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Pennsylvania nonprofits launch campaign to push for more pre-kindergarten funding

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A statewide coalition has kicked off a campaign to ensure every 3- and 4-year-old in Pennsylvania has the chance to attend a high quality pre-kindergarten program.

Pre-K for PA was launched in events across the state Thursday with civic, education, business and military leaders signing on to the effort aimed at boosting pre-K offerings across the commonwealth.

Many Pennsylvania families cannot afford high quality pre-K.

Fewer than 20 percent of Pennsylvania 3- and 4-year-olds have access to publicly funded, high quality programs, said Joan Benso, president and CEO of Pennsylvania Partnerships for Children, one of 10 nonprofit organizations involved in the campaign.

Research shows that children with access to strong pre-K programs do better in school, need less special education and remediation help and are more likely to graduate from high school and enroll in college, Benson said.

It is wonderful that Pennsylvania recently was awarded a \$51 million federal "Race to the Top" grant for early learning, but it is going to take a lot more funding to serve all 3- and 4-year-olds in the state, Benson said.

"While early childhood education isn't cheap, it is a lot more cost-effective than trying to fix the problems later on in a child's education," said Don Bernhard, PPL Corp.'s director of community affairs.

One in four Lehigh Valley children lives in poverty and there aren't enough classes to enroll in, said Paula Margraf, executive vice president of Community Services for Children.

A nonprofit based in **Allentown**, Community Services runs all of the Head Start programs in Lehigh and Northampton counties as well as Pennsylvania's Pre-K Counts free preschool program.

The organization manages to serve 26 percent of Lehigh Valley kids eligible for their programs, Margraf said.

Depending on the time of year, Margraf's organization has a wait list of 500 to 800 low-income children trying to get into publicly funded pre-K. In the last year, the region lost 340 seats of publicly funded pre-K for low-income students.

"We are in full support of the Pre-K for PA because we know it will really benefit our community if more children can get into high quality settings," Margraf said.

The campaign wants to keep early childhood learning a top issue this year as **Gov. Tom Corbett** is up for re-election. Policy recommendations are forthcoming this spring, Benso said during a conference call Thursday.

The campaign aims to boost access for all Pennsylvania families, Benso said.

Pennsylvania rates early childhood education opportunities through its Keystone STARS program, with three and four stars being the best facilities.

Only 4 percent of Lehigh Valley children from birth to age 5 are in the top-ranked programs, which are considered high quality, Margraf said. Children may be cared for by family members, a neighbor or in an unrated or low-rated program because the programs are too expensive or too in demand, she said.

"There are far more children than there are available opportunities for any kind of high-quality pre-K in the Leigh Valley," Margraf said. "I do see this as a concerns for all families in the Valley."

As **PPL's** director of community affairs, Bernhard gets to help guide its corporate philanthropy. PPL's long supported early childhood education, he said. The company relies on the Keystone STARS to help guide its giving, as there's a real difference in top-rated centers and those that aren't, he said.

"An educated workforce with technical skills benefits employers like PPL, so Pre-K for PA fits into its education and community development strategies," Bernhard said.

"It's in our long-term best interest to help make sure there's a pipeline producing those kinds of people," he said.

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