Pennsylvania Pre-K Counts Questions and Answers

For more information and access to the program’s Guidance and application, visit the Pennsylvania Department of Education’s Early Childhood Education page at http://www.pde.state.pa.us/early_childhood/site/default.asp.

What are the benefits of Pennsylvania Pre-K Counts?
Pennsylvania Pre-K Counts is a voluntary pre-kindergarten program that will provide quality early learning experiences to prepare 3 and 4 year olds for kindergarten and school success. Pennsylvania Pre-K Counts, to be established by the Pennsylvania Department of Education pending approval of the General Assembly, greatly expands quality pre-kindergarten opportunities to children and families across the commonwealth. Families in participating communities can choose to enroll their children in half- or full-day quality pre-kindergarten classrooms located in schools, Head Start sites, child care programs and/or nursery schools. Pennsylvania Pre-K Counts will serve more than 11,000 children in the 2007-2008 school year, with the vision to provide high quality early learning classrooms for every 3 and 4 year old in the commonwealth whose family wants this learning opportunity for them.

Pennsylvania has made great progress in serving young children through early childhood initiatives such as the Accountability Block Grant, Keystone STARS, Early Intervention and the Head Start Supplemental Assistance program, but it’s just a start.

- More than 4,000 children are receiving pre-kindergarten in 2006-2007 through school-based programs in 44 school districts funded by the Accountability Block Grants.
- A total of nearly 90,000 of Pennsylvania’s 3 and 4 year olds are expected to participate in a quality early childhood program in 2006-07 – that’s 37,000 more children than were served in 2002-03.
- Impressive as these gains are, this is still only 31% of Pennsylvania’s 3 and 4 year olds. Many children in our most at-risk communities are currently left without access and unable to reap the benefits of quality early learning.

Pennsylvania Pre-K Counts is based on best practices and quality components adopted by the State Board of Education. These regulations have been explored thoroughly through the regulatory process, including testimony and comments from the community and advocates at five public hearings and three public roundtables held by the State Board of Education between 2004-2006. The public process has resulted in regulations that reflect what best promotes young children’s learning in pre-kindergarten programs.

Pennsylvania Pre-K Counts is an opportunity for eligible early learning programs to create or expand quality pre-kindergarten services to 3 and 4 year olds in their communities.

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Pennsylvania Pre-K Counts Questions & Answers: 3/23/07
General Questions

1. **Why do we need a state-funded pre-kindergarten program? Isn’t this really just state-funded babysitting?**
   The early years are crucial to a child’s academic, social and emotional development. Research has shown that quality pre-kindergarten lays the foundation for future academic and career success.
   - Children who attend high quality pre-kindergarten do better in school, are less likely to repeat a grade or require special education services, are more likely to graduate high school and attend college, have higher earnings and are more productive citizens.
   - Quality pre-kindergarten prepares children for reading and math, but also for paying attention, following directions and getting along with others. Pre-kindergarten gives children a chance to learn, become excited about school and be better students.
   - Quality pre-kindergarten makes early learning a family activity! Parents and teachers work together to provide learning activities in the classroom and in the home that meet the individual needs of the child.
   - Pennsylvania’s investment in quality pre-kindergarten programs could save Pennsylvania $100 million in special education costs. Additional future tax savings are possible because children who are better educated are more productive as adults, likely to be healthier, pay more taxes and less likely to require public assistance.
   - Quality education for our children today prepares them for high quality jobs tomorrow. A high quality workforce empowers Pennsylvania to compete nationally and globally, improving the quality of life for all.

   Pennsylvania Pre-K Counts requires research-based standards for providing quality early learning experiences for children, including an appropriately educated teacher and defined curriculum. The local Pennsylvania Pre-K Counts program is responsible for selecting the curriculum.

2. **How will Pennsylvania Pre-K Counts improve access to quality early learning for our preschoolers?**
   More than 11,000 3 and 4 year olds and their families will be able to choose full or half day pre-kindergarten at no cost to their families. Because both school-based and community-based early learning programs such as Head Start, child care and nursery schools may offer Pennsylvania Pre-K Counts, classrooms in participating communities will be available near a family’s work and home. The Pennsylvania Department of Education will monitor all early learning programs providing Pennsylvania Pre-K Counts services to ensure that they meet the quality expectations of the program.

