
The State of Early Learning in Southeastern Pennsylvania

An Assessment of Early Learning for Young Children
in the Philadelphia Region



By the:

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Summary of Key Findings and Recommendations

- Of the 250,000 children in Southeastern Pennsylvania who are 5 years and under, an estimated 160,000 are in non-parental care settings, broken down in the following way: 49 percent with regulated childcare providers, 6 percent in school district pre-kindergarten (pre-K), 3 percent in Head Start, 11 percent in nursery schools, and 31 percent in all other childcare, comprised of legally exempt and illegal childcare.
- An estimated 41 percent of children in non-parental care are in the city of Philadelphia, and the remaining 59 percent are in the suburban counties of Bucks, Chester, Delaware, and Montgomery. This city/suburban breakdown is fairly reflective of the overall breakdown of the 5 and under population in the region – 42 percent versus 58 percent.
- In terms of assessing quality early learning experiences in each of the non-parent care settings, an estimated 22 percent of children are “good” or “high” quality settings. Good or high quality is defined by excellent staff credentials – i.e., at least 50 percent of staff have a degree in early childhood education or a related field. A mixture of non-parental care settings falls into this category – regulated childcare providers who have reached at least STAR Level 3 in the state’s Keystone STARS program, school district pre-k, Head Start, and licensed nursery schools.
- An additional 24 percent of children are in non-parental care settings that are “on the path” to quality – i.e., the provider is voluntarily participating in quality assessment, but they have not yet attained the 50 percent staff credential threshold established for good or high quality. These settings are all childcare providers that are participating in Keystone STARS and currently are at Level 2 or lower.
- Finally, for the remaining 54 percent – more than 86,000 in number – we know nothing about the quality of the non-parental care setting, either because the setting is opting not to participate in quality assessment or because the setting is operating outside the regulatory system altogether. An estimated 37,000 children are in settings that are opting not to participate in quality assessment – i.e., regulated childcare providers who are not participating in Keystone STARS or non-licensed nursery schools. The remaining 49,000 are with childcare providers who are exempt from regulation or operating illegally.
- There are four immediate actions that can be undertaken to promote more widespread quality in the region’s early learning system:
 - **Enroll remaining eligible providers in Keystone STARS.** The program is a supportive first step toward quality, and at the entry level requirements are small. With this step, as many as 1,600 childcare providers serving 32,000 children would move onto the path to quality.
 - **Devise an intermediate step or an alternative process for nursery schools.** At present, quality assessment is an “all or nothing” proposition for nursery schools, and for many, licensing can be a significant commitment. Extending Keystone STARS – an incremental process of attaining quality – to this group or developing a process akin to Keystone STARS could bring more into the quality assessment fold.
 - **Move providers from Keystone STARS Level 2 to 3 by addressing barriers.** More than 1,000 providers caring for 39,000 children (many of them in the suburbs) fall into this category. An almost geometric increase in staff credentials, time and cost separates STARS Level 2 from 3 and prevents many from advancing to the highest ranks of providers.
 - **Expand Head Start and school district pre-K.** A call in support of more public money devoted to these areas would allow more children to participate in these top quality programs.

- To promote widespread quality in the state’s “blended” system of early learning – and increase the educational and workforce potential of tens of thousands of children – the region’s businesses can assist along to fronts:
 - As employers, by providing information to the employees (also parents) through Human Resource communications and instituting creative corporate policies, such as matching dependent care benefits.
 - As regional business leaders, by helping childcare workers attain degree completion, providing technical assistance to key state initiatives, and engaging at the local level particularly with school districts.

Introduction: Project Background

Around the country, business leaders are joining – and often leading – efforts to provide quality early learning opportunities for young children in their community. Why has this become a business issue? Just as companies take measures to grow into the next generation, investing in early learning is proving to be a smart regional down payment to ensure a quality workforce down the line – a return increased by the “social costs” avoided if a kid gets a good start to his or her education.

Research shows that too many children are entering kindergarten and first grade with a deficit of skills that handicaps them throughout their educational career. Further, educational underachievers earn less and need more public services in adulthood. To achieve better results at the secondary school end there must be increased quality at the very beginning of the educational pipeline, and that means increased access to a quality early learning experience for every child.

And it's not just poor kids who benefit. Early learning benefits all children. Poor families, in fact, can qualify for Head Start or school district pre-kindergarten (pre-K) programs; affluent families can afford the best quality private programs. It's the majority in the middle who scramble for places and often have little option – especially as their children reach ages 3 and 4 – but to choose childcare or nursery schools that don't necessarily have a quality early learning component.

