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# ISSUES

**So No Child Starts Behind**

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## EDUCATION'S NEXT BIG STEP

No child left behind.

That haunting phrase for legislators, school boards, school administrators, and teachers has come to the fore as the strongest argument for financing early childhood education.

You can talk about cute 3- and 4-year-olds sitting on the floor, learning colors and numbers, or about the long-term benefits to society of pre-kindergarten (pre-K) training in terms of later curbing high school dropout rates and of future savings in the criminal justice and prison systems.

But right now, the stringent accountability rules connected to government funding under the federal No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act constitute the greatest performance pressure on Pennsylvania's school systems and, therefore, on the Pennsylvania legislature to do something. And in the short run, as well as for the long term, the quickest way to do something meaningful seems to be to finance early childhood education. Extensive research has shown that the best bet for improving test scores in elementary classrooms in the years just ahead is the extra boost given to future students by participation in classes before their kindergarten years.

"Pre-kindergarten pays," declares Harriet Dichter, policy director of education for the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania. "It is a critical down payment for a child's later education and

will have a great return on investment for us by ensuring that children can read and write and have a mastery of math necessary for meeting No Child Left Behind standards." Dichter, well aware that NCLB is criticized in some quarters for being overly focused, further explains that pre-K helps with more than math and language for a child—it develops valuable learning attributes such as paying attention, curiosity, persistence, listening skills, and socializing with other youngsters. "It helps make a child ready for school, with a demonstrated impact on school attendance and full classroom achievement."

For Dichter and others in the field, that record shows the breakthrough importance of Governor Edward G. Rendell's new Pennsylvania Pre-K Counts program—an inclusion in his 2007–08 budget of \$75 million for disbursement for pre-kindergarten training, both in public school systems and in private institutions such as nursery schools. This is in addition to a new \$25 million appropriation to expand full-day kindergarten programs. Both these programs and appropriations are embedded in the ongoing Accountability Block Grant program, which otherwise is maintained at the current \$250 million level.

Rendell's Pre-K Counts budget proposal is the culmination of an effort in Pennsylvania during the past dozen years to promote pre-K education. First taken up by philanthropic foundations, the movement built on

the success over decades of the Head Start program for low-income children. Teresa Heinz was a particular leader, with the Heinz Family Philanthropies launching a program in Pittsburgh called the Early Childhood Initiative (see Chapter 3). Added impetus came with the 1996 passage of federal welfare reform legislation, bringing a realization that if welfare mothers were propelled into the workforce, adequate educational provisions should be made for their youngest children. And if for them, why not for all 3- and 4-year-olds—particularly in an era where, at every income level, both fathers and mothers are working?

Significant interest at the state level began with Governor Mark Schweiker, a Republican, followed by Rendell, a Democrat, demonstrating the bipartisan nature of the support for early childhood education (ECE).

ECE became one of the options in the so-called Accountability Block Grants of state money made available to school districts. However, rather than investing in early childhood education programs, many school districts chose the option of using their block grant monies to offer full-day kindergarten.

That underlines the importance of the inclusion in the 2007–08 budget of money specifically for ECE.

However, whether the Pre-K Counts initiative becomes reality via the budget finally being approved by the state legislature may well depend upon the passage of tax increases

of various sorts also proposed in the Rendell budget. That, of course, is where the legislature comes into play.

In subsequent chapters of this *Issues* brief, we will discuss the history of ECE in more detail, including the growth of such initiatives as one launched by the United Way of Westmoreland County and another by PNC Financial Services Group, Inc., of Pittsburgh. But first, the case for pre-K.

## WHY INVEST IN EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION?

Extensive research in recent decades has amply demonstrated that quality pre-K experiences benefit children and their families at the time and in the future.

With this research in mind, the Pennsylvania Department of Education has established the Pennsylvania Pre-K Counts program. It summarizes its rationale as follows: “A good quality of life, high quality jobs and a strong economy for Pennsylvania require that every Pennsylvanian be provided with opportunities. Early education through Pennsylvania Pre-K Counts can open the doors of opportunity for every child to do well in school, in the workforce, and in life.”

Pre-K Counts and other early childhood education initiatives are backed by numerous studies. Particularly persuasive is a 2005 report by the Federal

Reserve Bank of Minneapolis keying on the best ways to spend tax dollars for economic development. Written by analyst Rob Grunewald and researcher Art Rolnick, it takes this unusual tack:

Unfortunately, many economic development schemes using public dollars are at best a zero-sum game. ... virtually every state in the union has a history of trying to lure new companies with public subsidies. Previous studies have shown that the case for these so-called bidding wars is shortsighted and fundamentally flawed. From a national perspective, jobs are not created—they are only relocated; the public return is at most zero. ...

Persuasive economic research indicates that there is a far more promising approach to economic development with government assistance. It rests not on an externally oriented strategy of offering subsidies to attract private companies, but rather on government support of those much closer to home—quite literally: our youngest children. This research shows that by investing in early childhood education, governments—in partnership with private firms and nonprofit foundations—can reap extraordinarily high economic returns, benefits that are low-risk and long-lived.

The Economic Policy Institute of Washington, D.C., focused on poor children in a 2004 report, *Exceptional Returns: Economic, Fiscal, and Social*

*Benefits of Investment in Early Childhood Development*, pointing out practical economic benefits for society as a whole from early childhood development (ECD) programs:

- By improving the skills of a large fraction of the U.S. workforce, these programs for poor children would raise the gross domestic product (GDP), reduce poverty, and strengthen U.S. global competitiveness. Within 45 years the increase in earnings due to ECD investments would likely boost GDP by nearly one-half of 1 percent, or \$107 billion (in 2004 dollars).
- In school, poor children too often fall far short of learning the needed academic skills for competing in the global labor market. As adults, they are more likely to suffer from poor health and participate in crime and other antisocial behavior. With EDC investments, “crime rates and the heavy economic costs of criminality to society are likely to be substantially reduced as well, with savings of about \$155 billion (in 2004 dollars) realized by 2050.”

