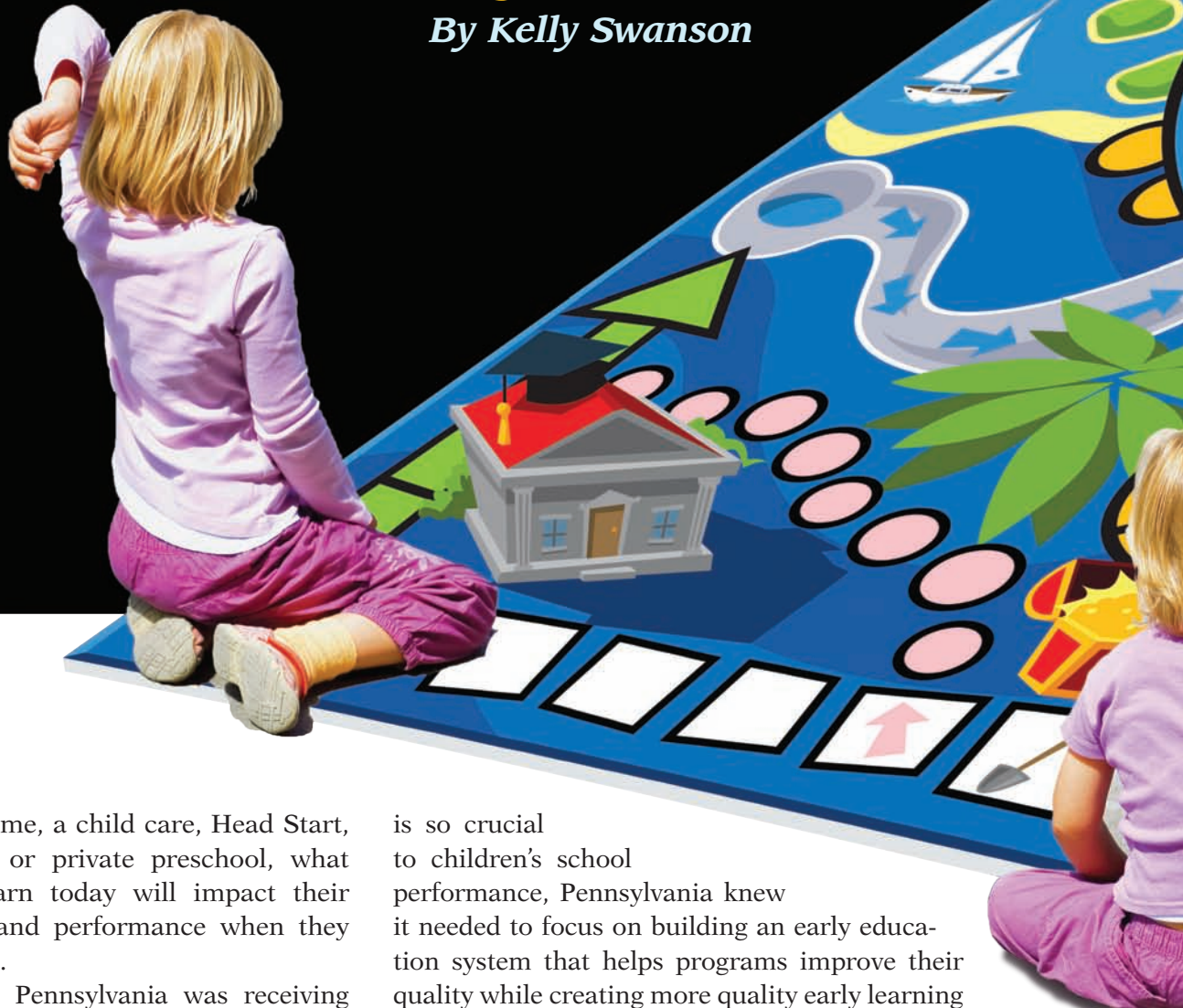


The early childhood education landscape in Pennsylvania

By Kelly Swanson



Whether in the home, a child care, Head Start, school classroom or private preschool, what these children learn today will impact their school readiness and performance when they enter kindergarten.