In Winter 2005, the Pennsylvania Economy League released a special edition of the *Greater Philadelphia Regional Review*, with articles that made a strong case in support of quality early learning experiences for young children as an effective economic development investment. While the Regional Review laid out the research case for the business community, particularly in economic development terms, this report attempts to define the issue at a finer level by “sizing” the challenge of quality early learning – or lack thereof – in Southeastern Pennsylvania. It asks basic questions about the settings our youngest residents are placed in today and what – if anything – we can say about their quality in terms of preparing them for kindergarten and success in school. Armed with this understanding of the challenge before us, the business community will then be in a much better position to take a lead and help move forward a thoughtful regional agenda.

Research Goal

This report asks two basic questions about early learning in Southeastern Pennsylvania:

- What types of settings are children 5 years and younger in Southeastern Pennsylvania placed in today?
- What – if anything – can we say about the quality of these settings in terms of preparing young children for kindergarten and success in school?

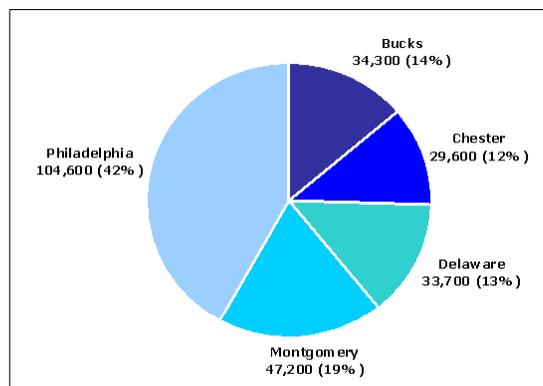
In answering these two questions, we can begin to understand the challenge before us and, at a practical level, how we can go about promoting widespread quality early learning throughout the region.

The next three sections provide details on the research approach, key definitions and assumptions, and sources of data and information. Given that there is no comprehensive “system” of early learning in the region (such as the public school system for elementary and secondary education), data and information had to be gathered from numerous sources. In a couple instances where actual counts of children in a particular setting were not available, reasonable estimates were made based on existing research and consultation with regional and state experts. Every effort was made to ensure that the data and information used for this research was up-to-date and accurate. Note, however, that figures cited in this report are intended to represent a “big picture” of the issue, given that precise measurement was not a possibility.

Units of Study

The primary unit of study in this report is children ages 5 and under who live in Southeastern Pennsylvania. Southeastern Pennsylvania is comprised of 5 counties: Bucks, Chester, Delaware, Montgomery, and Philadelphia Counties. According to the US Census Bureau's American Community Survey of 2004, there are 250,000 children ages 5 and under in Southeastern Pennsylvania, as illustrated in Figure 1 and Figure 2. Each county's 5 and under population somewhat mirrors its share of total population, though most notably Philadelphia's share of children 5 and under is greater than its share of the total regional population.

Figure 1: Total 5 and Under Population in Southeastern Pennsylvania



Source: US Census Bureau, American Community Survey, 2004

Figure 2: County Breakdown of Southeastern Pennsylvania's 5 and Under Population

<i>SE PA Counties</i>	<i>No. Children 5 & under in SE PA</i>	<i>Children 5 & under as % of total SE PA 5 & under population</i>	<i>County's total population as % of SE PA total population</i>
Bucks	34,300	14%	16%
Chester	29,600	12%	12%
Delaware	33,700	14%	14%
Montgomery	47,300	19%	20%
Philadelphia	105,600	42%	38%
SE PA Total	250,500	100%	100%

Source: US Census Bureau, American Community Survey, 2004

Understanding the Various Care Settings

The first goal of the research was to identify the types of care settings children 5 and under are placed in, and to determine where the 250,000 children of Southeastern Pennsylvania fit into each of these settings.

Parental versus Non-Parental Care

At the broadest level, children ages 5 and under can be divided into 2 categories – those cared for exclusively by a parent (or parents), and those cared for by a non-parent. At present time, there is no *regional* survey that quantifies these two general categories, however a survey of Pennsylvania families conducted in 2002 found that 64 percent of respondents with a child 5 years or younger had the child in a non-parental care setting (full or part time); the balance (36 percent) were in the exclusive care of a parent(s).¹

After consulting with regional and state experts, it was determined that these survey results could be applied to the Southeastern Pennsylvania region. When applied to the 5 and under population, 90,000 children in Southeastern Pennsylvania are cared for exclusively by a parent and 160,000 are cared for by a non-parent.

