

Stephanie Santiago
PHLpreK City Council public hearing testimony
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Good afternoon, Councilmembers. My name is Stephanie Santiago. I live in District 7, Norris Square, Councilmember Lozada's district. I'm here today to ask City Council to raise the number of seats allocated to PHLpreK to 6,000 in this year's budget.

PHLpreK has been a backbone for me and my daughter, now five. We are moving on to kindergarten this year, and I want to make sure more families in Philadelphia can access this incredible program.

My daughter has flourished in the time she's been with PHLpreK. When we started the program in 2021, we were coming out of the pandemic. We had been quarantining for a year and I was worried that the effects of isolating would really affect her development.

I am so lucky that we were able to get a slot in the PHLpreK program at Norris Square. Because of the excellent teachers and curriculum, my daughter flourished despite the pandemic. I was afraid she would have problems making friends and would be anxiety-ridden and fearful. My daughter now has many friends - of all different ages.

I was afraid that my daughter would have trouble writing her name or recognizing sight words. That's what people told me. Today, she can do it. She spells pizza and many other words.

She is very communicative. She can express her feelings, her boundaries, and start conversations with adults. She is empathetic, and she is happy.

PHLpreK did not do wonders for just my daughter, it was my backbone through the pandemic.

Before PHLpreK, I didn't know how I'd pay for child care. I earned too much to qualify for child care programs for low-income families - to be clear, I earned \$1,000 more than the cutoff. My only options for child care was to work a third job at night, which would take me away from being a mom.

Because PHLpreK has no income limits, I was able to get child care for my daughter. I was able to keep working as an outreach specialist with Norris Square. I am able to spend more time with my daughter when I get home.

I want PHLpreK to expand to 6,000 seats this year because this is how more families - families in my community - can get the same benefits I had.

Norris Square has 40 slots for PHLpreK and many families, who are in a similar situation as I was, are waiting to get a seat. That is because kids that start with PHLpreK in year 1 are grandfathered into year 2 and so the slots are hard to come by.

Like me, these families earn about \$40-50,000 a year. We earn too much to qualify for other child care programs - but we also have to earn this much if we want to stay in Norris Square. Our neighborhood is gentrifying and so we have to earn more money to keep pace with the rising cost of living. Without PHLpreK, moving or picking up even more work would have been our only options.

That is why I am asking City Council to invest in PHLpreK this year. We need 6,000 seats in this year's budget because families like me - people who earn too much for low-income programs and not enough to compete with rising rents and cost of living - need programs like PHLpreK. We want our kids to be set for their future - and we don't want to have to choose between quality education for our children and moving, picking up a third job, or not working at all.

If you want families like mine to stay to grow our neighborhoods, please make PHLpreK more accessible for all this year.