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Office of Childhood Development and Early Learning
Testimony before the House Education Committee on HB 2205
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Good morning Chairman Roebuck, Chairman Clymer, and House Education Committee members. Thank you for the opportunity to discuss the importance of early childhood education with you today.

As this is my first appearance before the committee, I would like to take a few moments to introduce myself. I am Todd Klunk, and I was appointed Acting Deputy Secretary of OCDEL in January of this year. Prior to this temporary appointment, I served in the civil service position as the Director for OCDEL's Finance, Administration, and Planning Unit. I have worked in a finance role for the last 12 years making it my priority to ensure good stewardship of state and federal funding through sound fiscal policy and monitoring.

Governor Rendell entered office with a goal of building the nation's best infrastructure for early childhood education. He will leave Harrisburg with the foundation set. Eight years ago, Pennsylvania was one of nine states to offer no publicly-funded pre-kindergarten. Today we are a leader nationally. Eight years ago, there were no children in state-funded, high-quality Pre-Kindergarten programs. Thanks to your support, Pennsylvania now provides quality early childhood education for over 11,000 children through the Pre-K Counts Program. In addition, our investments have increased full-day kindergarten enrollment 88 percent since 2002.

The investment has come at a critical time. In every county and every community there are children who are at risk of failing in school because of factors beyond their control. Research has shown that low family income and education levels of the mother place the child at risk of starting kindergarten developmentally behind, doing poorly in school, dropping out, being unemployed and getting involved with crime. Early failures create lasting burdens. Continuing to fund early childhood education, and focusing our limited resources on at-risk children, is the right policy. Our path will reap future savings.

Pennsylvania's Pre-K Counts program, the focus of Chairman Clymer's House Bill 2205, is a major part of our investment. Pre-K Counts was designed to complement other early education programs in the commonwealth, helping to fill a major need for quality pre-kindergarten. In designing the program, we made it possible for both school-based and community-based early education programs to participate, strengthening and solidifying our early education infrastructure for families within 300 percent of the federal poverty level. We insisted on high quality. Pennsylvania Pre-K Counts quality expectations meet or exceed nearly every benchmark set by the National Institute for Early Education Research.

Our program has seen results. In 2008-2009:

- Nearly three times as many children were proficient in Personal and Social Development, from 2,984 children upon entry to 8,763 at the end of the year;
- Nearly four times as many children were proficient in Language and Literacy, from 2,164 children upon entry to 8,135 at the end of the year;
- More than four times as many children were proficient in Mathematical Thinking, from 1,792 children upon entry to 7,910 at the end of the year;
- Five times as many children were proficient in Scientific Thinking, from 1,429 children upon entry to 7,686 at the end of the year.

Children who graduate from the program leave better prepared for kindergarten than their peers who did not have access to such a program. Last school year, only 2 percent of Pre-K Counts children entering kindergarten had Individualized Education Plans (IEPs) compared to 14 percent of the total kindergarten population with IEPs. Minimizing special education costs has the potential to save Pennsylvania millions of dollars in future expenditures.

Pre-K Counts works. We will continue to work to improve it. We routinely meet with the Early Learning Council and the Pa Pre-K Counts Advisory Board, both staffed with members from school districts, higher education and non-profits for ongoing program improvements and feedback. In September of last year, at the request of members of the General Assembly, OCDEL strengthened the income verification policies by requiring families provide evidence that they earned up to 300 percent of the federal poverty level for their child to be enrolled.

We have expanded the program's reach and its impact. Pre-K Counts now serves 62 counties with a good mix of provider types including nearly 65 school districts. Applicants must provide a detailed community needs assessment to show their classrooms will be in the highest poverty areas. They must also show how they are working with other early learning programs such as Head Start, and with their Child Care Information Services Agency to identify and recruit the highest risk children. In 2008-2009, 81 percent of classrooms were located in a zip code where at least 30 percent of children under age five live in low-income families; nearly half of our Pre-K Counts classrooms were located in zip codes where 50 percent of the children under age five live in low-income families. We expect similar numbers for the current year.

Recently adopted regulations also solidify the design and accountability practices OCDEL has put in place to help ensure consistent quality outcomes for children. Current guidelines require grantees meet quality expectations, collaborate and coordinate with their local early learning community, and appropriately use public funds. The regulatory language follows very closely to our present practice, keeping the program consistent across different administrations and agency leadership.

Chairman Clymer's House Bill 2205 addresses many of these issues. However, if passed in its current form, this legislation would negatively impact our Pre-K Counts

program by imposing a fee schedule on parents who cannot afford it and by lowering its quality.

The existing 300-percent poverty level cutoff was established based on evidence that children within this category have a higher risk of academic failure. A recent study by the aforementioned National Institute for Early Education Research found a marked performance gap between kindergarten children whose family federal poverty level falls between 235 to 300 percent and children above the 300-percent income level. The findings are clear: the group of children slightly above the federal line is as much at-risk as the children below.

Forcing co-pays from these parents is bad policy for several reasons. First, these payments are contrary to the purpose and mission of the program. Second, and most relevant, the targeted families do not have the resources to afford the fee. The PA Department of Labor and Industry's Self-Sufficiency Standard Index shows families earning up to 300 percent of the federal poverty level are at the brink without another cost to bear. Making it harder for children to access to free, high-quality pre-kindergarten only adds costs in the end.

A second contention with HB 2205 is the guideline exemption. The bill allows providers with any accreditation to be eligible for the program regardless of whether they meet the high program standards set by the Department. This could threaten program quality, as a provider could apply to USDE to be an accrediting agency and then approve themselves for accreditation. One major reason for the success of our Pre-K Counts program is our program standards – only the highest quality providers are approved, ensuring state funding pays for top-notch instruction.

I applaud you for bringing this issue before the Committee today. Despite our disagreements with the bill, discussions such as this bring needed attention to early child education. Governor Rendell and the work of this Committee have laid the necessary groundwork during the last eight years. There is more to be done and an early commitment from both candidates for Governor is a win for Pennsylvania's children. I look forward to working with you in the days and weeks ahead.