



12th Legislative District • Spring 2014

## New Caucus Finding Solutions for At-Risk Children

**A**t-risk children are those who face obstacles to success in life due to problems such as family separation, domestic violence, an incarcerated parent, poverty, or abuse. I have helped form a legislative caucus to find ways to address the behavioral problems, delinquency, truancy and dropout that are common among at-risk children, often leading to more serious problems and criminal behavior later in life. Many years of research has shown that early childhood education and evidence-based, early intervention programs improve children's lives. Every child's future is important to all of society, and we need to do all we can to change the course for troubled children who are helpless to change their own circumstances.



*March 3, 2014—Senator Greenleaf discussed the At-Risk Children and Families Caucus at a meeting with the Bucks County Network of Victims Assistance (NOVA).*

### Cost-Savings and Crime Prevention

**A**ccording to the Pennsylvania Commission on Crime and Delinquency (PCCD), an investment of only \$2.7 million for delinquency prevention programs for 5,300 juveniles results in \$11.1 million in benefits with a reduction in delinquency, drug use, and anti-social behavior. If we were to place a value on a life of crime, it is estimated that society pays \$1.3 – 1.5 million, versus the value of saving a child from a life of crime, which produces a value of \$1.7 – 2.3 million. For each dollar spent on prevention, we save approximately \$4 in future costs.

**4:1 Ratio:**  
**For every \$1 spent, there is a \$4 savings.**

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# A Changing Course in Criminal Justice

As we work to reduce the inmate population of our overcrowded prisons, we are leading the legislature to focus on prevention, not only remedial punishment. Helping at-risk children is the most effective prevention initiative we can hope to achieve. Providing high quality early education for all children and working with those in high risk situations is, in fact, crime prevention.

While early education and intervention programs are essential for young children, we have also changed the corrections model for juveniles already in the system. Nonviolent juvenile offenders are still considered at-risk children. In recent years, an underlying philosophy has been at work to use the least restrictive punishments, focus on rehabilitation and other evidence-based intervention programs, and avoid confinement whenever possible. As a re-

sult, since 2006, seven Pennsylvania counties have closed their juvenile detention centers. In 2011, I introduced legislation that was signed into law that now mandates the use of best practices, least restrictive punishments, and the use of confinement as a last resort. Reaching children early by providing high quality early education, early intervention, or rehabilitation for juvenile offenders is working to reduce serious crime and future costs to society.

## Early Childhood Education Programs

Early learning programs are proven to reduce dependency on public assistance, drug use, and involvement in the criminal justice system. They also increase high school graduation rates and college attendance. Many behavioral and learning problems can be identified early in a child's life and addressed before they have long-term consequences. The Pew Research Center reports that the number one predictor of behavioral problems is if a child cannot read by the third grade.

A landmark study of the High/Scope Perry Preschool Program in Chicago tracked two groups of at-risk 3 and 4 year olds throughout their lives. By age 40, those who participated in the program were almost twice as likely to have earned an Associate's degree than those who did not participate. By age 27, the children who did not participate were five times more likely to be chronic law breakers.

Early learning programs are working in Pennsylvania, but they are underutilized and underfunded. The state's cur-

rent annual investment of \$5,680 per child is below the \$7,467 the National Institute for Early Education Research says is needed to provide a high-quality program. The cost is nominal compared to the \$38,700 per year to house an inmate. The total costs involved when a troubled child grows up and drops out of school, uses drugs, and becomes a career criminal averages at least \$2.5 million per individual.

It is estimated that one quarter of Pennsylvania's \$1.9 billion corrections budget could be cut if early learning programs were fully funded for at-risk kids—a savings of \$490 million per year.

In 2013, just 18 percent – or almost 53,000 of the Commonwealth's nearly 297,000 3 and 4 year olds – were able to benefit from high-quality, publicly-funded pre-k. This leaves nearly a quarter million children, who are only three and four once, out of the social, emotional, and cognitive benefits that lay the foundation for a lifetime of success.

*Senator Greenleaf and Montgomery County District Attorney, Risa Ferman, visit a Head Start Program in Ambler, PA*



## Success so Far:

After implementing evidence-based prevention programs, York County was able to reduce the number of children in its welfare system from 611 in 2007 to 250 in 2010. They saved \$10 million in 18 months. Their success is attributed to an approach that brings together families, schools, and the community. They focused on reducing out of home placements for children by working with family members to regain stability. York also implemented a truancy prevention initiative in which students are monitored in schools and at home to ensure they are attending classes.

Since 1998, Pennsylvania has had a Violence Prevention Grant Program to assist communities in developing methods to prevent youth delinquency, violence, and substance abuse.

*May 21, 2014 - Senator Greenleaf met with Geoffrey Canada, (second from right) CEO of the Harlem Children's Zone in New York City. Mr. Canada has been responsible for implementing early learning and intervention programs that have transformed Harlem and changed the course for many at-risk children.*

**In 2013, Violence Prevention Programs improved the lives of 19,520 youth and 827 parents and guardians**

### THE OUTCOMES:

- 50% increase in school performance
- 48% reduction in anti-social behavior
- 63% increase in family cooperation
- 19% reduction in aggressive behavior

