

Special Report on Education

It's For Our Children, It's For Our Future



from *State Representative*
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Putting Our Children First – Finally!

For the first time in two decades, a bipartisan coalition of members from the General Assembly took an important first step forward toward serious, meaningful reform of the funding structure for the Commonwealth's 501 school districts.

Since the 1970s, public schools statewide have been under-funded. During this period, the state's share of funding dropped steadily from 55 percent to 34 percent. The result was that huge, unfair burdens were placed on local school districts to make up that difference – primarily by increasing onerous property taxes.

The budget package passed last year takes a much-needed step forward by increasing funding for basic education, restoring crucial special education programs and investing in programs like full-day kindergarten, tutoring and Head Start.

This year's proposed budget looks to make even larger investments, while reducing burdensome property taxes and providing wage tax relief for working families and senior citizens.

What's at stake is simple – the future of public education and the future of thousands of children in Pennsylvania.

The bottom line is that state House members on both sides of the political aisle finally came to the conclusion that longstanding patterns of funding public education via stop-gap measures – including bail-outs and emergency allocations – had to stop.

It is my hope that we can continue on the path that was started with this last budget – one that provides a lasting commitment to Pennsylvania's schoolchildren – one that invests in their future.

Early Childhood Education Programs Work!

Much of the debate over how to improve our public school system in Pennsylvania focuses on early childhood education. Fortunately, there is a growing inventory of proven, successful programs undertaken in states across the nation that can serve as important guideposts as Pennsylvania develops its own comprehensive strategy for moving ahead.

In July 2002, the National Conference of State Legislatures released a report which documented the importance of a number of critical factors relating to early childhood development including family and community engagement, school readiness, quality child care and coordination of services.

The report describes legislative initiatives across the nation that have shown how a positive and stimulating environment in early years can lead to greater successes as a child enters school. Nutrition, positive parental interaction and reading to children can improve their chances of learning. Furthermore, lawmakers throughout the nation are recognizing the importance of early education programs, such as preschool or Head Start, as essential to achieving school readiness.

In 2003, the House Education Committee heard from Dr. W. Steven Barnett of Rutgers, whose 20 years in the

field documented the importance of early childhood programs. A tape of the hearing is available by calling my office.

Pennsylvania is committed to expanding these programs. In his 2004-05 budget proposal, Gov. Ed Rendell committed millions of extra dollars to early childhood programs. I am an ardent supporter of these programs and will fight to see that money for early childhood programs is kept in the state budget.

Why is Full-Day Kindergarten a Good Investment?

Half of the children nationwide have access to full-day kindergarten, compared to fewer than one in three in Pennsylvania. Pennsylvania does not provide extra funding to school districts to provide full-day kindergarten.

The number of Pennsylvania school districts that offer full-day kindergarten increased by 20 percent between 1996-97 and 1999-2000. Nearly one in four families reported missing work the previous year because of child-care issues.

Why is Preschool a Good Investment?

Three out of four of Pennsylvania's youngest children already receive some care outside the home, but poor children are the least likely to get that care in an educational setting. Pennsylvania is also one of only nine states that do not fund preschool programs.

Children who have access to preschool are better at math and reading in high school, are less likely to be held back, or need special education, and are almost three times as likely to be enrolled in college.

Children who attend preschool also have better high school graduation rates and are less likely to be arrested as teenagers. Low-income preschool students grow up to have lower arrest rates, higher incomes and smaller chances of being on welfare.

Momentum is building across the country to develop more high-quality preschool programs. Therefore, it is crucial that we, as lawmakers, have a clear vision of what high-quality preschool programs look like.

We must work together to develop standards for all preschool programs and raise teacher salaries and benefits to levels similar to those who teach K-12.

We must also develop measures of early educational quality incorporating recent research on literacy, math, science and social-emotional learning, and provide continuous training and quality improvement efforts to all preschool teachers and programs.

Why is Quality Child Care a Good Investment?

One of the most important factors affecting early childhood development is quality child care, which involves adequate training, education and compensation for child care services. Lower quality programs tend to result in poorer school readiness, slower language development and socially non-desirable behavior.

Providers that offer appropriate stimulation, responsiveness and a nurturing learning environment can help a child achieve better peer interaction and higher math and reading skills.

The report indicates that low compensation in child services, where staff turnover rates are over 30 percent, is a major problem. The study found that on average, a family care provider earned about \$4.82 an hour, a child-care worker earned \$7.42 an hour and preschool teachers earned \$9.43 an hour. Further complicating this problem is that few child care professionals receive health-care benefits.

Legislators in Pennsylvania and across the nation are focusing on short- and long-term strategies to improve childhood and family services. Thanks to this research on early childhood issues, legislators are now better positioned to invest money and other resources in initiatives that work.

Why is Smaller Class Size a Good Investment?

Students in elementary schools with smaller classes scored about a half-year ahead of their peers in schools with larger classes on national reading and math tests. Five years later, those same students were more than a year ahead of their peers.

Teachers are more likely to know each student better and be able to quickly provide feedback on assignments, giving each student the individual attention he or she needs to meet his or her full potential.



Rep. Curry recently met with children from Jenkintown Elementary during a visit to the Capitol.

Supporting Fairer Funding of Schools

Taking the financial strain off of local school districts and property owners is once again at the top of my legislative agenda.

I believe that it is fundamentally unfair to fund our school districts by relying on the amount of property taxes collected by a district each year.

The property tax reduction plans being considered call for using money raised by legalized slots gaming at various horseracing tracks, and perhaps other locations, in Pennsylvania to provide \$1 billion worth of local school property tax relief.

