k programs.

## PA Pre-k Enrollment Rates Stagnating

Despite widespread support and growing evidence of its benefits in preparing children for k-12 learning, Pennsylvania's investments in publicly funded pre-k have not significantly increased in recent years.

**Only 1 in 6 children benefit from this once-in-a-lifetime learning opportunity.**

In 2013, just 18 percent – or almost 53,000 of the commonwealth's nearly 297,000 3- and 4-year-olds – were able to benefit from high-quality, publicly funded pre-k.

This leaves nearly a quarter of a million children missing out on the opportunity pre-k provides in preparing young learners for kindergarten. We need to increase investments in pre-k so we can boost access and reap the full benefits pre-k provides.

## Increased Investments = Greater Impact

Children deprived of quality early learning don't get a second chance to benefit from pre-k, and the missed opportunity can lead to a lifetime of trying to catch up.

Increased state support can ensure that many more children have high-quality learning opportunities before they enter kindergarten. Educational investments must begin in the early years, or the later achievement gap will be too wide and very costly to overcome. The National Institute for Early Education Research (NIEER) indicates \$7,467 per child annually is

needed to sufficiently provide a high-quality program, but Pennsylvania only invests an average of \$5,474 per child per year in our state-funded programs. The lagging investment is one reason Pennsylvania dropped from 25<sup>th</sup> to 28<sup>th</sup> among the states in the percentage of 4-year-olds participating in state pre-k programs last year. NIEER data shows Pennsylvania's neighbors – New York, New Jersey, Maryland and West Virginia – are all doing better in 4-year-old participation.

Even before Pennsylvania dropped in the rankings, several other states were making stronger investments in pre-k than Pennsylvania, and some began their efforts years earlier. Georgia started the nation's first universal preschool program for 4-year-olds in 1995. Oklahoma became the second state to offer free, voluntary access to preschool programs for all 4-year-olds. In addition to Georgia and Oklahoma, New York, Wisconsin, West Virginia and the District of Columbia either provide high-quality pre-k or are on the pathway to providing it for all 3- and 4-year-olds.

Pennsylvania must take aggressive steps to put our kids on a comparable playing field to their peers in other states. Ensuring more children can benefit from high-quality pre-k and enter school better prepared for academic success must be part of that goal.

NIEER has set the standard for high-quality pre-k programs, having convened a national research advisory panel to review the literature on pre-k and create a 10-point rating scale, which includes teacher qualifications, standards, group size, child-adult ratios, etc. PA Pre-K Counts received a ranking of 7 and Head

Start ranked an 8. Additional NIEER research indicates

that one core element of quality is the qualifications of the pre-k teacher. All publicly funded pre-k programs in Pennsylvania require teachers to have college degrees and early childhood training. Accreditation is another indicator of high quality. The Council on Accreditation, National Association for the Education of Young Children, National Early Childhood Program Accreditation and the National Association of Family Child Care all provide accreditation for Pennsylvania pre-k programs based on high-quality standards.

Pennsylvania wisely relies on a variety of public and private programs to provide high-quality pre-kindergarten. Programs that have reached key quality standards include child care programs with Keystone STAR 3 and 4 designations, Pre-K Counts grantees, private academic schools, public schools, and other programs accredited by the entities listed above.



Unfortunately, there simply are not enough high-quality programs serving Pennsylvania's preschool age children. Today in the commonwealth, fewer than 1 in 3 preschool children attends a program that meets the high-quality standards designed to ensure they have the opportunity to learn and will be prepared for kindergarten.

Further complicating this issue is the economic reality that the cost of high-quality pre-kindergarten is out of reach for many families. High-quality, private pre-k costs about \$8,800 a year,<sup>xi</sup> so a three-member family living at poverty level (earning \$19,530 a year) would have to spend nearly half of its income to enroll just one child.<sup>xii</sup>



For these families, pre-k could be the largest household expense, exceeding even housing costs. Affordability is a challenge for middle class families, too. For families with annual incomes between \$38,521 and \$62,434, the cost of enrolling one child in private, high-quality pre-k could be the second or third highest cost in their budgets behind housing and possibly transportation.<sup>xiii</sup>

Considering the high costs of private pre-k can consume so much of a family's income, it's hardly surprising that 4-year-olds from families in lower income brackets are enrolled in any type of pre-k, public or private, at much lower rates than those in families in the highest two income brackets.

## A PA Pre-k Call to Action

High-quality pre-k can help ensure all of Pennsylvania's children enter school with a solid foundation for the years of learning that lie ahead. When a child enters school with the academic, social and emotional skills that quality pre-k helps provide, it benefits not only that individual student, but also that student's peers. Prepared young learners are apt to be more focused and engaged in the classroom, meaning fewer disruptions or delays that can sidetrack others in the same classroom from reaching their fullest academic potential.

Of course, the sooner high-quality pre-k is made available to all Pennsylvania children, the sooner its benefits accrue. That sense of urgency has given rise to a new statewide campaign called "Pre-K for PA: All Children Ready to Succeed" that launched in January 2014.

The "Pre-K for PA" campaign's **vision** is that **every 3- and 4-year-old child in Pennsylvania has access to high-quality pre-k.**

The "Pre-K for PA" campaign's goal is to ensure every 3- and 4-year-old in Pennsylvania has access to high-quality pre-k, and that goal starts with educating the public and policymakers

about the benefits of high-quality pre-k and elevating the discussion on how it can be made available to every family that wants it for their child. You can learn more about this effort and join the campaign by visiting [prekforpa.org](http://prekforpa.org).

Young children get one chance to benefit from high-quality pre-k, and delayed investments mean not only lost opportunities, but higher costs to our children and our society for missing those opportunities. This is especially true for children who are at greater risk of academic failure due to circumstances beyond their control.

**Supporting high-quality pre-k "can be a pursuit of the heart – but beyond that, it is responsible stewardship of our children and our future," said Delaware County business executive Philip A. Peterson.**

The time has come for our elected officials, those seeking elected office and Pennsylvania voters to become those stewards and put the needs of our children first by making high-quality pre-k accessible to every 3- and 4-year old in the commonwealth.

By dramatically increasing our investments in high-quality pre-k accessibility and affordability, Pennsylvania can reap short- and long-term benefits that pay off for all of us. Investing more in our youngest learners is not only a smart step – it's a necessary one.

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Pennsylvania Partnerships for Children is part of the statewide Pre-k for PA Campaign. For more information visit: [prekforpa.org](http://prekforpa.org).

The list of citations used in this report can be found at [papartnerships.org/prekinpa](http://papartnerships.org/prekinpa)

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