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Preschoolers under government control in PA

Baby Ed: The government takeover of preschool children

It is generally accepted that “at-risk” children who traditionally come from low-income families can benefit from successful Pre-Kindergarten programs. Governor Rendell plans to radically redefine “at-risk” children to include those who live in a family of four with an income of up to **\$61,950**...and he wants to provide free (taxpayer-funded) Pre-K for these children!

This information is disclosed in Governor Rendell’s proposed 2007-2008 Budget that earmarks \$75 million dollars for **Pre-K Counts**, an initiative that will provide full- and half-day Pre-K programs for 11,000 children. That is a cost of almost \$7,000 per child. The funds will be distributed through a competitive process with facilities serving “at risk” children given priority.

The definition of “at-risk” is key to this proposal. Governor Rendell has redefined “at risk” for **Pre-K Counts** to include children from families earning up to 300% of the federal poverty level. The national poverty level for a family of four is \$20,650; 300% is **\$61,950**. Thousands of middle-income families will be labeled “at-risk” of failing to successfully care for and raise their children. In fact, the Pennsylvania Department of Education website states:

“Approximately two-thirds of Pennsylvania’s 3 and 4 year olds (nearly 200,000 children) are living in [such] households.”

To put these numbers in perspective, please consider:

- the median income for Pennsylvania families is approximately \$46,000
- Head Start income eligibility for a child living in a family of four is \$20,650
- the federal *free* lunch program includes families with incomes up to 130% of the poverty level (\$26,845); the *reduced* lunch program covers up to 185% (\$38,202)

This shocking expansion of the “at risk” designation will allow the state Department of Education to expand its control over the care and development of tens of thousands of the Commonwealth’s youngest children. And, if all 200,000 “at-risk” children eventually enroll in taxpayer-funded programs, the annual cost at \$7,000 per child will top \$1.4 billion!

This is the tip of the iceberg. To facilitate this initiative, the Department of Education and the Department of Welfare have jointly created a new bureaucracy: The Office of Child Development and Early Learning will now oversee the four providers of the **Pre-K Counts**:

- public school districts
- pre-schools already licensed by the Department of Education
- Head Start programs
- community-based centers or daycare centers licensed through the Department of Welfare

Any facility that takes the state money must base its curriculum on the *Pennsylvania Early Learning Standards for Infants and Toddlers* that cover Birth through Age 5. Other stringent criteria must also be met, including the use of state-approved assessments.

A massive public relations campaign is selling the **Pre-K Counts** initiative as the “magic wand” that will fix today’s social and educational problems. Advocates promise early childhood programs will eliminate poverty, drug use, smoking, crime and delinquency; increase the graduation rate; and decrease funding needs for welfare programs. ¹

Although Pre-K supporters make these bold assertions, **significant research indicates otherwise:**

- A 2007 National Institute of Health study found the more time children spend in a center prior to kindergarten, the more likely they are to have school behavior problems, including fighting, being disobedient, and arguing excessively. Problems also carry

Preschoolers Under Government Control—Baby Ed comes to PA!

It is easy to find out more about your school district—just use the Internet!

Take a look at Governor Rendell’s proposed 2007-2008 Education Budget

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over into the home where these children have increased difficulty dealing with their mothers. A surprising finding:

The quality of the program had little effect on these behavior problems.²

- University of Minnesota researchers found the stress hormone cortisol increased in 3- and 4-year-olds relative to the amount of time spent in daycare programs. Cortisol can cause some children to struggle in group situations.³
- Many students experience the phenomenon termed “fade out,” when any short-term academic improvements fade out by second or third grade.⁴
- Most research focuses on “at risk” children. It cannot be assumed that middle class children will experience the same results. In fact, “a significant body of research shows that formal early education can be detrimental to mainstream children.”⁴
- A Yale study reveals that the expulsion rate in daycare/pre-k programs is much higher for boys. Young boys often need more individualized attention than they receive in a group situation. When this one-on-one attention is lacking, young boys often misbehave and are labeled “at risk,” diagnosed as hyperactive, given dangerous medications, and/or eventually expelled.⁵
- The National Center for Education Statistics data shows that most children already enter kindergarten with the knowledge and traits they need.⁴

