

# public citizens for children + youth

Dear Governor-elect Tom Wolf,

Congratulations on your victory! Your campaign was historic in so many ways, some obvious and some less so. Among those less discussed implications of your great campaign was the impact you had on the mindset of Pennsylvanians. As the leading child advocacy organization in southeastern Pennsylvania, Public Citizens for Children and Youth (PCCY) witnessed a new kind of campaign that focused on the benefits that investing now in the next generation can have in the short and long term. Thank you for helping the public understand that investing in children means better lives for adults too and for future generations.

We write today to share a few suggestions for relatively immediate policy changes that can substantially enhance the lives of children in the short term, decrease the burden of safety net expenditures in the medium term and level the playing field for families across the state in the long term.

## **Early Childhood Education**

### **Start by Doubling the Number of Children in High-Quality Pre-K**

Thank you for making pre-K for every three-and four-year-old a priority in your campaign. To demonstrate your commitment to this campaign promise, we urge you to propose in your first budget creating at least 16,000 additional pre-K slots by increasing funding for the state's Pre-K Counts program, Head Start and/or the Child Care Subsidy System for STARS 3 and 4 providers. We have a long way to go to ensure every child has access to these essential school readiness programs, and a strong start in your first year will mean a smarter start for a substantial number of children.



1709 Benjamin Franklin Pkwy  
Sixth Floor  
Philadelphia, PA 19103

215-563-5848 Office  
215-563-9442 Fax  
info@pccy.org Email

@pccyteam  
facebook.com/PCCYPage

[pccy.org](http://pccy.org)

### **Build an Alliance with Legislative Leaders on Both Sides of the Aisle**

To build the legislative will to fully achieve your goals, we urge you to reach out to the leadership of the legislature's Early Childhood Education Caucus while you are preparing your Administration's first budget address and year one legislative agenda. There are many champions in the House and Senate who we hope will be interested in finding common ground on ways to best realize the goal of giving three- and four-year-old children access to high-quality pre-K. As evidence of this point, we recently arranged a reception for Early Childhood Education Caucus members in the southeastern delegations of the House and Senate hosted by David L. Cohen and Comcast. Both Senator Pat Browne and Representative Mark Longietti, the co-chairs of the Caucus, travelled to Philadelphia for this event and were enthusiastic about helping the Pre-K for PA Campaign succeed.

### **Meet with Pre-K for PA**

PCCY is a founding coalition member of the great Pre-K for PA campaign. To help you prepare an internal strategy for meeting your campaign promise, the campaign is planning to share a useful white paper with you in early December describing options for targeting new resources and streamlining state program oversight and operations so that you can reach the goal of enrolling every three- and four-year-old child in pre-K by 2018. We look forward to your agreement to meet with campaign leadership to discuss the white paper. We will also be sharing the same documents with the many members of the Early Childhood Education Caucus. We look forward to your interest and feedback on the white paper.

### **Optimize the \$50 Million in Federal Funds to Boost Early Learning Program Quality**

Your Administration has an enormous opportunity to improve the quality of the early learning system by ensuring the best and most efficient use of the federal \$50 million Race to the Top Early Learning Challenge Grant received in FY 2014. The Commonwealth has five years to put those funds to good use, and we urge you to charge your new Secretary of Education with

developing a plan to use those funds where they will matter most--namely, helping children who start life with the least and giving them the greatest access to high-quality early learning opportunities.

## **K-12 Education**

### **Enact a Fair and Adequate Funding Formula for Distributing State Aid to School Districts**

Thank you also for making investing in public education through a fair, transparent and adequately-funded school funding formula a campaign priority. As you begin the hard work on hammering out a formula, we urge you to ensure that the final formula meets the following principles:

- The formula is structured to respond to the actual cost of education, taking into account the extra costs associated with educating children who are poor, who do not speak English as their first language, or who have other special needs such as children in the foster care or juvenile justice systems.
- The formula is based on an accurate and up-to-date student count and gives school districts predictability with respect to the state share of funds.
- The formula recognizes that some school districts have very substantial cost burdens due to the density of low-income and other special needs students enrolled in their districts.
- The state share of the formula is calibrated to reflect local tax effort by ensuring that low tax effort communities are encouraged to boost funding for their schools and high tax effort communities receive targeted tax relief for limited income households.
- The formula accounts for the impact of charter school enrollment in school districts and ensures that school districts have sufficient resources to support charter and traditional public school enrollment costs.

The legislature created the Basic Education Funding Commission which is focusing on the elements of a funding formula. However, the leadership of the Commission is steadfast in their resistance to examine how much is needed to ensure every child is afforded a high-quality education. We recommend you send the Commission a letter outlining your principles for a formula and the need for a formula that sets the targets for adequacy so that the Commission can arrive at a consensus internally and with your Administration sooner rather than later.

### **Guarantee Restoration of the Education Cuts Made in FY 2011**

If it appears that the adoption of a new school funding formula backed by sufficient state funds cannot be enacted in tandem with your first budget, at a minimum we ask that you ensure that the legislature sends you a budget that restores the cuts imposed on school districts by the Corbett Administration. By restoring the cuts, you can ensure that school districts will receive the level of funding they received in FY2011, when the funding formula enacted in 2008 was last in place. The most significant cuts were made to the Basic Education Subsidy, Accountability Block Grant (that school districts mostly used for pre-K, full-day kindergarten and to keep class sizes at reasonable levels in elementary schools), dual enrollment, and the Educational Assistance Program (that districts use to pay for tutoring for students who are struggling).

