City Officials Press the Case for Early Education

By Wilford Shamlin III | June 10, 2016

Leading up to a consideration in City Council this week of Mayor Jim Kenney’s proposal for a sugary drink tax, city officials made their case at community meetings.

Kenney attended a community meeting recently in Germantown and his three top education officials spoke at a quarterly meeting of the Philadelphia Adult Literacy Alliance. The message across the board has been the same.

“Right now, 1 in 2 students arrive to their first day of kindergarten already behind their peers,” said Anne Gemmell, director of universal pre-kindergarten in the mayor’s Office on Education. “As a city we can either invest now or pay a lot more later.”

Gemmell said quality preschool programs were key for helping children learn literacy and other crucial skills that would help them achieve academic and career success in the job market.

During his 2015 election campaign, Kenney pledged to roll out universal pre-kindergarten programs and fleshed out plans to create 25 new community schools during his four-year term. His proposal to raise revenue for those education initiatives through a new tax on sugary beverages has run into strong opposition from retailers, consumer advocates and local unions.

His education office has been tasked with building support from the education community, reaching out to pre-kindergarten teachers, parents, owners and administrators of more than 100 early education providers. The effort has also included talks on the mayor’s vision for increasing up to 10,000 quality publicly-funded prekindergarten seats, according to Deana Gamble, spokesperson for the mayor’s office on education.

“Public input about pre-K is critical,” Kenney said. “My administration is committed to increasing access to quality pre-K, but we certainly can’t do it alone. We need the knowledge of experienced practitioners who do this work every day in order for this initiative to succeed.”

Following a recent meeting attended by the mayor, Khadijah Sabir, who helped showcased an early education center in West Oak Lane, said, “We are excited to have a mayor recognize the importance of quality early childhood education and we’re going to support him any way that we can.”

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Gemmell and Susan Gobreski, director of Community Schools, and their boss, Otis Hackney, the city’s chief education officer, recently spoke about the importance of community support for the city’s education agenda at the Philadelphia Adult Literacy Alliance.

In March, the mayor’s office on education began hammering out the process for designating community school status. Gobreski announced a tentative $4 million budget plan at a press conference at the time. City officials have indicated five to seven schools would win community school status, which would allow additional funding and resources to be leveraged into programs and services geared to meet the needs of the local community.

Gobreski has said a community school coordinator would be named to oversee the designated community schools, which would then tap community resources to provide customized services, such as in-school health services, financial literacy programs for parents and after-school and enhanced learning programs.

“We will engage important providers, like adult educators, and build relationships in order to meet the needs of diverse neighborhoods,” Gobreski said.

A planning process would start in the fall to identify the school’s strengths, prioritizing its needs and creating an action plan. The clamor for better schools has slowly started to emerge after a funding crisis, with the support of parents, school staff and community organizations.