3. **Isn’t it the parents’ responsibility to care for and educate their young children? Will Pennsylvania Pre-K Counts encourage parents to neglect this responsibility?**
   Parents are the most important teachers of a young child and play a vital role in their child’s early learning. Pennsylvania Pre-K Counts can strengthen the parent’s role in their child’s development. For parents that choose to participate in this voluntary program…
   - Parents have a partner in their child’s development. Parents can provide guidance to and learn from their child’s teacher, who has education and experience in child development. Parents can reinforce the learning in the classroom with fun activities at home. It makes family “quality time” even more valuable.
   - An important component of Pennsylvania Pre-K Counts is to actively engage the parents in their child’s activities. Teachers have regular contact with the parents and can discuss their child’s development.
4. How will Pennsylvania Pre-K Counts ensure that these children receive developmentally appropriate early learning opportunities that serve their cognitive, social/emotional, health and physical needs?

Programs providing Pennsylvania Pre-K Counts services must show that the curriculum they use aligns with the Pennsylvania Early Learning Standards, which address language and math, but also creative arts, personal/social skills, physical/health and parental involvement in their child’s development.

5. Will Pennsylvania Pre-K Counts raise local taxes?

No. Pennsylvania Pre-K Counts will be funded through the Pennsylvania Department of Education, so school districts or other government agencies will not need to raise any additional local funds for this program.

6. Does Pennsylvania Pre-K Counts require a state tax hike?

Governor Rendell’s budget makes essential investments in the future of Pennsylvania through new education funding, while simultaneously addressing the enormous challenges associated with health care, transportation and preserving the safety net in the face of massive federal funding cuts. When all elements of Governor Rendell's budget are enacted, the net result will be that the average homeowner will pay six dollars less in taxes.

7. Why is Pennsylvania Pre-K Counts part of the Accountability Block Grant?

The Accountability Block Grant is an umbrella for investment in programs that are proven to result in student achievement gains. Research has shown that investment in quality early education is a smart strategy for improving school performance. Pennsylvania’s school districts also recognized this value as 2/3 of the Accountability Block Grants have been spent on early childhood education. Even with this investment, only 55% of Pennsylvania’s 5 year olds participate in full-day kindergarten, and only 31% of our 3 and 4 year olds have access to quality early childhood education programs. Because of the overwhelming evidence supporting pre-k and full-day kindergarten and the clear interest of communities in making this investment, the Accountability Block Grant is the natural home of the $100 million targeted investment in early childhood education.

The Rendell Administration has also provided more than $1 billion in new funding that local communities have been able to decide how to invest, including:

- The current $250 million Accountability Block Grant allows school districts to choose from a menu of proven programs.
- The basic education subsidy – which gives school districts complete control – has increased by $675 million since 2002-03.

Districts will continue to decide how to invest $250 million of expenditures in the Block Grant.
8. What are the eligibility requirements for enrolling in a Pennsylvania *Pre-K Counts* classroom?
All children in participating communities from age 3 until they enter kindergarten are eligible, with a focus on children at risk of academic failure. Pennsylvania *Pre-K Counts* supports the inclusion of children with diverse needs.

9. How do you define children “at risk of academic failure?”
“At risk” is defined as “those children who, because of their home or community environment, are subject to such economic, language, cultural and like disadvantages to cause them to be at risk of school failure.” Children living in families earning less than 300% of the federal poverty level are considered at-risk. For example, a family of four earning $51,510 a year is considered at-risk for this program.

10. Does Pennsylvania have a lot of at-risk children?
Pennsylvania has many children who are at risk and will benefit from Pennsylvania *Pre-K Counts*:
- Approximately two-thirds of Pennsylvania’s 3 and 4 year olds (nearly 200,000 children) are living in households earning less than 300% of the federal poverty level.
- Approximately 10% of Pennsylvania’s families speak a language other than English at home.
- Approximately 23,000 of Pennsylvania’s 3 and 4 year olds have an Individual Education Plan (IEP) for special needs or special education services.

