



## City's pre-K chief leaves job

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As Philadelphia's pre-K program readies to launch in classrooms across the city this January, its director will shift from working for kids to parents.

Anne Gemmell, director of pre-K in the mayor's Office of Education, left the post this month to take a job in the Office of Adult Learning as director of family literacy.

Gemmell, appointed by Mayor Kenney in December to the newly created post, is an advocate for early childhood education. Kenney has credited her with drawing his attention to the importance of pre-K

"It's bittersweet. I'm really proud of how far I've taken early education along with so many others and gotten pre-K to such a great place, but I'm not sad," Gemmell said. "I'm confident it's in really good hands and excited to be focused on this new project that will focus on parents."

Gemmell said the decision to move was partly hers, partly the administration's.

"I recognized early on in the pre-K phase that working on pre-K for three years - the longest I've worked on a particular issue in a long time - I was ready for a new project," she said.

Mary Strasser, former deputy director of pre-K, will serve as acting director while the administration conducts a national search to find a full-time replacement.

Strasser, a Philadelphia native, retired from her position as director of Americorps Vista in Washington and returned to Philadelphia to help with the pre-K program.

Kenney's plan aims to put 6,500 more 3- and 4-year-olds into quality prekindergarten classrooms over the next three years.

Quality is defined by instruction depth, facility conditions, and teaching credentials of the staff.

The program will cost about \$60 million a year.

Despite a looming legal battle over the sweetened-drink tax, which was passed in June to fund pre-K, the program is well on its way. City officials say it will move forward even if a judge rules the tax unlawful.

Last month, the city hired two organizations to manage contracts and help the providers - many of them small, women-owned businesses - expand.

Eighty-five prequalified providers were selected for the first round of 2,000 new seats. The Public Health Management Corp., which is managing the contracts, is in the process of confirming that each pre-K center has the necessary city and state licenses and meets other health and safety criteria.

Approved providers will sign contracts by the end of November, with school set to start Jan 4.

About 300 people have enrolled through the city, which is still accepting applications.

Strasser said a major focus of hers is making

sure the highest-need families know about the program.

“We want to reach out to families who can most benefit, foster kids, kids in homeless shelters - those are target populations that we don’t want to overlook,” Strasser said.

Gemmell in her new role will focus on adult literacy and getting parents involved in programs including the pre-K and community schools initiatives.

“I’ll be listening to communities of parents about what they want to change in their neighborhood, what they want to build,” she said. “Sort of educating folks about how to empower themselves.” ■