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Pittsburgh's pre-K promise

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Give all the city's kids access to high-quality early-childhood education, urges city councilwoman NATALIA RUDIAK

A Pittsburgh child's access to high-quality early-childhood education should not be an accident of birth. It should be available and affordable for all Pittsburgh children.

The biggest hurdles facing our region — from high school dropout rates to violent crime to the rising cost of health care — can be addressed by expanding voluntary, high-quality pre-K education. Investing in children before kindergarten is much more cost-effective than spending tax dollars to address problems later in their lives.

That is why I am proposing what may be the most ambitious economic development project with the

highest return on investment our city has ever seen — a Pittsburgh Promise for preschoolers.

There are approximately 5,700 three- and four-year-olds living in our city. If we want to see our children and our city thrive, we can't wait for Washington or Harrisburg to act. We must work together to give every one of those children access to a free, high-quality preschool education.

Investing in high-quality early education yields higher returns than any other public investment. At-risk children who don't receive a high-quality early-childhood education are 25 percent more likely to drop out of school, 50 percent more likely to be placed in special education, 60 percent more likely to never attend college and 70 percent more likely to be arrested for a violent crime.

According to a recent study by Fight Crime: Invest in Kids, Pennsylvania taxpayers hand over almost $2 billion a year to house, feed and provide 24-hour supervision for state prisoners — more than $35,000 per inmate. We spend only a fraction as much — $340 million annually — on early-childhood education. We do not put prisoners on waiting lists, yet thousands of children are placed on waiting lists each year in Pennsylvania, simply because their families cannot afford high-quality pre-K programs. This is unjust and unacceptable.

I've heard from many of my constituents about the daunting obstacles they face to afford a preschool education for their children.

In Beechview, Michele and her husband struggle to pay down their own student loans, the $7,000 debt from her eldest child's preschool tuition, and monthly preschool fees for her second son, who has autism and requires socialization.

Kara was lucky to find financial assistance so her daughter could attend a great public preschool program, one of her main reasons for staying in the city. Once her husband's income increased slightly, however, they no longer qualified for assistance and were hit with a $600-a-month bill. As Kara said, "$600 a month is a mortgage payment for a lot of houses in the city. I don't know anyone who could afford that."

Christy has a similar story. She bought a house within the feeder pattern of the Bon Air Early Childhood Program Education Center specifically so her daughter could attend school there. Due to budgetary constraints, the center was closed the year her daughter was ready to enroll. Christy applied for Head Start but didn't qualify. The public and private schools she contacted started out at $650 per month for part-time pre-K. Due to the enormous expense, Christy and her husband could not afford preschool for their three-year-old.

As many of my constituents have found, accessing affordable pre-K programs can be a game of chance and circumstance. Some qualify for Head Start, which is funded by the federal and state governments. If your child is disabled, an English-language learner or otherwise at-risk, you also may qualify for aid. Your local school district might cover the cost if you live in the right

ZIP code. Don’t qualify for any of these programs or live on the wrong side of the municipal border? You are on your own. It is clear that this patchwork of programming is not working.

Cities and states across the country, including Boston, San Francisco, Oklahoma, West Virginia and large parts of New Jersey, have opened high-quality preschool to all their children. The Seattle city council is considering a proposal to make voluntary high-quality preschool available and affordable citywide.

According to independent studies, the children participating in these programs are achieving the intended results. A Rutgers University study showed that kids enrolled in New Jersey’s programs showed 30 percent higher gains in vocabulary and 80 percent higher gains in math skills than those who did not participate.

Because of the proven success of quality pre-K programs, I am happy to stand with the Pittsburgh Association for the Education of Young Children and other advocacy organizations across the state to support the Pre-K for PA Campaign. It is time that we raise the awareness of those in or running for office that it makes sense to invest in young children.

Gov. Tom Corbett is asking the state Legislature to provide $10 million more for pre-K programs in Pennsylvania this year. There is no guarantee our state legislators will go for it, but, even if they do, it is not enough. Over the last three years, the Legislature has gutted so-called accountability grants to local school

districts, 75 percent of which went for early childhood programs. To close its widening budget gap, Pittsburgh Public Schools has increased monthly pre-K tuition for middle-class families.

We need to take our city's destiny into our own hands. That's why I propose a Pittsburgh Pre-K Promise to ensure that people in the middle who can neither afford full pre-K tuition nor qualify for supplemental programs can get their children started on the right foot.

To make this proposal a reality in Pittsburgh, a coalition of business, labor, governmental, philanthropic and nonprofit leaders must work together. As we envision the next chapter of our city's prosperity, let's work together on high-quality early-childhood investments that will help all children realize their full potential while providing enormous long-term benefits to society.

Let's educate our children. Let's invest in our future. Let's get to work.

Natalia Rudiak represents Beechview, Bon Air, Brookline, Carrick, Overbrook and part of Mount Washington on Pittsburgh City Council.

This story was originally published with images that are no longer available.