

THE CASE FOR PRE-K IN PA

Smart Investment in Kids, Communities and the Commonwealth

Community and civic leaders have long believed in the value of investing in our earliest learners.

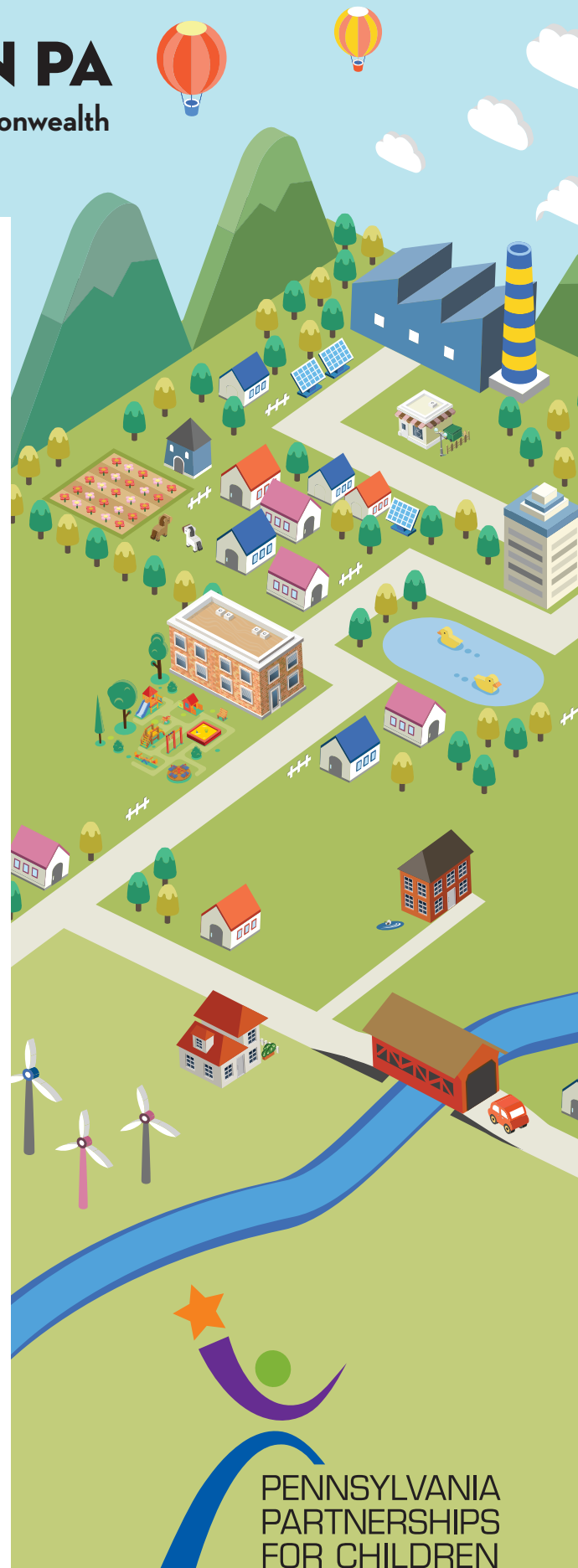
“Quality pre-k has the power to change lives and strengthen communities for all of us,” says Jim Cawley, the former Pennsylvania lieutenant governor, who now serves as president and CEO of the United Way of Greater Philadelphia and Southern New Jersey. “Unfortunately, the reality is too many children in our area lack access to quality pre-k, which studies show can change the trajectory of a child’s life.”

“When we work together to invest in quality early education today, it will translate into reduced special education costs, lower crime, increased earnings and taxes paid over time,” Cawley says. “In the long-term, these investments will also help Pennsylvania build the workforce it needs to remain competitive in a global marketplace.”

It’s not surprising that early learning opportunities like high-quality pre-k can be a powerful catalyst for a child’s success, considering the dramatic development that occurs in the earliest years of life. A child’s brain is 90 percent developed by age 5.¹ This means one of the most crucial periods for a child’s mental, social and emotional growth occurs before that child even enters a kindergarten classroom.

Pennsylvania is home to nearly 300,000 3- and 4-year-olds. Last year, only about 1 in 6 of these young learners was enrolled in publicly funded, high-quality pre-k — a statistic that has been relatively unchanged in recent years.² Even more troubling is that 70 percent of the approximately 175,000 preschool children at risk of school failure due to economic reasons missed out last year on this once-in-a-lifetime learning opportunity.³

We all pay for those missed opportunities, and Pennsylvania needs to do more to broaden access to high-quality pre-k, particularly for those children at greatest risk of academic failure. These are children living in households below 300 percent of the federal poverty level (\$72,750 per year for a family of four), have disabilities that affect their learning, or for whom English is a second language.



