

message



Barry Lavery

By Teresa Heinz
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Christine Russell and Susan Bechtold live on opposite sides of the state, but they have something important in common — something that every Pennsylvanian with a preschool child should have.

Christine, a nursing student in Pottstown in southeastern Pennsylvania, and Susan, who manages the family household in Verona in the southwest, are also busy mothers on tight budgets. Each has two children who are thriving in the statewide network of high-quality preschool education programs known as Pre-K Counts. That network, created by The Heinz Endowments in Pittsburgh and the state Office of Child Development and Early Learning, and supported by foundation partners William Penn in Philadelphia and Grable in Pittsburgh, has, according to the two women, profoundly improved their children's learning ability, and put them on track for school success.

After moving from a church day care to a Pre-K program with lesson plans and field trips — a theater trip featured “Charlotte’s Web” — Susan’s daughter Adeline blossomed. “You see her beaming about what she’s learned,” says Susan, “and you know there’s no stopping her.”

Christine says her son Joshua’s experience in Pre-K has been life changing. His teacher, Tina Brenner, noticed socialization problems and referred him to experts who diagnosed Asperger’s syndrome, an autism spectrum disorder that hampers socialization and communication. Joshua was able to get immediate help and — rather than being shunted into a special program — has been able to remain in his classroom, and to learn to socialize.

These powerful experiences explain why Christine and Susan are disgusted over attempts by some state legislators during the recent marathon budget stand-off to cut support for early childhood education.

Christine organized a postcard-campaign protest. Such citizen actions — along with unflinching support from Gov. Ed Rendell — won the day. But she wonders: “Isn’t there something that would end the debate once and for all?”

Well, now there is hard evidence that these programs work; that they are worth every penny.

Announced in Pittsburgh in October were results of a three-year study of learning gains by 10,000 Pennsylvania children at risk for future poor performance in school — one of the largest studies of this group ever undertaken in the country.

Among the significant findings were that children’s learning improved across racial and ethnic lines; projected special education placements dropped dramatically; nearly 7,000 high-risk Pre-K Counts children exceeded expected competencies at transition to kindergarten; and the skills of 5-year-olds exceeded those of age peers nationally. Complete results can be found at www.heinz.org.

But the over-arching message is this: High-quality early learning programs dramatically improve high-risk children’s prospects in formal schooling. This study should finally silence critics who complain about low return on investment and end the debate over state support for these efforts and the children they help.

In the course of our work in early childhood education — \$44.5 million in grants in the past 13 years — I have insisted on independent, rigorous evaluation. The study, funded by a \$1 million Endowments grant, was conducted by Dr. Stephen Bagnato of the University of Pittsburgh’s Early Childhood Partnerships and managed by the Children’s Hospital of Pittsburgh Foundation.

It validates with numbers what mothers like Christine and Susan have seen in their own children and know in their own hearts.

When the discussion moves from the ornate chambers of the state legislature to small kitchens crowded with high chairs and booster seats, the results are obvious. The debate is not about whether to enroll, it’s about how to afford it. When Susan learned about the quality of the Pre-K Counts program run by her local Riverview School District, and that she would qualify for free tuition, she jumped.

“A few weeks after my daughter started, she was telling me the difference between ‘deciduous’ and ‘evergreen,’” says Susan.

And for those who continue to argue about the taxpayer costs, there is Christine’s son, Joshua. By keeping him out of special education, the program saved the school system tens of thousands of dollars.

But right now, success stories like Adeline and Joshua are too rare. Most of Pennsylvania’s children don’t have access to the kind of classrooms that are changing their lives.

Heinz began funding early education pilot programs 15 years ago. Back then, compelling stories and studies outside Pennsylvania moved us to take on an enormously risky investment. The difficulty lay not in creating high-quality programs, but in bringing them to scale. There were hard lessons, and the system-building was painstaking — community by community, partner by partner.

Now, this definitive study allows us to declare victory in the debate over the value of these high-quality programs. It’s time to move forward, then, and ensure that every child in Pennsylvania can be like Joshua and Adeline, that every parent has the support that Christine and Susan needed. Their future, and ours, depends on it. *h*

This column was first published Oct. 23 in the Philadelphia Inquirer as part of the Endowments’ statewide public announcement of the result of the Pre-K Counts study.