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Pre-K Counts not best for children, families[Print Page](#)

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Published: Thursday, June 26, 2008 4:36 AM EDT

Last year, Gov. Ed Rendell resurrected his failed earlier calls for universal pre-K when his \$75 million Pre-K Counts program was added to the final 2007-08 budget. A year later, the governor is already calling for \$12.6 million more for this new, as of yet unproven, program.

While the goal of gaining preschool coverage is a laudable one, universal pre-K is not the answer. Pre-K Counts is not the best alternative for Pennsylvania children.

Pre-K Counts created a new, costly, one-size-fits-all government-run preschool system that is detrimental to children, families and taxpayers.

Pennsylvania already has an innovative and proven pre-K support system in place, the successful Pre-K Educational Improvement Tax Credit program, which has been providing parents with pre-K options since its enactment in 2003.

What's more, the Pre-K EITC program keeps decision making solely with those who know what's best for their children — parents.

Pre-K Counts cost taxpayers \$75 million this school year to cover 11,100 children. That's \$6,750 per child. In contrast, the Pre-K EITC program has provided about 10,935 scholarships since 2004-05 at a cost of \$15 million. That's \$1,370 per child.

Under the Pre-K Counts program, taxpayers and school district homeowners are responsible for paying the \$75 million per year, to start, to make the program happen. Under the Pre-K EITC system, money for scholarships is donated by businesses all over the state.

Pre-K Counts also limits the choices available to parents when it comes to where they can send their children to pre-K. Pre-K Counts money does not go to families to choose where to send their child to pre-K; it goes to school districts and government-approved schools that would decide how the money is spent.

Under the current Pre-K EITC program, scholarship money is provided to those who need it most and parents have the decision-making authority as to which preschool to choose.

An even more sinister aspect of the Pre-K Counts program is the fact that it would severely limit the types of providers available for parents to send their children to preschool.

Currently in Pennsylvania, the majority of pre-kindergarten providers where parents are sending their children are religiously affiliated. Under the Pre-K Counts program, only non-religious pre-kindergarten providers will be able to participate. Therefore, in order for a pre-K school to participate in the program and receive state funding, it must give up being religious.

Many parents make a conscious decision to seek out a religiously oriented pre-K for the types of education and values these institutions provide children at this very impressionable age.

Pre-K Counts is clearly just the first step down the road to a one-size-fits-all, government-run universal pre-school system. This is just as clearly a road that Pennsylvania taxpayers, families and, most importantly, our children, cannot afford to travel.

(LeFevre is executive director of the REACH Alliance & REACH Foundation.)