

# The Road to Success Includes High-Quality Pre-K

*How Pennsylvania's Pre-K Investments  
Compare to Other States*



When it comes to ensuring Pennsylvania's students are ready to succeed, high-quality pre-k works. High-quality pre-k programs set the early learners who have had the once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to attend them on the road to success, from the very first day of kindergarten to the time they collect their diplomas and transition to the workforce.

The body of academic research supporting the benefits of high-quality pre-k goes back decades, revealing improved outcomes for enrolled children that are difficult to dispute.

## Skills That Last a Lifetime

High-quality, publicly funded pre-k programs prepare students for kindergarten and beyond by supporting the development of the whole child. They guide the growth of the skills that serve as a foundation for all future learning and prepare students for lifelong success.

Children who experience high-quality pre-k may be only 3- and 4-years old, but during these years, children are putting in place the soft skills that become the basis for later success. They are learning to learn by asking questions - by building experiences and vocabulary through play, observation, interaction, problem solving, and by mastering their own feelings and emotions.<sup>1</sup>

A story in *Harvard Ed. Magazine* suggests that social-emotional learning is an “on-ramp” to academic success. Later in life when students enter the workforce, these social-emotional skills are critical to their success as they navigate office culture and demonstrate the ability to work well with others, be part of a team, and actively listen.<sup>2</sup>

Studies of children who were enrolled in high-quality social-emotional learning programs have shown that “they score, on average, 11 percentage points higher on

academic tests than children who do not receive such instruction.”<sup>3</sup>

## Workforce Readiness

High-quality, publicly funded pre-k provides an early chance at proactively impacting the development of Pennsylvania’s future workforce. Research documents the importance of early experiences on brain development, and educators and policymakers now have a deeper understanding of how to best foster young children’s learning.<sup>4</sup> By starting children’s development in core areas early, educators can stimulate a curiosity of science, mathematics, history, or art.<sup>5</sup> Since learning takes time and is cumulative, students often develop deep interests at an early age, so increasing access to high-quality pre-k programs is essential to long-term workforce development.<sup>6</sup>

A recent report released by Pre-K for PA Campaign partner Mission: Readiness, “Workforce Readiness - The National Security Threat From Within,” elevates the voices of military leaders urging further investments in health and education for the future of Pennsylvania’s armed services and workforce. According to the report, 71 percent of youth between the ages of 17 and 24 would not meet the military’s core eligibility requirements due to inadequate



**SKILLS THAT LAST A LIFETIME**

**WORKFORCE READINESS**

**BREAKING THE CYCLE OF POVERTY**

education, obesity or other disqualifying health conditions, or having a record of crime or substance use.<sup>7</sup>

Early childhood education has a proven positive impact on a child's future success, so ensuring the availability of high-quality, publicly funded pre-k should be part of Pennsylvania and the nation's workforce readiness approach.

### Breaking the Cycle of Poverty

In rural, suburban and urban communities across the Commonwealth, the significant unmet need for high-quality pre-k among eligible children is alarming. In nearly 2 out of 3 state senate districts, less than half of eligible preschoolers attend a high-quality pre-k program. In half of the state House districts, less than 40 percent of eligible 3- and 4-year-olds are currently attending one.<sup>8</sup>

