

Public Policy & Legislative Agenda 2022

PennAEYC's vision is that all Pennsylvania families will have access to high-quality, affordable early childhood care and education opportunities for their children provided by a profession that is valued, well-compensated and supported. Primary attention is devoted to expanding access to high-quality early childhood care and education programs for young children and appropriate compensation and support for the professionals and programs which provide these services. Our public policy and legislative agenda outlines goals for funding increases, as well as changes in policy and practice and regulation and law at the state and federal levels. We will achieve our goals through existing and new partnerships at the local, state and federal levels, including our chapters and membership, state advocacy partners and NAEYC.

Impact of COVID-19 and the Build Back Better Act

The COVID-19 pandemic continues to highlight the vital role that child care plays in the lives of children, working families and our economy. The child care system, which was fragile prior to the crisis and was brought to its breaking point as a result of the pandemic, is now experiencing a severe staffing shortage. According to a September 2021 Start Strong PA survey of over 1,100 child care programs:

- Nearly 26,000 children currently sat on waiting lists.
- More than 34,000 additional children could have been served at respondents' sites if they were fully staffed.
- 92% of respondents reported staffing shortages.
- 51% of respondents had closed at least one classroom.

The federal pandemic relief, which was intended to stabilize programs, helped many, however further investment at the federal and state level will be key in our economic recovery and building a stronger, more equitable early childhood care and education system. PennAEYC, as a principal partner of the Start Strong PA advocacy campaign, was successful in advocating at the federal and state levels for investments and policy recommendations to help stabilize the child care sector and prevent the closure of programs, particularly high-quality programs serving subsidized children. Yet substantial and sustainable federal and state investments are needed to meet the long term needs of Pennsylvania children and families and the programs and professionals that serve them.

In addition, the Build Back Better plan includes the substantial, long-term funding commitment to develop a high-quality birth to five early childhood care and education system that supports child and family needs and also appropriately compensates and supports teachers and programs. This plan was currently under consideration as this policy agenda was under development. Should it pass, PennAEYC will work to ensure Pennsylvania opts into the child care and pre-k programs and will assess how our policy goals and current programming in Pennsylvania need to be adaptable to implement this incredible opportunity.

Due to the continued pandemic and the potential for substantial, long-term funding from the federal government, our agenda was developed for a one-year time period to allow us to be nimble in responding to the sector's immediate needs.

PennAEYC sought input from our members to inform our public policy goals. We received feedback from 43 respondents through an online survey to determine the memberships' priority public policy issues. PennAEYC will continue its advocacy and will work to achieve the following five public policy goals:

1. Increase access to equitable, high-quality, affordable child care for infants and toddlers

This work aligns with the Start Strong PA advocacy campaign, of which PennAEYC is the administrative lead and principal partner, along with nine other organizations.

Brain science has determined that the development of brain architecture begins early, and provides the foundation for all future learning, behavior, and health. In fact, a child's brain develops faster from birth to age three than at any later period in life. Research demonstrates high-quality child care improves a child's cognitive, language, social and emotional development, early learning and school achievement and children from families with few resources and under great stress benefit most from quality child care¹. Increasing access to high-quality child care for all infants and toddlers creates equitable learning opportunities. While PennAEYC supports high-quality care and learning environments for all infants and toddlers, improving access to high-quality for those eligible for child care subsidies is a priority. Pre-pandemic over 114,000 Pennsylvania children were enrolled in subsidized child care. As of September 2021, only 91,000 children were enrolled. With more than 200,000 children under five years and more than 119,000 infants and toddlers eligible for child care subsidy in Pennsylvania and 81 percent and 85 percent unserved, respectively, this will continue as a priority.²

Office of Child Development and Early Learning (OCDEL) September 2021 data demonstrated only 40 percent of children under age five and 37 percent of infants and toddlers receiving subsidized care were in Keystone STAR 3 or 4 programs. In order for Pennsylvania to recover from the economic crisis created by the pandemic, it is critical that high-quality child care options be available for working families statewide. Improving access to high-quality can be achieved by adequate and sustainable state and federal investments for providers participating in the subsidy payment system and funds to serve new children. Expanding and improving the child care subsidy program to help give all children a great start and funding providers in a way that pays for the cost of high-quality and provides greater program stability is critical. It is time to move away from the flawed system of paying for child care subsidies based on a percentage of the market rate and to a cost-based model that accounts for appropriate teacher compensation. Further scaling up contracted slots for infants and toddlers in STAR 3 and 4 child care programs to provide families high-quality child care options statewide, greater financial stability for programs and greater supports for teachers and staff will help achieve this goal. In addition, policies which encourage family education about the importance of quality and build the demand for STAR 3 and 4 programs are encouraged.

2. Improve compensation and professional supports for early childhood professionals

This work aligns with the Start Strong PA and Pre-K for PA advocacy campaigns.