A most interesting progression of thinking on the subject comes from successive reports by the RAND Corp. In 1998, the widely respected nonprofit research organization cautiously used words such as “can” and “may” in assessing questions such as the following:

- Do early interventions targeted at disadvantaged children benefit

participating children and their families? After critically reviewing the literature and discounting claims that are not rigorously demonstrated, we conclude that these programs can provide significant benefits.

- Might government funds invested early in the lives of some children result in compensating decreases in government expenditures? Here, we examine the possibility that early interventions may save some children (and their parents) from placing burdens on the state in terms of welfare, criminal justice, and other costs. Again, after updating and refining earlier estimates, we find that, at least for some disadvantaged children and their families, the answer to this question is yes.

But half a decade later, RAND completed studies from which it concluded that universal preschool education benefited more-advantaged students as well as less-advantaged students. One such study was of California, with all its diversity in population, while the other two were of Oklahoma and Georgia, states which actually had universal preschool programs in place.

The 2005 report cautioned that studies using different methodologies “must be culled, as must those measuring a range of outcomes over a period of time.” Not surprisingly, it found that preschool education made a greater positive difference for less-advantaged youngsters—as, one

might say, they were starting farther behind the line of scrimmage. This led to a positive conclusion for universal early childhood education, although stated in this paradoxical fashion:

“These studies suggest that, at least in the short-term (in terms of school readiness or early test scores), more-advantaged children may also benefit from high-quality preschool programs but to a lesser extent than more disadvantaged children.”

A plethora of research studies were summarized by Steven Barnett, PhD, at an Institute of Politics seminar November 10, 2006. The director of the National Institute for Early Education Research ([www.nieer.org](http://www.nieer.org)), Barnett cited three long-term cost-benefit analysis studies with disadvantaged children: the High/Scope Perry Preschool Project (initiated in 1962 in Ypsilanti, Mich.); the Carolina Abecedarian Project (launched in 1972 in Chapel Hill by the University of North Carolina); and the Chicago Longitudinal Study, which began in 1986. All three studies found that students engaged in early childhood education required fewer special education courses and had higher high school graduation rates.

Moreover, the benefits didn't end there; follow-up at age 27 and—in the High/Scope Perry study—even at age 40 found that the participants had maintained their success rates. Cost-benefit assessments estimated that the investments examined in these three studies had attained annual return rates of 4–16 percent.

People in the ECD field particularly like to point to the Ypsilanti study because it has stretched across so many decades. Conducted by the High/Scope Educational Research Foundation, the study has examined the lives of 123 African Americans born in poverty and at high risk of failing in school. At ages 3 and 4, these individuals were randomly divided into a group that received a high-quality, active learning preschool program and a group that received no preschool program. At age 27, 95 percent of the original study participants were interviewed, with additional data gathered from their schools, social services, and arrest records.

### **The findings:**

- Adults born in poverty who participated in a high-quality, active learning preschool program at ages 3 and 4 had half as many criminal arrests, higher earnings and property wealth, and greater commitment to marriage.
- According to the latest findings of the High/Scope Perry Preschool study, over the lifetimes of participants, the public is receiving an estimated \$7.16 for every dollar originally invested.

Barnett said that the national enrollment rate for 4-year-olds in early education rose to 17 percent in 2005, while the rate for 3-year-olds remained steady at about 3 percent. Unfortunately, Pennsylvania lags behind Virginia, New Jersey, and New

York in dedicated funding for early childhood education. Those three states are committed to establishing universal early schooling.

But aside from research findings, there is practical Pennsylvania experience upon which to draw. For example, Joseph Iannetti points out from his experience that rural preschoolers are in as much need of early childhood education as city kids because, in their spread-out rural settings, they do not have as much of a chance to learn socialization skills. Iannetti is director of vocational education at the Western Area Career & Technology Center in Canonsburg, Pa., and also is a member of the school board of the South Side Area School District in Hookstown, Pa. This suggests that ECE should be of importance to rural as well as urban legislators.

To be sure, there are some caveats concerning ECE. Robert McCall, a psychologist and codirector of the Office of Child Development at the University of Pittsburgh, says that in this era of accountability, people should not expect systematic testing to work with pre-K students. He says there are no tests at that age that realistically measure, for example, school readiness.

The problem is that some parents want to have testing done to prove their children are ready for school or, for some highly competitive parents, that their children are on track for Ivy League colleges. Fortunately, McCall

says, others want their children to enjoy childhood, knowing there will be plenty of exposure to academics later.

“The good news is that kids change when they get to school. Kids do very well who did not show achievements on readiness tests. Kids adapt, for better or worse, in the new school environment,” McCall says. “My personal opinion is that quality education prevents disasters. It is disasters that cost money and lives. But quality is the proper modifier in considering early childhood education. It must be high quality.”

Harriet Dichter, policy director of education for the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania, says that because ECE makes a child ready for school, it has a good impact on school attendance and achievement. “It constitutes a return on investment in assuring that children can read and write and have a mastery of math necessary in a global economy. And it is more than math and language. A preschool education stimulates curiosity, persistence, and social and listening skills as part of socialization.”

For a state, pre-K has lifelong benefits, Dichter holds—a reduction in the number of children going into special education, a higher high school graduation rate, and a higher rate of students going on to college. All of these are important elements in workforce development for the global competition that our country and our students face.

In succeeding chapters, we will discuss what Pennsylvania has been doing about early childhood education.

## PITFALLS IN PITTSBURGH

Baby steps ... a fall ... more baby steps ... lessons learned ...

That’s Pittsburgh’s—and, in particular, the Heinz Endowments’—part in the story of early childhood education (ECE) efforts in Pennsylvania.

In the 1990s, research was advanced enough that practical moves were taking place across the country. Two women especially are to be cited for taking the lead in Pennsylvania. One is Teresa Heinz, who assumed leadership of the Heinz Endowments after the tragic airplane death in 1991 of her husband, Senator H. John Heinz III. Early on, she set forth early childhood development as a major issue for the philanthropic foundation. In that endeavor, she had the expertise of Margaret M. “Marge” Petruska, the Heinz Endowments’ senior program director for the Children, Youth & Families Program.

These women and others in the philanthropic community were struck by the fact that Pennsylvania had fallen behind other states on the subject. A description of the state of affairs is described in an article, “Building Blocks,” written by Michelle Pilecki in *h*, the magazine of the Heinz Endowments:



Across the country, states such as Oklahoma and Georgia began offering universal access to pre-kindergarten while others, like North Carolina, started to provide targeted, state-supported programs for disadvantaged 4-year-olds. Nationwide, spending on pre-kindergarten soared: from \$25 million in the 1970s, to \$198 million in the 1980s and \$118 billion by 1998.

With some 64 percent of Pennsylvania children cared for outside the home, “we were very anxious to do more funding for early childhood, but it’s tough to do it in a state with no system for early childhood education,” says Emily B. Watson, program officer at the Grable Foundation.

Even as late as 2000, “Pennsylvania was one of only nine states that didn’t invest in early childhood learning,” Pilecki reported.

Out of the endowments’ deliberations on the subject came the Early Childhood Initiative (ECI), a major effort to improve early care and education for low-income children from birth through age 5 in Pittsburgh and surrounding communities of Allegheny County. ECI was designed from 1994 to 1996 and operated by the United Way of Allegheny County from 1996 through 2001. The Richard King Mellon Foundation also provided financial support.

At that time, no other county had undertaken such a program with

neighborhood decision making and high quality as the underpinnings of its design. The goal was to double by 2001 the number of children participating in early care and educational programs. To achieve the goal meant enrolling at least 7,600 underserved children in high-quality Head Start, center-based child care, home-based child care, and other programs such as family literacy. That would mean enrolling up to 80 percent of the children in 80 targeted low-income neighborhoods.

ECI intended a community-driven approach by providing services through programs that were chosen and operated at the community level by local neighborhood agencies.

Announcements for the ECI program estimated the average cost per child would be in the range of \$4,000–\$5,000 per child, for a total budget of nearly \$59.4 million over a five-year period—1996–2001. Funds would be raised “over the five years through a unique partnership involving primarily the private sector (foundations, corporations, and individuals) and the public sector (local, state, and federal governments).” After 2001, it was planned that “governments at multiple levels will assume funding for ECI.” That sustainability hope, which included lobbying efforts to persuade the Pennsylvania legislature to provide ongoing funding, proved to be in vain, as we shall see later.

Support for taking the ECI direction came from new research showing that neurons in the brain for learning were bonded earlier than previously thought. These findings were the basis of a major Heinz Endowments-sponsored conference titled Nurturing Neurons, held in April 1997 at the Westin William Penn Hotel in downtown Pittsburgh. The event, complete with impressive PowerPoint presentations, was attended by hundreds of citizens.

An explanation of this neuron research was outlined in an article by Caren Marcus in the August 1997 issue of *Pittsburgh*, the monthly magazine published by WQED Multimedia.

Scientists have known for a long time that babies are born with some 100 billion nerve cells and that the connections between the cells need to be wired and strengthened.

“What we didn’t know was how or why the remodeling takes place,” explains Pat Levitt, chairman of the neurobiology department at Pitt’s medical school. “Now we know that actual experience and physiological activity can drive those changes.”

The wiring delivers brain power. It’s where we think, remember, learn and feel emotion, says Heidi Feldman, a national spokesperson on brain development for the American Academy of Pediatrics and a pediatrician at Children’s Hospital.

Now here’s the stumper: Those connections not stimulated are

pruned away—never to be available again—and 85 to 90 percent of this sculpting takes place in the first three to four years of a child’s life, says Leavitt. At the extreme, children who suffer severe neglect, with no one holding, talking or interacting with them, have smaller brain size than normal children. Brain scans show darkness where neural activity should be buzzing with color, Feldman says.

“Not long ago, the predominant theory was that the important influence was heredity,” she says. “The new information says a child gets something from heredity: a blue print and some raw materials. But it’s the act of living in the world and experiencing what is going on in the world that is responsible for construction of those blueprints into an organized, whole building.

“A rich environment leads to a mansion,” she continues. “An impoverished environment leads to a hovel.”

The Marcus article declared: “The spotlight on Pittsburgh is glowing with the added glare of [these] latest scientific findings. ‘The research will bring attention to people who never took young children’s [playtime] seriously and what they need seriously,’ says Martha Isler, ECI director. ‘We have the answers in terms of program and standards that make a difference.’”

The ECI organizational structure was legally headed by the United Way’s

Executive Committee. Next came a 17-member Early Childhood Management Board, composed of four members of the Executive Committee, four members of the Advisory Council, and representatives of other stakeholder groups. Beneath the Executive Committee and the Management Board were a Campaign Committee, the ECI Advisory Council, and a Public Sector Committee with the assignment of securing short- and long-term public sector support.

For evaluation purposes, the United Way chose a team from Children's Hospital of Pittsburgh of UPMC to conduct a broad-spectrum, longitudinal appraisal of the outcomes and success of ECI over a five-year period.

The effort first selected neighborhoods and assigned lead agencies to implement the ECI program in each. Here is the initial list:

- Hawkins Village (public housing project in Rankin)—Louise Child Care
- Six neighborhoods in Homewood—Primary Health Care Inc.
- Five neighborhoods in Braddock, Rankin, North Braddock, East Pittsburgh, and Swissvale—Heritage Health Foundation, Inc.
- Three neighborhoods in the Hill District—Hill House Association
- Wilksburg—Hosanna House, Inc.
- Three neighborhoods in Homestead, West Homestead, and Munhall—Steel Valley Family Center

A total of 946 youngsters were served: 390 children in family child care homes, 522 in child care centers, and 34 in literacy/Head Start programs.

From the beginning in 1996, the program ran into difficulties. According to Joan Benso—president and CEO of Pennsylvania Partnerships for Children, a nonprofit advocacy group—the 1996 Welfare Reform Act passed by Congress drastically changed the landscape.

Prior to 1996, welfare operated under the Aid to Families with Dependent Children program, an open-ended entitlement with cash assistance and other supports. But the new 1996 law established the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) Program, which mandated work for welfare mothers and set lifetime limits on collecting payments.

So, as Benso explains, ECI was planned for a pre-TANF world where many mothers would not be working outside the home for many hours, or would not be working at all. With TANF, full-time parents suddenly had to become part-time parents—creating a far greater demand than ECI had envisioned. “States were put in a difficult bind, with child care rather than childhood education forced to the fore,” Benso says.

Rather than recounting ECI's subsequent tortuous history, it is more useful to quote from a 2002 RAND Corp. report titled *A “Noble Bet” in Early Care and Education: Lessons from One Community's Experience*.

Worth noting is the fact that the study was funded by the very same Heinz Endowments foundation that had launched ECI in the first place. Rather than covering up the failings of the program, the Heinz Endowments saw great benefit in gathering ECI's lessons for the future. The RAND authors were Brian Gill, Jacob W. Dembosky, and Jonathan P. Caulkins. The report's introduction:

[ECI] was an ambitious effort launched in Pittsburgh in 1996 to provide high-quality early care and education services to at-risk children, on a countywide scale and under the direction of local neighborhood agencies. ... Four years after its launch, ECI was far short of its enrollment targets, the cost per child was significantly higher than expected, and its effort to secure a commitment of state funding had failed ... This report ... summarizes ECI's organizational history, analyzes and explains critical weaknesses that hindered ECI's ability to succeed, and articulates the lessons to inform the design and implementation of future large-scale reform initiatives, whether in early care and education or in other areas of social services.

Subsequent events have showed that the "noble bet" that didn't pay off initially laid the groundwork for later statewide progress on the issue. But first, the problems identified by the RAND consultants and, second, their lessons for the future.

## Problems

**Scale**—At its peak (around May 2000), ECI served only about 680 children, which is only one-quarter of the number expected to be served at that point in time and less than one-tenth of the total number originally targeted for service. While ECI served fewer children than intended, its hours of service per child were higher than intended because, contrary to the plan's assumption that most children would be in part-day services, virtually all children were in full-day services. Even if ECI had been able to scale up more quickly, it could not have served the intended 7,600 children, because costs per child were substantially higher than expected.

**Community**—"ECI's community-driven strategy had some successes and a number of failures. Devolution of authority to the neighborhood level succeeded in a few neighborhoods ... where local leaders eagerly joined the ECI process and established plans that led to a strong working relationship with ECI management. ... But disappointment is widespread in many of the neighborhoods that were targeted by ECI. Some local leaders felt that ECI did not live up to its promise of permitting neighborhoods to define their needs and the ECE services they wanted. ... Even in neighborhoods that successfully launched ECE programs under ECI's sponsorship, lead agencies felt undermined in 1999 and 2000 when ECI's ground rules were in flux."

Devolution of authority to the community level requires a trade-off. Neighborhood-led programs may be more robust and effective than those imposed from the outside, but implementation is not likely to proceed quickly. ECI's planners failed to appreciate how much time neighborhood groups would need to mobilize, assess residents' needs, identify space for child care centers, develop detailed proposals, and establish programs. ECI's business plan did not acknowledge the extent to which quality control and community control might be in opposition.

**Sustainability**—"Although ECI helped to raise the profile of ECE as an important policy issue in communities around Pennsylvania and in state government, it failed in its explicit goal of achieving a state commitment to support the initiative with public funds. ... At [the United Way] some of those responsible for supervising ECI recognized that sustainability would have to be achieved by other means and sought to make changes in the initiative to make better use of existing state funding streams. This effort was only partly successful, and it led to a power struggle over the direction of ECI as well as to frustration and resentment in the neighborhoods."

The RAND report was careful to emphasize the "Positive Aspects of ECI's Legacy," as follows:

Although ECI failed to achieve its greatest ambitions, its legacy is not entirely negative. ECI succeeded, first of all, in building the capacity of a number of low-income neighborhoods to provide ECE services that apparently are of high quality ... ECI also succeeded in helping a number of Head Start providers to improve their programs. ... The attention that ECI drew to the importance of quality not only contributed to the creation of similar initiatives elsewhere in the state, but also reportedly motivated improvements in the quality of several major nonparticipating child-care centers around Allegheny County. ... In addition, ECI demonstrated the ability of the Pittsburgh community to mobilize large-scale support and funding from diverse constituencies and political perspectives. ... Finally, ECI's troubles may ultimately serve a useful purpose by illuminating the serious public-policy dilemmas associated with ECE.

### Lessons for the Future

ECI's weaknesses suggest a number of lessons for future large-scale reform initiatives:

- Planners should focus on clear goals and well-defined services. In ECI's case, "quality, scale, and community control goals often came into conflict with each other, especially when different stakeholders ... prioritized these goals differently, or when

different stakeholders ... defined quality differently.”

- An ambitious, large-scale initiative should have an independent board and a clear administrative structure that promotes strong leadership.
- A clear, direct theory of action most effectively promotes an initiative’s goals.
- Careful consideration of demand, supply, and responses to incentives is essential to anticipating unintended consequences.
- Planners should make every effort to include all relevant stakeholders early in the planning process.
- Critical, independent review is essential from the start. Review should be conducted by “someone who (1) can identify flaws without fear of retribution, (2) is not a member of the original advocacy group, (3) has appropriate substantive expertise, and (4) will invest time and energy in the review commensurate with the importance of the project.”

As the RAND report writers hoped, the lessons learned from the ECI experience eventually were useful in promoting the cause of early childhood education in Pennsylvania. We turn next to that story.

## PENNSYLVANIA PITCHES IN

Both the successes and the limitations of Pittsburgh’s Early Childhood Initiative (ECI) spurred statewide efforts to address the subject of preschool education.

ECI and similar investments in early childhood education elsewhere in the state, such as in York and Philadelphia, had proved the worth of the approach. A particular example of success was Child Care Matters, a six-year, \$14 million program funded by the William Penn Foundation of Philadelphia. At the same time, these experiences had shown the necessity of state funding for sustaining the programs in major cities, let alone in school districts across the commonwealth. An important participant in the effort was Pennsylvania Partnerships for Children, a Harrisburg-based nonpartisan advocacy group founded in 1990 and headed by Joan Benso since 1996.

A statewide task force of chief executive officers was recruited, including CEOs from the Pennsylvania Business Roundtable, the Allegheny Conference on Community Development, the Pennsylvania Chamber of Business and Industry, and Philadelphia First. It was staffed for two years by Pennsylvania Partnerships for Children. The first major success came in gaining the support of key Republican leaders in the state legislature to advance a pre-K amendment to the state budget.

When the administration of Governor Tom Ridge did not agree, the amendment was eliminated. A Pittsburgh foundation official recalls a meeting with Ridge from which those present went away feeling they had made a sale. But nothing seemed to eventuate before Ridge was called to Washington, D.C., in the wake of the 9/11 tragedy to establish the federal Office of Homeland Security.

Fortunately, however, enough groundwork had been laid that Ridge's successor, Lieutenant Governor Mark Schweiker, prioritized the issue by appointing a Task Force on Early Childhood Education, which made a series of recommendations. At that point, the early childhood education advocates decided to propel the political process with a program titled Focus Five for Kids. The purpose was to push for improved access to health care, after-school programs, public school education, family support, and school readiness through a system of pre-K education.

Particularly involved in Focus Five for Kids were Pennsylvania Partnerships for Children, the Office of Child Development at the University of Pittsburgh, Philadelphia Safe and Sound, and Philadelphia Citizens for Children and Youth. A \$500,000 promotional budget was financed by the Heinz Endowments and the Grable Foundation of Pittsburgh, the Pew Charitable Trusts, and the William Penn Foundation of Philadelphia.

The goal was "to create a sense that kids' issues were big issues for the election," explains Benso. Therefore, the coalition partners met with major political candidates and their staff members, conducted events in key communities, published white papers, met with editorial boards, and commissioned polls. One poll found majorities of voters favored state-subsidized health insurance for uninsured children and more state funding for public schools, while 40 percent of likely voters would oppose a gubernatorial candidate who didn't support either proposal.

The coalition also created a buzz with a nontraditional event, as described in Michelle Pilecki's article "Building Blocks" in the winter 2006 issue of *h*, the magazine of the Heinz Endowments:

On a balmy Saturday in September 2002, signs proclaiming positive goals for children greeted Nittany Lion fans as they approached Beaver Stadium. Dotting the road in Penn State's blue and white were signs that likely brought puzzled looks from traveling football fans.

"Our children deserve to enter school ready to learn," shouted one banner.

Harsh realities were spelled out in the red and white of that day's opponent, Nebraska: "State money invested in Preschool = ZERO." Circulating among football followers were still another set of colors—purple and yellow—emblazoned

on buttons, signs, leaflets and even glow-in-the-dark beach balls with the message “What About the Kids?”

The slogans were intended to raise awareness of children’s issues among Pennsylvania gridiron fans—two in particular: state Attorney General Mike Fisher and former Philadelphia Mayor Ed Rendell, then in the last months of their contest for governor, with State College a highly visible campaign stop. ...

Bravo Group, a Harrisburg-based, political-communications consultant firm, scoped out where state legislators’ cars would be parked and leafleted them. Workers also followed candidates on the tailgate-party circuit, says Jeanette Krebs, the company’s vice president of public relations. Fraternity and sorority members distributed the beach balls and bookmark-like information sheets—complete with purple and yellow buttons—to partygoers and anyone talking to the candidates.

That push to be part of the candidates’ debate and on the agenda of the future governor worked.

“The only thing that Fisher and Rendell agreed on was a commitment to early learning and other childhood issues,” recalls Benso.

Then came what Ronnie Bloom, director of the William Penn Foundation’s Children, Youth & Families grant program, called “a watershed

moment,” when candidates Rendell and Fisher outlined details of their support for ECE in a presentation at the Delaware Valley Association for the Education of Young Children.

That didn’t automatically mean smooth sailing. In various efforts, including a widely circulated op-ed article, the conservative Commonwealth Foundation contended that Focus Five sought to allow “parents to abdicate, and the government to usurp, the most basic of child-rearing duties.” There followed a certain amount of political fencing between the newly elected Democratic Governor Rendell and the Republican-led legislature. But in 2004, the early learning concept came to the fore in a new \$200 million Accountability Block Grant program. Each of the state’s 501 school districts could use its grant share for any of 11 options. Significantly, the districts’ choices were such that two-thirds of the money went to the three options related to ECE: instituting full-day kindergarten, the most popular; creating pre-K programs; or reducing class size in the primary grades.

Already, in 2003, the legislature had passed a Head Start State Supplement, which by 2007 had grown to \$40 million.

Meanwhile, the Rendell administration took what many ECE advocates considered breakthrough steps. The first was to create an Office of Child Development in the state Department of Public Welfare. Second, to ensure a linkage between the work of the



education and welfare agencies, the governor appointed a staff person to lead the new office who also had an appointment as policy director at the education department. To head the office, the governor named Harriet Dichter, a lawyer by training who had made her reputation in the child development field with the Pew Charitable Trusts, the Office of Maternal & Child Health of the City of Philadelphia, the United Way of Southeastern Pennsylvania, and as coauthor of one of the first books on child education financing. In both education and public welfare circles, that appointment signified that the governor meant business on the issue.

Another important Pennsylvania venture was the 2004 launching by a group of funders of the Pennsylvania Pre-K Counts program. Spurred by the realization that Pennsylvania was one of only nine states without dedicated funding for early childhood learning, participants saw an opportunity to establish quality pre-K programming through community involvement. The purpose was to bring together all potential pre-K providers—including schools, Keystone STARS child care, and Head Start—as well as to stimulate ongoing leadership for early childhood education. Participants saw an opportunity to stimulate pre-K partnerships that would yield high-quality results for children and would elevate local leadership on these issues.

Funding was provided by the Heinz Endowments, Grable Foundation,

and Richard King Mellon Foundation of Pittsburgh; the William Penn Foundation of Philadelphia; the Raymond John Wean Foundation of Warren, Ohio; and the John S. and James L. Knight Foundation of Miami, Fla., as well as the Pennsylvania Departments of Education and Public Welfare. The executive committee was chaired by Rendell and James E. Rohr, chair and CEO of PNC Financial Services Group, headquartered in Pittsburgh. [Note: PNC Financial Services Group three years ago launched the PNC Grow Up Great program, which will be explained in Chapter 6.]

The ECE cause received yet another important boost when Rendell, in his 2007 budget message to the state legislature, included a \$75 million item for what he called the Pennsylvania Pre-K Counts Program—which took its name from the public-private partnership in recognition of the many lessons learned from that endeavor. The governor's proposal would provide parents in participating communities with options for quality full-day or half-day pre-kindergartens for their children in a school-based Keystone STARS child care center, a Head Start program, or a nursery school program during the school year. All children in participating communities from age 3 until they enter kindergarten are eligible, with a particular focus on children at risk of academic failure. Child care centers with a STAR Two rating (see explanation below), includ-

ing faith-based institutions, may apply.

The Pre-K Counts goal of serving 11,000 children depends upon funding by the legislature, specifically the \$75 million allocation proposed by the governor and described in Chapter 1.

Keystone STARS is another major new component in improving quality in child care in general—services for children from birth through age 12. STARS stands for Standards, Training, Assistance, Resources, and Support. Essentially, it is a state-based rating system for child care programs—not a one-time award but, rather, geared to recognize constant improvement. Evaluated by the University of Pittsburgh and Pennsylvania State University, this program is a real home run in terms of systematically improving child care quality to an acceptable level. The system enables a local program to receive grants to make its services better in order to qualify for more stars. Keystone STARS now engages nearly 70 percent of the centers in the state that serve more than 150,000 children.

People in the field point to such successes as the nationally accredited York Day Nursery and Kindergarten, in York, Pa., which serves 120 children ages 6 weeks to 5 years and has worked its way up to a STAR Four Keystone STARS rating.

The pre-K effort is moving along successfully enough that Dichter's office has begun work on a strategy for even younger children—infants and toddlers.

Susan Hibbard, a consultant with Build Initiative, a multi-state partnership, contends that even "pre-kindergarten alone is late, if you think of the brain research. The birth-to-3 years are imperative." The strategy includes training for caregivers and a pilot nurse visitation program to help parents be comfortable and confident in their role. The Heinz Endowments have made a \$400,000 grant toward the acceleration of this work.

Dichter is quoted in *h* magazine as commenting, "Our view is that it is a continuum. It's been a long trip to get to where we are, and we have a way to go yet."

All of this leads us to consider the details of two of the numerous spin-offs, one a nonprofit approach and the other a corporate endeavor.

## WESTMORELAND SHOWS A WAY

Any learning process should include profiting from both the mistakes and the achievements of the past. The United Way of Westmoreland County (UWWC) exemplified that truism in launching the School Readiness Initiative (SRI), one of the better early childhood education programs in the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania.

Nancy Kukovich, president of UWWC, is the first to say that the experiences, successful and unsuccessful, of such previous efforts as the Early Childhood Initiative in Pittsburgh (described in

Chapter 3) helped shape the effort in her county. Her organization six years ago really started at the community level with a from-the-ground-up approach, rather than just talking about it. Here is how she outlines the way the endeavor was developed:

- Built first on the child care institutions already in place, working with them to improve themselves, and encouraging their buy-in on high-quality standards.
- Enlisted the aid of the Penn State extension service through its Better Kid Care program to train day care providers, a very specific rural area strategy. Such day-by-day, hour-by-hour training allows for praising what's done well and also providing reinforcement when the learning is difficult.
- Talked directly to superintendents to get school districts across the county interested in full-day kindergarten first and then in pre-kindergarten (pre-K). One of the significant results is that Head Start programs are now located in several elementary schools, and two school districts are receiving state Pre-K Counts grants.
- Worked on improving the transition between child care/preschool and the formal education system "so kids do not get lost between." This included working to improve connections between Head Start programs and school districts, where

often there had been none. In some cases, this meant arranging to use empty classrooms in elementary school buildings for Head Start classes.

- Mobilized communities as a whole, including business leaders and community leaders as well as educators. Tasks included everything from cleaning up playgrounds to efforts to push the state to fund pre-K.
- Pushed higher education/teaching degrees, probably the top indicator of quality, for child care providers.
- Funded family literacy programs, such as the Pittsburgh-based Beginning with Books program, in school districts, more closely linking parents, children, and schools.

Kukovich says that foundations in Pittsburgh have provided "phenomenal support." She said that one of the pleasant surprises is that it has been easier in this smaller setting to bring all parties together, which means that the foundation money has been spread further than originally thought possible.

Fortunately, the state has come forward as an important partner. When UWWC took its first steps in 2001, it was a lonely effort. But by 2004, the state came through with a new program quality initiative called Keystone STARS (described in Chapter 4). By 2007, the Westmoreland County program was able to target its resources on assisting and celebrating Keystone STARS.

UWWC was also freed up to focus on

schools. To date, 15 of the 17 districts approached have agreed to participate in SRI and so did many of their Head Start and child care agencies. Together, these organizations plan and deliver strategies to engage each other and their families in more realistic expectations for school.

“When everyone understands what school is like, it is easier to get ready,” said Kukovich.

