



Starting School: Ready Or Not?

Efforts in Pennsylvania to prepare children for school get mixed reviews

Starting school ready to learn places children squarely on track for enjoying success in school and later in life. On the other hand, those who begin school behind are more likely to stay behind, do poorly, eventually drop out, and endure other poor outcomes.

Policymakers are increasingly recognizing the reach of the issue of school readiness – that not only is the future well-being of today’s young children at stake, but also the strength of Pennsylvania’s economy to some degree. For example, with at least 40% of today’s working men and women in Pennsylvania set to retire over the next 20 years, the generation that has yet to enter school will account for a large share of the future workforce.¹

Recent years have seen progress made in helping children enter school ready to learn. But Pennsylvania still lacks a comprehensive, fully effective approach to early learning, according to a report released by Pennsylvania Partnerships for Children.

Early Years

Factors that play a role in whether children enter school ready to learn including their health, language, motor, social, and emotional development; cognition and general knowledge; and access to quality early childhood services.

In America today, child care is the rule rather than the exception. In Pennsylvania, more than two thirds of the

The studies are clear: A firm foundation of learning and literacy during early childhood sets the stage for school success. But despite recent progress, not all of the pieces are in place to ensure that all Pennsylvania children enter school ready to learn.

children spend time each week in the care of others, whether with a center-based provider or in a home-based service. These settings, as a result, are becoming increasingly important in preparing children to enter school.

Unfortunately, the quality of early childhood services in Pennsylvania leaves much to be desired. The Universities Children’s Policy Collaborative reports that only 20% of early childhood services offer the kind of quality environment necessary for children to reap the full benefits of early learning.

Among the problems that beset child care in the state are low pay and high turnover rates. Annual turnover rates range from 31% for teachers who earned an average of \$16,566 in 1999, to 51% for aides whose wages averaged \$11,427.² A shortage of college-educated teachers also affects the quality of early childhood services.

A richer array of preschool options, particularly for low-income children at risk of school failure, is a pressing need within the state, Pennsylvania Partnerships for Children reports. Pennsylvania is one of only nine states that does not invest in preschool. In 2002, Pennsylva-

nia received more than \$189 million in federal Head Start funds, but did not supplement those funds or devote funds to other preschool options for low-income children as other states do.

Promising Initiatives

The good news is that there are initiatives that show promise. In Pennsylvania and 17 other states, for example, TEACH offers scholarships for child care teachers to pursue higher education. High quality programs typically employ well-educated teachers and staff.

The Pennsylvania Partnerships report also recommends fully implementing Keystone Stars, a performance-based, tiered rating system that rewards providers for achieving quality standards.

Pennsylvania is also doing a better job financing services that help maximize the learning abilities of young children with developmental delays or disabilities. Most are able to receive important early intervention services. Between 1990 and 2001, Department of Public Welfare funding for early intervention has increased from \$18.8 million to \$54.5 million, and state Department of Education funding has jumped from \$14.8 million to

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Pennsylvania's Report Card

Child Care

Overall, the quality of providers is mediocre, at best, raising serious questions about their educational benefits. Keystone Stars, an incentive program to raise quality, is a step forward.

Early Intervention

The state gets high marks for spending more on children with serious developmental delays or disabilities than a decade earlier. Most of these young children can get services that attempt to maximize their abilities to learn.

Preschool

Pennsylvania is one of only nine states that does not fund preschool — despite strong evidence that quality early learning, such as a good preschool, goes a long way toward helping children to succeed in school.

Reading Readiness

Policymakers are paying more attention to early literacy and state and federal funding to support it is increasing. But these investments are scattered and lack coordination to reduce overlap and fill gaps.

Kindergarten

Studies suggest attending full-day kindergarten improves a child's chances of doing well in later grades. But only 38% of Pennsylvania's 500 public school districts offer full-day sessions.

Early Grades

The public school systems in Pennsylvania are marked by a wide spending gap that separates rich districts from poor districts. Smaller class sizes for low-income students and a stronger focus on literacy are other needs.

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nearly \$95 million.

Kindergarten and Beyond

Kindergarten offers important benefits to children, particularly at-risk children. And the advantages are greater when children attend full-day sessions. In Ohio, for example, full-day kindergarten students scored higher on first-grade reading readiness tests and on achievement tests in third, fifth, and seventh grades.

But in Pennsylvania, kindergarten is not compulsory and few school districts offer full-day kindergarten. Although all 500 Pennsylvania public school districts offer kindergarten, only 187 districts offer a full-day session, and only 29% of the state's 121,000 public school kindergarten students attend a full-day program.

Education spending is an influence felt in all grades and in Pennsylvania the amounts districts spend per student cover a vary widely — from a high of \$13,096 per student to a low of \$3,932 per student, according to 1999-2000 spending reports. *Education Week* gives the state a D-minus grade for education equity in a 2002

report. Only other three states scored worse.

Another important area in school readiness is the development of reading skills. State and federal investments in reading readiness and reading success has recently increased.

But in Pennsylvania, literacy initiatives are scattered among state agencies and the state lacks an effective coordinating mechanism to reduce overlap among programs and address known gaps in services.

Among the recommendations offered in the Pennsylvania Partnerships report is that lawmakers reform education spending to narrow the gap between rich and poor districts.

Other policy recommendations include reducing class sizes, creating an incentive subsidy to help pay for full-day kindergarten in districts that have high numbers of low-income students, directing agencies toward the goal of improving children's reading before they leave third grade, and encouraging kindergarten programs to hire teachers with early childhood certification or training in teaching young children.

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references

This report was based on the following publications:

- From Building Blocks to Books: Learning for Children from Birth through 8 in Pennsylvania is available on the Pennsylvania Partnerships for Children web site: www.papartnerships.org.
- From Science to Policy: Research of Issues, Programs and Policies in Early Care and Education (Written by University of Pittsburgh Office of Child Development). www.pitt.edu/~ocdweb/policy21.htm

¹ Testimony of Marilyn Ware of the Pennsylvania Business Roundtable before the Pennsylvania House Committee on Children and Youth, December 5, 2001. <http://www.paroundtable.org/ware1205.html>

² Pennsylvania Budget and Finance Committee. *Salary Levels and Their Impact on Quality of Care for Child Care Workers in Licensed Child Day Care Programs*, June 1999.

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