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AN INITIATIVE OF EARLY LEARNING PA

Celebrating 15 Years of Pre-K Counts: Investments are Working

August 2022



Access to high-quality, publicly funded pre-k makes a significant difference in the lives of Pennsylvania's 3- and 4-year-olds by providing them with the opportunity to enter school ready to succeed. The most extensive pre-k program in the state, Pennsylvania Pre-K Counts, was adopted as Act 45 to the Public School Code in July 2007, making 2022 its 15th anniversary.¹

Pre-K Counts provides eligible 3- and 4-year-old children with an opportunity to attend half- and full-day publicly funded high-quality pre-k. Eligible families can earn up to 300% of the federal income poverty level, filling the gap between families eligible for federal Head Start but who cannot afford to pay for pre-k out-of-pocket. Children who are English Language Learners or those with an increased risk of barriers due to community factors, academic difficulties, or economic disadvantages also are eligible.

Pre-K Counts currently serves nearly 27,000 children across Pennsylvania, with over 920 high-quality* early learning providers participating in the program, including more than 450 high-quality child care providers rated at a Keystone STAR 3 or 4.²

High-Quality Pre-K, Including Pre-K Counts, Is Effective

A December 2020 evaluation of Pre-k Counts by the University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill showed children who participated in the program had significantly higher language and math skills in kindergarten compared to children with no pre-k education.³ In addition, children who participated in the program gained between four and five months of learning compared to non-participants.⁴ These findings are consistent statewide, meaning access to Pre-K Counts impacts children in rural, urban, and suburban communities.

Beyond academic benefits, pre-k also provides children the opportunity to develop social skills, learn positive behaviors and problem-solving skills, reduce their risk of criminal behavior, and save taxpayers money by minimizing the need for more costly interventions in the K-12 public school system, such as grade repetition. A report from Fight Crime: Invest in Kids found the Pre-K Counts program reduced the percentage of children at risk for problematic social and self-control behaviors to just 4%, down from 22%.⁵

A 15-Year History of Investing in Pre-K Counts

Policymakers understand the importance of investing in our children's future and have prioritized investments in Pre-K Counts over the past 15 years. With an initial appropriation of \$75 million in 2007⁶, more than \$300 million has been invested in the program.⁷ This includes the most recent and historic investment of \$60 million in the FY 2022-23 state budget (the highest increase in the program in a state budget save for the initial appropriation in 2007).

Support for investments in Pre-K Counts has been bipartisan and bicameral since the beginning. It was initially signed by former Governor Ed Rendell in July 2007 and received increased funding through subsequent administrations and legislative leadership changes. Since state funding is discretionary rather than mandated, this is especially noteworthy. The program is entirely state-funded without federal support, making

the investments over the last 15 years particularly commendable.

Pennsylvania voters agree that pre-k is a valuable investment. In a recent statewide poll of voters, 65% support additional funding for pre-k, a nearly 5-point increase from a survey conducted in November 2021.⁸ There is also universal agreement from voters that access to early care and education helps to set a child's path as they embark on their education and future endeavors.

Pre-K for PA

The Pre-K for PA campaign, a nonpartisan coalition of regional and statewide nonprofit organizations, was established in 2014 to ensure all children can enter school ready to succeed by making high-quality pre-k accessible to every 3- and 4-year-old in Pennsylvania.

To fully achieve this vision, bold investments are needed to ensure the Pre-K Counts program continues to serve additional young children across the state. To address the statewide unmet need of 40%, which is considered the national goal for state pre-school participation rates, \$322 million is needed. These funds would provide 32,200 more eligible 3- and 4-year-olds with the opportunity to attend high-quality pre-k.

The Pre-K for PA campaign looks forward to working with lawmakers to ensure investments in Pennsylvania's young learners continue. We celebrate the success of Pre-K Counts, but most importantly, the number



of children positively impacted by the opportunity to attend a high-quality pre-k program. We are thrilled to commemorate the program's accomplishments over the last 15 years and look forward to what we will achieve in the years to come.

**Pre-K for PA defines high-quality, publicly funded pre-k as Head Start (state- and federal-funded), Pre-K Counts, school district pre-kindergarten, Philadelphia pre-k (PHLpreK), and Keystone STAR 3-4 child care centers and group child care homes.*

References

- ¹ Pennsylvania Office of the Governor. Act 45, 2007. <https://www.legis.state.pa.us/cfdocs/legis/li/uconsCheck.cfm?yr=2007&sessInd=0&act=45>
- ² Department of Education, Office of Child Development and Early Learning. *Commonwealth of Pennsylvania Open Data Portal*, accessed July 11, 2022, <https://data.pa.gov/Early-Education/Pre-K-Counts-and-Head-Start-Supplemental-Assistanc/pgbt-5wid>.
- ³ Peisner-Feinberg, E., Soliday Hong, S., Yazejian, N., Zadrozny, S., & Burchinal, M. (2020). Kindergarten impacts of the Pennsylvania Pre-K Counts program: A statewide evaluation. Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina, School of Education and Frank Porter Graham Child Development Institute.
- ⁴ Ibid (2020)
- ⁵ Pre-K for PA and Fight Crime, Invest in Kids. (2016). Preschool key to cutting Pennsylvania prison costs and boosting school success. <http://www.prekforpa.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/06/PA-Im-the-Guy-Report-2016-final.pdf>
- ⁶ Pennsylvania Governor's Office of the Budget. (2022). *Commonwealth Budget: Past Budgets FY2006-07*. https://www.budget.pa.gov/Publications%20and%20Reports/Documents/07_07_15_gf_budget_negotiations_model.pdf.
- ⁷ Pennsylvania Governor's Office of the Budget. (2022). *Commonwealth Budget: Past Budgets 2021-22 to 2006-07*. <https://www.budget.pa.gov/Publications%20and%20Reports/CommonwealthBudget/Pages/PastBudgets2015-16To2006-07.aspx>.
- ⁸ Cygnal. Pennsylvania Statewide Survey of Likely General Election Voters. June 1-2, 2022.



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www.prekforpa.org

Pennsylvania Partnerships for Children is a principal partner of the statewide Pre-K for PA Campaign



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