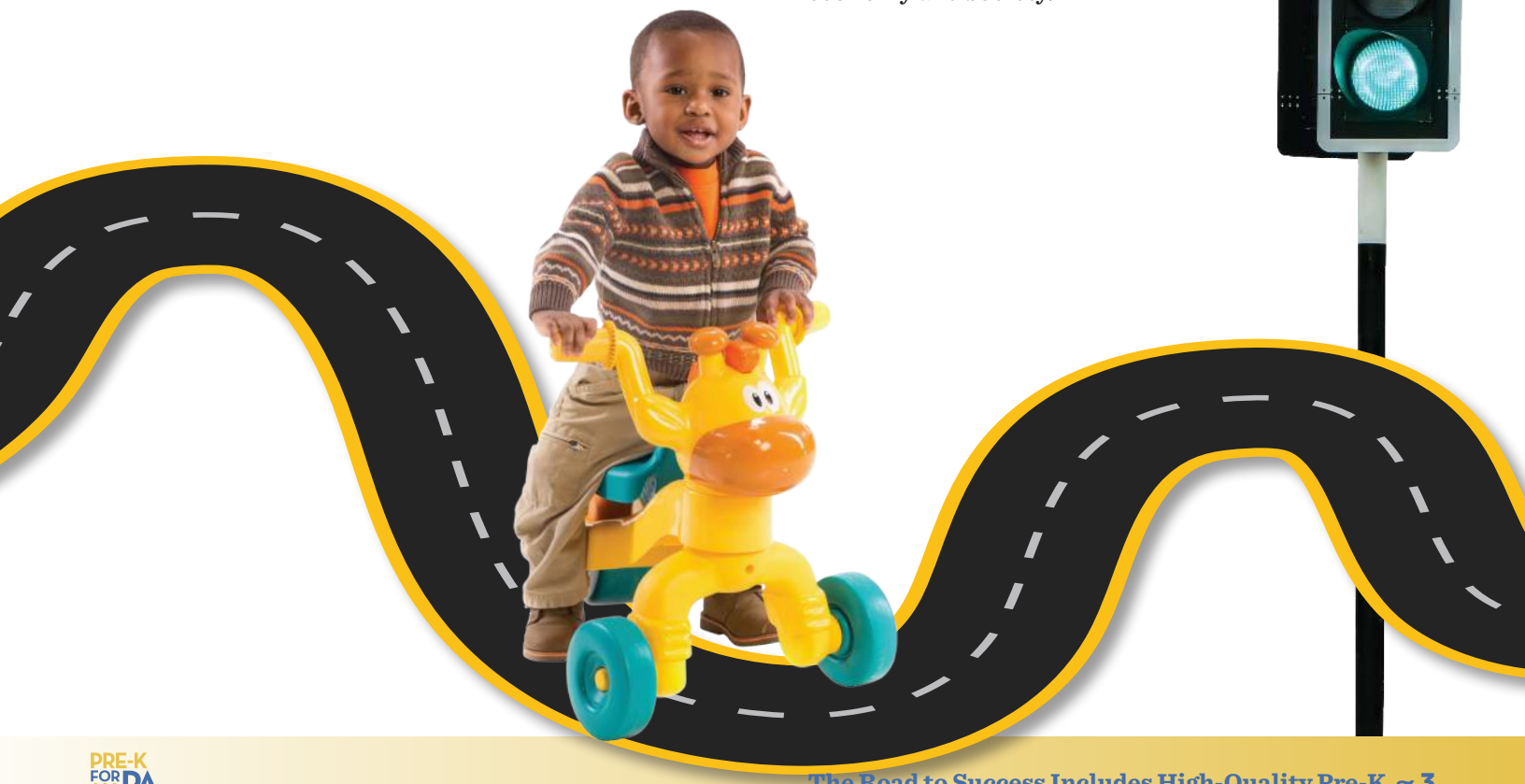
High-quality, publicly funded pre-k is particularly beneficial for low-income children, who are more likely to have road blocks along the way than their peers.

One study found that, "By school entry, the gap between the wealthiest children and the poorest

children is already pronounced. Children from low-income families are a year or more behind their more advantaged peers. The gaps that start at an early age only grow larger and catching up becomes ever more difficult."<sup>9</sup>

Perhaps the most illuminating evidence of the long-term economic and societal benefits of attending high-quality early learning programs comes from Dr. James Heckman, the Nobel Prize-winning economist and researcher of the historic original Perry Preschool Project that began in the 1960s, tracking outcomes for children into adulthood in Tennessee. Heckman demonstrates long-term results showing significant gains in personal and family outcomes for pre-k participants. Updated findings released in 2019 reveal longitudinal results that were able to illustrate the benefits of pre-k are sustained over time and substantiate high-quality pre-k as a mechanism which can help break the intergenerational cycle of poverty.<sup>10</sup>

If we don't break down barriers to access for more children at-risk of failure, then we cannot expect them to enter adulthood prepared to make meaningful contributions to our economy and society.