Types of Non-Parental Care

Breaking down the larger category – non-parental care – there are a number of settings analyzed in this report. Definitions and details on data sources and assumptions (if applicable) are provided for each setting:

- **Regulated childcare providers:** Full-day, year-round care-taking services for young children that may or may not include an educational component. Because they are full-day, year-round, these providers are required to obtain certification (i.e., licensing) from the Pennsylvania Department of Public Welfare (DPW). There are three general types of regulated childcare providers: center-based (serving 7 or more children), group-based (serving up to 12 children), and family-based (serving 4 to 6 children).

Data on this group was obtained from the Southeast Regional Key (SERK), sponsored by DPW's Office of Child Development. In instances where a provider's "capacity" (i.e., number of certified "slots") was not available, the following capacity estimates were used: center – 80 slots; group – 12 slots; and, center – 6 slots. Two additional assumptions were made regarding this group: 1) 90 percent of capacity is actually filled by children 5 and under (i.e., 10 percent vacancy rate); and, 2) 65 percent of certified slots are for children 5 and under (many providers are certified to care for school-age children as well). The first assumption is based on consultation with regional and state experts. The second assumption is based on a DPW estimate reported to the Governor's Task Force on Early Childhood Care and Education.

- **School district pre-kindergarten (pre-K):** Age-appropriate educational programs that coincide with the school day and year. These programs are regulated as part of school district activities. However, if "wrap-around" childcare services are provided, the program must obtain DPW certification. Note that some school districts offer Head Start programs; in this study, children in school district-run Head Start programs are "credited" as being part of school district pre-K.

¹ 2002 Family Survey, conducted for the Governor's Task Force on Early Childhood Care and Education.

Five school districts in Southeastern Pennsylvania (of the 64 districts in the region) have pre-K programs: Bristol Borough (Bucks), Chester-Upland (Delaware), Philadelphia, Pottstown (Montgomery), and Upper Merion (Montgomery). Data on these programs was obtained from the Pennsylvania Department of Education (PDE) and confirmed by the school districts directly.

- **Head Start:** A federal program providing comprehensive services for low-income families, including a strong educational component. These programs must comply with federal guidelines, and therefore no DPW certification is needed unless they are providing full-day, year-round childcare services. In Pennsylvania, state funding is provided for supplemental slots to eligible children. Data on this group was obtained from the Pennsylvania Head Start Association.
- **Nursery schools:** Private, part-time programs that may or may not include an educational component. Because they are not operating full-day, year-round, they are not required to obtain DPW certification. However, they do have the option of obtaining a license from PDE; if PDE-licensed, they must comply with high standards of operation, annual inspections, and yearly license renewal. Partial data (on licensed nursery schools) was obtained from PDE. The balance of this group was estimated to be 25 percent of the total, based on consultation with regional and state experts.
- **Legally exempt childcare:** Includes neighbor or relatives caring for 3 or fewer children; nannies, au pairs, and babysitters; and, summer camps. Generally, these are informal, cash arrangements (particularly the first two subgroups), so the state has no way of having an actual count of how many children fall into these care settings. Partial data was obtained from DPW on low-income children who receive state subsidies for childcare and fall into this category. The balance of this group (along with the estimate for “illegal childcare” – see next) was assumed to be the remainder of children unaccounted for by the above categories of care settings.
- **Illegal childcare:** Providers who are *not* exempt from state regulation but operating with no DPW certification and therefore operating illegally. Because they are operating outside the regulatory system, the state has no way of having an actual count of how many children fall into this care setting. This group, along with the balance of children in “legally-exempt childcare” (see above), was assumed to be the remainder of children unaccounted for by the above categories of care settings.