11. What can I expect when I enroll my child in Pennsylvania *Pre-K Counts*?
Where available, parents may choose to enroll their child in a full-day or half-day program in a school, child care center or group day care home with a Keystone STARS rating of STAR 2 or higher, Head Start program or licensed nursery school. A Pennsylvania *Pre-K Counts* classroom will meet the quality expectations adopted by the State Board of Education. Pennsylvania *Pre-K Counts* classrooms will provide:

- Teachers that have education and expertise in early childhood education;
- A curriculum that supports the healthy development of your child, academically and socially;
- Regular assessments of your child’s progress in order to guide instructional practice and learning activities;
- Coordination with community organizations and schools to ease children’s transition into programs; and
- A small class size (20 students per one teacher and one aide) so that children can receive individual attention and instruction.

12. What is the cost?
Pennsylvania *Pre-K Counts* is free to children and their families, and no additional fees can be charged by individual programs to cover experiences during program hours. Early learning programs will receive funding based on the number of children they serve.
13. When will Pennsylvania Pre-K Counts classrooms be available?
Pennsylvania Pre-K Counts must first be passed by the Pennsylvania General Assembly before grants can be awarded and early learning programs can open Pennsylvania Pre-K Counts classrooms. If the General Assembly meets its Constitutional responsibility to adopt the budget before July 1 and passes Pennsylvania Pre-K Counts, then classrooms will be up and running by September 2007.

General Early Learning Program Provider Questions

14. What early learning programs are eligible to provide Pennsylvania Pre-K Counts pre-kindergarten services?
The types of programs that can provide Pennsylvania Pre-K Counts are listed below. These providers must demonstrate a track record of providing quality early education and all must demonstrate that they meet the requirements and quality expectations of the Pennsylvania Pre-K Counts program. The programs that can apply include:
- School districts.
- Child care centers and group day care homes: All DPW-certified child care centers and group day care homes, with a designation of Star 2 or above by Keystone STARS, are invited to apply for Pennsylvania Pre-K Counts.
- Head Start: While participation in Keystone STARS is preferred, it is not a requirement of eligibility.
- Nursery schools: Nursery schools with a license from the Pennsylvania Department of Education.

15. What are the funding priorities for Pennsylvania Pre-K Counts?
All community providers that meet the requirements for Pennsylvania Pre-K Counts are eligible to apply. Priority will be given to those applicants that seek to serve children most in need of services, as described in the Priority Areas listed below.
- First priority is given to programs applying to serve children residing in a school district in which 30% or more of the students, on October 31 of the preceding school year, were eligible for free or reduced price meals under the school lunch program and who include children at risk of academic failure in their targeted enrollment.
- Second priority is given to programs in any community that target enrollment to children at risk of academic failure.

The goal of Pennsylvania Pre-K Counts is to provide more children with access to quality pre-kindergarten services, therefore, priority will be given to applicants who can demonstrate that they are expanding quality pre-kindergarten services to children who do not currently have access to such services.

16. How can I find out if I'm located in a school district serving 30% or more children receiving free or reduced lunch?
You can access a listing of school districts and an interactive map at www.pde.state.pa.us (click on Pre K-12; then Early Childhood; and Pennsylvania Pre-K Counts).

17. I'm a provider not in a school district with 30% or more of at risk children. Can I still apply for Pennsylvania Pre-K Counts?
All providers that meet the quality expectations may apply – regardless of where they are located.
18. Are there resources to help me complete the application?
The Office of Child Development and Early Learning (OCDEL) has prepared a guidance document to guide you through the application process and answer many of your questions about applying. The guidance document includes instruction and tips for completing your application, including
- quality expectations for the program,
- determining needs assessment and eligibility of children,
- what Pennsylvania Pre-K Counts can pay for,
- how you can blend current funding with Pennsylvania Pre-K Counts, including children currently receiving child care assistance through Child Care Works,
- how to apply as a single provider or as a partnership,
- what counts as instructional time and
- what curriculum and assessment your may use.
You can find the Guidance and application on the Pennsylvania Department of Education website at [www.pde.state.pa.us](http://www.pde.state.pa.us) (click on Pre K-12; then Early Childhood; and Pennsylvania Pre-K Counts).

The application guides school districts and community providers through the process of designing and describing your proposed pre-kindergarten program. It collects only the essential information that we need to evaluate applications, and Pennsylvania Department of Education staff is available and eager to help you through the process. There are seven bidders’ conferences across the Commonwealth to walk you through the application; additional conference calls by type of provider to answer questions; and you can call the OCDEL staff for one-on-one assistance.

