

PA House of Representatives Education Committee Testimony

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Chairman Roebuck, Chairman Clymer and members of the PA House Education Committee, thank you for the opportunity to testify before you today. It is truly an honor. My name is Kirsten Wolfe. I am the Supervisor of Special Education and Early Childhood Programs at the Smethport Area School District in Smethport, Pennsylvania. Smethport is the county seat for McKean County. We are located in the North Central portion of the state. Our school district is comprised of one campus for grades Pre-K – 12 with enrollment at 953 students.

Smethport is a community rich in historical heritage as well as a beautiful lush rolling landscape that surrounds the borough. In 1822 a dam was build in the center of town to create a millpond and used to power a water-powered sawmill. The start of this began a great heritage of the logging industry for the region. The lake is now named Hamlin Park and offers an excellent fishing or picnicking experience. The first magnetic toys were also invented in Smethport at the Smethport Specialty Company in 1908. The most popular of these is the Woolly Willy magnetic face which gained popularity in the 1950s.

As with any rural communities over the years, Smethport has seen its' explosion of economic growth but is now experiencing many economic hardships. Last year the Ethan Allen plant in Eldred, Pennsylvania closed the doors leaving a significant amount of area residents without employment. Pittsburgh Corning located in Port Allegany, Pennsylvania down sized and left many people without wages. Both the Bradford Regional Medical Center and Charles Cole Memorial Hospital have downsized and reduced staff as well. The logging industry took a plunge leaving loggers and construction businesses with less and less hope of making a fair wage. The percent of adults in Smethport with a college degree or higher is 13.4%. Most of the residents earn a living in and around the community. As you can see, this has become very difficult for many. The most recent data indicates that the median household income in the borough is %34,934.

The school district is the center of the community. Parents are passionate about extra curricular events including sports, and music events. We take great pride in the accomplishments of our students. The staff goes the extra mile to assist students in achievement. This idea of pride and accomplishment begins at an early age and stage for our students. This was most evident at a recent field trip and picnic the Pre-K students took last week. I witnessed many children laughing, smiling, singing, and eating healthy lunches. I also observed parents scuttling around assisting in pushing swings, opening juice containers and interacting with the students. The teachers and para-professionals were interacting and

providing support to students. It was a wonderful sight to see. This also is evident in a classroom visit on a typical Tuesday morning. Students are engaged in learning while staff plan and guide them in reaching crucial milestones.

For the past three years we have been recipients of the Pre-K Counts grant. Since the onset of the grant, parents are able to experience this excitement in learning and development for their children in our elementary building beginning at age 4. We have had and continue to maintain a partnership with the Bradford Area School District in which we are the lead agency. We initially started with 17 funded spots and now are up to 34 funded spots in the two elementary classrooms in Smethport. This increase to two classrooms was a result of the number of students in need of Pre-K services.

Both of the teachers and para-educators we employ receive professional development set forth by OCDEL and are highly qualified. Not only do these teachers and para-educators provide a nurturing environment, they utilize the Pennsylvania State Early Learning Standards in conjunction with a PDE approved pre-school curriculum, The Creative Curriculum. As part of the grant the staff also takes part in and utilizes the Early Childhood Environment Rating Scale. The ECERS gives our teachers and para-educators the ability to rate the effectiveness and the needs of our program. The blending of the revised Early Learning Standards, with the Creative Curriculum and the ECERS provide the structure and instructional focus to enable the staff to plan and implement high quality programming. Along with the instructional focus we are able to conduct partner meetings with Bradford Area School District personnel to plan events, professional development, and problem solve. Our Pre-K Specialist is in constant contact with us in how to implement the instruction, reflect on the ECERS, as well as budgeting our funds to provide the most effective programming.

Our local community lacks resources and services and many families do not get a chance to send their children to a Pre-K program. One of the local churches runs a "pre-school" although there is a long waiting list. The Intermediate Unit 9 runs an Early Intervention program although not all students qualify for this option. With the increased emphasis of inclusionary practices, the Early Intervention programs are seeking ways of being inclusive and working within programs. We are able to provide an inclusive setting with our Pre-K classes to enable Pre-K students with developmental delays the opportunity in attending with non-disabled peers. Head Start is an option for many of the students although it is not a full day program and not available to a wide array of students. Parents in our community have spoken out and need programming to be accessible yet high quality. Families lack the finances to individually support payment for a Pre-K program. Many of our families lack the educational background to prepare their children for kindergarten. It is imperative that we continue to offer this educational opportunity free of charge.

