

background

Report # 73

Pennsylvania's Focus On Children

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Focusing on Pennsylvania's children

Recent developments are raising the profile of children and family issues

Several recent initiatives are raising the profile of issues addressing the well-being of children and families in Pennsylvania, including greater access to quality early childhood care and education and streamlining services to make it easier for troubled families to get the help they need when they need it.

Initiatives such as the Governor's Cabinet for Children and Families and a state Office of Child Development are raising children and family issues at the highest levels of state government. A university collaborative is also working to provide lawmakers with evidence-based information to help them make informed decisions.

Reports also suggest that school districts are taking advantage of Accountability Block Grants to expand their early education offerings, and other recent statewide programs are helping make higher-quality child care available to more children.

Getting High-Level Attention

A key accomplishment in recent months has been establishing a process to routinely bring children and family issues to the attention of the highest levels of state government.

The 11-member Governor's Cabinet for Children and Families regularly convenes the directors of welfare, education, budget and other high-ranking state government officials to recommend ways of making services to children and families more responsive, efficient, effective and easier for them to access.

Last year, Gov. Edward G. Rendell appointed a 40-member Com-

mission for Children and Families made up of stakeholders from across the state to support the Cabinet and provide a broader perspective children's issues.

"With the Cabinet and the Commission, there is an opportunity for better collaborative work among the departments and for better communication and collaboration among state departments and key leaders in the community," said Robert Nelkin, Director of Policy Initiatives at the University of Pittsburgh Office of Child Development and the governor-appointed Executive Director of the Governor's Cabinet for Children and Families.

The work of the Cabinet and Commission includes identifying key issues and service gaps, reviewing and evaluating programs and policies that affect children and families, and making recommendations on how services can be improved, streamlined, and coordinated.

Although several issues are

Encouraging developments in early childhood issues include standards for early learning, statewide programs for raising the quality of child care among providers large and small, and evidence that many school districts are investing more money in early education.

being examined, one receiving attention early is the prevention of child neglect, abuse, juvenile crime, school failure, and other poor outcomes. Another is how the state can promote better ways of directing families to the services they need and making the process of getting those services easier and less confusing.

The approach is to explore solutions by examining issues, program models, evidence of what works and what doesn't, and how the state government can best apply its fiscal and human resources to improve child and family outcomes.

Promoting Informed Policy

Making informed decisions on policies affecting children and families is crucial at a time when public resources are tight. To promote such decisions, a collaboration of university experts was established based on a model that has proven successful in several other states.

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Known as the Pennsylvania Child and Family Impact Seminars, the initiative is arming Pennsylvania policymakers with evidence-based information on early childhood education and other child-related topics on the Commonwealth's policy agenda.

The initiative is expected to offer an ongoing series of seminars, briefing papers, and other activities to inform those involved in making policy decisions. It is based on a model first tried in Wisconsin and later adopted in 18 other states. The first workshop was held in June on the topic of universal pre-kindergarten programs.

In Pennsylvania, the seminars are being developed by the Universities Children's Policy Collaborative (UCPC), a collaborative that includes the University of Pittsburgh Office of Child Development, the Center for Public Policy at Temple University, and the Pennsylvania State University College of Health and Human Development.

"We strive to be reactive, not proactive," said Michelle Harmon of Temple University, who serves as administrator of the program for UCPC. "We see our role as providing information that relates to specific issues already on the policy agenda that would help them make better informed decisions."

The seminars are primarily intended to inform state legislators, but other officials are invited to participate. UCPC is working with legislative leaders and the Legislative Office for Research Liaison to identify pressing issues of interest to policymakers.

The initiative is also intended to:

- Provide research and practice-based information useful in developing state-level policies that strengthen and support children and families.
- Increase knowledge of current pol-

icy issues by presenting objective, evidence-based research.

- Present innovative, political, and economically feasible policy options for making complex problems more manageable.
- Promote a child and family perspective in policymaking.
- Develop innovative delivery methods for disseminating research to state policymakers.
- Promote communication and establish working relationships among researchers, policymakers, and those who implement policy.

UCPC was created to provide nonpartisan information on issues important to the well-being of children, youth, and families. Previous projects include providing evidence-based information to the Governor's Task Force On Early Care and Education, whose landmark report on this critical issue was released in 2002.

Focus On Early Childhood

Pennsylvania has seen several important developments made in recent months regarding early childhood issues, particularly in early learning. These include a statewide approach to improving child care quality and evidence that school districts across the state are investing more in early education.

Helping to raise the profile of such issues is the recently-established

state Office of Child Development, which links the state Department of Public Welfare and Department of Education to promote coordinated leadership and to advance issues of child development and early childhood care and education.

Raising the quality of existing child care is the focus of several recent initiatives. Standards for early learning have been established to elevate the quality of the early learning experiences offered by child care providers large and small. And more child care providers are discovering Keystone STARS, an initiative that offers support and incentives to improve the quality of their programs.

Last year, Pennsylvania contributed funds to Head Start early education programs for the first time in its history. Gov. Rendell's proposed budget for the upcoming fiscal year calls for doubling Head Start supplemental assistance to \$30 million.

Early education is gaining in local communities as well.

Reports show that two-thirds of the state's school districts are investing their Accountability Block Grant dollars in early education. Most use the money to support full-day kindergarten. Other uses include investing in quality pre-kindergarten, early literacy, and smaller class sizes. "It's an impressive record of getting funds to communities to expand early childhood education," Nelkin said.

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