



Elementary School Principals Resoundingly Support Pre-K Investments

Tells a story. Demonstrates self-confidence. Counts to 10. Completes a puzzle. Listens to directions. Recognizes colors and shapes. Demonstrates self-help skills. Aware of weather changes and seasons. Curious. Takes turns. Recognizes letters, some words and his or her name. Responds to other children's need for help. These are just some of the many skills that a child who experienced high-quality pre-kindergarten will demonstrate when he or she enters kindergarten.

As children head back to school this fall, elementary principals across the commonwealth will be welcoming a very special group of new students – kindergarteners. Principals are on the frontline of delivering quality education and report they can easily distinguish between children who attended high-quality pre-k and children who missed this once-in-a-lifetime opportunity, making their jobs more challenging as they work to level the playing field for all students.

The Pennsylvania Principals Association, in partnership with the Pre-K for PA Campaign, recently conducted a statewide survey to better understand elementary school principals' perception of high-quality pre-k and its importance in building the foundation necessary for children to enter kindergarten ready to succeed.¹

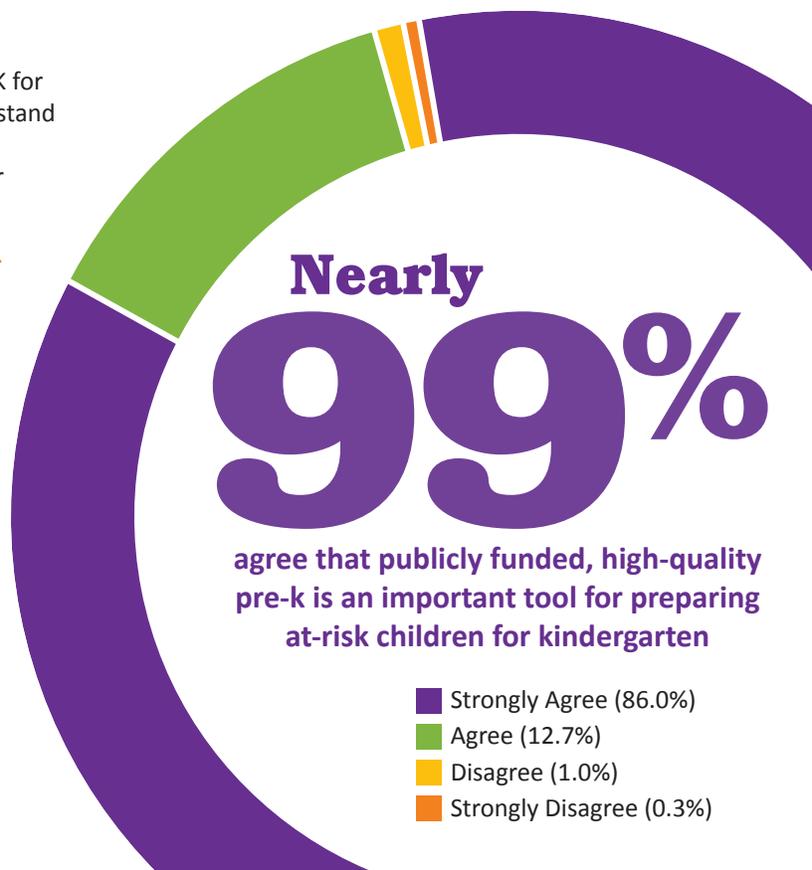
“Children who attend high-quality pre-k, especially those who are at-risk with greater needs, have been given a chance to grow socially and emotionally. Their academic needs also have been addressed helping build a strong educational foundation.”

– Ms. Charlotte Zmyslo, Principal, Corl Street Elementary School, State College Area School District

The response was overwhelming – nearly 99 percent of elementary principals agree that publicly funded, high-quality pre-k is an important tool for preparing at-risk children for kindergarten. Responses were received from a diverse group of rural, suburban and urban school leaders who are responsible for educating nearly 60 percent of elementary students statewide.

Children enter kindergarten with varying needs and experiences, and principals agree and research evidence proves that access to high-quality pre-k is one of the best investments we can make to prepare children for school, if children are to achieve their full academic potential – particularly at-risk children.

Over the years, governors and legislators from both political parties, business and education leaders, members of law enforcement, health care providers and military leaders have articulated strong support for state funding increases in pre-k, and now elementary school principals elevate their expert voices to the growing list of supporters.



