



Prioritizing Pre-K in Pennsylvania: A State Comparison

Pennsylvania's continued investment in publicly funded, high-quality pre-k is part of a positive national trend as more than half of the states increased their investments in pre-k in FY 2016-17 for the fifth year in a row.

Research shows that the early years are a crucial time in a child's development. High-quality pre-k is a fundamental building block of our state's education system and it lays the foundation for a child's success in elementary school and beyond. A growing body of research has shown that by the age of five, a child's brain will have reached 90 percent of its adult size with more than 1 million neural connections formed every second.¹ Simply put, the learning a child experiences in this critical period can significantly influence later behavioral, educational and economic outcomes. Pre-k helps create a solid foundation upon which the rest of a child's education – from kindergarten through high school graduation – can be built.

Yet 64 percent of Pennsylvania preschoolers eligible for publicly funded, high-quality pre-k don't get to attend, even though a growing number of bipartisan elected officials, business, law enforcement, military, health care, education and civic leaders have embraced the lasting benefits of high-quality early learning.

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Economists and business leaders are increasingly convinced that high-quality early education is a sound investment – creating a productive workforce and stimulating the economy. Over the long term, every dollar invested in high-quality pre-k returns \$4 in savings and benefits to the commonwealth in the form of social services, reduced crime, increased earning power and more.²

"Businesses across Pennsylvania are challenged to find the right job candidates," says Peter Brubaker, former President & CEO of Susquehanna Media Company. "In many cases, potential candidates lack both the technical and soft skills employers want. Attending preschool has a tremendous effect on a child's social and academic success, which translates into a skilled and motivated workforce. In this sense, an investment in high-quality pre-k is a cost effective investment in the state's economic vitality."

Research demonstrates the positive impact attending high-quality pre-k has on all kids, but evidence points to children living in lower-income communities reaping the greatest benefits.

Children in higher-income families are more likely to attend preschool than children from lower-income families.³ In fact, 83 percent of four-year-olds in the U.S. who have families with income in the top quintile attend preschool. These children have other opportunities that some at-risk children do not, such as someone who regularly reads to them and challenges them to learn, nutritional meals and the chance to play outdoors more frequently, just to name a few.⁴

“As a former superintendent, I can attest to the positive impact high-quality pre-kindergarten programs have on the academic achievement of children,” says Mark D. DiRocco, Executive Director of the Pennsylvania Association of School Administrators. **“The children that attended the Pre-K Counts Program in my district grew academically and socially providing them with the foundational skills needed to be successful as they matriculated through the school system. It is one of the best investments we can make for our children.”**

“Investing in early learning – particularly for at-risk children – sends a message to our youngest citizens that their community supports them and is confident in their ability to be successful,” says Indiana County Sheriff Robert E. Fyock.

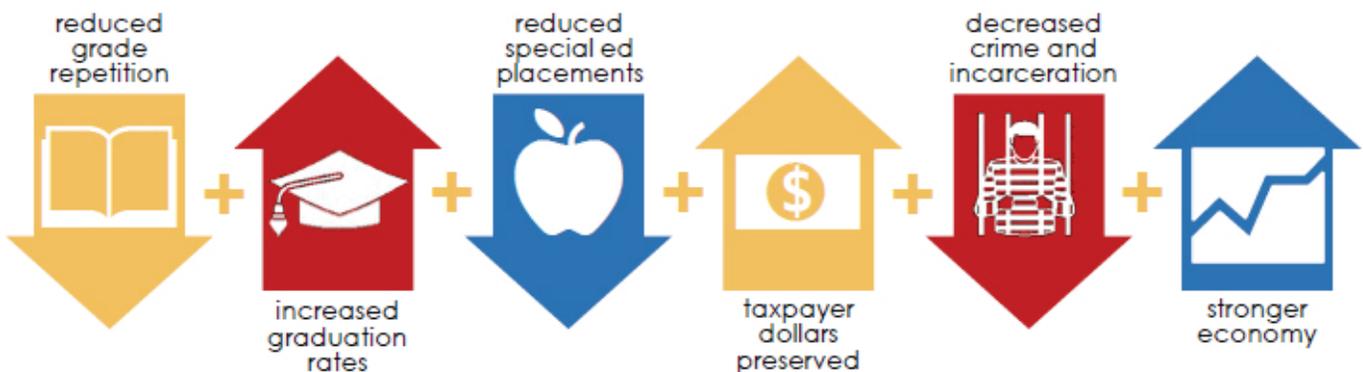
“From a law enforcement perspective, it is a mutually beneficial relationship that will ultimately create safer neighborhoods and a better quality of life for all.”

