

READY TO SUCCEED:

Kindergarten Teachers Support Investments in High-Quality Pre-k

Children who attend a high-quality, publicly funded pre-k program enter kindergarten ready to succeed.

An extensive body of research demonstrates the academic and social benefits of high-quality pre-k, including a reduced need for special education, remedial education services, decreased dropout rates and increased likelihood of graduation and college enrollment. Early learning investments have also been linked to reduced crime and incarceration rates and less reliance on public assistance programs.

Since the Pre-K for PA Campaign formed in 2013, a diverse group of supporters have articulated strong support for state funding increases in pre-k, including governors and legislators from both sides of the aisle, business and education leaders, law

enforcement officials, high-ranking military officers, pediatricians and world-class athletes.

Now, kindergarten teachers are joining the ever-growing list of supporters in favor of state funding increases in pre-k because they see firsthand the impact that high-quality pre-k has on a student's success in the classroom.

Their collective voice is important because almost immediately, kindergarten teachers can determine the “haves” and “have nots” in their classroom. The children who have attended a high-quality pre-k program are more prepared and the children who have not had the opportunity are less prepared. The “have nots” often require more time and attention to acclimate to the curriculum and are behind their peers in terms of social and emotional development. The Pre-K for PA campaign partnered



with the Pennsylvania State Education Association (PSEA) to survey kindergarten members in the late winter and early spring of 2019 to learn their perceptions of students entering elementary school and the role that access to high-quality, publicly funded pre-k plays in school readiness.

The results show resounding support for high-quality, publicly funded pre-k among surveyed kindergarten teachers.

“Students who attend high-quality pre-k programs come into kindergarten ready to succeed. They have already practiced essential learning behaviors, know how to regulate their emotions, interact appropriately with peers, and have a solid foundation of language and background knowledge onto which they can add new learning. For students who have had a high-quality pre-k experience, I don't have to spend as much time teaching these prerequisites to academic learning.”

– Miranda Clash, Carlisle Area School District, Cumberland County

96%

agree students who attend a high-quality pre-k program are ready for success in kindergarten

98%

agree high-quality, publicly funded pre-k is an important tool for preparing at-risk children for kindergarten

However, the Commonwealth is not investing enough in high-quality pre-k as more than 97,000 - or 56 percent - of eligible 3- and 4-year-olds do not have access to this once-in-a-lifetime early learning experience.

Research shows that access to high-quality, publicly funded pre-k benefits children socially and emotionally, helps cognitive development through physical activity, promotes healthy brain development through positive interactions and helps them develop early literacy skills.

Responses from the kindergarten teachers surveyed support this research. The top three skills kindergarten teachers found to be most important for early learning programs to focus on to ensure incoming students are ready for a successful kindergarten year were physical well-being and motor development, emotional development and social development. Respondents agree that high-quality early learning programs that focus on building skills to meet developmental milestones in these categories ultimately make a smoother transition into elementary school.

In addition, a poll commissioned in 2018 by the Pre-K for PA campaign and conducted by Harper Polling shows 94 percent of Pennsylvanians understand the value of pre-k when asked about the social and emotional growth happening in pre-k classrooms, believing it is necessary for children to learn the appropriate behaviors and social skills in order to succeed in school.

RESEARCH-BACKED BENEFITS OF HIGH-QUALITY, PUBLICLY FUNDED PRE-K



Physical Well-Being

Early childhood is considered one of the most critical and intensive periods of brain development throughout the human lifespan, and regular physical activity is key in how a child's brain gathers, processes, and understands information¹.



Brain Development

In the first few years of life, brain architecture is laid out for life. Up to 1 million new neural connections are formed every second through positive interactions and experiences with caregivers³.



Social Emotional Readiness

High-quality pre-k programs pride themselves on having classrooms that utilize intentional curricula designed to help build confidence, empathy, and self-regulation skills. Those same programs also have high-quality teachers which are trained in developmentally appropriate practices that help them build relationships and social skills between young learners².



