

**Testimony for Pennsylvania House Policy Hearing**  
**Presented by Tiffany Martin**  
**Owner & Director, Teddy Bear College Preschool**  
**Tuesday, July 29, 2025**

Good morning, and thank you for the opportunity to speak today. My name is Tiffany Martin, and I've worked in the field of early childhood education for over 20 years. I'm the owner and director of Teddy Bear College Preschool, a STAR 4 program in Lower Bucks County serving more than 50 families. I also serve on the Board of the Bucks County Chapter of PennAEYC and facilitate the Director's Focus Group, where I hear directly from fellow leaders in the field who share the same concerns I'm bringing to you today.

I've been fortunate recently to have a consistent and dedicated team, but that hasn't always been the case. I've lost amazing teachers—not because they weren't happy—but because they couldn't survive on the wages we were able to offer. And as many of us know, that story is far too common.

The staffing crisis in early childhood education isn't new—it's ongoing and getting worse. We're dealing with constant turnover, a shrinking applicant pool, and rising expectations, yet we have fewer and fewer tools to retain the people who make this work possible. As a director, I've worn just about every hat—teacher, substitute, janitor, therapist, even plumber—because when you're short-staffed, you do what it takes to keep the program running.

One of the biggest hurdles we face is onboarding. Before a new hire can even step into a classroom, they need to complete background checks, health forms, mandated reporter training, fire safety, health and safety orientations, and more. That process can cost \$200–300 per person—and in many cases, the program eats that cost. If the new hire backs out midway, it's a complete loss. I'm not here to argue against safety or oversight. I'm asking for investment—collaborative, ongoing support that reflects how seriously we take early childhood education.

The loss of Keystone STARS supports—like the Merit Award and the Education and Retention Award—has only added to the strain. These incentives encouraged staff to further their education and remain in STAR-rated programs. Without them, there's no clear reward for going above and beyond, especially when STARS demands twice the training hours required by DHS, and when centers receive no compensation for the administrative lift it takes to maintain compliance.

On top of that, for-profit centers like mine are often excluded from grants, subsidies, and pilot programs—even though we serve the same children and face the same challenges as

our nonprofit peers. I've tried to join initiatives that require 25% subsidy enrollment, but I'm stuck at 12.5%. Why? Because ELRC families only have 30 days to find a program, and my waitlist is full. By the time a spot opens, they've lost their eligibility. The system simply doesn't work the way it's intended to.

Meanwhile, directors like me are constantly recalculating tuition rates to keep up with staffing costs and increased requirements. We raise prices to stay competitive with wages, and families bear the burden. It's a cycle that's burning out leaders and pushing potential educators away from the field.

This bill gives me hope. A scholarship-for-service model has the potential to change lives—of future educators, of the children they'll teach, and of the directors who are desperate for reliable support. By partnering with high schools and technical programs, we can create real pathways into this profession. And by offering funding up front, we remove one of the biggest barriers that keeps passionate people from entering the field.

I also want to highlight an often overlooked area: the need for trained staff to support neurodiverse children. We're seeing rising diagnoses in preschoolers—ADHD, autism, sensory processing—and there simply aren't enough professionals with the training or bandwidth to support them. A strong pipeline of educators must include training in inclusive practices and trauma-informed care if we want to truly meet the needs of *all* children.

I'll leave you with this: For every dollar invested in high-quality early education, society gains between \$7 and \$13 in return. That's reduced crime, higher earnings, stronger families. Our children deserve stable, educated, supported caregivers. And our educators deserve a career path that is affordable, achievable, and respected.

Thank you again for your time and for considering real, lasting solutions for our field.