

Good morning! My name is Bernadette Rodrigo, I serve as the Director of Children's Village in Doylestown, Pennsylvania. I am honored to be here today to give my testimony before this Policy Hearing. Before I give my testimony, I must emphasize that I am here today as a citizen and what I express are my views and are not endorsed by or represent the views of Penn Medicine.

To start, I'd like to give you a little bit of information about myself. I have over 25 years of professional experience working in the childcare industry. I hold a Bachelor of Science in Business Administration and a Master's in the Art of Teaching. During my time working in the field of Early Childhood Education, I have filled many distinct roles including infant caregiver, toddler teacher, preschool teacher, kindergarten enrichment teacher, as well as various administrative positions. I am a member of the Middle Bucks Institute of Technology Advisory Council and Tender Bridges Advisory Council at IU#22. I live and work in the 143rd district.

Children's Village is an Early Childhood Learning Center on the campus of Penn Medicine Doylestown Hospital in Doylestown Pennsylvania. Children's Village was founded in 1983 and for 41 years has been providing quality early childhood experiences to children from ages 6 weeks to 6 years. Our Pre-K and Kindergarten classrooms are licensed by Department of Education.

Children's Village is licensed by the Department of Human Services, accredited by the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC), recognized as a STAR four center by PAKEY. Most recently Children's Village has earned Tier 1 Recognition by the PA Positive Behavior Support (PaPBS) Network.

Currently there are 63 staff members at Children's Village. We serve approximately 185 families and care for up to 200 young children per day. This Spring, prior to doing our fall student placement, we have over 300 families on our waitlist. We were only able to place approximately 50 children, and our waitlist still consists of over 200 families.

When I told my colleagues that I had the opportunity to testify today, they all said the same thing. They told me to share my experiences. So here we go.

About 25 years ago, I completed my master's degree and was very excited to have my first paid teaching job. I went to a local bookstore to purchase some books for my classroom. One Saturday per month this particular bookstore offered a 15% discount to teachers. I spent some time browsing, brought my books up to register, had my ID ready, and asked for the discount. The salesperson looked at my ID and told me that I was not permitted to take advantage of the discount because the discount is for "real teachers". Although I did not receive the discount that day, I was a "real teacher" and I still am.

Childcare is not babysitting. The educators who work in childcare are professionals with specific skill sets and extensive training. Having a well-qualified workforce equates to higher quality programs and better outcomes for children. Brain science confirms that the early years are critical for brain development. Highly qualified early childhood educators create nurturing, stimulating environments that support school readiness, social emotional growth, and long-term success. Research shows that higher teacher qualifications are linked to better child outcomes.

The childcare industry has reached a crisis level in terms of staffing. During the past 10 months our center has had a weekly average of 6 vacant positions, including 3 lead teachers. It has become increasingly difficult to hire staff. Our center has a starting salary of \$16 per hour, above the average, and the most common reason people turn down our job offers is the salary.

The average salary for childcare workers in PA is \$15.15/hour, under \$32,000 per year. This is not a livable wage in any of Pennsylvania's 67 counties. If we want qualified teachers in every classroom, we must make early childhood education a viable, respected profession.

One of our teachers has worked for us for 25 years, holds a bachelor's degree and is certified to teach by the Pennsylvania Board of Education. Last year her husband retired from his career. He took an entry level part-time job at a local grocery store that requires little education or experience. They are both earning similar hourly rates. As a certified teacher, this employee would make more than double the salary she is earning at our center if she worked as a kindergarten teacher in the public school system.

Many childcare teachers are anxiously waiting to see if funding for a new Recruitment and Retention program passes in the State Senate because they need the retention funds to pay down their debt or to cover unexpected expenses that they cannot otherwise afford.

Pennsylvania families who leave their children in the care of early childhood educators want to know that their child is safe, nurtured, and has the experiences needed to learn and grow. How do we make sure this happens? The answer is a well-trained, professional workforce.

The innovative pilot program proposed by Representative Labs and Representative Hogan is a great start. A training pipeline, creating the next generation of early education teachers, would help increase the number of early childhood educators who enter the workforce without compromising the quality that families deserve. A dual enrollment program would allow Career and Technical Education (CTE) students to enter and remain in the workforce with an associate's degree as soon as they graduate High School.

We are all here today because we care about Pennsylvania's children and families. We know from decades of research that the early years of a child's life are a critical window for brain development, social emotional growth, and foundational learning. During this time a highly qualified well-prepared teacher is not just beneficial, it's transformative.

Thank you for giving me your time and attention.