Considering the potentially massive scope of the **Pre-K Counts** program and the body of research that does not support the expansion of government programs beyond the most needy children, Pennsylvania residents and legislators must ask some serious questions:

1. Will **Pre-K Counts** provide long-term, positive results for low- **and** middle-income children?
2. Will this be a blatant expansion of an existing education system that already struggles to provide promised results, or will the Pre-K programs be fully evaluated with objective standards so the taxpayers know whether they are working?
3. Will **Pre-K Counts** be expanded to include ALL 3 and 4 year olds? An independent 2005 estimate of costs for universal preschool in Pennsylvania was over \$1 billion annually.⁶
4. Will these voluntary programs ultimately become mandatory?
5. Although the PDE claims there will be no need to increase local taxes to support these programs,⁷ who will pay for them when the grant money decreases or dries up?

6. What will happen to the traditional, non-profit, often religion-based nursery school that does not want to become a government program or can't meet the criteria established by state regulations? Will **Pre-K Counts** prompt their demise?
7. Is this really nothing more than the beginning of a state-operated daycare system, given the incorporation of community-based (daycare) centers into this program?

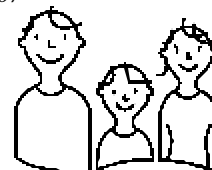
The proposed **Pre-K Counts** program takes a giant leap that must be carefully evaluated by legislators who will vote on it and taxpayers who will pay for it. **Pre-K Counts** greatly expands government-controlled preschool to include not only traditional “at risk” children, but also children from thousands of middle-class families. The government seems to believe that if one child needs the help of a program, then all children must need government intervention into their lives. Even at the federal level, Sen. Hillary Clinton is proposing universal Pre-K for the nation's 4-year-olds.

So the central question becomes:

Does it take the “government village” to raise a child?

For children of poverty who live in troubled family situations, a government solution may be all that is available. However, when the “**traditional village**” of parents and family, neighbors, friends, and religious leaders provides a nurturing, loving, consistent, and supportive environment to successfully raise children, **government intervention** becomes **government intrusion** that weakens families and wastes billions of taxpayer dollars. ?

1. “Preventing Crime with Pre-Kindergarten; a Critical Investment in Pennsylvania's Safety.” *A Research Brief by Fight Crime: Invest in Kids Pennsylvania.* March 2007
2. Belsky, Jay, et. al. “Are There Long-Term Effects of Early Child Care?” *The NICHD Early Child Care Research Network, March/April 2007*
3. *Research Study on Stress Levels in Young Children in Child Care.* Institute of Child Development of the University of Minnesota. July 2003.
4. Olson, Darcy. *Policy Report: Assessing Proposals for Preschool and Kindergarten.* Goldwater Institute. 8 Feb 2005.
5. Gilliam, Dr. Walter S. “Prekindergartners Left Behind: Expulsion Rates in State Prekindergarten Systems.” *Yale University Child Study Center.* 2004.
6. “Government-run Preschool.” *Policy Points: Quick Facts from the Commonwealth Foundation.* Dec 2005.
7. “Pre-K Counts Questions and Answers.” *Pennsylvania Department of Education, March 2007*



Checking-up on your school is a click away!

Just how good is your local school district? What do student scores on mandated state assessments indicate? How much is your district spending per pupil? Do some schools have better results than others within your district? How does your district compare with other districts?

Whether you are a parent, school board director, or taxpayer, you can find the answers to these questions and more by accessing two informational websites.

The first is www.schoolmatters.com, a service of Standard and Poor's. This website makes it easy to research just about any school district or individual school in the country. Uniform, detailed information on student performance, finances, the community, and other education factors are readily accessible.

The second website is www.paayp.com, a Pennsylvania Department of Education website that provides more limited information on the annual results of the Pennsylvania System of State Assessment (PSSA) tests that are administered to public school students by every school district in the state. Since school district comparisons can be made, this website is usually better than individual school district sites.

