

THE DOROTHY RIDER POOL

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Leonard Parker and Dorothy Rider Pool were generous and dedicated civic leaders who left their fortunes to advance health and quality of life in the Lehigh Valley. I have the privilege to serve as executive director of two philanthropic organizations established by the couple: The Rider-Pool Foundation and The Dorothy Rider Pool Health Care Trust. The Trustees of these charitable organizations utilize the limited resources to enable a positive impact in our communities. A theme common to both organizations is the health, well-being and education of our most precious resources: the families and children of the region. Through our work we have learned that health, wellness and education are very much integrated and connected parts for individuals, families and communities.

With our strategic partner, Lehigh Valley Health Network, and others, the Pool Health Care Trust has recently supported expanded health for children through a dental sealants initiative, expansion of school-based health services through telehealth technology, and expansion of Children's Advocacy Center services Valley wide.

Affordability of health care services and insurance coverage for kids is part of the larger picture of what constitutes wellness.

Children who have health insurance are more likely to be immunized, receive regular check-ups and get prompt treatment for ordinary childhood ailments such as asthma. Children who are uninsured have poorer health and miss more school than their insured peers.

Since enactment of the State Children's Health Insurance Program (SCHIP) in 1997, Pennsylvania has been a leader in providing health coverage to its young residents. The expansion of CHIP through "Cover All Kids" in 2007 provided the ability for every uninsured child in the state to have access to health coverage through a sliding-fee scale based on family income.

Governor Rendell's proposed 2010-11 budget includes a modest boost in funding for CHIP. This is important because, despite the state's commitment to covering kids, about five percent of children remain uninsured in the Commonwealth.

Education has always been a major emphasis for the Rider-Pool Foundation and we support numerous K-12 programs. The governor's budget proposal includes a pledge to increase basic education funding by an additional \$354 million and ensure a child's zip code does not determine the quality of education received.

Recent scientific advances have shown that the human brain has tremendous capacity for learning from birth to five or six years of age, more ability to learn and grow than at any other time of life. We need to do more to aid our youngest learners. Head Start and Pre-K Counts, the Commonwealth's preschool curriculum for academically vulnerable three and four-year-olds, have both shown promising results and should be supported to provide more children access to these critical early education programs.

Today, more than 80 percent of our state's three and four-year-old children are not enrolled in pre-kindergarten programs. Research consistently shows that quality pre-kindergarten helps get kids ready for school by improving literacy and social skills. Young parents who want their children to benefit from quality pre-kindergarten should have the opportunity to do so. In the long run, we will all benefit.

Leonard and Dorothy Pool had a vision of a healthy community with quality health care services being a part of that vision. I am proud to be a part of that mission. I applaud our civic leaders for their continued commitment to the health and wellness of children in the Lehigh Valley and Pennsylvania.

Further, quality early education is a key ingredient of a child's well-being. Pre-K Counts and Head Start are grounded in the science of early childhood development. They represent "best practice" and should be expanded to serve more children and families.

Edward F. Meehan, MPH, is Executive Director of The Dorothy Rider Pool Health Care Trust and The Rider-Pool Foundation, and is a board member of Pennsylvania Partnerships for Children (www.papartnerships.org)