

Key Takeaways

Rural Access to Child Care: The panels noted that access to child care is a critical issue in rural Pennsylvania. Quality early childhood education leads to positive developmental outcomes. Child-care access allows more people to participate in the workforce.

- *Increases in Funding:* Testifiers suggested increasing both state and federal funding for child-care centers. This could involve allocating more financial resources to support the operation and improvement of childcare facilities. Panelists noted that financial margins are low and often there is little to reinvest in employees and facilities within rural communities.
- *Higher Wages:* There were suggestions to raise wages for childcare workers. This is aimed at attracting and retaining qualified staff by offering better compensation and competitive salaries with other industries, such as public school districts and private-sector employers.
- *Removing Regulatory Barriers:* Panelists proposed the removal of regulatory barriers such as licensing, inspections, and compliance that hinder the effectiveness and accessibility of child-care services. This includes reducing the frequency of licensing requirements for childcare centers and reevaluating the qualifications required for staff in childcare settings to make them more realistic and feasible.
- *Universal Pre-K Implementation:* Suggestions were made for the implementation of universal pre-kindergarten (pre-K) programs. This would make pre-K education more widely accessible to all children, regardless of socioeconomic background.

Background

On March 11, 2024, the Center for Rural Pennsylvania Board of Directors held a public hearing on rural access to child care at the Schuylkill Technology Center (STC)—South Campus in Schuylkill County. State legislators, local leaders, and childcare professionals engaged in discussions addressing the challenges posed by the lack of childcare access in rural Pennsylvania.

Panel 1:

**Andrea Heberlein, Executive Director,
Pennsylvania Early Learning
Investment Commission**

Heberlein discussed the background and efforts made by the commission during the Rendell Administration from 2007 to 2008 to emphasize the importance of quality care in early childhood education. The commission efforts continued under the Shapiro Administration, highlighting the need for public and private-sector partnerships and investments in child care and communicating the need for childcare access. She stressed the critical role of quality early childhood education in child development and read-

iness for elementary school. She referenced the New Mexico childcare model, which reimburses childcare providers at the true cost of care, as a potential solution. The Colorado model of universal pre-K was emphasized as another potential solution, though concerns were raised about half-day programs without wrap-around care.

**Dr. Leah Spangler, President and CEO,
The Learning Lamp and Ignite
Education Solutions**

Dr. Spangler shared insights from operating a multifaceted childcare system. She discussed challenges faced by childcare businesses, including financial struggles and difficulties in filling job openings. Additionally, she highlighted the impact of childcare access on additional workforce availability and productivity. She noted that external employers struggle with recruitment and retention due to childcare issues faced by employees. She advocated for increased investments from the Commonwealth to address workforce issues and provide affordable child care, leading to more employed individuals and increased tax revenue.

Natalie Renew, *Executive Director, Home Grown*

Renew discussed the business feasibility of different types of childcare centers. She promoted home-based child care as a reliable provider for infants and toddlers in rural areas. However, there has been a significant decline in home-based care due to licensing requirements and procedures, forcing home-based childcare centers to close. She emphasized the need for care for workers in the community. Home-based child care was suggested as a solution for small rural communities with unique circumstances.

Karen Grimm-Thomas, *Early Childhood Education Strategy Advisor, The Pennsylvania Key*

Grimm-Thomas discussed the role businesses and community leaders play in supporting early childhood education. She also advocated for equitable access to and regulation of childcare providers. She noted that local communities need to get involved in childcare conversations, especially due to challenges faced by childcare providers that affect these communities as a whole, including low wages and staffing shortages.

The first panel discussed the difficult training requirements for early childcare professionals, along with their relatively low pay. It was noted that to work in early childhood education, an individual needs a high school diploma and various hours of secondary training that include working with children. Proposed solutions included encouraging academic credentials and lowering mass hours of training experience as a requirement, while still requiring necessary background checks and experience working with children. It was noted that childcare professionals need to be compensated for continued quality care, education, and child safety. Furthermore, the panel advocated for consistent federal and state funding for existing childcare programs. Panelists emphasized the need to reduce or eliminate redundant reporting and regulatory requirements at the local, county, and state levels. Reducing paperwork and compliance costs will allow for more resources to be devoted to child care. Additional policy solutions identified by the panelists included microsites for childcare centers and centers embedded within public schools.

