

The City of Philadelphia's new pre-K program, PHLpreK, launched less than a year ago and it's already providing significant educational and economic benefits for our city. Most notably, it's taken nearly 2,800 three-and four-year-olds from the couch to the classroom. These children are now able to participate in quality early education that their families otherwise couldn't afford or access.

I run a pre-K program in West Philadelphia, in Pennsylvania's 7th Senatorial District. I've had the great fortune of preparing students for kindergarten for the last 26 years. I am now one of 86 participating PHLpreK providers providing quality early education because of the Philadelphia Beverage Tax, and can personally attest to the positive impact that PHLpreK is having on small, women and minority owned businesses like mine. Because of the 90 seats we were awarded, I've hired eight new teachers so far and increased hourly wages for all my educators and support staff.

I have seen for myself how investments in children have a ripple effect on the local economy and growth of other industries. As the center has grown to serve more children, I've also hired more drivers and custodial staff, and now spend more on rent and at our local grocery store.

Another benefit of PHLpreK is that unemployed and underemployed parents are now able to focus on seeking full-time employment or enrolling in continuing education programs. More opportunities arise for parents when they have access to reliable, quality child care programs in their neighborhood. As a result, the overall dependency on public assistance will decrease in the long run. I know at least one mother who has landed a new job since her son enrolled at my center.

Philadelphia is known for its staggering deep poverty, but far too many families can also be categorized as "working poor." These families often do not qualify for federal or state subsidized pre-K which means they either forego preschool altogether or opt for lower quality options that may not even adequately prepare their children for kindergarten. Because PHLpreK is open to all families, regardless of income level or employment status, children from low and middle income families are not excluded from quality early learning because of their family's household income.

This massive citywide pre-K investment is funded by the newly implemented sweetened beverage tax. Some argue that the tax disproportionately impacts low-income families more than other economic groups, but from my vantage point the benefits for low-income families and people of color far outweigh the cost. We must shift our perspective and view the extra pennies as a small donation towards a better future for our great city. Manufacturers, distributors, and retailers should see this tax as an investment back into the communities they already profit from.

Finally, it is contradictory for legislators who oppose the beverage tax to also be in favor of quality early childhood education. Historical efforts to break the cycle of poverty through education have been met with big business or big government resistance. To repeal this tax would be a blatant attack on the pursuit of high-quality education for inner city children. Philadelphia families want, and deserve, more than TV for their kids. How, in good conscience, can anyone choose profits over progress?

Dr. Stacy Gill-Phillips
PHLpreK provider
Philadelphia, PA