Both of these sites exist because the federal *No Child Left Behind* (NCLB) education law mandates that school districts report specific, detailed data that are made available to the public. This shines light into many corners of public education, thereby enabling parents to make more knowledgeable decisions about their children's education.

In order to decipher the academic data provided on both sites, it is necessary to understand some education jargon, terms, and acronyms. The following glossary will help:

PSSA – The Pennsylvania System of School Assessment is given to almost all public school students in grades 3-8 and grade 11 to evaluate how well students are meeting the state academic standards. Subjects tested: mathematics, reading, and writing, with science beginning in the 2007-2008 year. Currently, each school district decides whether proficiency on the PSSA is a requirement for graduation. *(FYI: Parents have the right to preview the PSSA and should do so. Parents also can excuse their child from the test for religious reasons.)*

PSSA Scores – Student scores are reported in four categories: Below Basic, Basic, Proficient, and Advanced. Since the goal of NCLB is to have all students at the “proficient” level by 2014, students in the two lowest quartiles often receive the most attention.

AYP – This is an acronym for “Adequate Yearly Progress.” Each year the Pennsylvania Department of Education

determines the percentage of students who must score at or above the “proficient” level on the PSSA. The percentages rise every year in an effort to reach 100% by 2014. For this 2006-2007 school year, the AYP goals are 54% of students receiving a “proficient” or “advanced” score in reading, and 45% in math.

This means that it is “acceptable” in 2007 for approximately half of Pennsylvania’s students to score below the “proficient” level!

AYP also mandates 90% attendance rate, 80% graduation rate, and 95% of the students taking the PSSA.

Subgroups – One very good NCLB mandate involves reporting not only average or median scores of the entire student body, but also scores of various subgroups that have at least forty students taking the test. In order to meet AYP, ALL the subgroups in a school must meet the AYP goals. The subgroups reported include:

- Race/Ethnicity – White, Black, Latino/Hispanic, Asian/Pacific Islander, American Indian/Native Alaskan, and Multi-racial
- Special Education
- Limited English Proficiency
- Economically Disadvantaged

Consequences – Schools that do not meet AYP for any reason, even if only one subgroup fails, are penalized. Pennsylvania has developed a 5-step program that is supposed to help failing schools improve and meet AYP. The fifth step requires a complete overhaul, chartering, or privatization of the school. Unfortunately, students may remain in a failing school for years.

ACT and SAT – These are national exams taken by students for college admission. It is interesting to compare these scores with the PSSA score results.

NAEP – National Assessment of Educational Progress – also called the “Nation’s Report Card” – is administered to a percentage of students in every state. Students usually score lower on the NAEP than on the PSSA.

AP – Advanced Placement courses are college-level classes that are taught in high school. AP test scores are another measure of how challenging the courses are and how well students perform.

While this academic information provides significant data on student achievement and school success, a full evaluation of a school or district must include numerous additional factors, such as extracurricular activities, school atmosphere and safety, family involvement, and teacher quality. Most of this information is also available on-line so you can check-up on your school district. ?

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Problems in Pennsylvania's Proposed 2007-2008 Education Budget

The General Assembly is currently grappling with the details of an almost \$15 billion education budget. A close look at some of the details reveals serious problems with the following programs:

- **Pre-K Counts**—a taxpayer-funded preschool plan for poor and middle income children that is paving the way to government-funded universal preschool and daycare. Initial cost: \$75 million (See the article on page 1.)
- **Project 720**—a mixed bag of high school reforms that ultimately mandates school-to-work. Cost: \$11 million—a \$3 million increase from last year. (See this newsletter from Nov/Dec 2006—available at www.ceopa.org.)
- **Classrooms of the Future**—\$90 million for technology and training, including the purchase of 83,000 laptops. Research shows laptops do not improve learning, and can be detrimental. (See this newsletter for Jan/Feb 2007—available at www.ceopa.org.)
- **Quality Teachers**—\$1.2 million to pay for teachers to be certified by the National Board of Professional Teaching Standards (NBPTS). Research shows that NBPTS certification does not improve teacher effectiveness in the classroom. (See this newsletter for March/April 2007—available at www.ceopa.org.)