

## **Public Policy & Legislative Agenda 2023-2024**

*PennAEYC's vision is that each and every Pennsylvania family 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 campaign and coalition partners and NAEYC's strategic direction.*

### **Current Landscape**

#### *The State of Child Care in PA*

As Pennsylvania bounces back and navigates living with COVID-19, the child care system continues to experience a severe staffing shortage with parents unable to find care. According to a March 2022 Start Strong PA survey of nearly 1,000 child care programs:

- Nearly 32,500 children sat on waiting lists.
- More than 30,000 additional children could have been served at respondents' sites if they were fully staffed.
- 91% of respondents reported staffing shortages.
- 48% of respondents have closed at least one classroom.

Low wages are the most significant factor driving the child care staffing crisis. According to the most current wage data for Pennsylvania, the median wage in 2019 for child care workers was only \$10.69/hour and \$13.96/hour for preschool teachers. This leaves nearly 50% of the workforce being eligible for public benefits. Child care providers cannot afford to pay child care workers more, parents cannot afford to pay a higher price for child care and child care workers cannot afford to stay in the field.

One-time American Rescue Plan Act relief available through September 2024 continues to help programs stay open and families afford child care. Unfortunately, the federal Build Back Better proposal, which included significant and sustainable child care and pre-k funding, did not pass into law. In order to build a stronger, more equitable early childhood care and education system greater investments at the federal and state levels must be made. Without substantial and sustainable investments, child care programs will continue to face these challenges that burden families and the professionals that serve them.

#### *2022 General Election Impact*

The November 2022 General Election was a significant one which will bring great change in the policymakers with which we work. In addition to a new U.S. Senator and gubernatorial administration, there are a significant number of incumbents leaving the General Assembly as a result of retirements and primary election losses. Those leaving unfortunately include key champions. Education of these new policymakers and their staff will be incredibly important to increase state investments and make positive policy change in early childhood care and

education.

***PennAEYC will continue its advocacy and will work to achieve the following six public policy goals:***

**1. Increase equitable access to developmentally appropriate, high-quality, affordable child care, particularly for each and every infant and toddler**

*This work aligns with the Start Strong PA advocacy campaign, of which PennAEYC is the administrative lead and a 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. Research demonstrates high-quality child care improves a child's cognitive, language, social and emotional development<sup>1</sup>. Increasing access to high-quality child care for each and every infant and toddler creates equitable learning opportunities. While PennAEYC supports high-quality care and learning environments for each and every infant and toddler, 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 2022, only 88,806 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 80 percent and 84 percent unserved, respectively, this will continue as a priority.<sup>2</sup>

Office of Child Development and Early Learning (OCDEL) September 2021 data demonstrated only 44 percent of children under age five and 41 percent of infants and toddlers receiving subsidized care were in Keystone STAR 3 or 4 programs. Improving access to high-quality can be achieved by substantial 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 each and every child a great start and funding providers in a way that pays for the true cost of high-quality and provides greater program stability is critical.

In addition to funding, there are significant policy and structure changes needed in Pennsylvania's child care payment system for which we will advocate. It is time to move away from the flawed system of paying for child care subsidies based on a percentile of the market rate and to conduct a study with broad stakeholder input that informs a new cost-based model that accounts for appropriate teacher compensation and other provider costs. More significant scaling of the use of contracting in the child care system is also needed, building off of the success of the infant/toddler contracted slots pilot. Contracts provide greater stability to programs and help them increase the quality of the program offered to children.<sup>3</sup>

In addition, PennAEYC will advocate to ensure families are aware of the subsidy program to help them with the costs of child care and will support policies which encourage family education about the importance of quality and build the demand for STAR 3 and 4 programs.

**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.*

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

<sup>2</sup> <https://storymaps.arcgis.com/stories/1954f2ea6b1e45dfbabdf256a2c6b406>

<sup>3</sup> [https://s35729.pcdn.co/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/IT-Pilot-Evaluation-Report\\_PA\\_Final.V2.pdf](https://s35729.pcdn.co/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/IT-Pilot-Evaluation-Report_PA_Final.V2.pdf)

Early childhood care and education professionals are nation builders, responsible for raising tomorrow's workforce and future leaders. They need to be equipped with the knowledge, skills and competencies necessary to fully support the development and learning of young children. High-quality early childhood care and education 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.<sup>4</sup> 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.

