



# THE RESULTS ARE IN: PENNSYLVANIA'S PRE-K COUNTS PROGRAM MAKES A BIG DIFFERENCE

Research has long shown the importance of investing in high-quality pre-k education for young children to improve short- and long-term outcomes in academic achievement and even lifelong success. This is especially true for children living in low-income families, children of color and others facing barriers to academic success throughout their school years.

Pennsylvania proved its commitment to investing in pre-k education by establishing the Pre-K Counts program in 2007, thus creating an opportunity for eligible 3- and 4-year-old children to access high-quality, publicly funded pre-k. With a goal of reducing educational disparities for children who lack opportunities or reside in environments that place them at risk of school failure, program guidelines define children who are eligible as those who are living in households below 300% of the federal poverty rate, are English Language Learners (ELL), or those children that have an increased risk of barriers due to community factors, academic difficulties or economic disadvantage.

Since the creation of the program, Pennsylvania remains committed to building a robust infrastructure to support the early learning of children throughout the Commonwealth. The Pre-K Counts program and the Head



Start Supplemental Assistance Program (HSSAP) are the two programs providing high-quality pre-k education and are funded in the Department of Education budget. While Head Start is mostly federally funded, HSSAP provides supplemental funding to providers to serve more children or extend the academic instruction year. Both Pre-K Counts and HSSAP are discretionary programs and are not mandatory areas of state spending, making it laudable that policymakers have grown investments to over \$281 million for both programs.<sup>1</sup>

## Studies Show Positive Outcomes for Participating Children in Kindergarten

Although we have seen significant investments in pre-k education, Pennsylvania has never had a formal, independent evaluation of its Pre-K Counts program since its inception in 2007 – that is until recently. In December 2020 the University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill released a report including two studies looking exclusively at Pennsylvania’s Pre-K Counts program: [Kindergarten Impacts of the Pennsylvania Pre-K Counts Program: A Statewide Evaluation](#) and [Implementation of the Pennsylvania Pre-K Counts Program: A Statewide Evaluation](#).

*Kindergarten Impacts of the Pennsylvania Pre-K Counts Program* examines the effect of participation in the Pre-K Counts program on early academic, social, and executive function skills in kindergarten.<sup>iii</sup> Three research questions guided the study, including: if children who attended a program had higher levels of academic and social skills in kindergarten than children with no prior preschool experience; if attending for one year or two years

impacted kindergarten skills (enrolling at age three versus age four); and if the outcomes varied on characteristics like geography, how rural or urban the location was, or the percent of 3-year-olds served.

*Implementation of the Pennsylvania Pre-K Counts Program* surveyed administrators, current and former families with children in a program, and compared families whose children did not participate in Pre-K Counts.<sup>iiii</sup> The report focused on issues related to the variability in implementation of the program, the effectiveness of family engagement, adequacy of supports for continuous quality improvement and implementation challenges in supporting children’s school readiness.<sup>lv</sup>

Both studies of Pennsylvania’s Pre-K Counts program conclude that the investments in pre-kindergarten have been beneficial to Pennsylvania’s youngest learners. **Most importantly, the evaluations show children participating were positively impacted compared to children who were not participants in the pre-kindergarten program.**



## Highlights of Findings

✓ *Pre-k Student Learning Gains:* The impact study assessed children in the second half of their kindergarten year and found positive outcomes in educational gains for participants in the Pre-K Counts program compared to children without access to high-quality pre-k education. Specifically, the study found children who participated had significantly higher levels of language skills and math skills.<sup>v</sup> Furthermore, children in the program gained between four to five months of learning compared to non-participants, characterized in the study as a substantial difference particularly for young children.<sup>vi</sup> These learning gains suggest access to high-quality pre-k experiences can provide an important opportunity in academic achievement, as early math, reading and attention skills are strong predictors for subsequent success in later school years.<sup>vii</sup>



✓ *Positive Outcomes Are Consistent Statewide:* The impact study yielded consistent results statewide regardless of geographic region, the percent of 3-year-olds enrolled, or how urban or rural of a location, indicating steady implementation of regulations and curriculum and providing participating children equal educational opportunities.<sup>viii</sup> Flexibility in some areas provides for local approaches based on community need, such as recruitment for program enrollment.