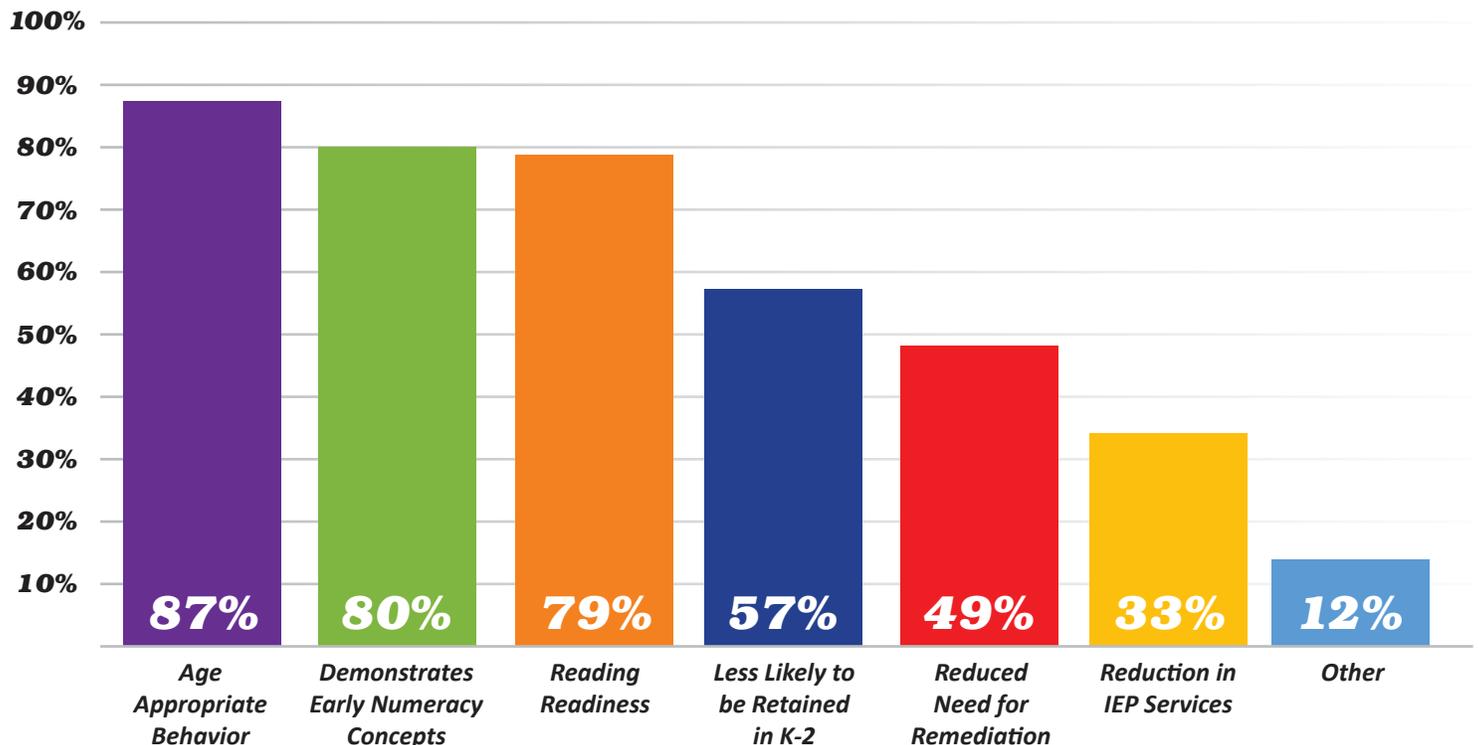
Elementary School Principals Support High-Quality Pre-K

Pennsylvania principals identify improvements in age-appropriate behavior and the ability to reach academic milestones in students who attended high-quality pre-k, validating research findings that show the returns of high-quality pre-k are immediate and long-lasting.

“I can tell students have had a high-quality pre-k experience as they are more able to focus in the classroom and have less behaviors that could impede learning and overall academic success.”

*– Christina McLaughlin, Principal,
Providence Elementary School, Solanco School District*

Outcomes of High-Quality Pre-K



“If we are to help students be successful, we need to provide them with a strong start in school. I have observed how students have been able to thrive due to their participation in pre-kindergarten, which can minimize the amount of special education services students receive. High-quality early education matters and it helps students develop the skills necessary to enter school.”

*– Dr. Monica D. Lamar, Principal,
Pittsburgh Dilworth K-5,
Pittsburgh Public Schools*

Principals’ perceptions are confirmed by research that tells us that high-quality pre-k is especially beneficial for children from low-income families, helping to put them at the same starting line as their more economically advantaged peers by the time they start school. Studies have shown that a high-quality pre-k experience can reduce grade retention and remediation needs, and improve a student’s performance on standardized assessments.^{2,3,4}

The years before a child enters elementary school provide a critical window for cognitive, physical, social and emotional development. The brain is rapidly developing in the earliest years of life (birth to age 5) with more than 1 million neural connections forming every second. These are the connections that build brain architecture – the foundation upon which all later learning, behavior, and health depend.⁵

When children do not have access to high-quality pre-k, they may fall short of their full potential and the commonwealth may never benefit from contributions they might have made to our economy. Over the long term, we can expect a return of \$4 for every dollar invested in high-quality pre-k.⁶

Pre-K Availability in Pennsylvania



Two-thirds of principals who responded to the survey indicated that their district doesn't provide pre-k and they rely on local community providers. Pennsylvania wisely uses a mixed service delivery system to provide publicly funded pre-k that is delivered by high-quality child care providers, Head Start grantees, licensed nursery schools and school districts.