# Per Capita Investment Rankings by State

Rank	State	Governor Party Control	Senate Party Control	House Party Control	Per Capita Spending 2019-20
1	New Jersey	D	D	D	\$3,421
2	Georgia	R	R	R	\$2,851
3	West Virginia	R	R	R	\$2,363
4	Michigan	D	R	R	\$2,143
5	Alabama	R	R	R	\$2,100
6	New York	D	D	D	\$1,894
7	Illinois	D	D	D	\$1,741
8	New Mexico	D	D	D	\$1,533
9	Arkansas	R	R	R	\$1,479
10	Louisiana	D	R	R	\$1,327
11	North Carolina	D	R	R	\$1,325
12	South Carolina	R	R	R	\$1,303
13	Oklahoma	R	R	R	\$1,214
14	Iowa	R	R	R	\$1,189
15	Vermont	R	D	D	\$1,118
16	Oregon	D	D	D	\$1,116
17	Washington	D	D	D	\$ 973
18	Maine	D	D	D	\$ 969
<b>19</b>	<b>Pennsylvania</b>	<b>D</b>	<b>R</b>	<b>R</b>	<b>\$966</b>
20	Maryland	R	D	D	\$ 965
21	Kentucky	R	R	R	\$ 755
22	Rhode Island	D	D	D	\$ 742
23	Tennessee	R	R	R	\$ 666
24	Delaware	D	D	D	\$ 563
25	Hawaii	D	D	D	\$ 537
26	Nebraska	R	I	I	\$ 532
27	Missouri	R	R	R	\$ 151
28	Mississippi	R	R	R	\$ 54

## Pennsylvania Pre-K Investments Still Not Keeping Pace

High-quality, publicly funded pre-k works, and policymakers in both red and blue states are investing in robust early learning programs. The road to success for Pennsylvania's children and our economy starts with a solid early foundation. Our state policymakers recognize this and, over the last five years, have increased the level of investment for pre-k by \$145 million, thereby increasing access to thousands of additional children.

**Despite historic increases in pre-k funding, too few eligible 3- and 4-year-olds are on the road to success because Pennsylvania ranks 19th out of the 28 states that also publicly fund high-quality pre-kindergarten programs with similar quality standards as determined by the National Institute for Early Education Research.<sup>11</sup>**

When the Pre-K for PA Campaign released its first report comparing per capita pre-k investments in 2017, Pennsylvania ranked 20th out of 28 states and the District of Columbia that were analyzed.<sup>12</sup> Another state-by-state comparison was done the following year in 2018, ranking Pennsylvania 18th out of 30 states when looking at per capita investments in high-quality pre-k.<sup>13</sup>

*It is important to note that states with the highest per capita investment have varying political landscapes, with governor's offices and legislative chambers controlled by both Democrats and Republicans – showing that support is rightfully strong for pre-k on both sides of the aisle.*

Since the first analysis was done in 2017, Pennsylvania's investments are still being outpaced by states with a variety of political compositions in their legislative and executive branches; both more conservative and more liberal than Pennsylvania, and some that are similar to the Commonwealth politically.

For example, both Alabama and Georgia annually invest significant public dollars in building and maintaining statewide high-quality pre-k.<sup>14</sup> Alabama has seen significant increases, ranking 5th on the list with a per capita spending level of \$2,100. Georgia's per capita spending is \$2,851, ranking 2nd in the nation. Both states are typically seen as politically more conservative-leaning than Pennsylvania and have Republican-led legislatures and governor's offices.