✓ *Future Investigations of Learning Gains May Show How to Diminish Summer Learning Loss:* The study suggests access to high-quality pre-k may help diminish summer learning loss. A study by Brookings indicated on average student's achievement scores decline over summer vacation by one month's worth of school-year learning.<sup>ix</sup> Using pre-k as a strategy to buffer against summer learning loss for our youngest and lower-income students is worthy of future study to see if it can lead to greater impacts in learning retention.



\*Of roughly **27 states** that compare to Pennsylvania

in terms of quality for their pre-k programs,

**17** offer pre-k to both 3- and 4-year-olds, showing the two-year enrollment opportunity is standard across the country.

**Pennsylvania can strengthen its two-year program to allow children participating the opportunity for even more positive outcomes.**

✓ *Improving Implementation of Programs for 3-Year-Olds to Improve Benefits of Two Years Of Instruction:* The impact study concluded outcomes from participation in the program did not differ based on age of enrollment.<sup>x</sup> However, the implementation study found there was little variation between curriculum and instruction based on the age group being served.<sup>xi</sup> Additionally, there were more challenges reported for programs that had higher proportions of 3-year-olds being served, including staffing.<sup>xii</sup> This analysis suggests more support is needed for programs enrolling both 3- and 4-year-olds, including strengthening the curriculum to ensure greater differentiation between one year and two years' worth of participation in the program, and for staffing support.



✓ *Pennsylvania Pre-K Counts Families Feel Positive and Engaged:* As part of program regulations, engaging families in their child(ren)'s academic plan is required, as well as providing additional supportive activities to encourage family involvement. When surveyed, families perceived the program positively for staff supportiveness and assistance with kindergarten transition.<sup>xiii</sup> Family voice is critical to ensuring positive impacts are benefitting communities being served. While communication from programs to families is positive, elevating their role in the decision-making process is important.





## Like PA's Results, Other Recent Studies Provide Consistent Positive Findings Nationally

While there has been an extensive body of research dating back decades showing the importance of investing in high-quality pre-k, more recent efforts broaden our understanding of the short- and long-term impacts of high-quality pre-k, helping us stay up-to-date with the most accurate and relevant evidence nationwide:

- **State Prekindergarten Effects on Early Learning at Kindergarten Entry: An Analysis of Eight State Programs – 2018**

This comprehensive multi-state analysis (Arkansas, California, Michigan, New Jersey, New Mexico, Oklahoma, South Carolina and West Virginia) about vocabulary, math and literacy outcomes points to improvements in learning for disadvantaged and general populations, but this varies state-to-state. As such, the study recommends routine, independent evaluations of pre-k programs.<sup>xiv</sup>

- **The persistence of reading and math proficiency: the benefits of Alabama's pre-kindergarten program endure in elementary and middle school – 2020**

While many studies have been able to ascertain the shorter-term impacts of high-quality pre-k, this study of Alabama's well-regarded First Class Pre-K (FCPK) program looked at whether those effects remain from third

through seventh grade. Results were statistically significant for proficiency in both math and reading for students enrolled in the program versus those who were not.<sup>xv</sup>

- **Impacts of the New Mexico PreK initiative by children's race/ethnicity – 2019**

With a diverse sample benefitting their study design, the results from five successive cohorts of children revealed the impacts of New Mexico's pre-k program were significantly impactful in the areas of language, literacy, and math skills. It also noted the importance of variability of outcomes across race/ethnicity even within similar program eligibility levels and suggests that more nuanced data be used when looking at family poverty and other risk factors impacting a child's outcomes later in life.<sup>xvi</sup>

- **Is Skill Type the Key to the PreK Fadeout Puzzle? Differential Associations Between Enrollment in PreK and Constrained and Unconstrained Skills Across Kindergarten – 2021**