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The economic and social benefits of high-quality pre-k have a ripple effect that touches every taxpayer and community in the commonwealth:

Every dollar spent returns up to \$17 in long-term savings and benefits.⁴

High-quality pre-k reduces grade repetition and special education placements in later grades, saving our schools money.⁵

Children who benefit from high-quality pre-k are less likely to drop out of school and more likely to graduate and attend college, boosting their employment opportunities and earning power while reducing social services costs.⁶

High-quality pre-k can mitigate disruptive and problem behaviors in early years that, if left unaddressed, can lead to antisocial or even criminal behavior in later years. This not only improves our collective quality of life, it also reduces costs in the criminal justice system.⁷



Elementary school teachers often can tell whether a child has benefited from high-quality pre-k, according to one of Pennsylvania's education leaders.

"The difference quality pre-k makes in a child's school readiness can be profound – and not just in subject-related materials like math or language," says Dr. Paul Healey, executive director of the Pennsylvania Principals Association. "Pre-k can infuse a sense of confidence in children's abilities to learn, explore and challenge themselves. This not only can reduce the need for costly remedial learning or special education services, but it also prepares a child for whatever challenges they take on throughout school and into their adult lives. This means long-term benefits for the communities."

Falling Behind Our Neighboring States

Pennsylvania has been losing ground in recent years when it comes to making high-quality pre-k more accessible. An early learning report card issued in 2015 by the National Institute for Early Education Research (NIEER) finds that among states offering publicly funded pre-k programs:

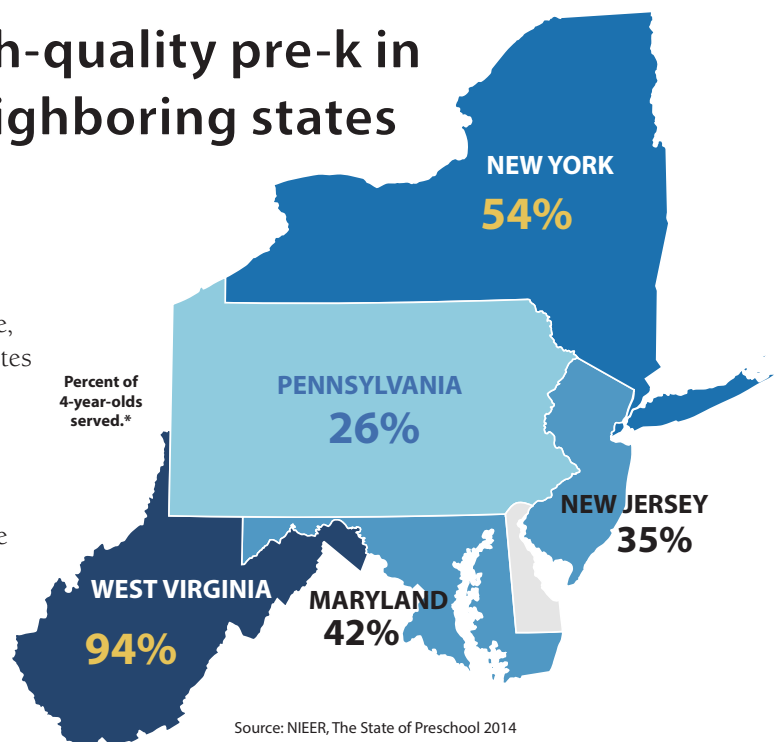
- Pennsylvania dropped to 15th in the nation in pre-k access for 3-year-olds. Five years earlier, we ranked 11th nationally.
- Pennsylvania remained stuck at 30th in the nation in pre-k access for 4-year-olds. Five years earlier, we ranked 24th nationally.⁸

The commonwealth has been moving in the wrong direction on pre-k access in part because many other states have decided to make investments in high-quality pre-k a higher public policy priority than we have. While opportunities are passing by in Pennsylvania, those other states – including most of our neighbors – are stepping up their investments in pre-k and making it available to a far higher percentage of young learners.

This is putting Pennsylvania at a competitive disadvantage, given the research that shows high-quality pre-k contributes to a stronger workforce, more robust employment rates and higher lifetime earnings.

The United Way of York County has been involved in improving pre-k opportunities since 1994, when the organization launched the Focus On Our Future initiative (now called FOCUS), a collaborative effort with local businesses, community leaders, educational institutions and others to help York County's youngest learners prepare for school success.

High-quality pre-k in neighboring states



Source: NIEER, The State of Preschool 2014

Reaching More At-Risk Children



Additional
\$400 million
investment to
high-quality
pre-k over
four years



Eligible At-Risk Children Served in
Publicly Funded, High-Quality Pre-k in 2019
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“You cannot argue the societal and economic benefits of investing in high-quality pre-k,” says United Way of York County Executive Director Robert Woods. “If we can increase the number of young learners who benefit from high-quality pre-k, we can increase the benefits it has for all of us – for our workforce, our communities and our commonwealth. We know it works, and we know it pays off for Pennsylvania.”

