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Avoid early ed cuts at school budget time

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There's a lot of talk right now about education. What to do about unbalanced school district budgets, falling test scores and failing schools. The talk centers on education from kindergarten through 12th grade. But what happens to a child before he or she enters kindergarten? The best way to make certain no child gets left behind is to ensure an even start for all. That's where high-quality early childhood education comes in.

York County has 13 National Association for the Education of Young Children accredited centers. The centers must meet more than 425 standards, conduct family surveys and self assessments, and have an on-site review. Nationally, only 7 percent of all child care programs are NAEYC accredited; in York County 14 percent are.

Other high-quality early childhood education programs include the Keystone STAR 3 or STAR 4 providers, Pre-K Counts grantees, EvenStart, Head Start and Early Head Start. So there are quality programs available, there just aren't enough of them. Only 18 percent of York County children under age 5 have access to high-quality early childhood education programs.

This past year, 97 percent of the pre-kindergarten children enrolled in the seven NAEYC-accredited programs administered by United Way of York County's partner agencies met developmental goals and were on track for success in life. These benchmarks are set by the Pennsylvania Department of Education and measured through a standardized tool.

Pennsylvania is one of a handful of states that have aligned their learning standards from infancy through high school. Each age and grade has specific standards in language, science, math and so on. The goals in each subject area build on one another. The standards serve as a guide for the school districts to ensure success not only on standardized tests but on "life's tests" of post-secondary education and success in the workplace.

Early childhood education programs are incorporating these standards and the results of child assessments into their curriculum. Teachers are developing lesson plans based on what the state indicates a 3-year-old should know and be able to do. Those children who are having trouble with a particular skill, as identified by teacher observations and screenings, receive extra support. All of this is done in a developmentally appropriate child-friendly setting. Young children do not learn through worksheets and memorization. Young children learn best through active experiences with peers, caring adults and the world around them.

And all this effort to improve the quality of early childhood education is paying off. Children, even those deemed at-risk of school failure, are meeting the Pennsylvania standards for a typical 4-year-old. As a result, York County school districts are revamping their kindergarten curricula because the children enrolled in high-quality early childhood education programs are entering school with more knowledge and better social skills. It's a good problem to have: children who exceed your expectations.

So why should people concerned with their school district's budget care about early childhood education? Because pre-K and other early childhood programs are outside of what districts are required to provide, under their mandates from the state. Which means budget cuts could reduce spending

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on early ed. And that's a bad idea, because research by top economists and educators prove that for every \$1 we spend on high-quality early childhood education, we can save \$7 in costs associated with special education, remediation programs, school failure and dropouts.

Pay a dollar now to prevent problems or pay \$7 later to fix problems. I know which one I would choose.

Christy Renjilian is the United Way of York County's director of Focus on Our Future. This piece originally appeared on the YorkCounts blog: <http://yorkcounts.blogspot.com>

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