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High quality early education leads to lifelong success for children and their communities, but this cannot happen without educators cultivating and facilitating these important learning experiences.

We all know the critical importance of the child care field, yet low pay – averaging \$12-\$13 an hour is common for most child care employees. Early Childhood educators endure poverty rates that are 7.7 times higher than elementary school teachers.

Child Care personnel frequently takes up 70% or more of a program's budget. As a result, even though programs charge parents a weekly tuition – they can only pay educators a very low pay and many programs say they have trouble keeping the lights on. This was an industry that had struggled with their budget before the pandemic, but during the pandemic and after, many programs could not manage and closed or reduced the services/age groups they cared for due to lack of staff. Closing a specific age group classroom is a hardship for parents who may not find that age group care anywhere else in their community. In this county we find child care programs that had offered infant and toddler care in the past, can no longer offer it because of lack of staff.

US Families are spending average of 24% of their annual income on childcare. All families should have available to them a safe, nurturing and healthy environment for their child. In our state we have home based and center based child care regulated and available to families. Center based care is an expensive service to provide, mainly because of

(importantly) low adult-to-child ratio – especially for infant and toddler care.

Rural families and child care programs have some of the greatest challenges in accessing and providing child care due to the unique realities of rural areas including few high quality child care options available, distance and travel, limited transportation, higher teacher turnover, few qualified individuals living in the region and lower family incomes. The affordability of and access to high quality child care create barriers to finding and maintaining employment. Child care is the workforce behind the workforce and access to reliable, high quality care impacts worker and business productivity.

A 2023 report from ReadyNation and the Early Learning Investment Commission found that the impact of insufficient child care can cost PA families, employers and the economy \$6.65 billion annually. According to the report 56% of Pennsylvania parents surveyed reported being late for work due to child care struggles, half or more reported missing full days of work, leaving work early or being distracted at work, and more than half of parents said problems with child care hurt their efforts at work.

Many child care programs throughout the state and in Schuylkill county just recently reported lengthy waiting lists for their programs. Due to lack of staff they cannot enroll more children into their program. Some programs have shortened their hours of operation as well. This is another hardship for rural parents that may need to travel more to their employment or work longer hours/non traditional hours. Options for evening and weekend care are scarce if non-existent.

## **Wages are inadequate and inequitable:**

**(The following statistics are from a wage analysis and survey of approx. 30,000 child care educators in PA. Conducted by Children First, OCDEL and the Dept of Labor and Industry.)**

- In 100% of the 67 PA Counties, earnings failed to meet the cost of living. Earnings are not sufficient to cover basic necessities like housing, transportation, food and child care.
- Educators struggle to cover costs of necessities on their salaries.
- Almost 50% of educators say they do not plan to or unsure of whether they will remain in their jobs in the next five years. More than half (53%) identified a higher salary as the most important factor in staying with their current employer.

## **Schuylkill County Parent Survey 2024:**

**As per our January 2024 Parent survey: (152 parent responses)**

- Most parents have not one else as a back up plan to help with child care, (78.9%) if their child care closed it would be a hardship to be able to continue working. (84.2%)
- 98% felt their child was in a safe, healthy and nurturing environment.
- Asking parents what they value most about their child's program gave an overwhelming response of caring, compassionate teachers and knowing their child is safe and learning and growing!

## **Sharing some county statistics:**

Of the 180,480 children under the age of 5 living in families eligible for Child Care Works (CCW) subsidy program, only 25% are receiving assistance to pay for child care. Only 45% are in high quality child care.

Child Care Works enrollment: 286 children under 5 and 127 are infants and toddlers

CCW enrolment in high-quality programs: 83 (29%) children under 5 years. 29 (22.8%) children that are infants or toddlers.

CCW enrollment that are in programs not meeting high quality standards: 71% of children under 5 years and 77.2% of infants and toddlers.

Total child care providers serving children under 5 years: 52 total (39 programs with CCW enrollment) 11 high quality all with CCW enrollment.

Center based programs: 36 (30 with CCW enrollment) 8 High quality all with CCW enrollment.

Group based programs: 9 (8 with CCW enrollment) 2 High quality all with CCW enrollment.

Family based programs: 7 (1 with CCW enrollment) 1 High quality with CCW enrollment.

Total provider capacity 2,620 of which 901 (34.4%) are high quality.

Provider capacity not high quality is 65.6%

Capacity of providers with CCW agreements: 2,480 of which 901 (36.3%) are high quality.

### **Schuylkill County Discussion highlights:**

Sharing a few comments from Child Care programs in the county regarding recruitment and retaining staff, enrollment of children in the county and supporting community. (taken from a Dec. 6, 2023 Schuylkill County Child Care discussion at Schuylkill County Chamber)

- Child care staff can make more money and have benefits at other types of employment in their community – convenience store, warehouse, gas station. Currently many child care staff have 2 jobs.
- Most child care programs cannot offer any benefits such as health care or 401K plan. These would be helpful in recruiting and maintaining staff.
- Many people are no longer going to college for a BA or Assoc. in Early Childhood, because they do not feel it is worth it in the long run. They would get employed at a child care program after graduation and not make the dollars needed for the type of economy we have today. Many use child care as a stepping stone to working in School Districts where they can use their degree but not be in the child care field.
- Long waiting lists at majority of programs from 60 to 300 children on a list. The waiting lists include parents that were approved for subsidy and have the money available for them, but there are no openings for them in the programs that are located near their home.
- In many cases, capacity of enrollment is not nearly being met and therefore, the income of the programs have diminished greatly. An example that stood out in this group was a program licensed for enrollment capacity of 63 children and currently has 13 enrolled because the owner/director only has two other staff besides herself working there at this time. She cannot enroll more children until she gets more staff. She is currently using her own money to pay the remaining two staff.

**Conclusion:**

The Early Childhood education field truly is on a brink of a breakdown. The field is losing degreed/credentialed educators because they are not earning enough to keep up with the cost of living in their region. There is a deep concern about the quality of early childhood programming that children will receive if this workforce crisis continues. Consistent and positive relationships with caregivers shape a child's experience.

There is a need for additional investments in the early childhood workforce, for the sake of our economy and, especially, the sake of our youngest children. Early learning opportunities for young children cannot be achieved without addressing the needs of the early childhood workforce.

Child care is essential for working families. Therefore, investing in child care providers is an investment in working families and in our economic future.