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.

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/hour<sup>5</sup>. Qualified teachers need appropriate compensation that pays them an appropriate wage that reflects their credentials and that is comparable to K-12 teachers for those with equivalent degrees. PennAEYC supports the following 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:

- Establish and implement a wage scale based on educational attainment.
- Support funding to support more teachers and staff to obtain higher credentials and degrees. In particular, PennAEYC itself will continue to support the incumbent workforce by providing community-based Child Development Associate coursework.
- In addition, policy changes related to paying programs based on cost in the child care system rather than the market rate and utilizing contracts to a great extent will support appropriate teacher and staff wages in the child care system. Our pre-k goal which follows also notes the importance of providing a rate that will allow for appropriate teacher compensation as well.

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

*This work aligns with the Pre-K for PA advocacy campaign, of which PennAEYC is the administrative lead and 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

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<sup>4</sup> *From neurons to neighborhoods: The science of early childhood development*. Phillips, D.A., & Shonkoff, J. P. (Eds.). National Academies Press. 2000

<sup>5</sup> <https://cscce.berkeley.edu/workforce-index-2020/states/pennsylvania/>

investments also have been linked to reduced crime and incarceration rates and less reliance on public assistance programs. A December 2020 evaluation by the University of North Carolina Chapel Hill 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.<sup>6</sup>

Pennsylvania families below 300% of the federal poverty guidelines qualify for publicly funded pre-kindergarten programs. However, due to limited funding, only 39% of eligible families have access to these programs. This equates to nearly 101,500 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 providing Pre-K Counts and the Head Start Supplemental Assistance Program, including appropriate teacher compensation.

#### **4. Implement the Infant/Toddler (Part C) Early Intervention Statewide Advocacy Agenda** *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 2020-2021<sup>7</sup>, 99,707 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. Priority advocacy strategies are:

- Serving all children can benefit from Part C EI through outreach, referral, enrollment
- Ensuring Part C EI services offer quality needed to make a difference
- Achieving equitable access in Part C EI
- Addressing mental health needs of infants and toddlers in Part C EI
- Partnering with Medicaid to improve Part C EI

#### **5. Advance policies that support Pennsylvania in reaching an equitable early care and education system**

To assist Pennsylvania in reaching an equitable early care and education system for children, families and teachers, PennAEYC is working with its advocacy partners to identify an independent entity that will conduct an evaluation of the system in order to identify inequalities

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<sup>6</sup> <https://www.papartnerships.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/Pre-K-Counts-Program-Report.pdf>

<sup>7</sup> [https://www.pattan.net/CMSPages/GetAmazonFile.aspx?path=~%5Cpattan%5Cmedia%5Cmaterials%5Cpublications%5Cimages%5Csicc-2020-21-annual-report\\_fnl.pdf&hash=611682a7da5653f3a6ad66f1b54b86d40e2f8c70b7effe1f3e423c0ebc537d8e&ext=.pdf](https://www.pattan.net/CMSPages/GetAmazonFile.aspx?path=~%5Cpattan%5Cmedia%5Cmaterials%5Cpublications%5Cimages%5Csicc-2020-21-annual-report_fnl.pdf&hash=611682a7da5653f3a6ad66f1b54b86d40e2f8c70b7effe1f3e423c0ebc537d8e&ext=.pdf)

and potential solutions, with particular focus on children living in poverty, multilingual children, children of color and children with disabilities. Reaching an equitable early care and education system will be advanced through all PennAEYC Public Policy Goals. PennAEYC will also support and advocate for policies that are identified through this work that will support Pennsylvania in reaching an equitable early care and education system.

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

Children learn cognitive, social, emotional and physical skills through play. PennAEYC believes that early childhood teachers and administrators (for children from birth through grade four) should 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.

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 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.

Finally, PennAEYC will continue to support teacher certification grade spans that reflect child and young adolescent developmental periods, ensuring teachers are prepared in developmentally-appropriate instruction and practice for the ages of children they teach.

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***In addition to our specific policy goals, PennAEYC will:***

- 1) Seek opportunities to build collaboration within the early childhood care and education system itself and between that system and other child-serving systems, with the goals of improved system navigation for families and professionals in the early childhood system having the tools necessary to provide information and linkages that help families holistically.***
- 2) 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.***