Investing in publicly funded, high-quality pre-k ensures at-risk children have the necessary tools to enter elementary school at the same proficiency level as their peers. At-risk children who participate in high-quality pre-k show immediate improvements in language and literacy skills. Lasting impacts have been found with reduced grade retention and special education placement in school and increased high school graduation and college enrollment rates.

Pennsylvania began funding pre-k in 2003 as a component of the Accountability Block Grant and the Head Start Supplemental Assistance Program. Pre-K Counts began in 2007 and Pennsylvania has grown its annual investment in pre-k, with the support of four consecutive governors. But our investment still isn’t enough to ensure that all eligible preschool age children benefit from publicly funded, high-quality pre-k, because 112,900 of them remain unserved and are unable to attend.

And while policymakers from both sides of the aisle joined governors from both parties by making pre-k a budget priority, even in tough budget years, other states are outpacing Pennsylvania’s investments and providing more opportunity to their preschoolers.

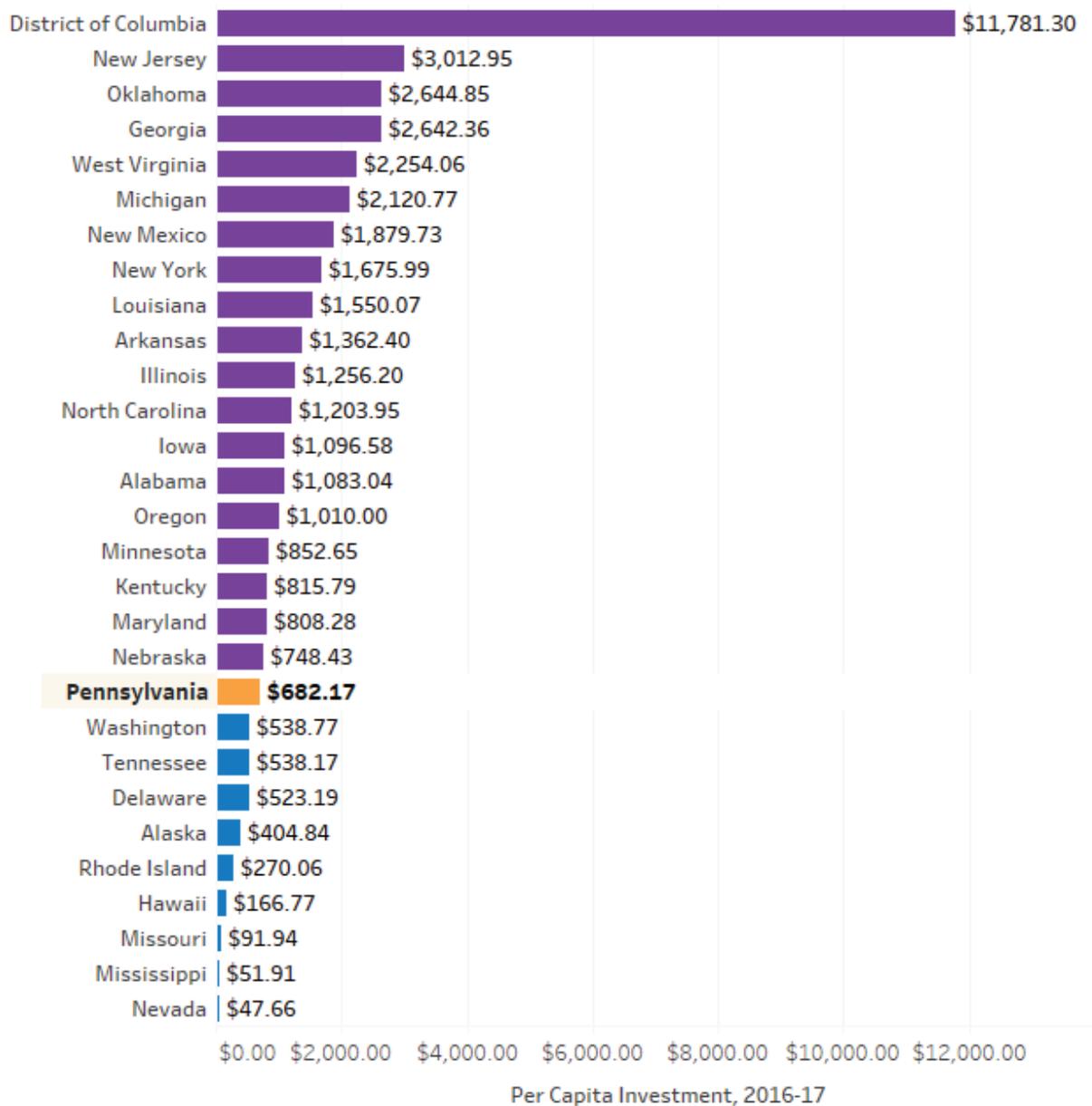
High-Quality Pre-K equals...