Early childhood care and education professionals are nation builders, responsible for raising tomorrow's workforce and future leaders. High-quality early childhood care and education

¹ [Investments in Quality Child Care Secure the Future: Infant-Toddler Child Care Fact Sheet](#), ZERO TO THREE, 2017.

² <https://papartnerships.maps.arcgis.com/apps/MapSeries/index.html?appid=25068de383324f58a3d474b5bc881f3e#>

programs can change the trajectory of a child's future by providing them with the best opportunity to learn and reach their full potential. The quality of child care boils down to the relationship between the provider and the child and skilled and stable providers promote positive development.³ The time is now to make significant and sustained investments in high-quality early childhood care and education provided by well-prepared and well-compensated professionals who reflect the diversity of the children and families they serve. Scaling up credential and degree attainment opportunities to grow the supply of highly-qualified teachers will be critical to addressing the early childhood workforce shortages.

In response to the National Academy of Medicine's 2015 report, *Transforming the Workforce for Children Birth Through Age 8: A Unifying Foundation*, 15 national organizations, which represent the early childhood field, collaborated to establish Power to the Profession, which met over 36 months. The Power to the Profession initiative has defined the early childhood profession by establishing a unifying framework for career pathways and addresses knowledge and competencies, as well as compensation. The vision of Power to the Profession is that each and every child, beginning at birth, has the opportunity to benefit from high-quality early childhood education, delivered by an effective, diverse, well-prepared, and well-compensated workforce. Three designations of early childhood education professionals are recommended in the framework with defined scopes of practice and clear preparation expectations. The Early Childhood Educator I, Early Childhood Educator II and Early Childhood Educator III designations will also have an expected level of master of the *Professional Standards and Competencies for Early Childhood Educators*.

While Pennsylvania's Keystone STARS Program Performance Standards recognize the impact of teachers on program quality and include education qualifications for each STAR level, Pennsylvania's child care teachers are still not adequately compensated, with half relying on government assistance (e.g., SNAP, TANF, Medicaid) and earning an average median wage of \$10.69/hour and preschool teachers \$13.96/hour⁴. Qualified teachers need appropriate compensation that reflects their credentials. PennAEYC supports the following short-term initiatives that will help more teachers to reach higher credentials and degrees, receive increased compensation and reduce turnover in the field, which will also lead to more high-quality programs in Pennsylvania for our youngest children:

- Increase state and federal funding to allow more teachers to access preparation programs that provide coursework to ensure graduates are proficient in the Professional Standards and Competencies, which will provide a seamless pathway to advance their preparation and role.
- Provide new funding specifically to increase teacher wages for programs serving subsidized children based on position, degree and credential achievement. Provide an increase in funding to provide rates for child care providers that reflect the cost of care, provide more sustainable funding to support providers serving subsidy children, further stabilize high-quality providers and provide STAR 2 providers the resources to meet higher-quality standards.
- Strengthen and align state professional development and preparation systems to ensure that they include quality assurance mechanisms, support workforce diversity, provide equitable access and address compensation parity.
- Support initiatives that will make the child care profession a priority in conjunction with

³ From neurons to neighborhoods: The science of early childhood development. Phillips, D.A., & Shonkoff, J. P. (Eds.). National Academies Press. 2000

⁴ <https://cscce.berkeley.edu/workforce-index-2020/states/pennsylvania/>

adequate funding to provide support and compensation for the workforce that aligns with the complex and demanding work performed. Removing the public's perception of early childhood education and the undervaluing of the field as a result of inequity and inequality in our nation's educational structures will encourage talented and ambitious individuals to enter and remain in the profession.

- Support the incumbent workforce by offering community-based Child Development Associate programs, make undergraduate and graduate academic programs specializing in early childhood careers more attractive and financially viable and create innovative teacher apprenticeships and mentoring programs that offer ongoing learning. Academic programs should add coursework in leadership, advocacy and civic engagement as core curriculum for early childhood education students and apprenticeships and mentoring programs should offer ongoing learning throughout an individual's first couple years in the field, along with practicum experience in all early childhood age groups (infant, toddler, pre-K, and K-4 classrooms). Equitable access to high-quality higher education and compensation for a qualified workforce is needed to ensure the workforce can meet the needs of its children and families.

While these initiatives are important steps toward supporting the workforce, much more effort will be necessary to achieve the larger goal of a credentialed workforce that is adequately compensated.

3. Increase access to high-quality pre-kindergarten programs

This work aligns with the Pre-K for PA advocacy campaign, of which PennAEYC is a principal partner, along with eight other organizations.

