



Taxpayer-Funded, Universal Preschool in Pennsylvania: Benefits Questioned

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The push toward taxpayer-funded preschool for every child in Pennsylvania continues with Governor Rendell's budget proposal for the 2007-08 fiscal year. The Governor wants \$75 million for "Pre-K Counts," which would provide grants to school districts, Head Start programs, and community providers at the discretion of the Rendell Administration to serve a projected 11,100 children. At a cost of \$6,750 per child to state taxpayers, "free" preschool would be made available to parents in certain areas of the state, without regard to family income.

Advocates of universal preschool intend for every three- and four-year-old child to have access to government-run or government-approved preschools at taxpayers' expense. While supporters argue that state-provided preschool saves money over the long-term, the research suggests that the benefits of such programs are frequently overstated while the negative consequences are ignored.

Overstated Benefits of Preschool

Supporters of universal preschool claim that for every \$1 invested in preschool, taxpayers will save \$17 in remedial education, welfare, imprisonment and other expenditures over the life of the child. (The \$17 figure comes from a study of the High/Scope Perry Preschool in Ypsilanti, Michigan; however the purported taxpayer benefits are only \$7.16 for each dollar spent. Nevertheless, advocacy groups and their allies continue to claim a 1:17 dollar benefit for taxpayers in their lobbying and media strategy).

The High/Scope Perry Preschool study tracked students who attended preschool and compared them with a control group that did not attend preschool. However, the results of this study do not support the implementation of large-scale, universal, statewide preschool programs—of which "Pre-K Counts" is a precursor. Consider:

- The High/Scope Perry program served a grand total of *58 students*.
- High/Scope Perry students were from low socio-economic backgrounds with substantial mental retardation (IQs between 70 and 85).
- Tracking and intervention of High/Scope Perry students lasted almost *40 years*, not simply the one-year of preschool. Several scholars speculate that tracking and home visits primarily explain the positive results.¹
- High/Scope Perry students still fared poorly compared with the general student population—one-third dropped out of high school, one-third were arrested, and 60% received welfare assistance as adults.²

Similar studies, such as a RAND study of the Chicago Child-Parent Center program, offer little guidance for taxpayer-funded preschool programs. This program was also small in scale, served only disadvantaged students, and involved intensive family and school interventions for several years beyond preschool.³

Preschool Can't Fix K-12's Problems

Gov. Rendell's "Pre-K Counts" will send more taxpayer money to school districts and Rendell Administration-approved schools to create and operate preschools. Ironically, the push for universal preschool is in response to the poor academic performance of the same system that will control the vast majority of "Pre-K Counts" money and academic standards. Yet the solution is to further expand that struggling system's scope? Consider:

- Only an estimated 81% of students entering high school as the "class of 2003" graduated with a diploma (including only 50% of Hispanic and 61% of African-American students).⁴ Only 41% of the class of 2002 graduated at a "college-ready" level, including only 28% of African-American students.⁵
- The more time students spend in public schools, the further behind they fall. According to the state's Report Card, 82% of 3rd-graders were proficient in math and 69% in reading; by 11th grade these percentages drop to 52% and 65% respectively.⁶
- The state currently spends \$250 million annually in job training programs for workers, who, even with a high school diploma, lack the basic skills they need to perform in the workplace.

Limited Short-Term Academic Benefits of Preschool

- A Goldwater Institute report finds that, after 10 years, Georgia's universal preschool program "has served over 300,000 children at a cost of \$1.15 billion, and children's test scores are unchanged."⁷
- Oklahoma implemented universal preschool in 1998, but instead of seeing educational performance rise, they have seen test scores fall. Oklahoma finished dead last in 4th-grade reading gains from 1992-2005, with more students below basic level in 2005 than before universal preschool was implemented.⁸
- A University of California study of preschool benefits found no measured gain in educational improvement or sustained success in closing the economic achievement gap past the third grade.⁹
- There is no measured benefit of preschool being offered to children not in poverty. Child-development scholar and co-founder of Head Start Edward Zigler has stated, "There is a large body of evidence indicating that there is little if anything to be gained by exposing middle class children to early education."¹⁰