19. How can I find out if my particular situation or partnership would be eligible for Pennsylvania Pre-K Counts funding?
OCDEL staff are available to assess each particular situation and determine if it meets the program guidelines of Pennsylvania Pre-K Counts. Contact information for staff is available in the Guidance which is available on the PDE website.

20. How will you ensure that children served in Pennsylvania Pre-K Counts classrooms are in a safe and healthy environment?
Pennsylvania Pre-K Counts requires that children receive immunizations and that the programs have adequate emergency and disaster response plans. Programs must meet standards and staff must have appropriate training based on the Pennsylvania Pre-K Counts quality expectations and State Board of Education regulations. The Pennsylvania Department of Education will actively monitor programs.

21. Will Pennsylvania Pre-K Counts cause my enrollment to drop because families are drawn to a free Pennsylvania Pre-K Counts classroom instead of my program?
Pennsylvania Pre-K Counts should provide access to quality pre-kindergarten to children not currently receiving quality services, therefore, the intention is to increase the number of children in early learning programs overall. Because Pennsylvania Pre-K Counts will fund up to five hours of instructional time, it cannot replace the child care services already being provided in the community. Early learning programs have an unprecedented opportunity to receive funding to be able to provide quality pre-kindergarten to preschoolers. Instead of losing enrollment, you could actually increase enrollment.
- Pennsylvania Pre-K Counts may also make it possible for new families to receive access to child care subsidy through Child Care Works. Many of the more than 21,700 3 and 4 year
olds from low-income families receiving child care assistance (and the 2,225 3 and 4 year olds on the waiting list) will likely be served through Pennsylvania Pre-K Counts programs, making those slots available for other families in need of child care assistance.
  o Child care programs that provide Pennsylvania Pre-K Counts pre-kindergarten to eligible children in their programs will receive adequate funding to support quality early learning.
  o Pennsylvania Pre-K Counts can open opportunities for child care assistance to low-income families of young children who are among the 7,183 families currently on the waiting list.

• Nearly half (14,000) of children in Pennsylvania eligible for Head Start are not receiving Head Start services. Pennsylvania Pre-K Counts will make it possible for Head Start programs to expand enrollment and/or expand services to children currently enrolled.

• Because Pennsylvania Pre-K Counts provides full funding for quality pre-kindergarten, school districts can create or expand a pre-kindergarten program without asking for local financial support through donations or tax increases.

22. What is the difference between Pennsylvania Pre-K Counts and the Pre K Counts Public-Private Partnership for Educational Success?
Pennsylvania Pre-K Counts is an initiative proposed by Governor Ed Rendell as a component of the Accountability Block Grants to provide quality pre-kindergarten opportunities to more than 11,000 3 and 4 year olds in Pennsylvania. It will be administered by the Pennsylvania Department of Education.

Pennsylvania Pre-K Counts builds on the work of the Pre K Counts Public-Private Partnership for Educational Success, a three-year project funded by leading Pennsylvania foundations and supported by the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania. Early results from this public-private initiative find that children’s early learning improves when all early learning programs in a community share resources to improve quality and coordinate early learning experiences in pre-kindergarten, kindergarten and beyond.

School District Questions

23. School districts are struggling to provide basic education services; why isn’t the Pennsylvania Pre-K Counts funding simply added to the basic education budget?
Governor Rendell has proposed a 3.5% increase in basic education funding, an additional $167 million increase, representing nearly one-third of the proposed total increase in the state education budget. Because research has consistently shown that quality early education improves a child’s school performance, this targeted investment is essential.

24. The Accountability Block Grant received no COLA this year. Why isn’t this funding simply added to the Accountability Block Grants so that we can choose where to spend it?
Research has shown that investment in quality early education is a smart strategy for improving school performance. Pennsylvania’s school districts also recognized this value as two-thirds of the Accountability Block Grants have been spent on early childhood education. Even with this investment, only 55% of Pennsylvania’s 5 year olds participate in full-day kindergarten, and only 31% of our 3 and 4 year olds have access to quality early childhood education programs. These additional funds will make it possible for school districts and other early learning programs to
create or expand their pre-kindergarten programs so more children can come to school ready to learn. The Rendell Administration has also provided nearly $1 billion in new funding that local communities have been able to decide how to invest:

- The current $250 million Accountability Block Grant allows school districts to choose from a menu of proven programs.
- The basic education subsidy – which gives school districts complete control – has increased by $675 million since 2002-03.