North Carolina and Michigan – where the political landscape is similar to Pennsylvania – have also been investing at a higher per capita rate than the Commonwealth, with \$163 million and \$249 million invested, respectively. On the list North Carolina ranks 11th and Michigan ranks 4th, and in both states, the General Assembly is controlled by Republicans and their governors are Democrats.

While New Jersey has historically been a leader in the early education space, increased investments for pre-k stagnated over nearly a decade until the state FY 2018 budget, when the legislature invested an additional \$25 million. With the election of Governor Phil Murphy and his prioritization of early learning in his policy platform, an additional \$151 million has been invested in pre-k in the state FY 2019 and 2020 budgets collectively, catapulting the Garden State back to preeminence. While situated differently than Pennsylvania in terms of political majorities, with both the legislature and governor's office being controlled by Democrats, this level of investment is happening right next door to the Commonwealth.

While the \$145 million in increased investments over the past several budget cycles is an achievement during a time of generally limited budget growth, states with similar political compositions and quality standards are making stronger per capita investments, putting their early learners on the road to success in school and in life at a faster pace than Pennsylvania.

## Case Study: Georgia

Program name: Georgia Pre-K Program

FY 2019-20 investment: \$379 million

Per capita investment: \$2,851

Rank: 2nd

Political landscape:

**Governor- R**

**Senate- R**

**House- R**

*Beginning in 1992, Georgia's program started as a pilot serving a few hundred at-risk four-year-old children and expanded in 1995 to be the nation's first state-funded universal pre-k program.*

## Case Study: Michigan

Program name: Great Start Readiness Program

FY 2019-20 investment: \$249 million

Per capita investment: \$2,143

Rank: 4th

Political landscape:

**Governor- D**

**Senate- R**

**House- R**

*In its most recent state budget completed in the fall of 2019, the Michigan Great Start Readiness Program, launched in 1985, received a modest increase for expansion as well as funds to study the overall effectiveness of the program.*

## Case Study: New Jersey

Program name: Preschool Education and Expansion Aid

FY 2019-20 investment: \$738 million

Per capita investment: \$3,421

Rank: 1st

Political landscape:

**Governor- D**

**Senate- D**

**House- D**

*In his most recent (state FY 2020) budget, New Jersey Gov. Phil Murphy included a \$68 million increase to expand pre-k, support existing programs and assist wrap-around services, building off his \$83 million increase in the state FY 2019 budget and cementing the state's leadership in prioritizing early learning investments.*



## Paving the Way to Success Means Improving Access

The Pre-K for PA Campaign has advocated for sustained investments in high-quality, publicly funded pre-k and has made significant progress since the inception of the Pre-K Counts program more than a decade ago.

If we want to pave the way to success in adulthood for our early learners, we need to increase our investments in high-quality, publicly funded pre-k, because **only 44 percent of eligible children in Pennsylvania are currently enrolled**, according to the most recent data available (FY 2018-19). That means 56 percent of eligible children do not have access to this vital education.

But policymakers have a roadmap to give more eligible preschoolers the chance to attend high-quality pre-k.

An increase of \$243 million in high-quality pre-k (Pre-K Counts and the Head Start Supplemental Assistance Program) by the 2022-23 fiscal year will put Pennsylvania on par with states that deliver similar high-quality programs.

**If that investment was made today without other states making additional investments, Pennsylvania would jump from 19th place to 7th in the current per capita spending comparison!**

Accomplishing this goal is not a heavy lift as other states with similar political compositions – where opposing parties control the legislative branch versus the executive branch – have increased per capita investments in pre-k. Helping Pennsylvania's youngest learners reach the finish line ready to succeed should be a top priority for all of our state policymakers, regardless of political party affiliation.



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- <sup>11</sup> Per capita investment divides the state investment with the total population eligible to participate in each high-quality, publicly funded pre-k program. The analysis for this report compared a total of 28 states, including Pennsylvania, with similar program quality standards established by the National Institute for Early Education and Research.
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