Lack of Long-Term Academic Benefits of Preschool

The United States Department of Health and Human Services conducted a report entitled "Head Start Impact Study: First Year Findings"¹¹ which studied the impact of Head Start on student achievement. The study found that Head Start failed to lift the performance of students served, even in the short term. The study concluded:

- Children in Head Start do reap some small benefits, but on most measures, graduates of the program continue to fall behind economically advantaged families.
- Head Start produced "small to moderate" impacts in pre-writing, pre-reading, vocabulary and health, but these impacts did not "close the gap between low-income children in the Head Start program and the general population of three and four year olds."

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- Head Start showed little to no impact upon mathematics, oral comprehension and social competencies.

Furthermore,

- Head Start co-founder Edward Zigler argues that preschools may teach children how to count, follow directions, and get along, but confer no lasting advantage.¹²
- Former Education Secretary Rod Paige said of Head Start, “After spending \$125 billion over 25 years, we have virtually nothing to show for it.”¹³
- Scholars have concluded that “Early intervention programs can boost children’s test scores, but those gains wash out within a few years of exiting the programs.”¹⁴

Questionable Social Benefits of Preschool

- Children who attended preschool at least 15 hours a week are more likely than their peers to display more negative social behaviors, such as acting up or having trouble cooperating.¹⁵
- A child’s long-term progress may be slowed by overly academic preschool experiences that introduce formalized learning experiences too early for most children’s developmental status. Pushing children too soon may actually backfire when children move into the later elementary school grades and are required to think more independently.¹⁶
- Early education can impair a young child’s social development, motivation to engage classroom tasks, natural eagerness to learn, and imagination.¹⁷
- The National Institute of Child Health and Development found that children who attend non-parental, structured, curriculum-oriented preschools have poorer work habits, lower grades and test scores, inferior peer relationships, substandard emotional health, aggression, and they are disobedient.¹⁸
- The Head Start bureau finds that preschool attendance increases aggression and decreases self control that persists through school with children being expelled from preschools at an alarming rate.¹⁹

Taxpayer-Funded Preschool Will Reduce Educational Options for Parents and Children

- States that have initiated universal preschool programs have experienced a loss of high-quality education providers when school districts own and operate taxpayer-funded preschools.²⁰
- Taxpayer-funded preschools provide services relatively “free” to parents. The use of tax dollars to compete with existing private preschool providers discourages use of non-governmental schools and reduces parental choice in education.

Preschool Needs Are Already Being Met

The Commonwealth of Pennsylvania currently operates a successful model of funding preschool education for low-income families—the Educational Improvement Tax Credit (EITC).

- The EITC provides tax credits to corporations that contributed money to state-approved scholarship organizations.
- The preschool scholarship portion of the EITC—which is currently limited to \$5 million per year—has provided nearly 11,000 students over the last three school years at a per-student average cost of \$1,370. Gov. Rendell’s “Pre-K Counts” program would cost taxpayers \$75 million per year at an average per-student cost of \$6,750.
- The EITC promotes educational and academic diversity by encouraging private, religious, and public delivery of preschool education. “Pre-K Counts” will promote a homogenous approach in which government bureaucrats make important decisions, and the values of Harrisburg—rather than the values of parents and school communities—are taught.

- The EITC encourages businesses to take an active role in funding preschool options for families, whereas “Pre-K Counts” will cost state taxpayers and lead to higher school property taxes.

Additionally, the push for taxpayer-funded preschool ignores that parents three- and four-year-olds in Pennsylvania already have access to and are choosing from a diversity of preschool options today.

- As of 2000, 49% of three- and four-year old children were enrolled in early childhood education programs in Pennsylvania.²¹
- An estimated 18% of three- and four-year-olds in Pennsylvania were enrolled in public center-based programs such as Head Start, nursery school, and pre-kindergarten in 2004-05.²²
- At least 30% of three- and four-year-olds in Pennsylvania are currently enrolled in some form of private preschool program.

ENDNOTES:

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