Districts will continue to decide how to invest $250 million of expenditures in the Accountability Block Grant.

25. Why isn’t Pennsylvania Pre-K Counts funding issued through the school districts like the Accountability Block Grants?

Children who can benefit from quality pre-kindergarten are served in every type of early learning program and may not have access to a school-based program. All of these children will become kindergartners and first graders. Pennsylvania Pre-K Counts gives parents the choice of settings for their child, while helping strengthen Pennsylvania’s early childhood education system.

26. My school district would like to enroll new children in our pre-kindergarten program, but we also want to enrich our existing pre-kindergarten program with this money, Can we do this?

Pennsylvania Pre-K Counts can supplement but not supplant public revenues. The district can add new children, and it can convert half-day to full-day programs. It cannot just enrich its existing pre-kindergarten program.

Child Care Questions

27. How do we know that all of the grants won’t just go to the school districts?

All eligible early learning programs that apply for Pennsylvania Pre-K Counts will be considered based on the merits of the application. Many states have pre-kindergarten funding offered to both school-based and community-based providers, and the funding includes all types of providers. The best way to encourage fair distribution of funding across providers is to encourage all eligible providers to apply.

28. Where will children go after the Pennsylvania Pre-K Counts program day is over?

Applicants are required to meet with other early learning programs in their community to discuss collaboration on issues such as wrap-around care.

Head Start Questions

29. How will you ensure that Pennsylvania Pre-K Counts funding won’t hurt federal Head Start funding?

Federal investment in Head Start is essential to the early learning system in Pennsylvania and it would be detrimental to the entire system to jeopardize any of that funding. In order to make the best use of both federal and state investment in early learning, applicants are required to meet with other early learning programs applying in their communities to discuss how they will attract new children to Pennsylvania Pre-K Counts and expand quality pre-kindergarten opportunities in their community.
30. **Head Start has national recognition as providing comprehensive services for our neediest children. If we participate in Pennsylvania *Pre-K Counts*, how will we maintain our identity?**

Experience has shown that Head Start programs that develop collaborations with school districts and other community early learning programs actually strengthen their standing in the community. Pennsylvania *Pre-K Counts* is an opportunity for Head Start programs to increase their capacity and their outreach in their communities.

31. **Head Start Supplemental Assistance Program funding has been flat funded in 2007-2008. Is Pennsylvania *Pre-K Counts* affecting Head Start funding? If we support Pennsylvania *Pre-K Counts*, are we doing so at risk of our Head Start State Supplemental Assistance Program funding?**

Head Start Supplemental Assistance funding has grown by 150% in three years; it is an important piece of the Governor’s commitment to providing access to quality early learning opportunities to Pennsylvania’s children. Pennsylvania *Pre-K Counts* will most likely make it possible for Head Start programs to increase their enrollment.

32. **How do we know that all of the grants won’t just go to the school districts?**

All eligible early learning programs that apply for Pennsylvania *Pre-K Counts* will be considered based on the merits of the application. Many states have pre-kindergarten funding offered to both school-based and community-based providers, and the funding includes all types of providers. The best way to encourage fair distribution of funding across providers is to encourage all eligible providers to apply.

*Pre-K Counts Public-Private Partnership for Educational Success Sites Question*

33. **How is our public-private partnership for Educational Success impacted, if we apply for Pennsylvania *Pre-K Counts* funding?**

Your public-private partnership grant is not impacted at all. You can apply for Pennsylvania *Pre-K Counts* to serve more children in your current public-private partnership programs.

34. **When we re-apply for public-private partnership funding, should we mention that we are applying for Pennsylvania *Pre-K Counts*?**

You may mention that you are applying for Pennsylvania *Pre-K Counts*, but it won’t affect the amount of funding you receive from the Public-Private partnership.

35. **Our children are currently being assessed using the BSSI assessment tool. If we receive a Pennsylvania *Pre-K Counts* grant, will we have to do two assessments, a BSSI and Work Sampling?**

For the 2007-2008 school year, early learning programs who receive Pennsylvania *Pre-K Counts* grants may choose their assessment, so you may use the BSSI assessment tool.