Parents watch the news. The research and data supports early childhood education for students to be successful throughout their school career. I received an overwhelming amount of phone calls and questions before we began advertising for the beginning of enrollment for our Pre-K Counts 2010-2011 classroom sign ups. I was excited at the overwhelming amount of interest and applications that were returned soon after enrollment began. The high quality instruction and reputation our staff and

program exhibit is evident through the inquiries I receive on a daily basis. Through the use of quarterly reporting I am able to capture the parent voice directly to staff at OCDEL of the progress of students. The quarterly reports give us an opportunity to report on many aspects of the progression through out the school year. I have received numerous reports from parents of the progress they see in their children. All of this would not be a reality in our community if it was without the assistance of OCDEL and the Pre-K Counts grant funded programming. Our district would not be able to ensure that parents would be able to, or make a commitment to pay a co-payment for education of their children.

In March, 50 students were brought in for Kindergarten registration. Thirty-three of those students were income eligible for Pre-K Counts and are currently attending our Pre-K Counts classroom. The remaining 16 students registered for Kindergarten were either enrolled in Head Start, Early Intervention, or were non funded Pre-K Counts recipients in our program. This data indicates that we were able to provide programming for 66% of our incoming class of Kindergarten students because they fell below the 300% poverty guideline. It is highly likely that if we began charging co-payments for Pre-K, many parents would choose to keep their children at home or with a relative due to economic reasons. We would see a decline in the readiness of our students which in turn would affect their long term success.

Since the economic crisis has struck our community parents are continuing to struggle and to make up for wages lost. Jobs can be found in a local supermarket, convenience store, or shift work at the local refinery although it takes months, even years to make up for what is lost. One parent called me in distress. Her child would be of age to participate in the Pre-K class. We talked for 5 to 10 minutes about the staff and enrollment process. As the conversation lengthened she began to tell me about their family struggle. She is a local professional and along with her mortgage, car payments, and student loans, she has two other children of school age. Her husband had been employed for many years at Ethan Allen although he lost his job last year and has been on unemployment. Recently he made plans to start attending college at age 44. The devastation this has caused her family has been immense and they struggle to make ends meet. She was ecstatic that her child would be able to attend and was eligible for the program. This family, like many others would not be able to make a co-payment for educational programming.

Since the Pennsylvania Department of Education has reviewed and revised the Early Learning Standards to parallel and align with the Pennsylvania Grade Level Standards, it seems logical to offer free public education to those students, especially students who may be at risk to take advantage of the opportunity to begin the instructional journey. Since 66% of our incoming Kindergarten students were income eligible students, we were able to provide an opportunity for them to prepare for Kindergarten as well as for the district in providing a head start in securing a trajectory toward AYP and student achievement. If these students were not able to take part in a funded program, they may have not attended. Students who fall below the 300% poverty could be at risk for special education services or failure to meet grade level standards. The research on children living in poverty is astounding. If we can continue to reach and teach children living in poverty at an early stage, their potential and outcome for life will be more successful.

I have led the school age re-evaluation meetings for several of our Pre-K students who may need special education services in Kindergarten. I have listened to the teachers and therapists report on the progress students have made from the initial weeks of school and how far skills have progressed. Eight out of this year's Pre-K students entered into Pre-K with an IEP. These students are going to be entering Kindergarten with nothing more than a need for speech/language support or occupational therapy as a related service. This is also a testament to the effectiveness of the instruction and environmental structure of the program.

The Smethport Area School District and community is not much different than other rural communities. Locally, the Galeton Area School District and the Austin Area School District also provide Pre-K programming with the aid of the Pre-K Counts funding. I believe that it is highly likely that parents in those communities would not be accepting of paying a fee for Pre-K. Those two community schools are smaller than our district and are also "feeling" the burden of the economic times. I urge you to support full funding of the Pre-K Counts initiative and to not support a co-payment for services. The research that supports early childhood education is solid as well as the testimonies of parents who are struggling to make ends meet and regain their own economic stability. Consider the median household income as well as the percentage of adults with college degrees in Smethport. The 66% of children that we served this year were possibly at risk of educational failure to meet grade level standards and/or special education services. With the continued support of a fully funded Pre-K program and guidance of OCDEL we are committed to provide and support the growth of students.