

**Testimony of Harriet Dichter, Deputy Secretary, Office of Child Development and Early Learning,
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Before the Joint Economic Committee of Congress

Investing In Young Children Pays Dividends:

The Economic Case for Early Care and Education

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Good morning, Senator Casey, Representative Maloney, and members of the Joint Economic Committee. Thank you for today's opportunity. I am Harriet Dichter, Deputy Secretary for the Office of Child Development and Early Learning of the Pennsylvania Departments of Education and Public Welfare. Improving the national track record for both investments and outcomes for young children is essential to both our short and long term competitiveness. The educational and economic payoffs from a systematic investment in early childhood education are compelling- we have far more evidence of the return on investment in this arena than in many others of significant public investment.

Based on our experiences in Pennsylvania, I have three points to make today:

- 1) There is no one silver bullet, not just one investment or program that works. What matters, no matter what the program, is a common framework of high standards, accountability and sufficient investment to make a difference.
- 2) The federal government has not been sufficiently proactive in this area, leaving too much to the states to do, especially on financing.
- 3) Proper public-sector governance needs to be a focus to assure good outcomes and efficient use of public dollars.

First: We can no longer afford to consider child care as only a way to get parents working, or that the quality of our children's learning experiences before they reach kindergarten or first grade is not a public responsibility. To advance the early childhood agenda, we need a continuum of services that assures the educational and economic benefits from early childhood investment. This is as true for early childhood education as it is for other systems such as higher education or health care. This means that we can and should expect to make investments in programs with different names and labels—child care and Pre-Kindergarten are two that come to mind – and that we should expect to make investments in children in each and every year up to their entrance into school (and of course continuing investment in the school years).

In Pennsylvania, we do not focus on just one type of early childhood program. We do insist that all of our programs get organized with certain commonalities: high standards, accountability, and sufficient financial and other supports. For example, we recognize that child care reaches the largest number of young children. To that end, we have created a systematic approach to voluntarily improving quality called Keystone STARS which integrates research-based standards, improvement strategies, financial resources, and public ratings of programs. An independent evaluation has shown that Keystone STARS has systematically reversed Pennsylvania's ten year decline in child care quality. But child care alone is not enough-- this year we are seeking to develop a new high quality program for at-risk three and four year olds called Pre-K Counts. This targeted, highly focused investment will have immediate payoffs in our school system and future payoffs in academic and career achievement which will benefit our children and the broader community. For the exceptionally at-risk children of young, impoverished mothers, we continue to expand the renowned Nurse Family Partnership program. All three programs apply a similar framework of high standards, accountability and sufficient financial supports to early childhood issues in different settings

We cannot afford to have a silver bullet approach to early childhood development where we focus on only one program or one financing stream. But we must insist upon a common framework across each of the programs for any public investment. This common framework makes a meaningful difference to children, and will build confidence from business and parents in our communities. This is the framework that we use.

- 1) High standards and expectations for program quality, articulated in plain language, based on research and experience, and focused on the bottom line- outcomes for children;
- 2) Professional preparation and ongoing education of the teachers and administrators to whom we are delegate the responsibility of delivering these programs. In short, investment in accountable methods for assuring that the people and programs are of good enough quality. It is not enough to tell people to achieve high standards, assistance is needed to achieve and maintain them;
- 3) Accountability for results—and a practical way to help those people whose work is far outside of early childhood to see and understand these results;
- 4) Financial supports that are linked directly and clearly to the standards we articulate and are made available at sufficient levels to get the job done.

See Chart 1 below for how I like to think about and how we do act on this—it is a reminder that the work is complex, but that it can be broken down and a realistic, achievable strategy can be achieved.

Chart 1: How Pennsylvania Approaches Its Early Childhood Programs



The second point is the importance of shared and responsible public investment in these programs. Professor Heckman has made the case for improved investment. In Pennsylvania, we have been working to improve our state investment in these programs. Each year, I have been disappointed with the lack of improved federal investment in early childhood programs. The established and

dedicated funding streams in areas such as the Child Care and Development Block Grant and Head Start are not keeping pace. Pennsylvania is using state resources, for example, to close the gap between those eligible for Head Start and those funded at the federal level. Our broad based educational streams that can be used on a discretionary basis to support some early childhood programs such as those under No Child Left Behind are also not keeping pace.

While Pennsylvania has moved from less than 20% of our young children with an opportunity to participate in a good-quality program in 2003 to just over 30% today, this is possible only because of our state commitment and the growth of state dollars.

This is not right—all of us reap a benefit when we invest in quality early education that makes it possible for children to achieve in school and throughout their lives. We need to see progress made at the federal level in improving our investment. From my perspective, this means we should stand by the established programs, and that smart proposals such as the one that Senator Casey has advanced for preschool should move out of the idea stage and into a funded reality.

The federal role is to help with financing at a level that makes a meaningful difference, to insist that states have meaningful standards and accountability based on nationally acceptable minimums, and to facilitate coherence across the federal programs. When we crafted Keystone STARS and the proposed Pre-K Counts, we turned to research-based evidence and to other states' experience to learn what standards, accountability and supports will produce quality results. It is possible to have a national baseline that does not interfere with the sensitive implementation of state programs.

This brings me to my third and final point, which is the importance of organizing the programs and resources so that they make sense. Historically, public responsibility for early childhood education programs has been scattered and divided among different agencies and revenue streams, both at the federal and state levels. I know that our families do not care what we call the programs that we offer to them- it doesn't matter to them if the program is named Keystone STARS, Head Start, Pre-K Counts or something else. As both parents and as taxpayers, people want to have confidence in the responsiveness and quality of the services to their children and they want to know that their public investments are made efficiently and are well-leveraged.

In our state, we have chosen to take these issues on through our governance structure. My office is part of the organization of both of our Departments of Education and Public Welfare. Governor Rendell created this office in order to be efficient, to unify and integrate the early childhood programs of both agencies. The office covers the waterfront—we encompass school and community-based programs for children from birth through full-day kindergarten. Working across two agencies allows us to take advantage of the assets of our human services and educational systems. At the same time, we have a single staff and, as I described earlier, a consistent framework that we use to systematically advance the work.

We are organizing the resources in new and creative ways and our governance structure recognizes the historical split between “care” and “education” and seeks an alternative, new pathway to early learning that takes the best from the history. We have to be prudent public stewards—and so this approach to governance allows us an ongoing commitment to both excellence and to efficiency.

I urge you to remember that every child we educate is also America's child.

Thank you for the opportunity to brief you today.