



# Pennsylvania Partnerships for Children

Joan L. Benso  
*President and CEO*

116 Pine Street, Suite 430  
Harrisburg, PA 17101-1244  
[www.papartnerships.org](http://www.papartnerships.org)

David S. Feinberg  
*Chair of the Board*

Good afternoon Senator Casey. Thank you for the opportunity to appear today before this field hearing of the Senate Health, Education, Labor and Pensions Committee: *Partnering to Prepare- Expanding Access to High Quality Early Childhood Education.*

I am Joan Benso, 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 that by 2014, PPC will have helped Pennsylvania move into position as one of the top 10 states in the nation to be a child and to raise a child. Providing children access to high-quality pre-K and assuring that every Pennsylvania child benefits from a K-12 education that prepares them for college and careers are core strategies as we strive to achieve our vision for the Commonwealth.

What happens early childhood can influence a lifetime of learning and earnings for every child. Research supports high-quality pre-K as an effective strategy to improve education achievement. Studies show that children who attend high-quality pre-K programs enter kindergarten with better language, reading, math and social skills.<sup>i</sup> They have fewer grade retentions, less remediation, higher standardized test scores, and higher graduation rates.<sup>ii</sup>

Many studies show a positive return for children, schools and communities by investing in high quality pre-K. Today you will hear from a researcher from the National Institute on Early Education Research who will provide you with much great insight into the literature than I can. But, let me share a little bit of home-

grown Pennsylvania evidence that supports investments in high quality pre-K. A recent study in Pennsylvania 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. <sup>iii</sup> A review of the PA Pre-K Counts program shows it is achieving great results; 75 percent of the children who entered at risk of education failure completed the most recent school year with age-appropriate proficiency in literacy, numeracy and social skills and headed off to kindergarten ready to learn.<sup>iv</sup>

But we know that all pre-K programs don't produce the same outcomes. Quality matters. It is high-quality that produces the positive academic results for children and the tremendous return on investments. High-quality in pre-K programs are driven by early learning standards that are part of a p-16 academic standards continuum. They are programs that use a research-based curriculum, employee degreed teachers who engage in continued professional development and specialize in early learning, assure that group size and adult:child ratios remain low, provide for health, vision and hearing screenings as well as family support services to name a few. Pre-K programs that don't conform to the research based program parameters are a poor use of the taxpayers' money.

Pennsylvania children enjoy the benefits of publicly funded pre-K through a number of programs and funding streams. They have access to pre-K through federal programs including Head Start, which provides pre-K to more than 27,000 low-income children<sup>v</sup> and Title I. Until a few short years ago, Pennsylvania held the distinction of being one of handful of states that did not support high-quality pre-K with state funds. In recent years, the Commonwealth has established several funding streams for pre-K including:

- Pennsylvania Pre-K Counts – delivers high-quality pre-K to children at risk of education failure through a mixed delivery system of school districts, Head Start providers, certain licensed child care providers, and private

academic nursery schools. Under the program, 115 grantees served 11,841 children in FY 2008-2009.<sup>vi</sup>

- Head Start Supplemental Assistance Program - expands Head Start services to more children in the Commonwealth. The state funds are being used to provide Head Start services to nearly 4500 children (in addition to the 27,000 that are supported only by federal funds).<sup>vii</sup>
- Education Accountability Block Grant – enables school districts to invest in education programs that are proven to help children’s academic achievement. Establishing, maintaining or expanding a quality pre-Kindergarten program aligned with the state’s current academic standards is an allowable use of grant funds. Districts are using a portion of the block grant to provide pre-K to 3,100 children.<sup>viii</sup>
- Basic Education Funding Formula – while very few did, school districts have been allowed to use basic education funding for per-K. Our new school funding formula requires school districts that receive increases greater than an inflation index to invest the funds greater than the index in student achievement strategies. Pre-K is one of the allowable student achievement strategies.

I am proud to have supported the creation of these Pennsylvania programs. Unfortunately, not all children who could benefit from these programs have access to them. There are about 295,000 3 and 4-year olds in Pennsylvania. Less than 18 percent of these children have access to high-quality public funded pre-K.<sup>ix</sup> If we dig a little deeper into the data, we see 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. But only 30 percent of children from these families have access to high-quality public funded pre-K.<sup>x</sup>

We have a good system here in Pennsylvania that only reaches *some* of our children who are at risk of education failure with high-quality public funded pre-K. More can and must be done to reach more of our youngest learners in

order to improve young learners' school readiness and long term academic and life outcomes.

The status of publicly funded high-quality pre-K in Pennsylvania bears a striking resemblance to where we stood with CHIP (Children's Health Insurance Program) in 1997. Then, we had a strong program that provided access to health insurance to a small percentage of Pennsylvania's uninsured children. As you well know, Senator Casey, it was one of a few state programs in existence at that time. State resources only took the program so far; enrollment was a little more than 45,000 and there was a very long waiting list.

