

Good afternoon, and thank you for the opportunity to speak with you today.

I come before you not only as a constituent of Representative Mihalek, and as an advocate of an early childhood education, but as someone who deeply believes in the critical role child care plays in the lives of children, families, and communities across Pennsylvania.

My name is Abigail Enz-Doerschner, and I am the Assistant Director of a STAR Four early learning center in nearby Washington, Pennsylvania. I have worked in early learning for nearly 20 years. I used the T.E.A.C.H. scholarship to earn my Master's Degree in Education. I am a Pennsylvania Quality Assurance System (also known as PQAS) instructor, a member of Early Learning Resource Center 4's Leadership Committee, and a member of Pre-K for PA and Start Strong PA's Statewide Provider Advisory Board.

Since 1988, our independent, for-profit organization has served families in a working-class community. We currently support about 50 families and care for up to 64 children at any given time. Like many programs across the state, we are committed to providing safe, nurturing, and developmentally appropriate care to every child who walks through our doors.

But we are facing an unsustainable challenge.

Early childhood educators are entrusted with an awesome responsibility: to keep young children healthy and safe, to serve children with diverse needs and abilities, to screen for disabilities early—when intervention can make the biggest difference—and to deliver all of this with the same care and intention we would want for our own children.

And yet, we are expected to do this for wages lower than you might offer a Friday night babysitter.

At our center, we operate with 12 dedicated teaching staff. These are people who have chosen this profession because they care deeply about children and believe in their potential. And in just the past two months, we've lost three of them—not because they wanted to leave us, but because they had no choice.

They were recruited by a nearby center in a more affluent area, one that can afford to pay one or two dollars more per hour than we can. That's the difference a zip code can make.

Our center serves a community where 88% of our families qualify for some form of financial assistance. And despite our best efforts—despite cutting costs, tightening our belts in every conceivable way—we have lost money every month for the past nine months. Inflation has erased our ability to break even.

This is not just our story—it's the story of child care across Pennsylvania.

There is a common misconception that we have a pipeline problem in early childhood education—that there just aren't enough people interested in doing this work. But we *do* have applicants. Wonderful people who are eager and qualified. What we don't have is the ability to pay them what they need—and deserve—to earn to support their own families.

The average wage for staff in our center who *aren't* in the state-funded Pre-K Counts program is \$17.25 an hour. That's just less than \$36,000 a year. Would *you* feel comfortable leaving your child in the care of someone making that salary? Would *you* feel confident that person could stay long-term in such a demanding job?

We don't need less regulation. While there are certainly rules we might fine-tune, they are not what's holding us back. It's the market. And the market cannot solve this on its own.

We also face a rising tide of children with more complex care needs. We were incredibly fortunate to benefit from the Rapid Response Team pilot program—an invaluable support—but that program is now coming to an end in our area. Without it, we will have fewer resources to meet the increasing needs of our children.

I understand that the state has finite resources. But early childhood education is not a typical business. It is a *public good*. If Pennsylvania cares about its future—if it wants families to thrive, employers to stay open, and children to succeed—then it must do more to support this sector.

I applaud initiatives like dual enrollment for high school students, but we can't invite the next generation into this field without also ensuring they can afford to stay in it. The compensation issue is the real challenge before us—and the one we must find the will to address.

Our staff are qualified, experienced, and dedicated. What we need is a commitment—at the state level—to help us value them accordingly.

Thank you.

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