

THE HEINZ ENDOWMENTS

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PA PRESCHOOLERS MAKE BIG GAINS Three-Year Study of 10,000 At-Risk Children:

Dramatic Reduction in **PROJECTED** Special Education Placements
80 Percent Meet Standards to Move to Kindergarten
5-Year-Olds Exceed Peers Nationally in School Readiness

Pittsburgh, Oct. 22, 2009 – A three-year independent study of 10,000 Pennsylvania pre-school students at risk for future poor performance in school has found that significant numbers of children in a range of age groups and categories showed marked improvement in EARLY learning abilities as a direct result of enrollment in high-quality PRE-KINDERGARTEN programs.

The study, one of the largest ever conducted on high-risk preschoolers in the country, was funded through a \$1 million Heinz Endowments grant. Its focus was on children RAISED IN POVERTY who were enrolled in programs covered by Pre-K Counts, the statewide partnership of foundations and the state Office of Child Development and Early Learning that led to the creation of certified, high-quality pre-school classrooms across the state.

The STUDY WAS conducted by THE SPECS RESEARCH TEAM from the University of Pittsburgh's Early Childhood Partnerships PROGRAM and managed through the Children's Hospital of Pittsburgh Foundation. SPECS FOR PRE-K COUNTS found that CHILDREN WHO PARTICIPATE IN A HIGH QUALITY EARLY LEARNING PROGRAM dramatically improve THEIR prospects for success in their formal school years.

“We believe that this is the definitive study in Pennsylvania on the issue of whether quality pre-school education has been worth the public and private investments,” Heinz Endowments Chairman Teresa Heinz said today in announcing the results. “The answer to that, we can say now based on hard numbers, is a resounding yes. This is the evidence that will allow us to finally declare victory in the debate that Pennsylvania has been mired in for much too long – whether spending modest amounts on preschoolers’ early education will improve their long-term school performance.”

Among the study’s most significant findings:

- ALL AT-RISK children in Pre-K programs demonstrated significant gains in development and early learning skills in a range of basic subject areas, from reading to math to socialization and behavior.
- 80 percent of the children in the study met critical state school success competency standards for transition to kindergarten.
- Children from every ethnic group represented in the study – African American, American Indian, Asian, Caucasian and Hispanic among them – made significant gains.
- Greater than two of every three children with developmental delays were able to attain a low average to average level of performance at the end of their time in the program – meaning that school districts participating in the Pre-K Counts program were able to dramatically reduce their special education placement rates.
- HISTORICALLY, PARTICIPATING SCHOOL DISTRICTS SHOWED AN 18% SPECIAL EDUCATION PLACEMENT RATE FOR HIGH RISK CHILDREN; PKC CHILDREN’S RATE WAS ONLY 2%
- Nearly 7,000 high-risk Pre-K Counts children exceeded expected competencies in basic areas at transition to kindergarten, and the skills of 5-year-olds from the program exceeded those of age peers on a nationally standardized measure of early learning in spoken language, reading, math, classroom behavior and daily living skills.
- Mentored programs improved quality and teaching, which promoted child success.

Dr. Stephen Bagnato, PROFESSOR OF PEDIATRICS AND PSYCHOLOGY AT PITT, who led the SPECS team that conducted the

study, and who has directed previous evaluations of early childhood intervention programs in the Pittsburgh region AND NATIONALLY, said the overarching conclusion that can be drawn from the findings is that “quality pre-school programs for vulnerable children are not add-ons or luxuries. They are essential to the future school success of these children,” he said. “So we know a system like Pre-K Counts works well and now we just need to find out more about the specific parts of the system that work most effectively for individual children.”

When the study is considered in its entirety, Mrs. Heinz said, it validates nearly all the suppositions that led the Endowments and other philanthropic partners, The William Penn Foundation of Philadelphia and the Grable Foundation in Pittsburgh to begin making significant investments in creating a high-quality pre-school education system nearly 15 years ago. The Endowments’ grant making to support early childhood education strategies totals \$43.5 million for that period.

“There have been some tough lessons learned along the way in our work,” Mrs. Heinz said. “You can’t take on a big idea like creating a new education system for our youngest and neediest children and make the doing of it risk free,” she said. “But this study endorses the course that we took – to build a network of partners, one community at a time, stick to strong evaluation, set standards, involve parents and train teachers.”

Mrs. Heinz said the study also affirms Gov. Ed Rendell’s determination during the recent budget battle to fight attempts in the Legislature to cut funding for early childhood education programs, including Pre-K Counts. “He was a hero to the educational system in that fight,” she said.

Harriet Dichter, deputy secretary of the Office of Child Development and Early Learning in the state Departments of Education and Public Welfare, and the point person in the Rendell administration’s strategy for early childhood education, praised the study as a landmark validation of the public-private partnership model in building a quality pre-school education system statewide.

“Our office was created by Gov. Rendell to raise the priority level for early learning and to create an early learning system. It would have been

unthinkable for us not to have partnered with a foundation community that has been so committed to early childhood education,” Ms. Dichter said. “The degree of foundation involvement is unique among the states and the funding of this study by the Heinz Endowments is just one important example of why Pennsylvania has been able to make significant strides.”

Among the 21 school districts – both urban and rural – covered in the Pre-K Counts study is the Pittsburgh Public Schools’ programs. The district has about 2,200 children, ages 3 to 5, in district-run classrooms. The support comes from a variety of sources – federal Head Start, state Accountability Block Grants and foundation support supplied through Pre-K Counts.

District Superintendent Mark Roosevelt said one of the most important initiatives the district has undertaken to improve learning, close the racial achievement gap and increase the numbers of students going on to college or other post-high school education is The Pittsburgh Promise, a scholarship program that will provide as much as \$10,000 per year in tuition payments for qualifying graduates to pursue higher education.

“What this study tells us is that our efforts to ensure students are Promise ready in high school must begin with pre-school education classes,” Roosevelt said. The impressive findings on learning readiness, he said, should remind teachers and administrators in the main school system that “these children are coming to us well prepared and we need to treat it like a relay race. We need to be able to pick up the baton and keep it going.”

Marge Petruska, senior director of the Endowments’ Children, Youth & Families Program, who devised the foundation’s first early childhood funding strategies and brought in other foundation partners, said one of the most heartening findings of the study was its endorsement of school-community collaborations as effective in building better learning environments for preschoolers. “The training of child care providers, teacher mentoring, rating systems for early education programs – all of these helped create a top-notch system and that was a key funding area for the foundation community and we are very proud.”

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