The federal government took a bold step to help children's access to health care in 1997 and enacted a federal counterpart to Pennsylvania's CHIP that was based on our successful, but limited program. The state-federal partnership provided much needed financing in federal matching funds as well as rigorous program requirements. Pennsylvania was immediately able to clear our CHIP waiting list and continue to serve every eligible child applying for coverage. The elimination of a waiting list and the comfort that low-income families enjoyed – knowing they could turn to CHIP to assure their children would have insurance coverage - gave hundreds of thousands of Pennsylvania parents' peace of mind. In 2006, Pennsylvania took the monumental step to make insurance coverage available to all children in the Commonwealth whose families do not have access to or cannot afford health insurance. This could have never happened without a strong state-federal financing partnership.

Pennsylvania needs a strong partnership with the federal government to expand access to high-quality pre-K to more children, and eventually to reach all children. Senator Casey, your Prepare All Kids legislation (S. 839) provides a solid foundation for such a partnership. The legislation provides

matching federal resources for state pre-K programs. It ensures that the public funded pre-K programs would be of high quality and utilize a research-based curriculum that supports children's cognitive, social, emotional and physical development. Prepare All Kids would also establish strong teacher credential requirements as well as provide for accountability for state programs. Importantly, the program does not seek to divert funds from other education programs.

The federal Early Learning Challenge Fund proposal could also help improve access to high-quality pre-K. The proposal would create a framework for states to guide them in establishing and growing a comprehensive system of high-quality early learning environments. It would set a clear and important goal of increasing the number of disadvantaged children in high quality programs. We were disappointed that the Fund provisions were not included in the final version of the reconciliation bill that accompanied health care reform, but we were greatly encouraged by your support for it.

The reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) presents a unique and timely opportunity to establish a strong state-federal partnership to expand access to high-quality pre-K in Pennsylvania and in states nationwide. Pennsylvania Partnerships for Children believes that government has a responsibility for educational opportunities for children and young adults from birth to age 25 or through completion of a post-secondary education program that prepares a young adult for an individual and family sustaining wage job.

I respectfully urge this committee to make pre-K a part of the education continuum in ESEA and include provisions in ESEA to ensure that public funded pre-K is of high quality. But, let me offer a serious caution. While inclusion of pre-K is a laudable goal, it cannot happen without significantly expanding federal financial support for the base of ESEA first, and then

augmenting that enhanced based with additional resources to fund pre-k. The goal of ESEA in the past – to assure that every American child achieves to world class academic standards – has been on target. But the problem has been that it has been a hollow promise – a mandate without the resources to implement our common vision that every child can and should achieve. Pennsylvania Partnerships for Children works on the full education continuum and we will not support ESEA reauthorization that is driven by a “rob Peter to pay Paul” mentality. If resources can be made available, adding an explicit initiative to promote pre-K will help provide a solid foundation in ESEA which can multiply the impact of other reforms in the Act. If additional resources are not found, the very least that should occur during reauthorization is more guidance and incentives to encourage to states and local education agencies to expand pre-K.

The Prepare All Kids Act and provisions similar to the Early Learning Challenge Fund would be good additions to ESEA with a new pot of funding. Some additional ideas are present in The U.S. Department of Education’s Blueprint for Reform for the reauthorization of ESEA. We urge the committee, at the very least, to consider pre-K as you develop the legislation in the following areas:

- Designate high-quality pre-kindergarten as an option for turning around low-performing schools.
- Include children ages 3 and 4 in the ESEA funding formulas including grants authorized in Titles I and V.
- Include students enrolled in publicly funded pre-k in state longitudinal data system.
- Include pre-K as part of literacy initiatives.
- Include pre-k teachers in professional development opportunities.

These are but a few recommendations for promoting high-quality pre-K and enhancing access to pre-K through ESEA. Reauthorization of the Act is a

tremendous opportunity to create a strong state federal partnership on pre-K and create a continuum of learning from early childhood to post-secondary completion.

Thank you again for the opportunity to appear before you today and thank you for everything you do for Pennsylvania's children.

---

i 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.

ii 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.

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

iv 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.

v Administration for Children and Families, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2009-2010 enrollment

vi Office of Child Development and Early Learning. (2009). Program Reach and Risk Assessment. Harrisburg, PA: Pennsylvania Departments of Education and Public Welfare.

vii Administration for Children and Families, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2009-2010 enrollment

viii Office of Child Development and Early Learning. (2009). Program Reach and Risk Assessment. Harrisburg, PA: Pennsylvania Departments of Education and Public Welfare.

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

x Ibid