### **Stop Direct State Payments to Charter Schools that Operate Outside of their Charter Agreements with School Districts**

In addition to putting a fair and adequate funding formula in place, we urge you to direct the Secretary of Education to immediately reverse the Education Department's recently adopted policy of paying charter schools for enrollment in excess of the number of students permitted in the agreements between a school district and a charter. The state has been making these excess payments directly to charters who are out of compliance with their agreements and

deducting the amount of the payments from the state's subsidy payment to school districts. Obviously this practice flies in the face of local control and makes managing a school district budget impossible.

### **Reduce the Number of Years Students Take Standardized Tests**

Undoubtedly as you campaigned across the state you heard the outcry from parents frustrated by the fact that their kids are subjected to six consecutive years of standardized testing in grades three through eight, which is then followed by end of course tests known as the "Keystone Exams" in a limited number of subjects in high school. There is scant research to suggest that six years of standardized testing is causing student performance to rise or that annual testing is essential to individualizing learning. Although federal law requires six years of testing, growing resistance is causing some parents and school districts to opt out of testing altogether. Instead of permitting individualized action by parents or school districts to define the state's assessment policy, we urge you to enlist a group of experts to make recommendations to you within a six month time frame on how the state could cut back on standardized testing in elementary school by eliminating testing in at least two grades. At the same time, we urge you to examine the potential federal action that could be taken and reach out to federal officials to seek their cooperation in the Commonwealth's effort to ensure a statewide testing system remains in place but is implemented in a way that is making a more meaningful impact on student learning and public accountability.

### **The Health of Our Children Requires Your Attention**

#### **Medicaid Expansion Makes Sense, but Medicaid Provider Networks Must Do a Better Job Serving the Needs of Children**

Your proposal to improve the state's approach to implementing the Affordable Care Act by expanding Medicaid would improve the care that parents receive which, in turn, is proven to result in healthier children. We are fully on board with making this policy change.

With respect to children who are currently enrolled in CHIP and Medicaid, greater attention is needed to ensure that children eligible for Medicaid are enrolled in that program since its benefit package is more robust than services provided under the CHIP program. Further, our research demonstrates that some children are being served by Medicaid managed care organizations that fail to offer reasonable access to the full complement of health care services they need because of under-developed provider networks. We urge a review of these networks and stronger departmental oversight to ensure children in Medicaid can get reasonable access to the health care services they need.

### **The Child Health Insurance Program Must Continue and Continue to Improve**

As the first state to enact a CHIP program, Pennsylvania has a particularly important role to play in ensuring the federal government continues its commitment to this extraordinarily effective program that offers families the ability to purchase health insurance for their children. The U.S. Congress must re-authorize the CHIP statute in 2015, and we urge you to actively make the case for them to do so. The Pennsylvania CHIP program, while robust, can be improved by, at a minimum, aligning the CHIP benefit package to Medicaid so that all children receive the full services they need. Illinois has already done this, and it operates its CHIP and Medicaid programs in a unified platform that affords families the greatest continuity of coverage when their incomes change. Pennsylvania should try to emulate this approach.

### **Insure All Children**

In 2006, the Pennsylvania legislature enacted Cover All Kids which was intended to ensure that every parent could afford to purchase health care for their child(ren). Unfortunately, that legislation included 13 words that bar children whose parents entered this country with them illegally from enrolling in the state's CHIP program. We estimate that as many as 29,000 children in this state are not insured because of this barrier to health care in state law. We have collected dozens of heart-wrenching stories from parents whose children are habitually

ill, have chronic illnesses or are increasingly absent from school because they are sick and their parents cannot afford the out-of-pocket costs of seeing a doctor. We urge you to direct your Insurance Commissioner to prepare a plan for Pennsylvania to replicate the practices in parts of California, Illinois, Massachusetts, Washington State and New York that permit these families to purchase health care for their children through the CHIP program.

### **Make Sure No Child is Hungry**

#### **Remove Bureaucratic Barriers to SNAP Enrollment and Reach out to Families Who Need Help Making Ends Meet**

We are grateful that you have already been outspoken about the need to remove the asset test for the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program. We support this position and would be eager to find other ways the state can expand its SNAP outreach so that families can afford to feed their children. Here, again, other states manage more robust outreach strategies that can be replicated in Pennsylvania and help us ensure that no child goes hungry.

#### **Expand School Breakfast and Lunch Participation**

The federal government also covers nearly all the cost of school breakfast and lunch programs for low-income children. Unfortunately, only half of the students who receive free or reduced-price school lunch also receive school breakfast – even though they are eligible for both meals. Last winter, with the cooperation of the Governor’s Office and the Pennsylvania Department of Education, PCCY and the Greater Philadelphia Coalition Against Hunger ran a statewide “School Breakfast Challenge” to boost the share of students receiving a free or reduced-price breakfast in school. With very little state effort, 1,000 schools participated in the challenge, and as a result, the share of their students starting the day with a school breakfast rose by nearly 30%. Your campaign called for leveling the playing field, and research shows that when children start the day with breakfast, they are more likely to pay attention, learn and engage in school.

With simply more effort to expand school breakfast participation, we can level the playing field for the tens of thousands of children who go to school hungry every day. We urge you to charge the Secretary of Education with creating a plan to boost school breakfast and lunch participation and to propose ways that you can use the power of your office to motivate school officials across the state to join in increasing the share of students who get this essential start-of-the-school-day meal.

Public Citizens for Children and Youth is the only multi-issue child advocacy organization serving the five southeastern counties in the state. I believe that our 30 years of research, advocacy and organizing played an important part in developing a base of voters receptive to the child-friendly ideas you emphasized in your campaign. In the last three decades, nearly every major public policy measure aimed at improving the lives of children in the Commonwealth has been realized when the Governor or champions in the General Assembly sought out our support and we mobilized our base to build the public will necessary for success. We look forward to working with you to help accomplish the great promises you made to the children and families of this state.