Pennsylvania Pre-K Investments Not Keeping Pace

According to the National Institute for Early Education Research (NIEER) – the leading experts on pre-k programming – Pennsylvania, 27 other states and Washington, D.C. have comparable high-quality pre-k programs by earning a score of nearly 7 or above on NIEER’s 10-point quality rating scale.

Per capita investment of states providing high-quality pre-kindergarten programs



However, comparing Pennsylvania with these other states provides insight regarding stronger efforts to scale up investments. Despite a demonstrated, bipartisan commitment to funding pre-k year after year, Pennsylvania ranks in the bottom half of per capita investments for preschool aged children to attend publicly funded, high-quality pre-k. Approximately 15 states with high-quality pre-k had a per capita commitment of more than \$1,000 in 2016-17 while Pennsylvania’s per capita commitment was under \$700.

"Pre-k is an issue that many Democrats, Republicans and Independents see in the same light – a powerful investment in our children's futures that also returns benefits to our state many times over," notes Jim Cawley, President & CEO of the United Way of Greater Philadelphia and Southern New Jersey.

Opportunity for Kids to Learn and for Pennsylvania to Lead

Attending high-quality pre-k is a "once in a lifetime" opportunity and provides the cognitive, social and emotional development needed to harness a child's potential during this formative time.

Over the last two budget cycles, more than 6,200 eligible children have gained access to high-quality programs like Pre-K Counts and the Head Start Supplemental Assistance Program. Despite these historic gains, almost 112,900 – or 64 percent – of eligible 3- and 4-year-olds lack access to publicly funded, high-quality pre-k in the commonwealth.

Every year, state policymakers must make difficult decisions negotiating a state budget, and the 2017-18 fiscal year is no exception. A \$75 million increase in pre-k programs (\$65 million for Pre-K Counts and \$10 million for the Head Start Supplemental Assistance Program) will allow 8,400 more children to benefit from publicly funded, high-quality pre-k next school year. Growing the investment to an additional \$340 million by FY 2020-21 will ensure all at-risk children have the opportunity to attend.

For all the proven cognitive, social and economic benefits pre-k provides, and the continuous bipartisan support Pennsylvania policymakers have demonstrated in making early learning a priority, Pennsylvania has the opportunity to lead by example on the national scale by making publicly funded, high-quality pre-k available to children who would most benefit.

We have high learning expectations for Pennsylvania's children that are necessary to ensure they graduate ready to succeed in post-secondary education, the military and the workforce. Continuing to make publicly funded, high-quality pre-k a state budget priority will give children the tools and the confidence they need to enter school prepared to succeed and on a pathway to exceed those expectations.



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Acknowledgments

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