

**Testimony to:
House Democratic Policy Committee
Pennsylvania House of Representatives**

Subject: Universal Pre-K and Kindergarten

**April 16, 2014
Philadelphia, PA**

**Presented by:
Ronald Cowell, President
The Education Policy and Leadership Center (EPLC)**

Representative Sturla, Representative Boyle, and members of the Policy Committee:

Good afternoon and thank you for the invitation to offer testimony today on the subject of Universal Pre-K and Kindergarten.

I am Ron Cowell, President of The Education Policy and Leadership Center (EPLC). EPLC is an independent, non-partisan, and not-for-profit organization based in Harrisburg with public policy and leadership development programs and activities throughout Pennsylvania. Our purpose is to improve the development and implementation of state-level education policy.

Thank you for considering a subject that is very important to Pennsylvania's youngest and most vulnerable citizens and to all taxpayers across the Commonwealth.

The state budget here in Pennsylvania is substantial – more than \$28 billion for 2014-2015 General Fund Budget as proposed by Governor Corbett. The Legislature will presumably act on this budget during the next three months.

This budget, as is the case with every annual state budget, will represent priorities established by state policymakers. It will represent what is valued and what is most important in the view of the lawmakers.

Here in Pennsylvania, every day, we assure more than 40,000 state prisoners that they will have housing, three meals a day, and all necessary medical care. And we spend more than \$40,000 per year for each of these prisoners.

Why do we not make anything near that kind of commitment to Pennsylvania's youngest and most vulnerable citizens?

The issues which are the subject of today's hearing – Pre-K and kindergarten – are vital components of state policy answers to how we will treat Pennsylvania's youngest children.

You will hear from others that the evidence is clear and compelling. Quality Pre-K makes a difference, especially for children who are at risk of school failure. Quality full-day kindergarten helps to ensure that students will be reading at grade level by the third grade, a critical moment in a student's schooling that is a good predictor of whether that student will be a successful learner and ultimately graduate from high school.

Not only our educators understand this, but also our business leaders, our public safety leaders including police chiefs and district attorneys, and our military leaders who are concerned about the readiness of young people to serve in the defense of our nation.

What is it that keeps Pennsylvania policymakers from addressing this issue in a more serious and effective manner?

While we have made some important progress in the past ten years – moving from our embarrassing position of being one of fewer than ten states not providing any state support for early education programs other than early intervention – we still have a long way to go to meet the needs of Pennsylvania's children.

According to Pennsylvania Partnerships for Children, in 2013 just 18% - or almost 53,000 of the Commonwealth's nearly 297,000 3- and 4-year olds – were able to benefit from high quality, publicly funded Pre-K.

Each year state lawmakers want to claim progress and ask us to celebrate when we count in the hundreds the additional children who may be served by a small increase in the state budget, but the underserved or unserved children number nearly a quarter of a million.

On other important policy issues, let's look at how we compare to other states.

Let's begin with something as basic as the age for compulsory attendance. In Pennsylvania, except in Philadelphia, parents do not have a legal obligation to provide for the education of their child until the age of eight. Just a couple of years ago, with the

leadership of the Philadelphia legislative delegation, the compulsory attendance age was changed to six for children in Philadelphia.

According to the Education Commission of the States, in March 2014, the compulsory school age is eight only in Pennsylvania and Washington. It is seven in thirteen states, and six or five in all other states. In our contiguous states, the compulsory school age is five in Delaware and Maryland, and six in New Jersey, New York, Ohio, and West Virginia.

Another issue is access to kindergarten. Pennsylvania still does not require all school districts to offer kindergarten to all students. Today, all districts do offer some kindergarten, although there appears to be much variance in terms of length of day and quality of program. Also, it is important to note that because kindergarten is not mandated by state law, many school districts have considered reducing their kindergarten program in each of the past three budget cycles as districts have been forced to contend with more than 850 million dollars in funding cuts from the state for programs and services for students. Since 2011, state lawmakers reduced the Accountability Block Grant by 60% or 150 million dollars, and it was this state funding that had been used by many districts to support expansion of kindergarten programs in the preceding several years.

According to the Education Commission of the States, in March 2014, only Pennsylvania and four other states do not require all districts to offer kindergarten. Twelve states require all districts to offer full-day kindergarten. These include our contiguous states of Delaware, Maryland, and West Virginia. In addition, the so-called Abbott districts in New Jersey are required to offer full-day K; and there is in the implementation stage a move to full-day K in Washington, and a move to full-day K in the lowest performing districts in Nevada.

As you consider whether to require all districts to offer developmentally appropriate full-day kindergarten programs, you must be cognizant of the terribly negative impact on school districts during the past three years caused by state funding cuts to districts in 2011 that largely have not been restored.

If we are going to require all districts to have available such kindergarten programs, the General Assembly must fix Pennsylvania's terribly inadequate and unfair school funding system.

As you craft legislation, I urge you to also consider the following:

1. Will it be the intention of the Legislature to assure access for all eligible children to high-quality Pre-K and kindergarten programs? Will you in fact create a right for all eligible children?

2. Is there a commitment to support the development and availability of high quality programs?
3. Is there a commitment to professional development for all Pre-K staff?
4. Is there a commitment to improving the salaries of Pre-K staff?
5. Is there a commitment to assure appropriate facilities?
6. Does the legislation wisely recognize the great diversity of Pre-K providers and respect and build upon that diversity?
7. Is there a commitment to promoting close working relationships between school districts and all providers of pre-K services?
8. Is there a commitment to provide the state funding that is adequate and sustainable to accomplish all of this?

While the benefits of Pre-K and developmentally appropriate full-day K are clear, our state policies have been woefully inadequate to support the research, and the needs of children.

We are missing not a few hundred or even a few thousand children. We are missing generation after generation of young people and sadly we are missing the children who need help the most.

Educators have done their part. Researchers have done their part. We know what works. We know how vital early education opportunities are for our children. The question now is whether state policymakers will have the will and commitment to address these issues.

More than twenty-five years ago, I had the privilege to sit on your side of the table and to lead a discussion across the Commonwealth and in the General Assembly about the need for early intervention services for children from birth to the beginner age of school. In 1982 when the discussion began, we were spending no state money for early intervention. In 1990, we passed Act 212 that established a statewide early intervention program, created a right for all eligible children, and began to provide significant state funding to support that objective. This year's state budget provides \$236 million through the Department of Education and \$127 million through DPW to support early intervention services for children from birth through beginner age of school.

It can be done. It is only a matter of will and commitment on the part of state policymakers.

I will be happy to respond to questions today or to provide any additional help that may be useful in the future.

Thank you.

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