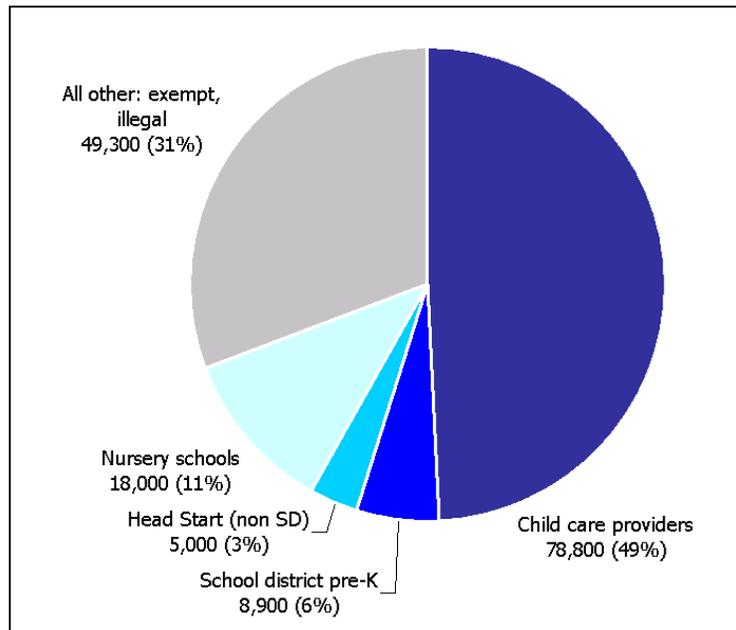
There are two factors that could not be addressed in this study because of data constraints. First, quality early learning opportunities are most important for children ages 3 and 4 as they prepare to enter kindergarten (typically around age 5). Ideally, this study would have separated out 3 and 4-year olds from the 5 and under age group for specific analysis. Unfortunately, the data is available only for the 5 and under age group, not by specific age. This constraint is most notable in looking at the group of children who are cared for exclusively by a parent. It is believed that many (if not most) of these children are infants and toddlers (i.e., 2 years and younger), and therefore it would be inappropriate to analyze the quality of care (in terms of educational exposure) provided to this group of children.

Second, some children are placed in more than one care setting during the week. For example, a child in a morning Head Start program might go to a childcare provider in the afternoon so that the full workday is covered. Unfortunately, it is impossible to know how many children are placed in multiple care settings as there currently is not cross tracking of children between the different care settings. Note that some providers offer multiple programs – for example, childcare services that “wrap around” a part-day pre-K or Head Start program. In this situation, a child will only be counted once in the analysis, and so double-counting due to placement in multiple settings might be minimal.

Who is caring for Southeastern Pennsylvania’s children?

Figure 3 illustrates the range of non-parental care settings young children of Southeastern Pennsylvania are placed in. First, note that the smallest slices, just 9 percent of available spaces, are true pre-K programs in that they have an educational component: Head Start and school district pre-K. Another 11 percent are in nursery schools. Nearly a third are off the educational radar entirely because exempt or illegally operating providers are caring for them. Finally, fully half the pie is served by regulated childcare providers of various shapes and sizes.

Figure 3: Breakdown of Children in Non-Parental Care Settings



Source: PEL estimates using data sources identified on pp. 4-5

Note that capacity for each care setting is an actual count of children as derived from data sources, with the exception of nursery schools (which is only a partial count of licensed providers) and “all other,” a combination of legally exempt and illegal childcare. The latter two groups are estimates.

Figure 4 illustrates the same set of numbers further broken down by city versus non-city. “City” is comprised of Philadelphia City/County, and “non-city” is comprised of Bucks, Chester, Delaware, and Montgomery Counties. In the two instances where actual data counts for the care setting do not exist (“non-licensed nursery schools” and “all other”), it was assumed that a county’s share of children in these settings was proportional to its share of the region’s 5 and under population.

Figure 4: City vs. Non-City Breakdown of Children in Non-Parental Care Settings

<i>Type of Care Setting</i>	<i>No. Children 5 & Under</i>		<i>Share of Children 5 & Under</i>	
	<i>City</i>	<i>Non-City</i>	<i>City</i>	<i>Non-City</i>
Regulated childcare	27,500	51,300	35%	65%
School district pre-K	8,600	300	97%	3%
Head Start	2,300	2,700	46%	54%
Nursery schools	2,700	15,300	15%	85%
All other: exempt + illegal	24,700	24,600	50%	50%
SE PA Total	65,800	94,200	41%	59%
Share of 5 & under pop			42%	58%
Share of total SE PA pop			38%	62%

Source: PEL estimates using data sources identified on pp. 4-5

On balance, the distribution of available places for non-parental care between city and non-city is fairly reflective of the city/non-city share of children 5 and under (41 percent versus 59 percent, as compared to 42 percent versus 58 percent). Further, the city's share is commensurate with its share of the 5 and under population, which is larger than its share of the total population.

