

As Pennsylvania works to expand access to high-quality pre-kindergarten programs, it must be mindful not to compromise quality. This briefing paper examines how the quality of programs and their providers can be maintained and strengthened as we expand to ensure public investments in pre-k remain smart investments.

About 53,000 Pennsylvania 3- and 4-year-olds benefit from high-quality, publicly funded pre-k. This is a small number compared to the nearly 126,000 children who were income-eligible for state-funded pre-k in 2013 and were not served, and far less than the 244,000 children without access to publicly funded, high-quality pre-k.<sup>1</sup>

Clearly, Pennsylvania can do more to increase access to pre-k, but it must do so while maintaining the quality of its programs. So what is high-quality pre-k?

The National Institute for Early Education Research (NIEER) measures the quality of pre-k programs across the country using 10 criteria, including the use of comprehensive early learning standards, teacher qualifications, class sizes, staff-to-child ratios, and other benchmarks. The Pennsylvania pre-k programs rated by NIEER receive quality ratings of seven or higher on this 10-point scale – meaning our programs are high quality. Additionally, we consider Pennsylvania programs that employ teachers with college degrees and early childhood training or are accredited by the Council on Accreditation, National Association for the Education of Young Children, National Early Childhood Program Accreditation, or National Association for Family Child Care as high quality.



### NIEER Quality Benchmarks

Uses comprehensive early learning standards

Lead teacher has BA

Lead teacher has early education certification

Assistant teacher has early education certification

Teachers participate in 15 hours of training annually

Class size is 20 children or fewer

Staff-child ratio is 1:10 or lower

Offers health screenings and referrals

Provides meal and/or snack

Program monitoring includes site visits



## Using Data to Drive Quality

By continually assessing the quality of its existing pre-k programs and ensuring those measures remain when any programs are added or expanded, Pennsylvania can build access to pre-k while ensuring high quality.

Providers participating in Pre-K Counts and HSSAP (see sidebar) already must meet quality criteria and are monitored for compliance. Children are assessed for their skills when they enter participating programs and when they leave.

Through site monitoring of Pre-K Counts and HSSAP facilities, the state:

- Collects program records;
- Observes classroom quality;
- Documents children's learning and outcomes;
- Reviews facilities and safety procedures;
- Documents program-level outcomes; and
- Gathers program self-assessment results.

While site monitoring helps the commonwealth identify needs - such as teacher training and professional development, curricula adjustments, policy changes, and provider sanctions or funding levels - it isn't coupled with child assessment data to drive or inform more direct action to ensure children benefit from high-quality programs. Pennsylvania keeps tabs on program outcomes but doesn't connect them to child outcomes. Providers are monitored and collect child outcome data but this information is not used fully enough to improve program quality or drive expansion.



*Pennsylvania delivers high-quality, publicly funded pre-k in a cost-effective manner through existing facilities and programs operated by a variety of public and private providers. Pennsylvania has two dedicated state funding streams for pre-k programs: Pre-K Counts (PKC) and Head Start Supplemental Assistance Program (HSSAP).*

*Pre-K Counts awards funds to public school districts, Head Start programs, licensed nursery schools, and child care centers/group homes with Keystone STAR 3 and 4 ratings. Keystone STAR 3 and 4 programs strongly align to the NIEER quality rating scale, including having comprehensive early learning standards, small class sizes, requirements for teacher specialized training, and much more. HSSAP awards grants to federal Head Start providers.*

*Pre-K Counts and HSSAP grantees also may subcontract with public schools, Head Start programs, private child care, and licensed faith-based centers. HSSAP also partners with family child care, and Pre-K Counts can subcontract with licensed nursery schools. State law allows high-quality pre-k operated by religious institutions and charter schools to receive funding.*



When children leave pre-kindergarten for kindergarten, school districts may voluntarily use Pennsylvania's Kindergarten Entry Inventory to help teachers prepare to instruct incoming students according to their individual language, literacy, and math skills, and their social, emotional, and physical development. These inventories could be valuable in determining the degree to which pre-k programs are preparing children for kindergarten. However, these inventories are not fully aligned or formally linked with the early learning outcomes reporting for children enrolled in publicly funded pre-k.

## Revising Program Eligibility

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Pennsylvania can do more to ensure our investments in high-quality pre-k are truly preparing children for school success. There are multiple ways the commonwealth can use existing data to preserve and build on quality in its pre-k programs:



Review data-collection requirements: focus collection on essential data elements and use key data the state already collects on program status and child assessments to drive program quality improvement. These findings could potentially be used to determine terms for expanding programs and renewing contracts.







Fully align the Pennsylvania Kindergarten Entry Inventory with pre- and post-assessments conducted by publicly funded pre-kindergartens.



Create incentives for school districts to use the state's Kindergarten Entry Inventory for every child. Together, the pre-k assessments and kindergarten inventories could validate children's school readiness.

In addition to continuing to use widely recognized, program-driven systems to assess pre-k quality, Pennsylvania should consider adding an alternative route for child care centers, licensed nursery schools, Head Start programs, or school districts to obtain a quality rating – a route based upon their demonstrated ability to consistently prepare preschool children to be kindergarten-ready as aligned with the Pennsylvania kindergarten academic standards. Any such alternative, outcomes-based route to quality should include, but not be limited to:

-  Use of an approved, appropriate, valid and reliable individual student assessment to measure kindergarten readiness;
-  Administration of the assessment to every child at the start and completion of the pre-k program;
-  Annual, aggregate results that show a significant majority of children finish the program kindergarten ready; and
-  Provider quality determinations that are made based on multiple years' worth of data and require periodic recertification.

## REFERENCES

<sup>1</sup> Pennsylvania Partnerships for Children. (2014) A Smart Choice for a Solid Start: The Case for Pre-k in PA. Harrisburg, PA: Author.

## About Pre-K for PA

Pre-K for PA is an issue campaign supported by individuals and organizations across Pennsylvania who believe that investing in our children is the right choice and an urgent necessity.

Our vision is that every 3- and 4-year-old in Pennsylvania will have access to high-quality pre-k. The campaign's founding statewide leadership includes:

