

# The value of Pre-Kindergarten

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As a Pennsylvania pediatrician for the past 25 years, I've seen thousands of children grow up in the commonwealth. And I've seen how their well-being can be impacted not only by their health, but also by their opportunities — particularly their opportunities to learn.

One of the most significant periods for a child's mental, social and emotional growth is before they even enter kindergarten. Research shows a child's brain is 90 percent developed by age 5, making the early years a crucial time in life, a brief window of opportunity that can provide every child with the foundation for a lifetime of success.

One of the best ways to help these young learners is high-quality pre-kindergarten, which can bring about dramatic gains in academic and social skills in all children, particularly those who might face disadvantages due to circumstances beyond their control. High-quality Pre-K programs provide appropriate, interactive, supportive and stimulating environments for these young minds to thrive.

And pre-k has a ripple effect that goes far beyond the early years. Research shows kids who benefit from high-quality pre-k enter school with stronger literacy, language, math and social/emotional skills. They are less likely to need special education services, less likely to repeat grades and more likely to graduate from high school and enroll in college. And over a lifetime, these young learners will see stronger employment opportunities and increased earning potential, and they will be less likely to end up on the wrong side of the law.

All of this adds up to benefits not only for the child, but for all of us. The problem is, not enough children have access to high-quality pre-k.

In Pennsylvania, only about 18.9 percent of our 3- and 4-year-olds (or about 1 in 6) is able to attend publicly funded, high-quality Pre-K, according to the statewide, non-partisan Pre-K for PA campaign. In McKean County, that sta-



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tistic is better at 35 percent — or about 1 in 3 children — but it still means about 650 McKean County 3- and 4-year-olds don't have access to publicly funded, high-quality Pre-K.

A budget proposal currently on the table at the state Capitol would increase the state's investment in high-quality Pre-K by \$120 million — less than a half percent of the state's total proposed budget for the coming fiscal year. This increased investment would make high-quality Pre-K available to 14,000 more children across the commonwealth, increasing access from 1 in 6 of our 3- and 4-year-olds to about 1 in 4.

This is a solid first step, but still leaves a large majority of young learners missing out on the lifelong benefits goal of making high-quality Pre-K universally accessible.

Why should we make this investment? Because we all benefit from it. An economic analysis by the Pennsylvania Economy League shows every \$1 Pennsylvania invests in high-quality Pre-K generates \$1.79 in immediate new spending. The return on investment is even more impressive in the long term because every dollar invested in Pre-K returns up to \$17 in savings and benefits to the commonwealth in the form of a reduced reliance on taxpayer-funded social services, reduced crime and incarceration costs and increased earning power in a better-educated, more competitive workforce.

Many other states understand what a powerful social and economic tool high-quality Pre-K is, and they are outpacing Pennsylvania when it comes to expanding access to these programs. A national preschool report card issued in May found Pennsylvania continues to lose ground in the effort to expand Pre-K access. We dropped to 15th in the nation in Pre-K access for 3-year-olds in 2013-14, and we remain stuck at 30th in the nation in Pre-K access for 4-year-olds.

We can turn this around and make Pennsylvania a national leader in high-quality Pre-K by making stronger Pre-K investments a priority in Harrisburg — and it needs to start now. I've been proud to see our commonwealth shape some tremendous young people over the years, and I look forward to seeing many more grow and thrive in our area with the help of high-quality Pre-K.