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tryingtogether.org

Thank you to Chairman Rowe for elevating child care in policy committee discussions. Thank you to Rep. Mihalek for hosting this important conversation on child care challenges and solutions in your district and for giving me the opportunity to lay the groundwork for what the child care landscape looks like in Pennsylvania right now. I'm going to do my best to provide a comprehensive overview of a complex system in just a few minutes.

My name is Emily Neff. I am the Director of Public Policy for Trying Together, and have been in early childhood education for a little over a decade. ECE has been my entire professional career from teacher to family support coordinator to advocate and now is taking on a whole new meaning as my husband and I are expecting our first child later this year. As someone who knows the field and its challenges well, adding our child to child care waiting lists was one of the first things we did. In fact, I added my child to waiting lists before I shared the news with my own family and friends.

Trying Together supports high-quality care and education for young children by providing advocacy, community resources, and professional growth opportunities for the needs and rights of children, their families, and the individuals who interact with them.

Trying Together is pleased to partner with PennAEYC to support the Pittsburgh Chapter of PennAEYC. Additionally, Trying Together is a principal partner of the statewide coalition Early Learning PA (ELPA) which includes the Pre-K for PA, Start Strong PA, Childhood Begins at Home, and Thriving PA campaigns. Regionally, Trying Together partners with the Allegheny County Department of Human Services and The Alliance for Infants and Toddlers to support the Early Learning Resource Center (ELRC) Region 5 in Allegheny County. ELRCs are single points of contact for families, early learning providers, and communities to access information and resources, including child care subsidies for families and quality coaching and technical assistance for professionals.

Pennsylvania families rely on a mixed-delivery child care system—including faith-based, for-profit, and non-profit programs—which supports parent choice, operates within a free market, and enables parents to work and contribute to the economy. The options of a mixed delivery system meet the needs of families including center-based and home-based child care options. Early care and education is a complex market and system that is mostly private-pay from parent tuition with many families paying nearly as much as their rent/mortgage and in-state college tuition.

State funded birth-to-five programs include:

- Child Care Works - subsidy program for working families with an income at 200% of the Federal Poverty Level (FPL) or below; for children ages birth through age 12 (Family of 4 - \$64,300)
- Pre-K Counts - state funded high-quality pre-k program for three- and four-year-olds from families with an income at or below 300% of the FPL (Family of 4 - \$96,450)
- School district pre-k
- Head Start Supplemental Assistance Program - additional state funding to federal grantees to serve three- and four-year-olds living in families at or below 100% of the FPL (Family of 4 - \$32,150)
- Early Intervention - provides special education and intervention services for children ages birth through five; Part C (infants and toddlers) & Part B (preschoolers)

Any licensed program - faith-based, for-profit, non-profit, center-based, home-based- with a signed subsidy agreement are able to receive CCW funding which follows the eligible family to a program of their choice. While Pennsylvania provides income-eligible families with public funding for early care and education programs, there is still a great deal of unmet need for families and the reimbursement rates don't cover the full cost of care for early learning





programs.

- 77% of infants and toddlers eligible to receive CCW are unserved, that's more than 80,000 children who having working parents but don't make enough income to support access to child care on their own
- 56% of 3- and 4- year olds eligible for publicly funded pre-k are unserved, that's nearly 85,000 children
- CCW reimburses programs at the 75th percent of the market rate for children using subsidy; based on what the regional market can charge families, not on the actual costs to providing quality care

In Pennsylvania, the Office of Child Development and Early Learning (or OCDEL, as you know) administers birth-to-five programming and is jointly overseen by the Department of Human Services and the Department of Education.

Child care certification regulations require programs to meet basic health and safety standards to protect Pennsylvania's youngest children. When looking for solutions within the regulations, it's critical to make sure that we are not making changes that tie directly to child health, safety, and quality learning. And while there are certainly areas where regulations can be improved and the system can be strengthened, this will not resolve the sector's most critical challenges.

Adult-child interactions and relationships between teachers and children in the classroom are the cornerstone of high quality care and education. Maintaining ratios is most fundamental for supporting health and safety in any program. Ratios allow children to be adequately supervised and enable classroom teachers to meet the needs of each child, so the benefits of high-quality child care can be fully realized. High-quality teachers recognize the importance of supporting the growth of a child's social, emotional, physical, and cognitive skills, with the best results occurring when quality practices are consistent and continue throughout a child's time in the program.

I want to provide some clarity for PA ratios for children under the age of five:

- Infant (birth to 1 year of age) 1:4 - max group size - 8
- Young toddler (1 to 2 years of age) 1:5 - max group size - 10
- Older toddler (2 to 3 years of age) 1:6 - max group size - 12
- Preschool (3 years of age to the date the child enters kindergarten in a public or private school system) 1:10 - max group size - 20

Does anyone here have experience with a three year old? All the emotions they go through in a day. Imagine being solely responsible for ten three year olds — all developmentally at a slightly different stage...helping them learn their letters, use the potty or perhaps still changing a few diapers, transition to lunch, move to nap time, explore the outdoors. Imagine, ten three year olds.