At a more detailed level, it appears that available places in the city (on balance) tend to be with school district pre-K (particularly the Philadelphia School District, which accounts for 8,600 of the 8,900 available places). Roughly equal shares of available places for Head Start can be found in the city and suburbs, perhaps reflecting the strong demand for free high quality, pre-K programs especially in the suburbs (where school district pre-K is largely unavailable). There are relatively more available places for private programs in the non-city portion of the region – childcare providers and nursery schools – though it should be noted that many of these private programs take in children whose care is subsidized by the state.

Assessing Quality in Southeastern Pennsylvania

The second goal of the research was to determine which care settings could be considered “quality” in terms of preparing young children for kindergarten and success in school.

What is quality?

There has been extensive research over the past few decades on care settings for children 5 years and younger and what makes up a quality early learning experience. As part of the Governor’s Task Force on Early Childhood Education and Care, the following factors were identified as being major characteristics of a quality early care or education service.²

- **Well-educated staff specifically trained** in the child development area and related fields.
- **Consistency of staff** over time, often promoted by adequate salaries and benefits, reasonable workloads, and pleasant and supportive working conditions.
- **Low child-staff ratios and small group sizes** are necessary for staff to effectively interact with individual children, develop relationships, and provide the “teachable moment” that defines developmentally appropriate practices.
- **Comprehensive education and social services available or by referral** that are directed specifically to each individual (e.g., parent, child) and domains of desired improvement (e.g., child cognitive, social-emotional, parenting skills, drug and alcohol problems).
- **Sufficient extent** (e.g., hours per day, weeks per year, years per program) and **program intensity** (e.g., time on task, direct instruction on learning tasks, etc.) are necessary to produce benefits.
- **Supportive and regular supervision of staff** by knowledgeable administrators. The benefits of training staff are often achieved only if there is supportive supervision.
- Plans for developing rapport with, mutual respect, support, and **involvement of parents**, both fathers (custodial and non-custodial) and mothers in the program and ensure that staff and curriculum are culturally competent.
- Programs need **systematic monitoring and evaluation** to continuously improve programs and benchmark progress.

Based on review of this research and consultation with numerous regional and state experts, it was determined that the most appropriate proxy for assessing quality of care settings in Southeastern Pennsylvania was the presence of teachers in the classroom with a degree in early childhood education (ECE) or a related field. There are numerous quality assessment processes in place in Pennsylvania, each addressing a different part of the early learning “system” (see a summary of these processes in the table below). Across the board, these processes award the highest ratings of quality to providers and programs whose staff are specifically credentialed in ECE. Furthermore, this proxy was chosen because it is easily measurable for most care settings assessed in this study and it provided a consistent, objective measure of quality across all the care settings.

² *From Science to Policy: Research on Issues, Programs and Policies in Early Care and Education* (page 108), conducted for the Governor’s Task Force on Early Childhood Education and Care.

<i>Type of Care Setting</i>	<i>Quality Assessment Process</i>
Regulated childcare providers (Center, Group and Family)	Keystone STARS (Standards, Training, Assistance, Resources, Support): A state-run, voluntary quality assessment and improvement program available to DPW-regulated childcare providers. Keystone STARS rates providers that exceed state health and safety licensing requirements at four quality levels. STAR Four is the top rating and approximates the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) standards.
School district pre-K	Pre-K programs run by school district operations are regulated as part of school district activities, with internal evaluations in place. Note: a pre-K program is much like an elementary education classroom, with a degreed teacher in each classroom.
Head Start	As a federal program, Head Start programs are subject to federal guidelines, which include the requirement that at least 50 percent of staff must have a degree in ECE or a related field (completed or in progress). Head Start program evaluations are conducted regularly. The Pennsylvania Head Start Association was able to confirm that all Head Start programs in Southeastern Pennsylvania are currently in compliance with federal guidelines.
Nursery Schools	Providers that opt to obtain a PDE-license must comply with high standards of operation, which includes the requirement that degreed teachers are in the classroom. Providers are subject to annual inspections and must renew their license each year. For non-PDE licensed providers, there currently is no way of assessing quality.
Exempt childcare providers	Because the state has no legal authority to track this type of care setting, there currently is no way of assessing quality of this setting.
Illegal childcare providers	Because these providers are operating illegally, there currently is no way of assessing quality of this setting.