In this study researchers examined the importance of specific skills and how long the benefits of pre-k can be sustained. Looking at children in the Boston Public Schools pre-k program, findings indicated that constrained skills like memorizing letters and numbers are essential. But unconstrained skills such as building vocabulary and problem solving that continue to develop throughout life and emerge through activities like storytelling are more likely to be sustained for longer periods as a benefit of attending pre-k.<sup>xvii</sup>

## Next Steps for Policymakers: Long-term Support and Ongoing Evaluation

The Pre-K for PA campaign, comprised of various statewide partners, understand the importance of ensuring every child has access to high-quality, publicly funded pre-k. We advocate for increased investments in pre-k and believe continued support is necessary to ensure all children are on the right path to academic success prior to entering kindergarten. **A next step as a result of the positive findings from the University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill study is continuing on the path of the campaign's long-term goal of an additional \$296.5 million invested in high-quality pre-k over the span of several state**

**budget cycles to allow eligible 3- and 4-year-olds the opportunity to attend a high-quality pre-k classroom.**

Currently, there are over 106,000 eligible children – or 64% – living in rural, suburban and urban communities that do not have access to high-quality, publicly funded pre-k. We have come a long way since the Pennsylvania Pre-K Counts program was implemented in 2007, and we can meet our enrollment goals with continued investment increases.

In addition, the study from the University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill was just the first of what is needed in a series of academic evaluations to show the outcomes of high-quality, publicly funded pre-k in Pennsylvania. For all its illuminating benefits, it is important to note that this study would not

have been made possible without the generous support of private funds. And it came as a result of persistent calls for the need for an evaluation on the efficacy of the Pre-K Counts program i.e., “show me proof that it is working.” This study answers that call. The program operates with very little overhead for administrative costs, leaving few additional resources to conduct frequent evaluations. Further research is needed to better understand what supports and resources will allow for continued academic achievement for the Commonwealth’s youngest learners.

**In a second step, the Pre-K for PA campaign calls for a small, targeted investment to fund ongoing, objective analyses of the pre-k program** to show return on investment and build on the foundational research provided by the first study. **Planning for future, independent research is responsible stewardship of taxpayer dollars, and can help ensure our youngest learners experience the most enriching programs possible.**

This funding can be constructed in a multitude of ways, whether it is through the General Government Operations



(GGO) funding, allocated to Pre-K Counts and stipulated in statutory language, or prescribed in a different manner.

We can point to sustained investments in high-quality pre-k as a reason the University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill research study shows Pennsylvania’s Pre-K Counts program is successful. And, without the support of our policymakers, eligible and participating 3- and 4-year-olds throughout the Commonwealth may have missed the once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to attend high-quality pre-k. The campaign looks forward to continuing to work together to ensure every child in Pennsylvania has access to high-quality pre-k education with proven results for them, their families, policymakers and taxpayers.

## States that Effectively Use Regular Evaluations to Promote Pre-k Programs

Similar to the call for Pennsylvania to make small, commonsense investments in routine, objective evaluations of its pre-k program – ultimately ensuring a return on investment for children served and taxpayers – other states frequently examine the effectiveness of their early learning programs:

**Michigan:** This state, similar politically to Pennsylvania, ranks high when it comes to both quality standards and annual per capita investments. Thanks to regular evaluations, including ones looking into specific topics like the impact on children in rural areas, the *Great Start Readiness* program has built a high level of bipartisan support over time.

**Alabama:** Widely regarded on a national level for the standard of its pre-k program – and known for its deep-red politics – state administrators meet regularly with policymakers to update them on the results of their program evaluations, understanding the positive impact it has on generating more support for pre-k and broader early learning initiatives.

**North Carolina:** Based out of the well-regarded University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill, the state has utilized the school as its external evaluator since its inception nearly two decades ago and has since produced an analysis of program efficacy nearly annually. The results speak for themselves, as North Carolina regularly ranks near the top of the list for states in terms of per capita investment for pre-k programs and program quality.

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