

# A Path Forward

## Publicly Funded, High-Quality Pre-K in Pennsylvania



### Pre-K in Pennsylvania

Access to high-quality pre-kindergarten is a fundamental building block of our state's education system and helps ensure children have the strong foundation necessary to enter kindergarten ready to learn. Decades of research studies demonstrate the positive impact of attending high-quality pre-k for all kids, but evidence points to children living in lower-income families reaping the greatest benefits.

Every dollar invested in high-quality pre-k returns up to \$17 in long-term savings and benefits.<sup>1</sup> High-quality pre-k reduces grade repetition and special education placements in later grades, saving our schools money.<sup>2</sup> Children who benefit from high-quality pre-k are less likely to drop out of school and more likely to graduate and attend college, boosting their employment opportunities and earning power while reducing social services costs.<sup>3</sup> High-quality pre-k can mitigate disruptive and problem behaviors in early years that, if left unaddressed, can lead to anti-social or even criminal behavior in later years. This not only improves our collective quality of life; it also reduces costs in the criminal justice system.<sup>4</sup>

### Web-Based Mapping

The data presented in this report is available at the local level by visiting [papartnerships.org/prekinpa](http://papartnerships.org/prekinpa). Web-users will be able to search for their legislative and school districts and learn more information about local children served, unmet need, local providers, their current capacity and much more.

Pennsylvania's support for high-quality pre-kindergarten gained a foothold in the early 2000s with Governor Schweiker's Early Care and Education Task Force. Under Governor Rendell's leadership, the commonwealth enacted both the Head Start Supplemental Assistance Program and the Accountability Block Grant in 2003 and Pre-K Counts in 2007. Governor Corbett continued to advance small program growth immediately following the recession. Most recently, Governor Wolf proposed the largest funding expansion in the programs' history and a sizeable increase was realized in both 2015 and 2016. Driven by bi-partisan support, including both Democrat and Republican budget negotiators, pre-k growth was placed as a top state funding priority.

# Many Children Still Lack Access to High-Quality Pre-K

Unfortunately, even with recent state increases in publicly funded, high-quality pre-k, the unmet need for eligible children remains alarmingly high. There are over 112,900 eligible preschool children, or 64 percent statewide, who qualify for high-quality, publicly funded pre-k but remain unserved. This is not an issue concentrated in one geographic area of our state - children missing out on the benefits of pre-k live in every type of Pennsylvania community. Approximately, 68 percent of eligible children residing in rural school districts, 74 percent in suburban school districts and 51 percent in urban districts don't have the opportunity to attend publicly funded, high-quality pre-kindergarten.

## Eligible preschool children

who qualify for high-quality, publicly funded pre-k but remain unserved.

# 112,900

### Children who don't have the opportunity to attend publicly funded, high-quality pre-kindergarten.



residing in rural school districts



residing in suburban school districts



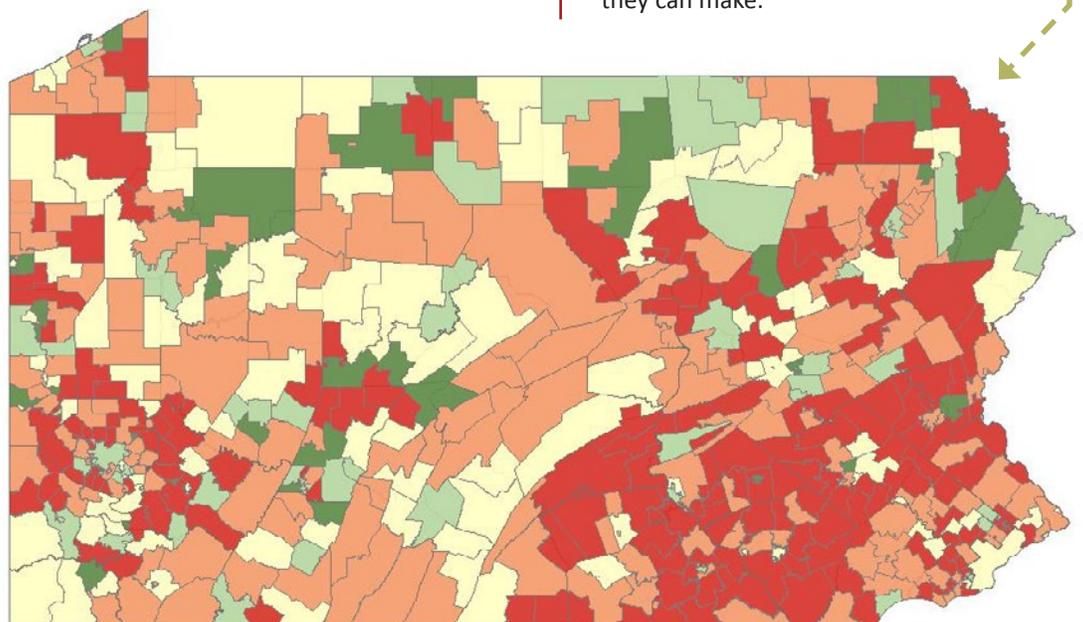
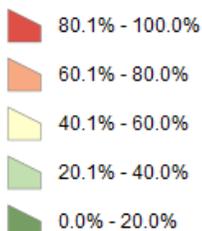
residing in urban school districts

In some communities, the unmet need is even greater than the statewide averages. For example, more than 80 percent of eligible children attending the **Deer Lakes**, **Greenwood** and **Solanco school districts** are not being served. The same is true for children living in suburban districts, where the economic needs of children can sometimes be overlooked. This is the case for students living in the **Interboro**, **Manheim Central** and **Red Lion school districts**. We also see a continued and persistent need in our urban centers where nearly 70 percent of children are going undeserved in the **Allentown** and **Reading school districts**. While a larger percentage of children are being served in urban communities, even a smaller percent of unmet need scales to alarmingly high numbers because of population density.