The plan was to work first with kindergartens and Head Start units, then elementary schools, concentrating on the children first and then the parents. In terms of strategy, the idea was to push for full-day kindergarten and then for pre-kindergarten.

The growth of this strategy was demonstrated at the fourth annual UWWC retreat in 2006, attended by 200 people from across the county.

Kukovich says that the underlying goal was to move beyond good child care to an emphasis on pre-K training three hours a day for 3- and 4-year-olds, with special attention to at-risk kids. The reasoning was based on the findings described in Chapter 3—the changes in neurons in children at the earliest age and the long-term successes of children who had gone through Head Start programs.

Rather than sitting at desks in a classroom setting, children are arranged around tables or on the floor, learning the skills they’ll need to be successful kindergartners. Sometimes it’s learning about fractions by dumping

measuring cups of water into buckets; sometimes the focus is on pre-reading skills or following directions. Beyond that, the preschoolers learn socialization skills, something that all children need. In an interesting sense, these pre-K approaches offer to middle-class children educational advantages that under Head Start were available only to low-income families.

At the Westmoreland program’s annual retreat last summer, behavioral problems came to the fore as a significant issue in early care. Each of the settings is reporting more children with special needs, such as autism or other developmental disabilities. The Staunton Farms Foundation in Pittsburgh has provided special funding for finding ways to cope with this problem.

Despite the progress being made, Kukovich says there still is what she calls passive/aggressive resistance to the school-readiness principles. Everybody wants children to enter school ready to learn, but perhaps because this work has traditionally been provided by mothers, grandmothers, and other female caregivers, there is a reluctance to pay for it—even in the face of growing evidence that the investment really pays off.

Under the present system, the turnover of caregivers is quite high. A state study in 2000 showed the turnover rate to be as great as 30–50 percent, which can greatly reduce quality. Keystone STARS and Pre-K Counts would go a long way to combating this problem.

That's where, in Kukovich's view, studies of the economic as well as educational benefits of early childhood education (ECE) need to be presented more fully to the public. And to people in the field, that is where efforts such as those of the United Way of Westmoreland County are especially valuable.

But this effort was not the only unusually different ECE initiative. Another was a major corporate endeavor, which we describe next.

## BANKING ON PRE-K

"What would happen if we harnessed the power of PNC by focusing on an issue of major importance in the communities we serve?"

That question—posed by James E. Rohr, chair and chief executive officer of the PNC Financial Services Group in late 2002—sparked a review that resulted in launching the nation's largest corporate commitment to school readiness, PNC Grow Up Great. Historically, PNC had given millions of dollars each year to many worthwhile causes but had difficulty assessing how its efforts impacted its communities. That prompted Rohr's query, which in turn initiated the extensive research, including employee input, that led to a major commitment to pre-K education.

In 2004, PNC Grow Up Great began a 10-year, \$100 million investment to help prepare children from birth to age 5—especially those in underserved communities—for success in school

and life. With key components that include employee volunteerism, grants, advocacy, and awareness, the PNC initiative's ultimate goal is to help produce stronger, smarter, and healthier children, families, and communities.

This corporate initiative provides 17 Demonstration Grants to Head Start centers throughout nine states and Washington, D.C.; training grants for preparing teachers in preschool education; and grants to arts organizations specifically targeted to establishing programs for preschoolers. PNC Grow Up Great also partnered with Sesame Workshop and Family Communications, Inc., the nonprofit educational organization behind *Mister Rogers' Neighborhood*, to produce educational kits for parents in both English and Spanish, which are free in all of PNC's branches and are donated to specified state-funded preschools and Head Start programs.

The program's significance is underscored in this comment from a noncorporate source—Harriet Dichter, policy director of education for the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania:

PNC's corporate leadership on early childhood education is invaluable. PNC understands the economic return on investment from quality early childhood education, and is leveraging this understanding through its Grow Up Great initiative. PNC sees this work as broader than corporate philanthropy—Grow Up Great includes leadership activities

at the highest level of the organization to secure greater public support for early childhood education, as well as public engagement activities, volunteer opportunities for PNC employees, and more traditional corporate giving in the area.

The broad scope of the PNC program can be seen in the following categories:

### **Demonstration Grants**

- A total of 17 Demonstration Grants have been made to Head Start centers in the major metropolitan centers of Pittsburgh; Philadelphia; Boston, Mass.; Cincinnati, Ohio; the greater Washington, D.C., area; Louisville, Ky.; and Wilmington, Del., as well as in other locations in Pennsylvania and New Jersey. Nine of them are in Pennsylvania.
- Approximately 12,000 children and 2,600 parents, teachers, and staff members in Pennsylvania have been served by Grow Up Great grants made to Head Start centers and other early childhood education centers since the program's inception.
- The dollar total for these grants to Head Start centers and early childhood education initiatives in Pennsylvania totals approximately \$2.66 million.

### **Teacher Training Grants**

In addition to the Demonstration Grants, market grants have been made that focus on preparing teachers in preschool education and equipping them and their support staff with the skill sets they need to teach successfully.

- Teacher training helps to increase teacher confidence in the subject matter.
- Teacher mentoring programs help to reinforce training and new approaches to teaching.
- Teach for America places top college graduates, the best and brightest, in underserved school districts to teach children. New last year was the inclusion of preschool teachers, who debuted in Washington, D.C., with the aid of a PNC grant.
- The establishment of the PNC Professorship in Early Childhood Education at Temple University will allow the university to extend its work on the quality of early childhood learning through both the development of early childhood programs and academic research.

### **Arts Organization Grants**

Grants made to arts organizations now ask that programming be established for preschoolers. Examples of recipients include the Pittsburgh Symphony Orchestra, Pittsburgh Ballet Theatre, and the Kimmel Center for the Performing Arts in Philadelphia.

### **Tips to Parents**

All of PNC's tips for parents have been developed through its program partners, Sesame Workshop and Family Communications, Inc., the producers of *Mister Rogers' Neighborhood*.