A decade ago, Pennsylvania was receiving failing grades for its early education programs. At that time, Pennsylvania was one of only nine states that did not offer any publicly funded pre-kindergarten and had experienced a 10-year decline in the quality of child care. Because early learning

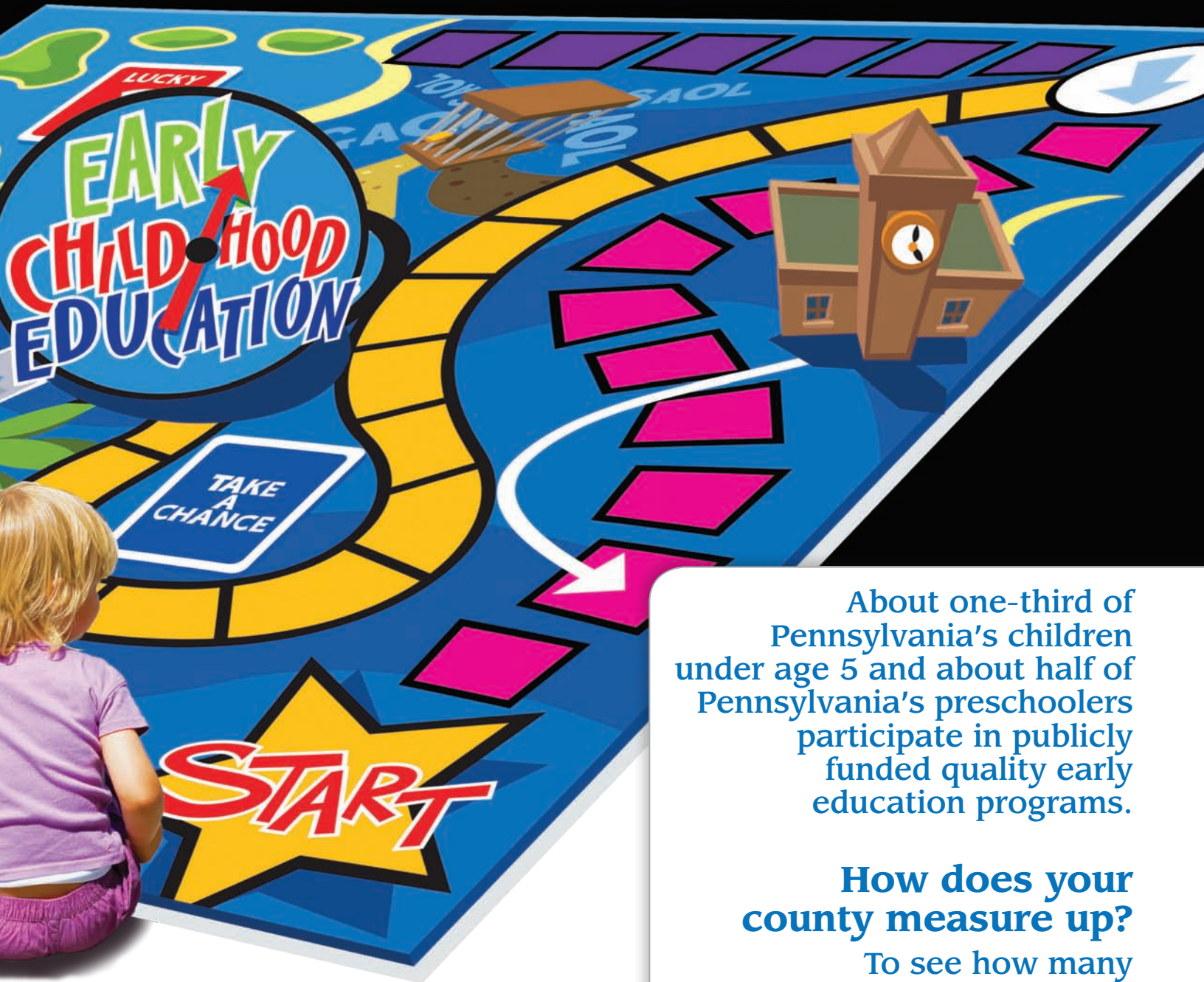
is so crucial to children's school performance, Pennsylvania knew it needed to focus on building an early education system that helps programs improve their quality while creating more quality early learning opportunities for families.