The old adage “a picture is worth a thousand words” rings true as we examine Pennsylvania maps detailing unmet need. Next school year, more than 380 of Pennsylvania’s 500 school districts will face the challenge of closing the readiness gap for 50 percent or more of their kindergarteners who were eligible but didn’t have the opportunity to attend high-quality, publicly funded pre-k programs. Only 32 school districts will have a kindergarten class filled in which 80 percent or more of their neediest children benefited from high-quality, publicly funded pre-k. This is clearly a missed opportunity and one that will cost the taxpayers more in education costs in the years to come.

Moving forward, it is imperative that the governor and general assembly continue to prioritize high-quality pre-kindergarten as one of the best public investments they can make.

Unmet need for publicly funded, high-quality pre-k



# Current Publicly Funded Pre-K Providers: A Model Public-Private Partnership

Currently, high-quality, publicly-funded pre-kindergarten is delivered in Head Start, Pre-K Counts programs, Keystone STAR 3 and 4 providers using Child Care Works funding, and public schools.

There are approximately 2,000 public and private provider sites delivering publicly funded, high-quality pre-k to nearly 64,000 children in our state. There are an additional 430 private provider sites that are eligible to compete for Pre-K Counts funding but not participating. All school districts are also eligible to compete for Pre-K Counts funds. Pre-K Counts relies on a mixed-service delivery system of pre-existing high-quality child care centers, Head Start sites, licensed private academic nursery schools and school districts.

As we scale our publicly funded pre-kindergarten investments, it will be critical to understand the challenges

facing our current public and private providers. For example, in some rural areas of the state, the supply of high-quality child care centers and private academic nursery schools is very sparse. In these areas, local education agencies might consider how they expand their reach. However, there is likely to be some resistance due to the serious funding shortfalls many school districts face in providing K-12 education. Private academic nursery schools are eligible to participate in Pre-K Counts but many do not, as they can fill their programs with children living in higher-income families that can afford their tuition.

Head Start programs have provided high-quality pre-k to our poorest children for more than 50 years predominately using federal funds. They have expanded access over the past 13 years to serve more children with state funds but also face challenges to do more. Head Start

programs are faced with the challenge in hiring and retaining qualified staff and a limited availability of appropriate facilities that meet health and safety standards.

High-quality child care centers provide a large percentage of publicly funded pre-k in our state but their capacity to scale-up is limited by several factors. Many participating programs have historically participated in Child Care Works – the state’s child care subsidy program. The state hasn’t raised the rate of reimbursement for these programs since 2007, currently paying at only the 33rd percentile of what providers charge families who pay private fees.<sup>5</sup> The impact is an industry that is fragile and failing to cover basic operating costs. Far too many providers have been rendered unable to achieve the quality standards necessary to participate in publicly funded pre-k, such as the requirement for higher credentialed teaching staff.

## Building Necessary Provider Capacity

While state investments have continued to expand access to high-quality pre-k and important efforts have been made to improve early learning program quality, they have simply not been enough.

### Rural School District

**Unmet Need (%)** 68.4%  
**Unmet Need (#)** 37,408  
**Additional High-Quality Classrooms to Scale-Up** 1,870

### Suburban School District

**Unmet Need (%)** 74.2%  
**Unmet Need (#)** 46,410  
**Additional High-Quality Classrooms to Scale-Up** 2,320

### Urban School District

**Unmet Need (%)** 51.2%  
**Unmet Need (#)** 31,863  
**Additional High-Quality Classrooms to Scale-Up** 1,593



# A Path Forward

Pennsylvania should be proud of its 13-year history of investing in high-quality pre-kindergarten and the bi-partisan support it enjoys. But we cannot rest on our laurels as we still fail to serve 64 percent of our preschoolers at greater risk of school failure. We need to continue to prioritize pre-k investments, and even in these challenging budget times, increase our expansion efforts.

Simply put, our preschoolers don't get a "do-over" when economic times gets better.

## The solutions include:

Expand state investments to reach more eligible children by investing \$85 M in FY 2017-18 and growing the investment to an additional \$340 M by FY 2020-21 to serve all eligible children; invest an additional \$100 M by FY 2022-23 to begin to serve children living in families with incomes over 300 percent of federal poverty income guidelines (FPIG).

Align and expand investments in Keystone STARS, guided by the STARS Revising process, to help providers achieve STAR 3 and 4.

Increase investments that will create an expanded pool of child care providers who achieve Keystone STAR 3 or 4 by improving state child care payment rates to reflect the true cost of providing high-quality child care.

Take steps to ensure that more eligible pre-kindergarten providers such as local education agencies and private academic nursery schools participate in Pre-K Counts, especially in communities where there are few, if any, child care centers.



## Acknowledgements

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Pennsylvania Partnerships for Children is a principal partner of the statewide Pre-k for PA Campaign.