



EARLY LEARNING FOR PENNSYLVANIA'S YOUNG CHILDREN:

Challenges and Prospects

By Harriet Dichter, Commonwealth of Pennsylvania

While the federal government is a major funder of childhood care and education, states are primarily responsible for developing and implementing policies and programs for our children. What major initiatives are underway in our Commonwealth, and in what direction are they taking us? We hear from the Rendell Administration's newly appointed "point-person" on early childhood care and education on efforts underway to ramp up Pennsylvania's commitment to our youngest citizens.

Child Care vs. Early Education

For the past 100 years or so, when people who think about policy for preschool age children, they have tended to think in one of two ways: Either they think they are looking at a "child care" issue, or they think they are looking at a "nursery school" or "early education issue." While nothing makes these two perspectives mutually exclusive, in practice they were code words for very different perceived missions and clusters of issues. That led to very different public sector oversight philosophies, regulatory requirements, and funding streams.

Our challenge today, from a public policy perspective, is to uphold the best values of both the "child care" and "early childhood education" approaches — hence the term "early care and education" — and to assure that families and children are getting a firm foundation for educational and employment success. We also need an honest appraisal of what public investment is achieving, compared to what it should or could achieve.

Where Pennsylvania Stands

Pennsylvania is just beginning to treat early care and education as a foundational element for its children. We have been taking some exciting steps forward, but we lag our "competitors" in other states and abroad in many areas. We are a long way from assuring that all parents who need it can enroll their children in an early learning program and expect that program to be effective in preparing their child for future success.

There is substantial bi-partisan support for the broad objectives the state is pursuing. During his short administration, Governor Mark Schweiker commissioned a report called **Early Care and Education: The Keystone of Pennsylvania's Future, Preparing Our Children for Success**. Key recommendations in that report included:

- making full-day kindergarten available
- making quality prekindergarten available

- improving financial assistance to parents who cannot afford to purchase early care and education
- making school readiness a priority at the gubernatorial level

The efforts of the Rendell Administration are fully consistent with the report's recommendations:

Full Day Kindergarten. The Rendell Administration has made particularly dramatic progress for full-day kindergarten. With the initiation of the Education Accountability Block Grant funded at \$200 million for the school year 2004-05, local school boards and superintendents could select from among 11 proven approaches to boost quality in their educational programs. The Accountability Block Grant that Governor Rendell signed into law makes available three early childhood options — full-day kindergarten, quality prekindergarten, and small class size in the early grades. Local educational leaders acted: at least \$2 out of every \$3 in Accountability Block Grants will be used for these early childhood programs. Full-kindergarten is seeing a dramatic surge in Pennsylvania — if past trends stay the same, this year's Accountability Block Grants will increase the number of children in full-day kindergarten from about 40 percent of kindergartners to at least 54 percent.

Quality Prekindergarten. The Rendell Administration marks the first state-level public sector support in Pennsylvania for quality prekindergarten offered through Head Start and public schools. Until very recently, we were one of a very few states with no public investment in quality prekindergarten. Under Governor Ed Rendell, we have joined the mainstream, but other states and governments abroad are doing far more.

In order to involve public schools in offering quality prekindergarten, the Education Accountability Block Grant offers a first-time state option for schools to offer quality prekindergarten. The choice is up to the local education leaders to proceed. Given the urgent need to move to full-day kindergarten, quality pre-K is off to a slower start, with 40 districts taking advantage of this option. Among these is Pittsburgh, which is investing all of its resources in quality prekindergarten, and will serve as a beacon for the remainder of the state.

Head Start, a federal prekindergarten program, has repeatedly proven to be a highly effective way to improve eventual school success of disadvantaged children. By adding \$15 million of Pennsylvania funds to the direct federal contributions that primarily fund Head Start, we have been able to add 2,500 children to Head Start programs statewide. This has been done by initiating new partnerships among Head Start, child care and schools. However, even with the combined new state and ongoing federal investment in this

program, we are reaching only about 50 percent of the impoverished children who are eligible for enrollment. We still have another 30,000 children to reach!

Keystone STARS. Keystone STARS, which is administered by the Department of Public Welfare (DPW), is Pennsylvania's program to boost quality in its child care centers by identifying standards, providing financial and technical assistance to achieve the standards, and rewarding progress in meeting standards. Keystone STARS was designed to help child care centers become true partners in supporting the school readiness of young children. It represents the most comprehensive approach of any of the nation's state-based quality improvement initiatives for non-school-based early education.

Just moving from planning into implementation as the state's leadership moved from Governor Schweiker to Governor Rendell, this program is growing. Forty-two percent of Pennsylvania's 4,000 regulated child care centers are participating. We are very proud of this. But Keystone STARS is still a long way from reaching all centers and from assuring parents that their child care provider's Keystone STARS participation will truly enhance their children's school readiness.

Another important aspect of Keystone STARS is that, unlike Head Start and school-based prekindergarten, it addresses the early learning needs of vulnerable infants and toddlers. An effort is also underway to continue to strengthen the Nurse Family Partnership, which provides first-time teen mothers with intensive child development support for their babies and toddlers.

Financial Assistance for Parents. The Rendell Administration has increased the budget for child-care subsidy, which builds upon the trend initiated in the Ridge-Schweiker Administration. DPW also recently proposed a complete overhaul of the regulations governing its tuition subsidy program, one which substantially simplifies both eligibility requirements and the procedures for getting and retaining assistance. We hope that this simplification removes unnecessary barriers to parents who desperately need quality child care for their children.