Pennsylvania's early education programs are administered through the Office of Child Development and Early Learning (OCDEL). Created in 2007, OCDEL spans the Departments of Educa-

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More than 536,000 children under age 5 participate in early learning programs in Pennsylvania each year.



About one-third of Pennsylvania's children under age 5 and about half of Pennsylvania's preschoolers participate in publicly funded quality early education programs.

How does your county measure up?

To see how many children participate in your county, visit www.papromiseforchildren.com and click on "Early Education in My County."



tion and Public Welfare. By combining all early childhood education programs in one department, the commonwealth has been able to maximize resources and expertise as well as align quality and accountability of programs from birth through kindergarten. As a result, families experience more consistency and smoother transitions between programs. School districts can also experience more consistency among early learning programs and opportunities to partner in pre-k transition plans and teacher continuing education programs.

Although Pennsylvania offers about a dozen early learning options for children from birth through school-age, there are common elements across the continuum to ensure quality, accountability and results.

- **Research-based standards and practices.**

Requirements for teacher quality, program quality, curriculum, observation and assessment are designed to reflect evidence-based best practices.

- **Pennsylvania's Learning Standards for Early Childhood.** All OCDEL programs use the Learning Standards for Early Childhood to guide instructional practice. Pennsylvania's Learning Standards for Early Childhood for Infant-Toddler, Pre-Kindergarten, Kindergarten, First and Second Grade outline the approaches to learning, (emerging) literacy and numeracy, science and social studies, creative expression, social, and physical skills that a child develops throughout the course of the year and provides guidance for activities to support this development in the classroom and at home. Pennsylvania's early learning standards are aligned with the commonwealth's Third-Twelfth Grade academic standards and included in the Standards Aligned System Companion documents for families.

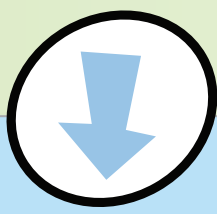
- **Professional career track for early childhood teachers.** Teacher education and experience is a key factor in providing a quality early learning experience, yet in child care settings, teacher compensation (and therefore education level) is typically very low. New teacher education requirements coming into effect in 2010-13 have spurred an increased need for early edu-

cation professionals to earn credentials, college degrees and teacher certification. To meet this need, Pennsylvania created the Early Learning Career Lattice, established three professional credentials for early childhood teachers and directors, and provides financial aid for teachers to earn credentials and college degrees while continuing to work.

- **Monitoring of classroom quality.** Since 2002, Pennsylvania has implemented the nationally recognized Environment Rating Scales (ERS) as a standard tool to assess the quality of instruction in Keystone STARS, Head Start Supplemental Assistance Program and Pennsylvania Pre-K Counts programs. The ERS scales rate elements that promote children's learning, such as the classroom design; quality of interactions between teachers, parents and children; and how the program promotes acceptance of diversity. Independent ERS assessors visit classrooms in child care programs, Head Start programs, licensed nursery schools and pre-kindergarten classrooms in public schools.

- **Child observation, assessment and documentation of progress.** In building its early education system, Pennsylvania wanted to be able to document children's progress through kindergarten and beyond. In 2007, Pennsylvania began developing the Early Learning Network (ELN), a comprehensive system coordinating outcomes from OCDEL programs for children from birth until they enter kindergarten. The vision is to link information about children's participation in, and outcomes from, their early learning programs to their school-age participation and outcomes, such as PSSA scores. For example, children whose data is entered into the ELN are assigned the PA Secure-ID they will use throughout their public school careers.

- **Linkages with public schools.** Early learning programs are encouraged and supported to partner with their local school districts to better prepare for and create a smoother transition to kindergarten. Opportunities include transition activities that support family involvement,



Pennsylvania invests in a number of programs, serving more than 300,000 of Pennsylvania's children and families:

- ***Child Care Certification***
- ***Child Care Works***
- ***Children's Trust Fund***
- ***Early Intervention***
- ***Full-Day Kindergarten***
- ***Head Start Supplemental Assistance Program***
- ***Keystone Babies***
- ***Keystone STARS***
- ***Parent-Child Home Program***
- ***Pennsylvania Pre-K Counts***
- ***Nurse-Family Partnership***

aligning curriculum and kindergarten readiness expectations, joint professional development opportunities for teachers, and shared community events.