Early Literacy Development

Research exploring the link between public pre-kindergarten and literacy achievements by the end of first grade show that early literacy instructions provided by a high-quality pre-k program meaningfully impact children's first grade reading ability, noting that children, regardless of income, who attend high-quality programs are able to meet expected reading benchmarks⁴.



"These children have been exposed to beginning reading and social skills which help them have a smoother transition to school."

- Jamie McCaffrey, Wissahickon School District, Montgomery County

"Students who have had high-quality pre-k come into kindergarten already understanding the basic 'how-to's of school. They know how to work with others. They have a basic understanding of foundational skills like letter and number recognition. In a nutshell, they have already started building a foundation of learning. They have practiced social skills and can often times manage their emotions better than students without the high-quality pre-k experience."

- Heather Hake, Grove City Area School District, Mercer County



Pennsylvania wisely relies on a variety of public and private programs to provide high-quality pre-k. This mixed-delivery system includes programs that have reached key quality standards such as child care programs with Keystone STAR 3 and 4 designations, Head Start grantees, private academic nursery schools and school districts.

Pre-K Counts provides quality half- and full-day pre-kindergarten programming to eligible 3- and 4-year-olds in Pennsylvania. It is designed for children who are at risk of school failure and living in families earning up to 300 percent of the federal income poverty

level (such as a family of four earning \$77,250) who may also be English language learners or have special needs.

In addition, the Head Start Supplemental Assistance Program (HSSAP) awards existing Head Start grantees with grants to increase the number of children they

serve or to expand the length of the Head Start day or year for children. The program is based on the federal model of Head Start, providing services to 3- and 4-year-old children and their families with family incomes up to 130 percent of the federal poverty guidelines.



Investments in high-quality pre-k have a significant return on investment for our children, schools and communities. Economists have determined that creating healthy environments early in life for children where they are safe to grow and learn provide a healthy return on investment. Over the long term, every dollar invested in high-quality pre-k returns the commonwealth \$4 in savings and benefits in the form of reduced crime, increased earning power, and more⁵.

However, the economic reality for many low- and middle-income families is that the cost of high-quality pre-k may be out of reach.



We know that the rigor and academic expectations of kindergarten classrooms today is what was required 20 years ago by the end of first grade⁶. High-quality pre-k can help ensure all of Pennsylvania 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 high-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 from reaching their fullest academic potential.

Policymakers have demonstrated their commitment to early learning and

"Kindergarten standards and expectations have changed dramatically. Those who enter school without a strong foundational knowledge of letters, number sense, fine and gross motor skills, social/emotional maturity, and the structure of a school setting often begin at a disadvantage. High-quality pre-k is essential in preparing our littlest of learners for the demands of kindergarten and setting them on a path towards school success."

- Rachael Dunn, Dallas School District, Luzerne County

high-quality, publicly funded pre-k has enjoyed continuous bipartisan support in Pennsylvania. **Since the Pre-K for PA campaign formed six years ago, approximately \$115 million in state funding has been invested in high-quality, publicly funded pre-k, which enabled 12,170 additional at-risk children to attend a high-quality pre-k classroom.**

However, the fact remains that Pennsylvania still ranks 18th of the 30 states investing in high-quality pre-k. Pennsylvania must take aggressive steps to put our kids on a comparable playing field to their peers in other states. Ensuring more children, especially those who are at-risk, can benefit from high-quality pre-k and enter school better prepared must be part of that goal.

The Pre-K for PA campaign is calling for a \$50 million increase in the 2019-20 state budget; \$40 million for Pre-K Counts and \$10 million for the Head Start Supplemental Assistance Program (HSSAP). This investment will provide access to an additional 5,500 children.

Acknowledgements:

We gratefully acknowledge the support of the William Penn Foundation*.

Supporting research for this report can be found at prekforpa.org.

**The opinions expressed in this report are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the views of the William Penn Foundation.*

