



PRE-K OUR WAY

Prepared for school, ready for success.

**Brian Maher
State Senate Testimony
State Senate Education Committee
September 21, 2015**

I want to thank the committee for having this hearing on expanding pre-k educational programs to more children in New Jersey.

People are always asking me, “How did a guy who spent his whole career in the Marine Terminal Business in Port Elizabeth become interested in early education?”

The answer is that, like many people, I am concerned about the growing income disparity, the shrinking middle class, and the lack of opportunity for upward mobility for financially disadvantaged and working class people. I also share the concerns of businesses that the future workforce will not have the skills necessary to fill the needed jobs.

While there is disagreement as to the causes of the current situation—and certainly disagreement as to the economic and fiscal policies necessary to improve it— most people agree that a strong education system in New Jersey is an essential ingredient of any solution.

While I was the Chairman and CEO of Maher Terminals in Port Elizabeth, we invested in educational programs that provided young people, particularly disadvantaged youth, with enhanced educational opportunities.

After selling my company in 2007, I resolved to try to use my good fortune to address the growing economic inequality and decided that education was the best way to have a significant long-term impact. As I researched what works in education, it became clear that high-quality preschool education programs were a proven way to improve educational performance throughout a person’s educational career and thus enable children to have much improved opportunities for success in high school, college and life.

My first direct investment was to partner with the Ironbound Community Corporation in Newark to build an integrated, high-quality 0 – 5 early education center. I provided the capital funding; the program is owned and operated by the Ironbound Community Corporation. Using Early Head Start and the pre-k 3- and 4-year-old program funded by the state, this center now demonstrates the power of early education in preparing our youngest citizens for success in school and life.

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The lessons learned at the ICC Early Learning Center led me, along with many others, to undertake an effort to make 3- and 4-year-old preschool programs available to more children. Former Governors Tom Kean and Jim Florio—along with other civic and business leaders—have come together to create a non-profit advocacy effort to expand these existing high-quality preschool programs across the state. This effort, Pre-K Our Way, is working with communities and you to build support for this expansion. You can learn more about Pre-K Our Way at www.prekourway.org.

Luckily we do not have to invent a new pre-k program. We already have it. My colleagues, Dr. Steve Barnett and Ceil Zalkind have shared the success of the New Jersey program. Particularly compelling is that New Jersey has developed a proven model that is the envy of the rest of the nation.

However, New Jersey's leadership in providing high-quality pre-k programs is limited to only a select number of districts. Thousands of children are missing out on high-quality preschool simply because of their ZIP code.

The legislature recognized this deficiency by passing a 2008 law designed to expand the program to approximately 90 additional school districts. It was never funded or implemented.

This is not a Democratic or Republican issue. Pre-k is supported by members of both political parties in New Jersey and across the nation in so-called red and blue states such as Georgia, Alabama, Oklahoma, Pennsylvania and North Carolina. Even during the most difficult economic times in recent memory, states across the nation are investing in expanding pre-k because they have determined that it is critical to their future economic and social well-being. The leaders of these states are saying what our former Governor, Tom Kean says: "This is what works. If there is anything that you felt is a magic bullet, it is pre-k education."

I am not talking about expanding child care or day care. I am talking about expanding the high-quality pre-k program that already exists in New Jersey. A program that has proven to produce better education outcomes. Public Education at all levels is an investment—the educators and all the research say it should start at age 3 not age 5. I submit to you that anyone who has spent any significant time with young children knows that they are learning and absorbing at an incredible rate long before they reach age 5. My personal experience with my own 5 grandchildren has provided me with a front row seat to watch their development at a very early age. Every child is born with that promise—the question is whether New Jersey will make good on its promise to help more 3- and 4-year-olds reach their full potential.

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Do we have the will to step up and finish the job by implementing and funding the law that is already on the books?

Will we offer to children and families across this state the opportunity to be prepared for school and ready for success?

We believe now is the time to say Yes and take action to expand pre-k in New Jersey.