Here are brief profiles of the primary publicly funded¹ early education programs that serve preschoolers in Pennsylvania. To find more information on eligibility, services and where programs are located, visit the Pennsylvania's Promise for Children website, <http://paprom.convio.net/programs>.

- **Early Intervention.** For children from birth to age 5 who have disabilities/developmental delays, Early Intervention provides services to help promote their development so they are successful in any early education setting. Services may include parent education, developmental therapies and other support services. Families can call the CONNECT Helpline at (800) 692-7288 to receive screenings and services. In 2009-10, approximately 33,000 infants and toddlers and 48,300 preschoolers were served.

- **Head Start.** Head Start provides comprehensive early learning and family support services to young children living in poverty. The comprehensive approach of Head Start addresses the nutrition, health and early learning of the child while helping parents become more engaged in their child's development. In 2004, Pennsylvania made it possible for more children to participate through the Head Start Supplemental Assistance Program. In 2009-10, approximately 36,860 children participated in Head Start in Pennsylvania, with 5,600 children through the state-funded Head Start Supplemental.

- **Keystone STARS.** Begun as a pilot program in 2002, Keystone STARS/Early Learning Keys to Quality supports child and school-age care, Pennsylvania Pre-K Counts and Head Start programs that are committed to continuous quality improvement. Programs participating in this voluntary program may enter at the Start with STARS level and earn a STAR 1-STAR 4 rating by meeting research-based standards for staff qualifications, learning environments, family and community partnerships, and management. In 2009-10, Keystone STARS provided quality early learning experiences to more than 165,000 children in nearly 4,500 child care centers, group and family child care homes. A listing of Keystone STARS programs by county and zip code is available on the PA Early Learning Keys to Quality website.

- **Pennsylvania Pre-K Counts.** Now in its fourth year, Pennsylvania Pre-K Counts provides high quality pre-kindergarten to 3- and 4-year-olds at no cost to families. PA Pre-K Counts is targeted to children at risk of



Three out of four preschoolers in high quality Head Start Supplemental, Keystone STARS 3 and 4, and PA Pre-K Counts programs ended the 2009-10 school year with age-appropriate literacy and math skills.

Source: Office of Child Development and Early Learning 2009-10 Annual Report



school failure, either because of income, language (English is not the first language), or special needs. PA Pre-K Counts programs are in school districts, Head Start, Keystone STAR 3 and 4 programs, and licensed nursery schools. In 2009-10, approximately 11,800 children in 402 school districts participated in the program. School districts interested in partnering with and/or applying for Pennsylvania Pre-K Counts can visit the Department of Education website for a listing of current grantees and the program guidance.

- **PA-PACT.** Using PA-PACT funds, school districts are able to support early learning in the following ways: 1) establish, maintain or expand pre-kindergarten; 2) establish, maintain or expand full-day kindergarten; or 3) reduce class size in kindergarten through third grade to 17 or fewer students/classroom. In 2009-10, 3,554 children in 33 school districts were enrolled in pre-kindergarten programs through PA-PACT funds.

Useful Links:

- Visit <http://paprom.convio.net/build> to sign up for OCDEL's biweekly Build Early Childhood Education E-News.
- Pennsylvania Department of Education, (click on Office of Child Development and Early Learning), www.education.state.pa.us.
- Pennsylvania Department of Public Welfare, www.dpw.state.pa.us, click on "For Children" and "Child Care and Early Learning."
- Early Childhood-related SAS Resources and Information, www.pdesas.org/ocdel, OCDEL's Standards Aligned System (SAS) web portal, includes resources for standards, curriculum, and assessment for teachers and education professionals.
- Pennsylvania Early Learning Keys to Quality, www.pakeys.org, provides information on Career Development and access to Higher Education for early learning professionals.
- Pennsylvania's Promise for Children, www.papromiseforchildren.com, provides easy to understand information on why quality early education is important and Pennsylvania's early education programs. **b**

Footnote

¹In addition to OCDEL's programs, there are private academic preschools licensed by the Department of Education, nonpublic non-licensed preschools and child care programs certified by/registered with the Department of Public Welfare that do not participate in OCDEL programs.