How quality is assessed in Southeastern Pennsylvania

Using the quality assessment processes in place (defined above), this study divides quality of care settings into four main categories, each explained in the table below. For the first two categories (“outside system” and “opting out of quality assessment”), we are not able to say anything about quality because the setting is not part of an assessment process or is outside the regulatory system altogether; for the second two categories (“on the path to quality” and “good or high quality”), we are able to assess quality because the setting is subject to or voluntarily participating in a quality assessment process. Of knowable quality, the difference between a care setting deemed good/high quality and a care setting “on the path to quality” is whether or not it passes the staff qualification “threshold” – at least 50 percent of staff have a relevant degree. Each type of care setting is assigned a place in this quality assessment grid, as outlined in the final row:

	ASSESSING QUALITY			
	<i>QUALITY UNKNOWABLE</i>		<i>QUALITY KNOWABLE</i>	
	<i>Outside System</i>	<i>Opting Out of Quality Assessment</i>	<i>On the Path to Quality</i>	<i>Good or High Quality</i>
Definition	Exempt from or operating illegally outside of the regulatory system	Provider eligible for quality assessment, but choosing not to participate	Provider or program participating in quality assessment, but not yet attained good or high quality staff qualification	Provider or program participating in quality assessment, and has at least 50% of staff with relevant degree
Applies to...	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Providers exempt from DPW certification ▪ Illegal childcare providers 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Providers not participating in Keystone STARS ▪ Non licensed nursery schools 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Keystone STARS providers at Level 2 or lower 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Keystone STARS providers at Level 3 or higher, or NAEYC-accredited ▪ School district pre-K ▪ Head Start ▪ Licensed nursery schools

Research Findings and Priorities

Applying staff qualifications as the primary proxy for quality, Figure 5 shows the quality picture for Southeastern Pennsylvania’s 160,000 children in non-parental care settings, and Figure 7 shows the same set of numbers in a bar chart. Figure 6 shows the breakdown by city (Philadelphia City/County) versus non-city (Bucks, Chester, Delaware, Montgomery, and Philadelphia Counties).

Figure 5: The Quality Picture for SE PA Children in Non-Parental Care (Table)

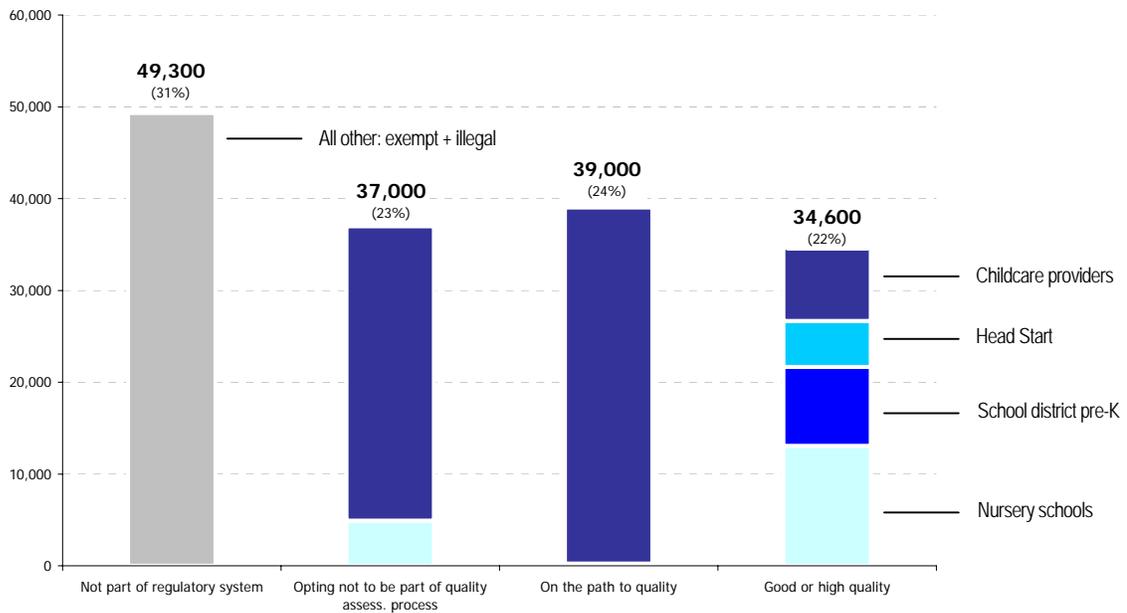
<i>Type of Care</i>	<i>ASSESSING QUALITY: No. SE PA Children 0-5 in Non-Parental Care</i>				
	<i>Not part of regulatory system</i>	<i>Opting not to be part of QA process</i>	<i>On the path to quality</i>	<i>Good or high quality</i>	<i>Total</i>
Regulated CC providers		32,100	38,700	8,000	78,800
SD pre-K programs			300*	8,500	8,800
Head Start				5,000	5,000
Nursery schools		4,900		13,100	18,000
All other: exempt + illegal	49,300				49,300
Total	49,300	37,000	39,000	34,600	159,900**
% of Total	31%	23%	24%	22%	100%