Panel 2:

Robert S. Carl, Jr., *President and CEO, Schuylkill Chamber of Commerce*

Carl discussed the Chamber's ongoing advocacy efforts on rural childcare access, including meetings with state legislators and discussions with various stakeholders in the childcare industry. He emphasized the collaborative approach taken to address key issues and propose pathways for reform. Carl emphasized that the Chamber has made its childcare advocacy agenda one of its *highest* priorities. Carl noted that \$6.65 billion is the annual cost of Pennsylvania's childcare problems in lost earnings, productivity, and revenue. He highlighted the crucial role of quality child care in early childhood education, describing it as the foundation for a child's future development and learning. He stressed that childcare providers play a vital role in addressing societal challenges such as mental health, nutrition, and educational attainment. The Chamber outlined the significant challenges faced by childcare providers, including low wages, high turnover rates, and inadequate support systems. Additionally, emphasized was the financial strain on families due to the high cost of childcare services. He shared data presented by the Chamber from a survey conducted among Schuylkill County parents titled, *Schuylkill County Child Care Impact Report*, highlighting their struggles with child care affordability and availability. He noted that the testimonials from childcare professionals further the urgent need for reform. Emphasized was the importance of prioritizing child care as a cornerstone of workforce development and economic vitality.

Samantha Chivinski, *Executive Vice President, Schuylkill Chamber of Commerce*

Chivinski highlighted the childcare crisis in Schuylkill County and all of rural Pennsylvania. She noted that families struggle to find affordable and high-quality childcare options, with waiting lists ranging from months to years. Childcare providers face difficulties in retaining and attracting teachers due to low wages, a lack of benefits, and financial burdens such as training costs. The COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated mental health and behavioral issues among children, leading to burnout among providers. High turnover rates and difficulty filling open positions are experienced by employers due to childcare

issues. Many working parents report leaving their jobs because of inadequate childcare solutions. The childcare crisis resulted in significant economic losses, including \$591 million annually in tax revenue and \$2.88 billion per year in costs related to absences and turnover for Pennsylvania employers. The child care report revealed that the median household income in Schuylkill County is \$49,559, and parents spend 25 to 35 percent (as a median) of their wages on child care. Many reported spending 40, 50, 60, 75, and even 80 percent of their wages on child care. One respondent stated they spend \$2,000 per month on child care, followed by one who stated, “more than our mortgage.” Chivinski noted that \$2,000 per month in Schuylkill County is a very sizeable amount of money. The report also revealed that 62.5 percent of parents indicated having been on a waiting list for childcare services ranging from a minimum of six to 12 months and many in the range of one to two years. The survey revealed that a majority of parents would face hardships if their childcare provider closed, and many do not have backup plans. Extended hours of care beyond the typical school day are essential for families. Chivinski shared her own experience of being on a waiting list before her daughter was born and the financial strain of childcare costs, even as part of a two-income household. Chivinski advocated for stakeholders to listen to childcare industry experts and proposed potential policy solutions such as cost-cutting, incentivizing businesses, reducing regulatory obstacles, and increasing funding to support childcare providers and families.

Mary Ann Devlin, Executive Director, Child Development, Inc.

Devlin addressed the challenges and importance of access to child care in rural areas. Child Development, Inc. is a non-profit organization providing various programs for children and families, including Head Start and PA Pre-K Counts. Devlin highlighted the difficulties faced in sustaining comprehensive childcare options due to inadequate funding for such nonprofits, leading to the discontinuation of before- and after-school programs, infant care, and toddler care over the years. She emphasized the importance of multi-funding to meet diverse needs and maximize resources, but noted challenges in cost allocation and navigating different eligibility

requirements. Additionally, Devlin addressed the critical issue of teacher recruitment and retention, citing the significant impact of low wages and demanding job responsibilities. In Schuylkill County, there is a pressing need for quality early care and education programs, with a large percentage of preschool children living in low-income families lacking access to high-quality early education. Devlin stressed the importance of investing in early childhood programs, citing numerous benefits for children’s future success and societal outcomes. She urged stakeholders to prioritize children’s needs in all aspects of policy and decision-making.

Michelle Dallago, Director and Head of School, Perception Early Learning, Montessori

Dallago shared her experience working in early childhood education and shared potential solutions for addressing the childcare crisis. She shared insight on the difficulties of finding staff and staff retention. She noted that many childcare professionals truly enjoy and value their work, but can no longer work due to low wages. Many individuals working in child care seek employment through public school districts or non-childcare employers for better compensation. Dallago advocated for competitive salaries in early childhood education to retain teachers. She noted there must be a change in the mental mindset surrounding child care to prevent wasteful spending as a reaction to the crisis and to shift towards issue prevention. She suggested including child care and early education in the planning, discussions, and budgeting for social services, mental health, and the education of K-12. She proposed funding programs such as PA Pre-K Counts and PA Keystone STARS to improve quality initiatives consistently with increases rather than decreases. She noted that these programs only exist with state funding. She discussed reviewing and improving existing programs, such as the Child and Adult Food Care Program (CACFP). She advocated for state funding reimbursements to handle the true costs of food, the nutrition aide, and the administrators needed to effectively meet regulations. The sharing of grants and resources applicable to childcare centers by communities and stakeholders was discussed. Additionally, ongoing market exposure was emphasized as a potential solution for promoting long-term careers in child care.