An extensive body of research demonstrates the academic and social benefits of high-quality early childhood learning, including a reduced need for special education and remedial education services, decreased dropout rates, and increased likelihood of graduation and college enrollment, not to mention creating equitable learning opportunities. Early childhood investments also have been linked to reduced crime and incarceration rates and less reliance on public assistance programs. A recent study by the University of North Carolina Chapel Hill confirmed that the Commonwealth's investment in pre-k is paying dividends for the children fortunate enough to access pre-k through Pennsylvania's Pre-K Counts program. The study showed that children in Pre-K Counts outperformed their kindergarten peers in language and math skills who did not enjoy access – an advantage that equated to four to five months of learning gains, which is a substantial difference in development at that age and a meaningful advantage during the COVID-19 era.⁵

Pennsylvania families below 300% of the federal poverty guidelines qualify for publicly funded pre-kindergarten programs. However, due to limited funding, only 36% of eligible families have access to these programs. This equates to nearly 107,000 eligible children living in rural, suburban, and urban communities that do not have access to high-quality, publicly funded pre-k. PennAEYC supports increased state and federal investments to fully fund the Pre-K Counts and Head Start programs so all eligible families have access to high-quality, publicly-funded pre-kindergarten programs. PennAEYC also supports rate increases that reflect the cost of care for the Pre-K Counts and the Head Start Supplemental Assistance Program to remain viable. Rate increases should be directly passed through to programs in order to meet current needs of the sector and improve quality, including a focus on teacher compensation. PennAEYC also supports city and county policymakers' efforts to allocate funding that would supplement state and federal sources.

⁵ <https://www.papartnerships.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/Pre-K-Counts-Program-Report.pdf>

4. Develop an Early Intervention Policy Agenda and Advocacy Strategy

PennAEYC and Pennsylvania Partnerships for Children are leading this work on behalf of the Early Learning PA coalition.

Pennsylvania Early Intervention (EI) provides individualized services and supports to families of children birth to school-age who have developmental delays or disabilities. EI supports and services differ depending on the child's and family's needs and focus on enhancing the child's physical (including vision and hearing), cognitive, communication, social, emotional and adaptive development while providing parent education and support as appropriate. In 2019-2020⁶, 104,797 children were served. EI enhances the family's capacity to meet the developmental needs of their child in settings such as the child's home, child care program, Head Start program, etc. Their supports are embedded in the routines and activities of the family, community or child care program. EI and child care programs connect and collaborate in support of the child and family.

The research is clear that EI improves the health, language and communication, cognitive development and social/emotional development of young children who have or are at risk of developmental delays. EI is also a smart investment as it reduces the need for special education services. Pennsylvania Partnerships for Children and PennAEYC are currently leading an effort with national consultants on behalf of the Early Learning PA coalition to develop an EI policy agenda for the infant/toddler program through the transition to the preschool program with a broader group of stakeholders and launch an advocacy strategy.

5. Support high-quality experiences in early childhood care and education programs and school districts for children through grade four.

PennAEYC leads a workgroup of early childhood care and education professionals focused on Pennsylvania's teacher certification grade spans which reflect research-based child and young adolescent development periods as issues arise.

Play is the work of childhood and an avenue for learning at all ages. Children learn cognitive, social, emotional and physical skills through play. PennAEYC supports a paradigm shift that acknowledges the role of play in children's learning and development. To accelerate this shift, PennAEYC calls on early childhood teachers and administrators (for children from birth through grade four) to implement the following best practices for play including:

- creating abundant and active exploration opportunities through hands-on activities;
- connecting new concepts to what children already know;
- engaging in projects that connect learning in multiple subjects;
- supporting social and emotional development along with physical and mental health;
- offering experiences that stretch thinking and provide challenges; and
- providing time for free, unstructured, outdoor play, as well as physical activity breaks in the classroom.

Recognizing that the COVID-19 pandemic has altered how play is occurring in-person in a program and virtually, it continues to an important role in learning and development.

PennAEYC also recommends the State Board of Education adopt the early learning standards (infant-toddler through second grade) created by the Office of Child Development and Early

⁶ <https://www.pattan.net/CMSPages/GetAmazonFile.aspx?path=-\pattan\media\publications\sicc-report-wba.pdf&hash=e2c023ea71548b3bd8414bf1747b9560a957c072154a59aa7b2784c7e9c536de&ext=.pdf>

Learning and that the standards be promulgated in regulation. This will ensure the educational continuum is represented in the series of academic standards, providing clarity to what children should know and be able to do at specified levels beginning at infancy for purposes of curriculum development and teacher instruction. PennAEYC supports teacher and administrator preparation curriculum content and certification grade bands which reflect research-based child development periods and developmentally appropriate practice as they will produce effective educators that are equipped with the skills to optimize young child development and learning. Initiatives to build effective transitions between early childhood programs and schools are supported as well.

In addition to our specific policy goals, PennAEYC will engage in advocacy as opportunities arise and as appropriate to support initiatives at the state and federal level that benefit the children and families the early childhood community serves and the early childhood workforce.