Kenney’s pre-K plan bolstered by $15M

By Julia Terruso  
STAFF WRITER

The William Penn Foundation will commit a one-time, $15 million grant to improve and expand quality pre-K facilities in Philadelphia.

The announcement marks the first major philanthropic investment in pre-K since Mayor Kenney announced his goal to make such care accessible to all city 3- and 4-year-olds.

“This means an organization like William Penn is confident that this is the right initiative and we’re the right people to do it,” Kenney said.

The grant is projected to create space for 1,500 preschoolers in quality centers by 2021. Kenney’s goal is 10,000 new quality seats in Philadelphia over the next five years.

“The research is really clear that investing in early childhood education is one of the most productive investments you can make,” said Laura Sparks, executive director at the foundation.

The grant money will go into the Fund for Quality, a See PRE-K on B6

“Pre-K

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local initiative that provides financial and planning assistance to high-quality early childhood centers citywide.

William Penn gave $4.6 million to the fund when it was created in 2014.

Kenney has said part of the goal for universal pre-K is ensuring that children are going to quality facilities, places where they get instruction, not babysitting, with certified teachers in well-kept, resource-rich facilities.

In Philadelphia, only 20 percent of providers are considered “high quality,” based on a state certification program. Only these centers will be eligible for the grant money.

Leslie Spina, executive director of Kinder Academy, opened her Northeast location in a shuttered shoe store last year with help from the Fund for Quality.

“This money allowed insulated floors so infants and young toddlers on the floor all day aren’t on cold floors,” she said. “It paid for sinks and bathrooms in every classroom.”

Pre-K providers like Spina operate on extremely thin margins. “It’s hard to put aside time or money for expansion, and these folks are experts in educating young children, not facility expansion,” said Natalie Renew, managing director for early childhood education at Public Health Management Corp., which operates the Fund for Quality.

Interested providers can apply for help identifying potential sites and appropriate contractors, as well as help navigating city zoning rules.

Anne Gemmell, Kenney’s director of prekindergarten, said she hopes the fact that the grant money is available only to quality providers prompts lower-quality centers to improve.

“It feels like a big vote of confidence,” Gemmell said. “William Penn has said to us, ‘You don’t have to do this alone, here we are.’”

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Kenney has said part of the goal for universal pre-K is ensuring that children are going to quality facilities, places where they get instruction, not babysitting, with certified teachers in well-kept, resource-rich facilities.
Kenney's pre-K pitch gets big boost from $15 million grant

Philadelphia Mayor Jim Kenney's plan to provide free preschool to all city 3- and 4-year-olds lacking access to quality options is getting a major philanthropic boost.

At an event Tuesday afternoon, The William Penn Foundation will announce a $15 million five-year capital grant that will allow quality pre-kindergarten providers to expand physical capacity—paving the way for creation of at least 1,500 new seats in the city by 2021.

That will give tens of thousands of children better opportunities over time and benefit the region economically, said board chairwoman Janet Haas.

"Clearly the city needs all its citizens to be functioning at their very best potential, and early childhood education is an important ingredient in that," she said in a telephone interview.

A recent study of the Philadelphia area found that providers have little fiscal incentive to provide top-tier early childhood education.

This grant aims to combat that phenomenon by rewarding operators with a quality track record. Funds will be available only to pre-K operators with a 3 or 4 rating on the state's Keystone Stars metric.
The Kenney administration lauded the announcement.

"My administration is committed to increasing quality pre-K opportunities, but we certainly cannot do it alone," said Kenney in a statement. "Business and philanthropic participation is critical to the success of this effort."

Kenney’s pre-k chief AnneGemmel said the grant will allow providers to upgrade classrooms and build new facilities when they otherwise couldn’t.

"It’s like manna from heaven for these providers, because they do not have the profit margins or the credit to borrow these kinds of sums on their own,” said Gemmell. "It’s really an incredible boon for the providers that can access them."

Kenney says $60 million in recurring revenue is still needed to cover pre-K tuition for the 16,000 3- and 4-year-olds in the city who lack access to quality early learning options.

Kenney has pledged to erode that number entirely by the end of his first term, and aims to bring 4,000 new quality seats online each year.

Last week, Kenney proposed a 3 cents per-ounce tax on sugary drinks to pay for this and other priorities.

The cash in this grant will be directed to the Fund for Quality — a project jointly managed by the Reinvestment Fund and the Publi Health Management Corporation — which began in 2014 with a $4.6 million grant from William Penn.

Those initial funds are credited with supporting the expansion of 17 early learning centers that added 630 quality pre-K seats — 90 percent of which are occupied by children of low-income families.

In addition to the $15 million, the Reinvestment Fund has committed up to $7.6 million in loan capital at below-market rates in order to help providers complete particularly large infrastructure projects.

Faas hopes the grant will inspire other philanthropies and businesses to chip in for a cause that has risen to the forefront of education advocacy in recent years.

