

Remarks by Dr. Elizabeth Hammond Yonson, Superintendent, Morrisville School District

Welcome Senator Casey. My name is Dr. Elizabeth Hammond Yonson and I am the superintendent of the Morrisville Borough School District in Bucks County. Additionally, I serve as co-chair of Pennsylvania's PreK Counts Advisory Council, as a member of Pennsylvania's Early Learning Council and the United Way's Success by Six Council. As a superintendent, I believe early childhood education is critically important and helps us better educate the children in my district as well as children throughout Pennsylvania.

When people think of Bucks County, they often think of bucolic pastures and wealthy school districts, but that is not the case in the southern part of the county. In my school district, 52% of our children receive free or reduced school lunch. People sometimes believe our Commonwealth's poor only live in Philadelphia or Pittsburgh; that simply isn't true; there are plenty of children living in poverty across Pennsylvania. Some of our children are the epitome of at-risk. Our special education enrollment is 20%, well above the state average.

The PSSA scores in our primary grades have improved significantly in the past few years. I credit this to our full day kindergarten program, which began 4 years ago and our 4 year old preK program, which began 3 years ago. Nearly 40% of our students in 11<sup>th</sup> grade scored below proficient on their PSSA reading tests in 2008-2009. I can't help but wonder if our 11<sup>th</sup> graders had access to quality pre-kindergarten when they were younger, if they would be scoring higher on these high-stakes test.

Nearly 50% of children under 5 in my district live in families earning 200% or less of the federal poverty level. These families cannot afford quality pre-kindergarten, and many of them do not receive the kind of developmentally-appropriate learning activities they need to build the vocabulary, pre-academic and social skills they will need in kindergarten. When they get to kindergarten, they are behind their peers, and often stay behind throughout their school careers. If we can reach these children early with quality pre-kindergarten, they would never get behind.

Pennsylvania Pre-K Counts provides a quality pre-kindergarten experience at no cost to their families. These families have the option of half-day or full-day pre-kindergarten in schools, Head Start or child care programs, or nursery schools. A part of this quality experience includes parent involvement, so the child's learning can continue at home. This is exactly the sort of program our families need.

Prior to opening our preK, my kindergarten teachers told me they could identify the children who did not have a pre-school experience. They also told me that they could identify the children who had a quality pre-school experience and children who did not attend a quality pre-school. I believed strongly that children needed a quality pre-school program because of what our teachers were telling us but also because studies show that at least half of the eventual "achievement gap" already exists in kindergarten. Students

who start behind are at a higher risk of staying behind, dropping out, and eventually getting into trouble with the law.

When I became superintendent of Morrisville six years ago, one of my goals was to improve the quality of the early education our students received. All of our Accountability Block Grant funds were invested into full day kindergarten so that all of our students would be able to have a full-day kindergarten experience. Before ABG, only one of our kindergarten classes was full-day, now all four offer full-day kindergarten. I would have loved to begin a quality pre-kindergarten program with our ABG funds, but there was no money left.

Pennsylvania Pre-K Counts is a godsend for districts like mine who want to invest in quality pre-kindergarten but do not have the resources. Using these funds for a dedicated funding stream for Pre-K is more valuable to us than adding it to the rest of the Accountability Block Grant because through Pennsylvania Pre-K Counts these resources go where they are really needed rather than swallowed up by other programs or operating support. Because Pennsylvania Pre-K Counts is fully funded by the state, I don't have to pull from our budget. I can serve children who can most benefit from pre-kindergarten. Now they don't have to start behind.

Four years ago, Morrisville Borough, Bristol Borough and Bristol Township School Districts collaborated to write a Pre K Counts Public Private Partnership grant. We used the grant from the Public-Private Partnership to invest in our pre-kindergarten partners through coaching, professional development, and parent literacy activities. The Public-Private partnership helped me build relationships with our community-based programs such as Head Start, child care, and Early Intervention that I never had before. Because of these relationships, we developed transition activities between our elementary schools and community pre-k providers so that when children come to kindergarten, they are comfortable in the school environment.

Three years ago, our school district applied for Pennsylvania Pre-K Counts in partnership with the Morrisville YMCA and Head Start, in cooperation with the Bucks County Intermediate Unit. We have served 76 three year olds at the YMCA, and 61 four year olds in our primary elementary school building in the past three years. Ten percent of these slots are dedicated to children with special needs, and priority enrollment has been given to children who are on the waiting list for Head Start services. I am delighted to think of the great start we have given these children because of Pennsylvania Pre-K Counts.

I asked my kindergarten and first grade teachers to reflect on the progress of their students who attend our preK program. The following are comments they shared with me. A first grade teacher told me, "The 6 students I currently have who attended our PreK are doing very well. Their overall performance is great. They not only pick up material quickly, but I find that I usually need to find more challenging activities for them. They are above level in math and reading. When I think back to the first few weeks of school, these students for the most part seemed easily acclimated to the school

environment and routine. Three of the students are reading at a 3<sup>rd</sup> grade reading level, two are reading at a 2<sup>nd</sup> grade level and one is on level. A kindergarten teacher said the following, "K. is a true leader and an enthusiastic learner who works hard to complete tasks neatly and on time. J. is a very mature student who loves learning. He was well prepared for kindergarten compared to his peers. He is the best behaved and most focused student in my class. Y. enjoys writing stories. He has excellent spelling and Kid Writing skills. They are all above level in reading, writing and math. Another kindergarten teacher told me that it is really wonderful to have students in kindergarten who were part of our preK program. They begin the year with excitement and fantastic readiness skills. They understand the general expectations of playing and working together in small groups. They have practice with sitting on the carpet quietly and listening to books read aloud. These skills can be even more important than academic skills because they set the stage for learning. Providing this experience for children who would otherwise be unable to participate is truly a gift in preparing them for a successful school experience. Additionally, my students have strong academic skills. They are able to make, label, and extend patterns. They can count objects and write and order numbers. They can create graphs when given data. They identify coins by name and can count to 100 and beyond independently. They can recognize all of the sight words that have been taught. They use these words regularly in their Kid Writing Journals. Some of the children can even identify words that have not been introduced applying phonetic skills that have been taught." One of the first grade teachers told me that one of her students who attended our preK had already met the end of the year first grade goals last marking period, which was at the end of January.

Seventy-one percent of our students who attended our preK program are above level in reading. Fourteen percent are on level and fourteen percent are slightly below. These youngsters have been receiving additional supports and are making excellent progress. The PreK teacher alerted the kindergarten teachers of the needs of these students, which allowed the teacher to begin the process of having the children screened upon entering kindergarten so that they could receive needed services. Students also have worked with our gifted teacher for enrichment purposes and are being evaluated for the gifted program. All of the students are above level in math.

Morrisville School District's PreK program has proven that providing a quality prekindergarten experience for at risk children allows them to begin school on the same level playing field as their peers from more privileged backgrounds. I urge Congress to support funding early childhood programs as they reauthorize the Elementary and Secondary Education Act. Our children deserve early childhood program so they can start school ready to learn and ready to succeed.