

NEWS FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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Departments of Corrections and Human Services Advocate for Quality Early Education as a Key to Future Success

Scranton, PA – Department of Corrections (DOC) Secretary John Wetzel and Department of Human Services (DHS) Secretary Ted Dallas today made the case for continued investment in early care and education as the route to future success.

Governor Wolf's 2016-17 budget provided an additional \$200 million in basic education funding, as well as a \$30 million increase for early childhood education, that preserves the number of admissions slots for proven early childhood education programs like Pre-K Counts and state-funded Head Start. It also includes a \$20 million increase for special education, a more than \$10 million increase for Early Intervention.

“Improving early childhood educational opportunities for children, especially in the most disadvantaged communities, is an investment with guaranteed returns – both fiscally, and most importantly, in the lives of thousands of young people,” said Wetzel, speaking at an event at Marywood University. “Investment in pre-k education is critical to ensuring that today’s children do not become tomorrow’s inmates.”

Studies show that children who participate in high-quality pre-kindergarten perform better in school, graduate at higher rates, and earn more throughout their working lives compared to peers that do not have access to early learning programs.

“We want to ensure that all Pennsylvania children, regardless of background, have a chance to develop, grow, and learn critical skills that will lay the groundwork needed to be successful for the rest of their lives,” said Dallas. “We can invest in our young children now to help build the skills they need for success in school and beyond, or pay the public costs of remediation, public assistance, and corrections later when they don’t reach their potential. I’d much rather invest in success than pay the public costs later.”

Additionally, children who were previously enrolled in Pre-K Counts outperform their economically disadvantaged peers in third-grade math and reading.

Some studies further indicate that participation in high quality pre-k also helps lower the chance that high-risk youths will end up in prison.

Currently, Pennsylvania spends more than \$2 billion annually—about seven percent of the state budget—to house about 50,000 inmates. Yet, only 30 percent of Pennsylvania children in families earning up to three times the federal poverty level – or \$72,750 for a family of four – are enrolled in high-quality pre-k programs.

In Governor Wolf's first two years of office, he secured historic education funding increases totaling almost \$640 million dollars, including \$415 million in basic education funding, \$60 million for early childhood education, and \$50 million in special education funding.

The investment has created more than 6,000 slots for pre-k students statewide, but more must be done to provide expanded opportunities for Pennsylvania children to get a jump-start on their education.

Governor Wolf believes there is an immediate need to expand publicly funded pre-k and early care and education programs with the goal of universal pre-k for all children. There is also a need to revise Keystone STARS to make it possible for more child care and other early learning programs to earn high-quality STAR 3 and 4 ratings.

Early childhood programs only work if families, especially where children are most at risk, are aware of them and enroll their children.

To that end, Secretary Wetzel and Secretary Dallas, along with Education Secretary Pedro Rivera, collaborated earlier this year to launch an initiative to help families of the more than 80,000 children with incarcerated parents get access to quality educational programs for pre-schoolers.

The Child Resource Centers now provide material at all 26 state correctional institutions help connect families with early learning services and programs throughout the state.

MEDIA CONTACT: Amy Worden, DOC, 717.728.4026

Rachel Kostelac, DHS, 717.425.7606

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