Source: PEL estimates using data sources identified on pp. 4-5 & pp. 9-10. *These children are with childcare providers who are partnering with school districts, not in school district pre-K classrooms. **Total not equal to 160,000 due to round-off error.

Figure 6: The Quality Picture Broken Down by City vs. Non-City

<i>Type of Care</i>	<i>ASSESSING QUALITY: Percentage Breakdown Between City and Non-City</i>									
	<i>Not part of regulatory system</i>		<i>Opting not to be part of QA process</i>		<i>On the path to quality</i>		<i>Good or high quality</i>		<i>Total</i>	
	City	Non-City	City	Non-City	City	Non-City	City	Non-City	City	Non-City
Regulated CC providers			37%	63%	33%	67%	42%	58%	35%	65%
SD pre-K programs					100%	n/a	97%	3%	97%	3%
Head Start							47%	53%	47%	53%
Nursery schools			42%	58%			5%	95%	15%	85%
All other: exempt + illegal	50%	50%							50%	50%
Total	50%	50%	37%	63%	33%	67%	42%	58%	41%	59%

Figure 7: The Quality Picture for SE PA Children in Non-Parental Care (Bar Chart)

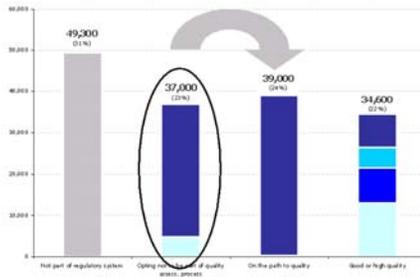


The Great Unknown

The two columns on the left of the bar chart in Figure 7 represent 5 of 10 children (54 percent) about whose early learning experience we know nothing. Thirty-seven thousand of these children are in settings that are not participating in a quality assessment process – childcare providers opting out of Keystone STARS or non-licensed nursery schools (especially in the suburban counties) – even though they could, and nearly 50,000 (equally split between the city and the suburban counties) are in settings outside the regulatory system altogether either because they are exempt or operating illegally.

ACTION: Enroll remaining eligible providers in Keystone STARS. The program is a supportive first step toward quality, and at the entry level requirements are small. With this step, as many as 1,600 providers serving 32,000 children would move onto the path to quality.

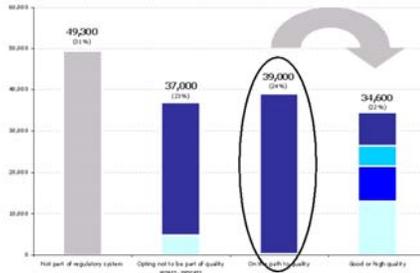
ACTION: Devise an intermediate step or an alternative process for nursery schools. At present, quality assessment is an “all or nothing” proposition for nursery schools, and for many, PDE licensing can be a significant commitment. Extending Keystone STARS – an incremental process of attaining quality – to this group or developing a process akin to Keystone STARS could bring more into the quality assessment fold.



Path to Quality

The bar at middle-right in Figure 7 is comprised of childcare providers (including a handful partnering closely with school districts) that, while not having achieved “good” quality, are at least part of the assessment process for childcare providers, Keystone STARS. More than 1,000 providers caring for 39,000 children (many of them in the suburbs) fall into this category. An almost geometric increase in staff credentials, time and cost separates STARS Level 2 from 3 and prevents many from advancing to the highest ranks of providers.

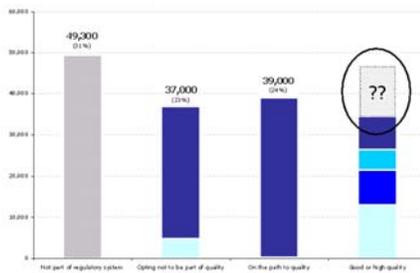
ACTION: Move providers from Keystone STARS Level 2 to 3 by addressing barriers.