“If Pennsylvania wants to be competitive nationally and globally, we must do more to invest in our children’s future, and high-quality pre-k is clearly one of the smartest investments we can make.”

Making PA a Pre-k Leader

If Pennsylvania wants to make high-quality pre-k more broadly available to the young learners who need it most, the commonwealth needs to make significant, sustained investments over several years. Such a multi-year commitment can help increase access to those children at greatest risk of academic failure and take a small step toward serving some middle-class children.

A critical goal of the Pre-K for PA campaign is to ensure access to high-quality pre-k to children facing the greatest risk of academic failure first. These are children who, through no fault of their own, face hurdles that can trip them up and have lifelong detrimental effects.

“As a society, one of the most important things we can do to help an at-risk child is give them the tools for success at the earliest ages,” says State College Police Chief Tom King. “High-quality pre-k is a tool that we know works and we know it is cost effective. Young children who benefit from pre-k are less likely to drop out of school and less likely to end up on the wrong side of the law.

“Prevention is such a critical part of law enforcement, and it’s a lot less expensive to put a child on a path to success than it is to detour them off a road of failure,” he notes. “High-quality pre-k is the doorway to that path of success.”



Affordability and Access

Even though high-quality pre-k can have the greatest benefits for at-risk children in lower income households, Pennsylvania families in lower income brackets enroll their children in pre-k at much lower rates than families in higher income brackets.

This is hardly surprising given how much of a family's income can be eaten up by the cost of pre-k.

High-quality, private pre-k costs about \$8,800 a year for just one child to attend a program that operates during traditional school day hours over the course of a school year (not including holidays and summer).⁹ So a three-member family living at poverty level (earning \$20,090 a year) would have to spend nearly half of its income on pre-k enrollment, potentially making pre-k the largest household expense, even exceeding the cost of housing. Even for a middle-class family with an annual income of about \$50,000 to \$60,000, the cost of enrolling one child in private, high-quality pre-k can consume about one-sixth of the family's pre-tax income.¹⁰

Pennsylvania began moving in the right direction with the \$30 million increase in pre-k funding included in the commonwealth's partial fiscal 2015-16 budget that was enacted in late December, nearly six months into the fiscal year. The governor used his line-item veto authority in enacting the spending plan, making it clear that he wanted to revisit education funding for fiscal 2015-16 and pursue an additional \$30 million investment for pre-k programs, potentially resulting in an overall \$60 million increase for pre-k in 2015-16. (As of January 2016, negotiations on remaining portions of the state budget remain unresolved.)

We need to accelerate that effort with a focus on making high-quality pre-k available to children at risk of academic failure, who can achieve the greatest benefits from our investments.

We can reach our most at-risk children, as well as a portion of middle-income children, if we make significant new investments in publicly funded, high-quality pre-k over this fiscal year and the next three fiscal years. Here's how:

- An additional \$370 million investment in high-quality pre-k over this and the next three fiscal years – coupled with the \$30 million increased investment made so far in fiscal 2015-16 – can reach the more than 47,000 Pennsylvania 3- and 4-year-olds at greatest risk of academic failure.
- An additional \$100 million investment can help us reach about one-fifth of the 3- and 4-year-olds in middle-income households. This investment would reach about 23,500 young learners in these households.
- Combined, these two targeted investments can help Pennsylvania reach nearly 71,000 additional 3- and 4-year-olds over a four-year span, reaching a total of more than 125,000 children by 2019. (By contrast, fewer than 53,000 of our 3- and 4-year-olds were benefiting from publicly funded pre-k prior to the Pre-K for PA campaign's launch in 2014.)

This means, if Pennsylvania follows through on investing an additional \$470 million in high-quality pre-k over this and the next three fiscal years, we can increase access to these valuable programs to more than 40 percent of our 3- and 4-year-olds, compared to fewer than 20 percent who benefited in 2013.

High-quality pre-k has a proven return on investment for our children, our communities and the entire commonwealth, which is part of the reason so many parents want it for their children. We can't tell those children or their parents to hold off on pre-k until more funding becomes available, and we shouldn't have to tell them Pennsylvania simply isn't making pre-k more available while others states are picking up the pace on pre-k investments.

Now we need to maintain that momentum by continuing to increase our annual investments in pre-k to reach \$500 million in new investments over a four-year span. This will help ensure high-quality pre-k opportunities will be there for those young learners who need it most.



prekforpa.org

Data in this report is courtesy of the PA KIDS COUNT Data Center, a project of the Annie E. Casey Foundation. Pennsylvania Partnerships for Children is the KIDS COUNT state-level partner in the commonwealth.

Supporting research for this report can be found at papartnerships.org/prekinpa

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Pennsylvania Partnerships for Children is part of the statewide Pre-k for PA Campaign.

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