

Rendell touts funding for early education

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By Dan Hardy

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Speaking to a friendly crowd of educators and education policy makers in Philadelphia yesterday, Gov. Rendell said he is determined to see 100 percent of Pennsylvania's kindergarten students enrolled in full-day programs and greatly expanded numbers of children in state-funded prekindergarten before he leaves office at the end of 2010.

The governor was addressing the 2007 National Forum on Education Policy, organized by the Education Commission of the States, an influential national think tank that includes governors, state politicians, education experts, and state education secretaries on its board. Also speaking to the lunchtime audience of several hundred at the Sheraton City Center hotel were Kansas Gov. Kathleen Sebelius and Rhode Island Gov. Donald L. Carcieri.

The speech came at a time when Rendell had just demonstrated his ability to back up words with deeds. After months of sometimes-contentious negotiations and a one-day government shutdown, he got state legislative leaders to agree early this week to a budget package that includes \$100 million for the expansion of prekindergarten and full-day kindergarten. The package has not yet been approved by the General Assembly.

Before this, those programs were offered only as part of block grants that allowed school districts to choose from a wide menu of options; this was the first time money was earmarked exclusively for them. Republican legislators had wanted to continue their funding through the block-grant program.

"We thought there was such an urgency to up the number of children in prekindergarten and full-day kindergarten," Rendell said in an interview before his speech, explaining why the block-grant program was not satisfactory. "We were not going to budge on that."

This year, about 55 percent of Pennsylvania's children are in full-day kindergarten and about 12,000 children are in state-funded, public-school prekindergarten programs. The \$75 million in new funding for prekindergarten will add 11,000 children to state-funded programs, and the \$25 million for full-day kindergarten will push participation there up to 65 percent.

That is great progress from the day he took office, Rendell said, when only about 30 percent of the state's children were in full-day kindergarten and "Pennsylvania was one of only nine states that did not spend one dollar for pre-K education."

But it is not enough, he added. "Early childhood education is not a frill - it's not something you propose only in good budget times. It is absolutely essential if our children are going to be able to learn and compete" in the global economy.

Another Rendell priority, a \$90 million program to buy laptop computers for high school classrooms, will also be fully funded, he said in the interview. This is the second year of the Classrooms for the Future program; last year, the legislature refused to appropriate money for it and Rendell had to use \$20 million in discretionary funding to get it started. It "was very successful this year; it has revolutionized classroom teaching," Rendell said. "It was so popular that it sold itself" to the General Assembly.

Rendell's push for more early childhood education comes at a time when many states have recognized the need for similar programs, said conference participant Mimi Howard, the Early Learning Program director for the Education Commission of the States. "The number of states that are currently putting dollars into preschool programs grows significantly every year," she said.

Educators and policy experts, Howard added, recognize that "it's not just a moral imperative that we provide children with as much stimulation as we can. It's also good business; it's good economics. . . . If children don't come into schools with some skills and some knowledge and a foundation of good language ability, their chances of being successful are far less than if they do."

The new Pennsylvania prekindergarten initiative calls for the \$75 million to go to private child-care and Head Start programs as well as public schools, targets children in high-poverty school districts, and sets high standards for participation by the private providers. Those are all good indicators that it will succeed, Howard said. "A lot of really good things are happening here."

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