Good or High Quality

The far right bar in Figure 7 shows the number of children in “good” or “high” quality settings. Ideally, this is where we want 100 percent of children to be. One way to gain quality places is by the expansion of programs known to be of the highest quality – Head Start and school district pre-K programs (particularly in the suburbs, where school district pre-K is practically non-existent). Additional state funding proposed for school district pre-K (through **Accountability Block Grants**) and Head Start (through the **Head Start Supplemental Assistance Program**), as well as partnerships formed between school districts, Head Start, and childcare providers (as encouraged through **Pre-K Counts**), would go a long way toward achieving this goal. Figure 8 provides more detail on these major state initiatives promoting quality in Pennsylvania.

ACTION: Expand Head Start and school district pre-K. A call in support of more public money devoted to these areas would allow more children to participate in top quality programs.



These four actions present the most immediate opportunity for increasing access to quality. But we should not forget the nearly 50,000 children in settings that are exempt from regulation or operating illegally. While more difficult to ascertain, it may be possible to assess and encourage quality through state subsidies of low-income children, many of whom are in care settings that fall into this group. And lastly, of the 90,000 children being cared for exclusively by their parents, it is likely that a segment would consider putting their children in an early learning program if quality could be assured.

Figure 8: Major Initiatives Promoting Quality Early Learning in Pennsylvania

Keystone STARS (Standards, Training, Assistance, Resources and Support): A voluntary quality assessment and improvement program available to providers regulated by the DPW; program rates those that exceed state health and safety licensing requirements at four quality levels. STAR Four is the top rating and approximates the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) standards.

Accountability Block Grants: Provides funding to school districts to improve education quality via 11 options, incl. 3 for early learning. In '04-05, over \$2 of every \$3 grant dollars were spent on ECE.

Head Start Supplemental Assistance Program: Supplements federal funding for Head Start programs for eligible children in PA. In '05-06, state grants allowed 4,700 more low-income children to benefit from this in-demand pre-K program.

Pre-K Counts (formerly Partnership for Quality Pre-Kindergarten): A 3-year public/ private pilot effort to create a cohesive educational system for young children. Pre-K Counts is working with 23 school districts to deliver pre-K in a range of settings through partnerships with Head Start, high quality childcare providers, and early intervention.

Call to Action for the Business Community

As consumers, we tend to like choice, and today's reality is that families require choice. When it comes to pre-school age children, we not only have to address their early learning needs but also the care-taking needs of working families.

Pennsylvanians enjoy a great deal of choice due to a "blended" system that the state (in conjunction with federal and local dollars) is investing in. But with more choice comes greater complexity. Understanding what is good quality and what is not can be confusing for parents and vexing for teachers who welcome these children into their classrooms without knowing which children already need to catch up.

To promote widespread quality in this blended system of early learning — and increase the educational and workforce potential of tens of thousands of children — the region's businesses can assist along two fronts:

As employers. Employees are also parents and consumers of early learning and care-taking services. Employers can help stimulate demand for quality early learning by:

- Providing information to employees through Human Resources communications.
- Instituting creative corporate policies, such as matching dependent care benefits.

As regional business leaders. Providers of services for young children, particularly childcare providers, are businesses too. If we are to build a true blended system, then the business community can help transform these businesses into much more than basic care-taking services by:

- Advocating and funding programs that move child care workers and school aides with some college credit to degree completion.
- Providing leadership and technical assistance to key state initiatives, such as Pre-K Counts.
- Engaging at the local level with the primary agents for forming early learning partnerships: school districts and school boards.
- Supporting demonstration projects such as Pottstown's ambitious effort to transform its economy in part through improvement of early learning.

While this report helps build an understanding of the size of the region's early learning challenge, the need to continue researching early learning escalates, especially as the push for quality becomes more widespread. Many questions remain, in particular: How will increased quality affect the business model particularly for child-care providers, especially compensation for credentialed staff? And how will this affect affordability for families? And how can we increase access to school district pre-K and Head Start without putting significant financial costs on taxpayers or undermining the childcare industry? While these questions will be a challenge to answer, in asking them we know we'll have made tremendous progress toward attaining quality throughout the region's early learning system.

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Data and information sources for this report:

- Governor's Task Force on Early Childhood Care and Education: 2002 Family Survey; From Science to Policy: Research on Issues, Programs and Policies in Early Care and Education
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