The program's main piece is the Happy, Healthy, Ready for School kit developed by Sesame Workshop. Availability of the educational kits has

been featured in both print and television advertising. The kit is available in both English and Spanish for free at all PNC branches. People may request to have a kit mailed to them for free by calling 1-877-PNC-GROW or by e-mailing [pnc.growupgreat@pnc.com](mailto:pnc.growupgreat@pnc.com). PNC also has made large donations of the kits to state-funded preschools in New Jersey, Delaware, and Pennsylvania and to the Reach Out and Read program. The kits also have been given to all of the Head Start programs where PNC employees volunteer and to all of the children at the Head Start Demonstration Grant project sites. To date, more than 200,000 kits have been distributed.

In addition to the kits, PNC also has created brochures and tip sheets for parents featuring ways to use everyday moments to help prepare children for school. These materials are available in PNC branches and also are featured at community events, festivals, and conferences where PNC has a presence. The Grow Up Great Web site ([www.pncgrowupgreat.com](http://www.pncgrowupgreat.com)) also houses resources for parents and caregivers, including “101 Great Tips” available in a downloadable pdf.

In 2006, Grow Up Great television advertising featured four spots, 15 seconds each, that each provided a tip on how to help prepare young children for school. Tips for parents and caregivers also were provided in print advertising.

## **Volunteers**

PNC employee volunteers have been a big part of the Grow Up Great initiative. Indeed, volunteerism is one of the four components of the initiative. To date, 22 percent of PNC’s employees have volunteered in some way to support Grow Up Great. A smaller number actually interact with children, as the state requires certain clearances and testing, the cost of which PNC covers.

As part of its corporate volunteerism policy, PNC gives eligible employees up to 40 paid hours a year to volunteer at early childhood education centers. The Grants for Great Hours Program goes a step further, providing grants for \$1,000–\$3,000 to organizations supported by PNC Grow Up Great where employees or a group of employees have volunteered an approved number of hours over a 12-month period. A PNC publication describes this component this way:

In 2005, 22 PNC employees stepped out of their roles as investment advisors, product managers, branch managers, software engineers and business bankers, among others, to volunteer 40 hours or more for PNC Grow Up Great, the company’s investment in school readiness. In turn, they’ve gotten something back: smiles and thanks from children and teachers, and a sense of pride that comes with giving something priceless to the community.

One volunteer’s testimonial comes from Jim Duch, a records management

manager in PNC's wealth management division in Pittsburgh.

There was a young boy in the class who was very shy. I helped him to gain confidence. The teacher told me about a little girl in the class who seemed to be afraid of men. She "warmed up" to me, and I was able to read and play games with her.

As to the grant program that recognizes volunteers who meet qualifying service standards, here is an example of its meaning. "Thanks, Ed!" wrote West Mifflin Head Start Center Director Cheryl Fleming to volunteer Ed Gleason after being notified of the \$500 grant. "The kids loved you. So many of them are lacking strong male role models. We will enjoy choosing new materials for the classroom."

### Examples of Results

Demonstration projects funded by PNC Grow Up Great have produced some exceptional results since officially being launched just three years ago. Two examples are of note:

- Council of Three Rivers American Indian Center in Pittsburgh: Science proficiency of preschoolers jumped 19 percent in one year after receiving a PNC Grow Up Great grant to develop a specialized science curriculum.
- North Philadelphia YMCA: Math skills increased 14 percent in less than one year for preschoolers enrolled in the math program funded by PNC Grow Up Great.

"Through PNC Grow Up Great, we have focused much of our company's philanthropic and volunteer efforts on the issue of school readiness. And we are very pleased that we have already generated tangible results," said Rohr, noting the 19 percent increase in one year at one center.

"Improvements like that demonstrate that high-quality early childhood care and education do make a difference," Rohr continued. "This is a critically important issue. Credible research consistently shows that children who begin kindergarten ready to learn are more likely to go on and graduate from high school, succeed in the workplace, and volunteer in the community. That's why we are involved and it's why we are advocating for more public and private support. If we invest in preparing young children for school now, our country will become even stronger and more competitive in the future."

## 7

### OBSERVATIONS

Globalization and its challenges for Pennsylvania ... the shrinking number of blue-collar jobs ... growing prison populations ... the No Child Left Behind federal law ...

For Pennsylvanians and their state legislature, there obviously is no single sure-fire solution to these looming issues. But survey after survey has shown one important approach with both short-term and long-term



consequences—early childhood education for preschool youngsters.

Let's consider the short term. Of major concern for Pennsylvania school districts and, therefore, legislators are the accountability standards of the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act regulating federal funding to schools. They should be of interest to taxpayers, too, as their tax bills will be affected in two ways. First, they can expect to pick up the tab if federal allocations are cut because their school district can't meet NCLB standards. Second, low NCLB ratings will adversely affect any hopes that economic development, in keeping or attracting jobs, will help their tax base.

In the long term, every \$1 spent on high-quality early education saves \$7 in reduced future expenditures for special education, delinquency, crime control, welfare, and lost taxes—or an estimated \$48,000 in benefits per child from a half-day preschool program. That conclusion comes from the 2002 article, "Age 21 Cost-Benefit Analysis of the Title I Chicago Child-Parent Centers."

At stake, of course, are the budgeting issues that will keep the Pre-K Counts program (described in Chapter 4 of this *Issues* brief) alive.

Understandably, this particular initiative faces competition from other demands facing the legislature—whether transportation issues, Medicaid, prison expansion, and on and on. The governor's call for new

taxes to finance these challenges is also an issue.

But parents, economic development agencies (both private and public), and taxpayers throughout the commonwealth should consider both the short-term NCLB requirements as well as the equally acute challenges of the future in both prodding and supporting the legislature in funding the early childhood education initiative.

And legislators in turn should weigh the evidence from research and from community and corporate endeavors and choose to support early childhood education. The future of Pennsylvania's children and the commonwealth's future progress are at stake.

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