Kim Bastian, *Regional Advocacy Program Ambassador, Pennsylvania Child Care Association*

Bastian noted that early childhood education is crucial for children’s lifelong success and community development. She discussed how childcare professionals face low pay, often averaging \$12 to \$13 per hour. It was emphasized that many early childcare professionals are making the minimum wage. Childcare programs struggle financially, with personnel expenses consuming a large portion of budgets, limiting their ability to pay adequate wages. The pandemic exacerbated existing challenges in the childcare industry, leading to closures and reduced services due to staffing shortages. Access to affordable and high-quality child care is limited, especially in rural areas, due to factors like distance, transportation issues, and high turnover rates. The economic impact of inadequate child care is significant, costing families, employers, and the economy billions annually. Many childcare programs have lengthy waiting lists due to staffing shortages, further exacerbating the challenges for parents, including limited operating hours and scarce options for non-traditional work hours.

The second panel noted that the early childhood education field is facing a critical breaking point as degreed and credentialed educators leave due to inadequate compensation. Furthermore, the panel discussed the strain on families and parents seeking and relying on child care to maintain employment and the financial struggles that come along with affording child care. This crisis threatens the quality of early childhood education and the relationships crucial for children’s development. Additional investments in the early childhood workforce are necessary to support

both the economy and the well-being of young children. The panel noted that child care benefits families and helps to support workforce availability.

Thank You

Thank you to the hearing participants who presented testimony: Andrea Heberlein, *Executive Director, Pennsylvania Early Learning Investment Commission*; Dr. Leah Spangler, *President and CEO, The Learning Lamp and Ignite Education Solutions*; Natalie Renew, *Executive Director, Home Grown*; Karen Grimm-Thomas, *Early Childhood Education Strategy Advisor, The Pennsylvania Key*; Robert S. Carl, Jr., *President and CEO, Schuylkill Chamber of Commerce*; Samantha Chivinski, *Executive Vice President, Schuylkill Chamber of Commerce*; Mary Ann Devlin, *Executive Director, Child Development, Inc.*; Michelle Dallago, *Director and Head of School, Perception Early Learning, Montessori*; Kim Bastian, *Regional Advocacy Program Ambassador, Pennsylvania Child Care Association*.

An additional **thank you** to the participants who submitted written testimony: Steve Doster, *State Director, ReadyNation*; Gina Cappel, *Director, Jerusalem Child Care and Early Learning Center*; Katie Hetherington-Cunfer, *Director of Government and Community Relations, Greater Reading Chamber Alliance*; Holli Zelinsky, *The Doodle Bug Preschool and Daycare Center*; Jill Simons, *Co-owner, Sisters Early Learning Center*; Laura Manion, *President, Chester County Chamber of Business and Industry*.

Scan QR code for the public hearing agenda, testimony, and recording.



Center for Rural Pennsylvania Board of Directors

Chairman, Senator Gene Yaw | Vice Chairman, Representative Eddie Day Pashinski

Secretary, Dr. Nancy Falvo, Pennsylvania Western University Clarion | Treasurer, Mr. Stephen M. Brame, Governor’s Representative
Senator Judy Schwank | Representative Dan Moul | Mr. Richard Esch, University of Pittsburgh | Dr. Timothy Kelsey, Pennsylvania State University
Ms. Shannon M. Munro, Pennsylvania College of Technology | Dr. Charles Patterson, Shippensburg University of Pennsylvania
Ms. Susan Snelick, Northern Pennsylvania Regional College | Mr. Darrin Youker, Governor’s Representative

Center for Rural Pennsylvania Staff

Executive Director, Kyle C. Kopko, Ph.D., J.D. | Assistant Director, Laura R. Dimino, Ph.D. | Senior Policy Analyst, Jonathan Johnson
Communications Manager, Katie Park | Quantitative Data Analyst, Michaela Miller | Office Manager, Linda Hinson

625 Forster St., Room 902, Harrisburg, PA 17120
717-787-9555 | www.rural.pa.gov