"We are wanting to seize that momentum, because we do think that this is achievable — as ambitious as it is," she said. "We have been at this for a long time, but we know that with additional partners — including, importantly, the city and mayor Kenney — we’ll be able to bring this about much more quickly."
The William Penn Foundation announced a $15 million grant to support the expansion of high-quality early education for low-income families in Philly.

Mayor Jim Kenney just got a significant boost in his ongoing push for universal pre-K in Philadelphia. The William Penn Foundation announced Tuesday that it will provide a $15 million grant through the Fund for Quality to help expand ed in 2014 to expand high-quality early education.

Just 10 weeks into his first term as mayor, Kenney has made universal pre-K a central focus of his administration. He is pushing to pass a new tax on sugary drinks to help fund universal pre-K, and has set up a website for parents and pre-K providers to get involved with the city’s efforts.

Kenney set a goal of raising $256 million with a mix of state and federal funding to give an additional 25,000 kids pre-K education over the next five years during his first budget speech last week. Right now Kenney is working to create 5,500 new, locally funded and quality places at pre-K programs.

He’s also received support from the private
$256M KENNEY'S FUND-RAISING GOAL FOR THE PROGRAM

free pre-kindergarten early education services to low-income Philly families.

“This investment helps providers enhance facilities, enroll more students, and grow businesses,” Kenney said in a statement. “My administration is committed to increasing quality pre-K opportunities, but we certainly cannot do it alone. Business and philanthropic participation is critical to the success of this effort.”

The announcement took place at Rising Stars APM Preschool Center in Kensington, an early childhood education center that has received support from the Fund for Quality, which was founded.

business community. Comcast senior executive VP David Cohen, former chief of staff to former Mayor Ed Rendell, wrote an op-ed last week urging the local business community to step up to help provide funding.

“Pre-K is not an option — it’s a critical equalizer,” Cohen wrote in his Feb. 29 op-ed. “Neuroscientists attest that 80 to 90 percent of a child’s brain is developed in the first five years of life. Early education can enable our most vulnerable children to break the cycle of poverty by capitalizing on the tremendous learning potential of 3- and 4-year-olds during this critical time in their development.”

“Business and philanthropic participation is critical to the success of this effort.”

Kenney, on private financial support of universal pre-K
Early-Education Measures Percolating at State, Local Levels

Pre-K upgrades, funding among proposals on tap

By Christina A. Samuels

Philadelphia Mayor Jim Kenney has a sweet tooth to boost early-childhood education in his city-strengthing.

In his first budget address, the freshman mayor proposed a 3 cents-per-ounce tax on sugary drinks that he says would generate $400 million over the next five years, more than half of which would be allotted to universal-prekindergarten in the city.

"There is simply nowhere else to find this revenue. We all know we can't raise property taxes again," said Kenney in his March 3 address.

Philadelphia's proposal to expand prekindergarten is just one of several ideas percolating among city and state leaders around the country during this legislative year. According to the National Conference of State Legislatures, about 450 bills with some tie to early childhood are pending in 46 states.

At this early stage, it's unclear how many of those proposals will be enacted into law. But if local and state lawmakers follow the trend of previous years, many bills will be seen increased early-childhood investments.

Rise in Spending

In an event released in January, the Education Commission of the States, which tracks state policy, found that state funding for preschool programs increased by $755 million between fiscal 2014 and 2016, for a total of nearly $7 billion. An increase seen in 32 states and in the District of Columbia. The state increases in funding also appeared to be bipartisan, with 25 states that have Republican governors and 10 with Democratic governors allocating more money to early-childhood education for fiscal 2016.

"No one has the funding level been going up every year, but we're seeing additional states every year who were not funding pre-K at the state level starting to do that," said Emily Workman, an analyst with the commission who co-authored the report. The number of states that do not provide any state funds for preschool now stands at just five: Idaho, Montana, New Hampshire, South Dakota, and Wyoming.

Bipartisanship is on display in Minnesota, where Republican and Democratic lawmakers last week proposed the "A Better Chance," or ABC Act, which would expand access to prekindergarten scholarships that low-income children could use at public or private programs. It would also fully fund the state's quality-rating system, which ranks early-childhood programs, and home-visiting programs.

In 2016, the National Institute for Early Education Research said that Minnesota ranked last in terms of access for 4-year-olds among the states that paid for preschool programs. Democratic Gov. Mark Dayton is planning to make early childhood a priority again this legislative year and is eying the state's $900 million budget surplus to help pay for it.

Nonprofit Approach

Program expansion: Prescriptions for the to make the state's pending in the House would require the state to offer other options to help families meet the cost of care.

The continued focus on early-childhood education nationwide is gratifying, said Laura Sparks, "Cities and states are realizing if they want to invest in our future, this is one of the most effective and efficient ways to do it..."