Eliminating health and safety standards, like ratios, could weaken the child care system and create skepticism among its consumer, working families. Just as industries like transportation and healthcare must meet safety regulations to protect the public, the child care industry relies on these regulations to keep the young children safe. Maintaining strong health and safety standards is essential for the well-being of children and the peace of mind of parents who depend on child care in order to work — these must be centered when searching for improvements regarding regulations.

Personally, as a mom-to-be who is planning to use center-based child care, the ratios matter deeply to me. Considerations to raise ratios, increase group sizes, or change staff qualifications are concerning to me as a soon-to-be consumer of child care. I want my child - and all children - to be in a safe and nurturing environment where teachers





have the capacity, passion, skills, and knowledge to care for and educate them while being well-compensated and valued for their professional work as early educators.

Providers have also expressed concern as they are seeing more children with developmental, emotional, and mental health needs. Increasing ratios is likely to lead to more burnout and higher turnover than we are already facing in the field.

There are qualifications for directors, group supervisors (lead teachers), assistant group supervisors (assistant teachers), and aides within the regulations that offer flexibility and are required for programs to legally operate. Aides and assistant teachers (assistant group supervisors) do not need bachelor's degrees.

There are also pathways within the voluntary, quality rating system, Keystone STARS, for programs to increase their quality based on staff educational attainment. Keystone STARS builds upon state child care licensing regulations by focusing more deeply on the essential elements of quality, including physical environment, instructional materials, program support structure, and most importantly, interpersonal relationships and daily interactions. In Pennsylvania, all licensed early care and education programs receive a STAR 1 rating upon receiving their full license. It is up to a program to decide to try to attain higher STAR levels. STAR 2 has no additional requirements related to education qualifications. To reach a STAR 3 or 4 there are required indicators which must be met and then there are optional and points-based indicators, allowing programs to choose which indicators best exemplify quality practices in their programs.

While there is not a required indicator relating to credentials/degrees, there are quality indicators focused on credential/degree attainment which help programs accumulate points to reach the higher STAR levels. Degree attainment of staff is based on a career pathway

Brain research shows the most rapid period of brain development occurs in the first five years. Caring for and educating young children takes specialized skills and training in child development. Pennsylvania's ECE Career Pathway guides the early childhood profession towards meeting the minimal qualifications and competencies needed for each role.

- There are many support pathways for folks in the field to advance their career. OCDEL offers a variety of programs to help child care professionals reach higher degrees/credentials at no or very low cost, including Professional Development Organizations, T.E.A.C.H. Scholarship Program and Rising STARS Tuition Assistance.
- There are CTE programs here in the county that include early childhood. Trying Together offers a Child Development associate prep program which matriculates to multiple community colleges and universities. Carlow University's apprenticeship program is utilized by many programs we work with in the southwest region which supports current early childhood educators in working toward their Bachelor's degree.
- The problem is not the pipeline. There are dedicated people who are passionate about teaching young children, but when at the end of the pipeline the wage is only \$15.15 an hour people don't want - or can't - pursue the path.

I know you've all heard stories of many challenges and a field in crisis. While there are certainly ways to improve and streamline aspects of regulations that reduce red tape, this is not what's going to address the root causes of the system's most dire challenges - the demand side of family affordability and supply side of workforce development will take robust, sustained public investment.





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The root of the crisis is recruitment and retention of teachers in child care programs. Early educators, who do some of the most important work in our society—are paid, on average \$15.15 an hour—wages that do not meet the cost of living in any county in Pennsylvania.

A statewide survey of 1,140 child care programs conducted by Start Strong PA in September 2024 found that nearly 9 out of every 10 programs that responded reported staffing shortages, and 92% reported challenges in recruiting teachers. Those programs have 3,038 unfilled teaching positions, and if those positions were filled, they could serve an additional 25,320 children. This is only a snapshot of 17% of programs statewide.

Why can't we fill these jobs? Because child care runs on impossible math. Families can't afford higher tuition, state subsidies don't cover true costs, and teachers—our most critical workforce—earn poverty wages. Our teachers make less than cashiers at Sheetz or Target.

A few months ago bi-partisan ECE caucus and the Early Learning Investment Commission, hosted a meeting with labor economist, Dr. Kathryn Edwards. She clearly laid out the market failure of the child care system and emphasized it will take public intervention, specifically by investing directly in providers to benefit the market. Thankfully we are positioned to take a significant first step in solving this for Pennsylvania's families, children, and educators through an investment of \$55 million for a Child Care Teacher Recruitment and Retention Initiative in the 2025-2026 state budget.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify. We've only scratched the surface of this conversation and I look forward to continuing discussing ways to uplift the child care system and ensure Pennsylvania is a place for families to thrive.

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