It is important to recognize, as well, that the expansion of Head Start and public-school-based prekindergarten also represents a very important form of financial assistance to the parents of the children served by these programs, since they are free to the families served.

Gubernatorial Leadership. In 2004, the state established a new Office of Child Development within DPW in order to unify the various child care and early intervention efforts within DPW, and has also appointed the leader for this office as Policy Director at the Pennsylvania Department of Education (PDE).

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The purpose of this new office, and the joint appointment, is to assure ongoing progress in the establishment of early childhood education and care as a major thrust of state government. The newly established Governor’s Early Learning Team brings together the Governor’s Office, PDE, DPW, the Department of Health, and the Head Start program to assure that the Governor’s early childhood priorities are well-established and understood, and to assure appropriate cross-departmental leadership and collaboration in this work.

The Struggle for Quality

Historically we have paid little attention to the quality of the early educational experience.

The quality of the programs that are offered makes all the difference to the children and families that participate. Paying for programs that do not offer the kind of quality we value does not make sense. Several ongoing initiatives by Pennsylvania are focused on boosting the quality of the programs we regulate or sponsor.

Disseminating Best Practices. One way to help unify disparate types of programs is to use a common set of standards that identify the most effective program practices and also establish high expectations for children. Pennsylvania has significantly lagged the nation in this area, as was noted in Governor Schweiker’s report, but during 2003-04, PDE and DPW came together with stakeholders from around the state to develop Pennsylvania’s Early Learning Standards. These standards are being used to inform the essential, ongoing continuing education that is offered each summer to early childhood teachers and administrators. In the summer of 2004, nearly 2,000 early childhood practitioners — from public and private schools, from child care programs, and from Head Start — were reached, a significant improvement over the number reached the previous decade.

Making Credentials Work. Translating these best-practice standards into good outcomes for children requires well-trained teachers and administrators. They need to be versed in how young children learn and develop, and to use their knowledge day in and day out with young children and their families.

Right now, there are radically different rules for teachers, depending on the setting in which they teach — and different consequences for these teachers in terms of compensation and professional recognition. For the early education settings that come under the umbrella of PDE, a B.A. in early childhood education is required, programs of induction are required, and continuing education must occur for at least 180 hours every five years. For the early care and education set-



tings in child care that DPW oversees, the acceptable teacher credential is an A.A. in human services with 6 hours of continuing education each year. Head Start is moving towards a credentialed teacher requirement and has no formal requirement for continuing education hours, but it has a vigorous system for ongoing professional development and program reviews.

Over the summer of 2004, DPW and PDE teamed up with United Ways from across the state and met with over 700 child care practitioners and administrators, child care trainers, and higher education faculty in order to gather on-the-ground information about how to assure that all of the state’s investments in professional preparation and development meet the standards and support practitioners in gaining appropriate degrees.

The current work includes modifying the guidelines for the B.A. programs to align them with the new Early Learning Standards. We are also aligning the investment in child care practitioners to offer a more credential-based course of study and shifting the state’s investment in child care professional development from a “workshop” to a credit-based model.

We have initiated efforts to improve compensation for child care teachers who are well-credentialed and experienced in early childhood education. Improving compensation is crucial both for encouraging teachers to obtain meaningful training, and for making certain

that the best-trained teachers remain in the system and help build its human capital store. Compensation for child care teachers is being addressed in three ways: 1) through the development of a new part of Keystone STARS (e.g., Education and Retention Awards) that offers financial awards to highly qualified teachers who are working in the areas of the state with high poverty and where children are at high risk of school failure; 2) through payments that child care providers accept when they enroll low-income children; and 3) through expansion of the popular T.E.A.C.H. scholarship program, which supports current early childhood practitioners to get their early childhood degrees. This work is early in its development and will require deeper investment and additional strategies over time.

Conclusion

Experienced participants in state policy and politics know that little happens fast here in Pennsylvania. The progress being made now is the result of years of work in the state and across the nation. In the years ahead, we will need to invest more, and expect more from our investment.

Harriet Dichter is Governor Rendell's point-person on early childhood care and development, with a joint appointment as the Deputy Secretary in the Office of Child Development of the Pennsylvania Department of Public Welfare and the Policy Director of the Pennsylvania Department of Education. For more information on the state's policies, programs, and initiatives, visit the state's website: www.state.pa.us.

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Pennsylvania Investments in Early Childhood Care and Education		
Item	FY 2004-05	FY 2003-04
Quality Prekindergarten		
• Prekindergarten Head Start	\$15 million	\$0
• School-led Prekindergarten	\$9.3 million	\$0
Early Care and Education/Child Care	\$521.9 million	\$491 million
Full-Day Kindergarten	\$97 million	\$0
Child Care		
Item	FY 2004-05	FY 2003-04
Access to Child Care	\$448.7 million	\$433.9 million
Community Engagement	\$2.5 million	\$2.4 million
Health/Safety Grants	\$0 (incorporated health and safety as part of STARS)	\$15 million
Keystone STARS	\$25 million	\$15 million
Licensing and Inspection	\$6.3 million	\$6.2 million
Parent Information and Referral	\$11.5 million	\$11.5 million
Professional Credentialing		
• Basic credentials	\$.8 million	\$.3 million
• T.E.A.C.H. education scholarships	\$2.4 million	\$1.8 million
• Higher Education Vouchers	\$.3 million	\$.3 million
Quality Supports for Home-Based Programs	\$.8 million	\$.4 million
Community-based training for practitioners (non-credentialed)	\$3.6 million	\$3.5 million

Source: Pennsylvania Departments of Education and Public Welfare