

**Testimony Presented to Philadelphia City Council,
Committee on Public Education**

**By Leslie Winder
Chairperson of the Board
Public Citizens for Children and Youth**

**Public Hearing:
The Need for High Quality Early Learning Programs
February 26, 2014**

The impact of high quality early education is undisputed and well described by the previous speakers. In Philadelphia the shortage of high quality early learning options robs our children of the foundation they need to achieve in school and adulthood.

James Heckman, the Nobel-winning economist, found in 2000 that failure to provide low income children high quality early learning programs increases the cost of public education and drives up social welfare, policing and correction costs while it depresses local tax revenues. Suffice to say, our failure to give our children this strong start is simply bad public policy. I've attached a recent *Business Week* article summarizing Dr. Heckman's research.

Last year's report on pre-k by the Accountability Review Council of the School District of Philadelphia found that children who enrolled in the District having attending high quality pre-k were significantly more likely to be prepared for kindergarten than their peers without pre-k or with poorer quality pre-k. Quality matters every bit as much as access.

You can also find the Accountability Review Council's report attached to my testimony.

Instead of spending more of my testimony on the legions of data to prove the benefit of high quality early learning programs, I would like to offer you some suggestions of what you can do to align public policy with research and sound fiscal management of the public's tax dollars.

Here are our top five recommendations:

1. We urge this Committee and every member of City Council to encourage the School District to take a leadership role in growing the pipeline of high quality early learning programs. That does not necessarily mean the District should divert more funds to creating slots in programs, although that of course would be terrific if affordable. But the District can and must convene early learning centers and work with providers to help them increase their instructional quality, to be more inclusive of children with special needs, and to align their early learning activities so children are more prepared for entering the district's kindergarten classrooms. **We urge you to be relentless in asking the District about its plan to improve the early learning options for our children, including efforts to boost the quality of the programs it operates as well as those by external providers.**
2. As powerful as early learning is, it is not a lifetime inoculation against school failure. That same Accountability Review Council study identified that by 3rd grade, social-emotional gains are retained but academic achievement gains fade. To reverse that trend, the school district must focus on how it sustains children's learning gains by improving the support it gives to teachers in its

K-3 classrooms. For this reason we suggest that Council **discuss with the district the possibility of creating a new Office of Early Learning, staffed with an experienced person who knows how to manage and improve large systems. That office could successfully be charged with the responsibility for improving student learning from pre-k to third grade.** A terrific way to demonstrate your support of early learning -- and the need for the district to take this bull by the horns -- is to act swiftly to pass the ordinance to transfer \$120 million from the current sales tax collections to the School District so that the District can afford to do this important work.

3. Last month, four of our region's most respected organizations announced that they had joined forces with other influential organizations across the state to launch the Pre-K for PA campaign. The Campaign is working to make pre-k a defining issue in the 2014 elections for all state offices, including the Governor. The goal is to have every candidate see the political wisdom of adopting a formal campaign commitment of enacting the state policies necessary to ensure access for every 3- and 4-year-old to high quality pre-k. **This City Council can send a powerful message to all candidates by formally endorsing PreK for PA and urging high quality pre-k for Pennsylvania's 3- and 4-year-olds to be a firm commitment from all candidates.** I've attached to my testimony a sample ordinance that, if passed, would put you on record as an early and strong supporter of this effort.
4. City Council acted decisively last year when it passed the first City investment in a grant program to expand early learning programs. Thank you for making this \$500,000 available; it was an important

step in increasing access to high quality early learning. **Today we urge you consider expanding your investment, and doing so in a manner that more specifically ensures public funds are used to grow the share of high quality programs in the city.**

5. In addition to looking to the state to fund the expansion of seats in high quality early learning programs, City Council can take decisive action to augment whatever we can persuade the state to do. In 2012, Mayor Julian Castro of San Antonio Texas persuaded the residents of his city to increase their sales tax by one-eighth of a cent to make high quality Pre-K available to every 4-year-old. San Francisco Mayor Gavin Newsome directed nearly \$12 million from his city's budget to expand early learning programs. Just as the K-12 education system requires dedicated funding from federal, state and local resources, it is both prudent and necessary for the City to be an investor in building the early learning skills of our future workforce. **We urge Council hold a special Committee of the Whole meeting, hosting representatives from other large cities that are investing their local resources in high quality learning programs so we can learn about the sources of their funds and what they've learned about how to ensure these local resources are put to best use.**

It is undisputed that high quality early education is the single most important variable in narrowing the achievement gap and assuring all children succeed in school. Succeeding in school has to build on that good foundation or the achievement gap just gets wider -- and we all pay a very big price later on. While many of our City Councilpersons are deeply aware and concerned about this early learning dilemma, our City has yet to find the will to unite around policies and priorities that will set

us on a path to reverse it for the next generation, the generation born since 2010 on whom our city's future rests. Because these children won't get a second chance, we can start today with a new commitment to them. We believe that these five policies are modest and achievable. Some of them can be achieved next month, and all of them can be implemented this year. They are just the beginning.