Regardless of the availability of high-quality pre-k or how it is delivered to students entering their school districts, nearly all elementary principals support pre-k for the positive impact it has on developing young minds.

High-Quality Pre-K Gives the Disadvantaged an Advantage in School

Despite the evidence that high-quality pre-k gives kids a strong start, too many Pennsylvania children miss this opportunity.

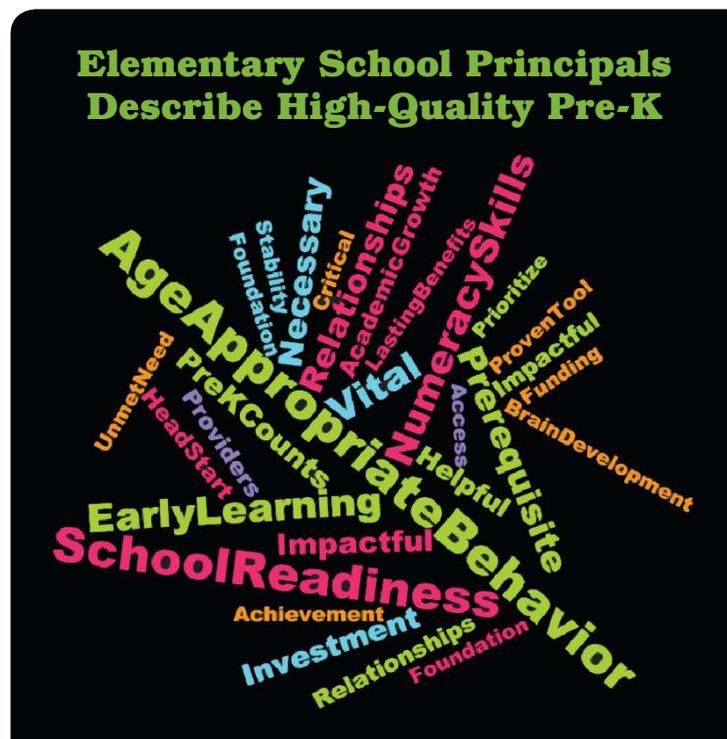
Approximately 64 percent or 2 in 3 eligible preschoolers don't have the opportunity to attend publicly funded, high-quality pre-k in our state. As a result, many of our children will enter kindergarten this fall at a disadvantage.

Throughout Pennsylvania, the unmet need is felt sharply in every community, whether rural, urban or suburban:

- *Nearly 420 of Pennsylvania's 500 school districts enroll a kindergarten class where 40 percent or more children eligible for publicly funded, high-quality pre-k miss this opportunity.*
- *There are only 32 commonwealth school districts where 80 percent or more kindergarten children who are eligible for publicly funded, high-quality pre-k had the opportunity to attend.*

Expanding access to publicly funded, high-quality pre-k has been a national trend for the last five years, however, Pennsylvania ranks 20th in its per capita investment in high-quality pre-k when compared to the 27 states and the District of Columbia with publicly funded, high-quality programs. In other words, the critical needs of preschool age children have been pushed to a higher priority in many other places.

Elementary school principals across the state have seen the opportunity gap firsthand and agree the commonwealth must provide additional support to ensure every at-risk child is afforded the opportunity to attend a high-quality pre-k classroom.



Pennsylvania Still Has Work to Do



More Than
97%
of
elementary school principals
in the commonwealth

strongly agree or agree that additional state investments in publicly funded, high-quality pre-k should be made

Despite the economic challenges facing the state, policymakers demonstrated a strong commitment to ensuring children can reach their full potential by increasing funding for pre-k by \$30 million in the 2017-18 state budget.

An additional \$310 million in state funding for pre-kindergarten by 2022 will ensure that every at-risk child has access to a high-quality pre-k program and an additional \$100 million so that middle-income families will be able to more easily afford high-quality pre-k for their children.

By supporting substantial investments in high-quality pre-k, Pennsylvania can close the opportunity gap and ensure that every child who needs it enjoys enriching learning experiences that prepare them for school.

Acknowledgments

- Supporting research for this report can be found at www.paprincipals.org.
- We gratefully acknowledge the support of the William Penn Foundation.

“High-quality pre-k provides the opportunity for children to get ready for school, helping to build their early literacy skills, which provides children with the foundation to have the stamina and skills to be successful in elementary school.”

– Terri Koehler, Principal, West Pottsgrove Elementary School, Pottsgrove Area School District

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