The House has already passed a version of this plan. I will work with leaders in the Senate to ensure that a comprehensive plan – one that will reduce property taxes AND bolster education initiatives – is signed into law.

America stands to lose far more in educational benefits for our children than we save by limiting the requirements for and underpaying preschool teachers. Pennsylvanians are ready for a change in the way the state educates its young people.



Rep. Curry participated in an education rally at the state Capitol last year calling for increased support for early education programs.

What's Everyone Else Doing?

- Lawmakers in Minnesota, Montana and Missouri created At-Home Infant Care programs that provide subsidies to working parents to stay home with their infants. At least 19 other states allow working parents to receive income while they take time off with newborns and eight states have established commissions to study cost advantages of family leave.
- In Hawaii, a 1999 law expanded the state's Good Beginning Alliance, an effort to promote policies and programs that provide integrated and sustainable early childhood services to help support early childhood development.
- In neighboring New Jersey, legislation passed in 2000 emphasized the importance of early childhood education programs and services as precursors for future success in school, noting that the costs of providing the programs are far outweighed by the benefits, including increased employment rates, a decrease in welfare dependence and a decrease in other socially non-desirable behaviors later in life.

Source: 2002 NCSL Report

Reserve Your FREE Gun Lock

I am pleased to announce my partnership with Project ChildSafe to promote firearms safety and distribute free gunlocks.

Project ChildSafe, sponsored by the National Sports Shooting Foundation, is designed to promote the protection and safety of children. Because gun-related injuries are a leading cause of death among children, including deaths from unintentional injuries, homicide and suicide, the organization advocates responsible ownership of firearms.

The goal of the program is to prevent a loaded firearm from getting into the hands of a child. The intent is to avert a tragedy by providing gun owners with a Project ChildSafe kit that comes complete with a gun lock and a firearms safety pamphlet that explains the importance of firearms safety in the home, and safety strategies gun owners may adopt in their homes.

Please call my district office at (215) 572-5210 to reserve a gun lock for your household. Let's protect our children from tragedy.

Curry Advocates for Disabled Students

Current law allows school districts to receive state financial aid for the placement of students with severe disabilities in one of 30 approved private schools. Sadly, a pattern of continued under-funding puts the existence of these schools and the essential programs they provide in serious jeopardy.

I am increasingly concerned that these schools cannot continue to operate without state reimbursement. Our collective concern was evidenced when we met at the Vanguard School on Jan. 22 with board members and parents to learn more about the dilemma.

On Feb. 12 I attended a musical performance by students at HMS School for Children with Cerebral Palsy in Philadelphia with students from Germantown Friends School. I was deeply moved by the parents' and students' situation and the necessity for the state to maintain schools such as HMS where students with these disabilities flourish. Fifty-four students between 6 and 21 throughout the state attend HMS, some as resident students if the commute is too far. Each of

these students' local school district is unable to meet his or her unique complex special education needs.

In the past the state Department of Education has proposed eliminating the state's financial assistance and shifting full costs to local districts. This would be too great a financial burden on local taxpayers. Some of our most vulnerable students would no longer have the opportunity to participate in these programs. I will fight to ensure that the state does not slash this vital educational service.

Rep. Curry meets with a student at the School for Children with Cerebral Palsy in Philadelphia.





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Elm Street Bill Will Help Revitalize Communities

I was proud to sponsor legislation (H.B. 500) that creates the Elm Street Program, a significant urban residential enhancement initiative that targets older established residential neighborhoods for revitalization.

Gov. Ed Rendell recently signed the bill into law.

Pennsylvanians who live in older, established residential neighborhoods will now be able to draw on some significant resources to reclaim and stabilize their communities.

The Elm Street Program will be similar to the state's existing Main Street Program. While Main Street focuses on revitalizing downtown commercial districts, Elm Street will target residential districts in close proximity to those commercial districts.

The Elm Street Program will provide municipalities with a maximum of five years of financial assistance to

hire an Elm Street manager to work with local officials and community groups to establish a plan for revitalizing targeted neighborhoods.

Grants will go toward infrastructure and structural improvements like sidewalk repairs, tree plantings and building façade work. The Elm Street manager will also focus on marketing plans; promoting home ownership and other housing options; addressing blight, crime and public services in targeted neighborhoods; and assessing zoning codes and plans to ensure their compatibility with revitalization efforts.

Rendell proposed \$5 million for the Elm Street Program in last year's state budget. He proposed \$7 million for Elm Street this year.

ATTENTION VOTERS!

Pennsylvania law requires that registered voters who appear in person to vote for **the first time** in an election district must now present a form of identification. If you are voting for the first time in your county, and you intend to vote by absentee ballot, please include a copy of a form of identification with this voter registration mail application. Otherwise, you will be required by federal law to include a copy of a form of identification with your absentee ballot.

Following is a list of the acceptable forms of identification that may be presented.

Photo ID

- A valid Driver's License or Identification Card issued by the Department of Transportation.
- A valid Identification Card issued by any other agency of the Commonwealth.
- A valid Identification Card issued by the United States government.
- A valid United States passport.

- A valid Student Identification Card.
- A valid Employee Identification Card.
- A valid Armed Forces of the United States Identification Card.

A Copy of One of These Forms of Non-photo ID

- Non-photo Identification or other document issued by the Commonwealth, or any of its agencies, which shows the name and address of the voter.
- Non-photo Identification or other document issued by the United States government, or any of its agencies, which shows the name and address of the voter.
- A firearm permit.
- A current utility bill.
- A current bank statement.
- A paycheck.
- A government check.