

Public Policy & Legislative Agenda 2025-2026

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 coalition partners and NAEYC's strategic direction.

Current Landscape

Pennsylvania's early care and education system continues to experience staffing shortages, with the most severe being in child care. This is impacting families who need child care in order to work. According to a September 2024 Start Strong PA staffing survey of 1,140 respondents (17.6 percent of total open certified child care programs):

- 85 percent reported teacher shortages
- More than 3,000 unfilled staff positions
- More than 25,300 additional children could have been served at respondents' sites if they were fully staffed
- 92 percent reported challenges recruiting teachers
- 69 percent reported challenges retaining teachers

Low wages are the most significant factor driving the child care staffing crisis. According to the March 2024 Independent Fiscal Office report, the average child care teacher in Pennsylvania earns \$15.15/hour. Child care earnings fail to meet the cost of living in all 67 counties. 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.

With one-time American Rescue Plan Act relief having expired, it is more important than ever to build a stronger, more equitable early childhood care and education system with greater investments at the federal and state levels. Without substantial and sustainable investments, child care programs will continue to face these challenges that burden families, the professionals that serve them, and the economy the sector supports. Local chambers of commerce across Pennsylvania recognize that a state investment that directly helps child care providers attract and keep their teachers is vital to maintaining and reopening classrooms and increasing availability of child care for families so that they may remain in the workforce and contribute to the economy.

2024 General Election Impact

The November 2024 General Election resulted in more significant changes to Pennsylvania's congressional delegation than in the Pennsylvania General Assembly. The U.S. Senate power shifted to the Republican Party, with the Pennsylvania U.S. Senate seat up for election flipping from Democrat to Republican. In the U.S. House of Representatives, the Republican Party maintained control with two Pennsylvania seats flipping from Democrat to Republican making

the current delegation ten Republicans and seven Democrats.

In the Pennsylvania House of Representatives, the Democratic Party maintained control of the chamber by one seat. Sixteen new Pennsylvania House of Representative members were elected, 11 Republicans and five Democrats. In the Pennsylvania Senate, four new Pennsylvania Senate members were elected with the Republican Party maintaining control of the chamber, with 28 Republicans and 22 Democrats. One incumbent was defeated, flipping the seat to Republican and a seat held by Republicans flipped to the Democratic Party. Three of the four new senators served in the state House of Representatives prior.

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

1. Improve compensation for early childhood professionals

This work aligns with the Start Strong PA and Pre-K for PA advocacy campaigns, of which PennAEYC is the administrative lead and a principal partner, along with nine and eight other organizations, respectively.

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.¹ 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 remain critical.

The Power to the Profession initiative has defined the early childhood profession by establishing a unifying framework for career pathways, addressing 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 includes education qualifications for each STAR level, Pennsylvania's child care teachers are still not adequately compensated, with 21 percent relying on government assistance (e.g., SNAP, TANF, Medicaid)² and earning an average wage of \$15.15/hour, according to the Independent Fiscal Office. 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 implementing a recruitment and retention initiative utilizing new and recurring state funding to increase child care staff compensation, which will lead to more high-quality programs in Pennsylvania for our youngest children.

¹ [From neurons to neighborhoods: The science of early childhood development](#). Phillips, D.A., & Shonkoff, J. P. (Eds.). National Academies Press. 2000

² https://static1.squarespace.com/static/5c2e545d0bdba3cf1389658c/t/6407aa7a9b250b7b707d3dc7/1678223996782/PA_Child_Care_Wages_1-23.pdf

In addition, policy changes are needed related to paying programs based on the cost of care and moving away from market rate surveys. Our pre-kindergarten goal which follows also notes the importance of providing a rate that will allow for appropriate teacher compensation as well.

2. Increase equitable access to developmentally appropriate, high-quality, affordable child care, particularly for each and every infant and toddler and provide more stable and cost-based payments to child care providers.

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 and language development, social and emotional development and social achievement.³ 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 July 2024, only 96,300 children were enrolled. With more than 168,000 children under five years and more than 98,000 infants and toddlers eligible for child care subsidy in Pennsylvania (71 percent and 75 percent unserved, respectively), this will continue as a priority.⁴

Office of Child Development and Early Learning (OCDEL) May 2024 data demonstrated only 44 percent of children under age five and 45 percent of infants and toddlers receiving subsidized care were in Keystone STAR 3 or 4 programs. There are approximately 2,500 children in subsidized child care suspended status because either there is no provider available, the provider is at capacity or the provider is unable to meet the child's needs. The number of children in suspended status has been increasing largely due to the staffing crisis, which has resulted in classroom and program closures. Investment in recruitment and retention is imperative to increasing equitable access to child care. Improving access to high-quality programs can be achieved by substantial and sustainable state and federal investments for providers participating in the subsidy payment system and additional 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 cost estimation study with broad stakeholder input that informs a new alternative model that accounts for appropriate teacher compensation and other provider costs. A policy change is also needed to increase the use of grant funded slots particularly for infants and toddlers through the child care subsidy program to increase access to child care for children and families. Grant funded slots also provide a stable funding source for child care programs and will help build supply. As a result of a requirement of the Child Care and Development Block Grant final rule released in April 2024, OCDEL will also be moving to payments to providers based on enrollment, rather than attendance, providing for more stable funding for programs.

³ [Infant-Toddler Child Care Fact Sheet](#), ZERO TO THREE, 2021.

⁴ <https://papartnerships.maps.arcgis.com/apps/instant/portfolio/index.html?appid=14d1138d1d524648bc25ea3c848ed95c>

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 investments also have been linked to reduced crime and incarceration rates and less reliance on public assistance programs. An analysis of Pennsylvania's Pre-K Counts program by the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill showed that children who participate are positively impacted compared to children who did not. Children participating in Pre-K Counts have significantly higher language and math skills and gain an additional four to five months of learning compared to their peers, which is a substantial difference in development at that age.⁵ The analysis suggested access to high-quality pre-kindergarten can also help students diminish summer learning loss, which can be up to a full month of learning based on a study by Brookings. The impact study noted consistent results statewide regardless of geographic region, the percent of 3-year-olds enrolled, or how urban or rural of a location. This indicates a need to emphasize quality in implementation and curriculum and providing participating children equitable educational opportunities.

Pennsylvania families below 300 percent of the federal poverty guidelines qualify for publicly funded pre-kindergarten programs. However, due to limited funding, only 52 percent of eligible families have access to these programs. This equates to nearly 78,171 eligible children living in rural, suburban, and urban communities that do not have access to high-quality, publicly funded pre-kindergarten. PennAEYC supports rate increases for the Pre-K Counts and Head Start Supplemental Assistance Program that reflect the true cost of providing high-quality pre-kindergarten, including appropriate teacher compensation. PennAEYC also 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. Expanding access to high-quality pre-kindergarten also provides a more equitable opportunity for early learning. Researchers at Penn State University that looked at Pre-K Counts and Child Care Works found disparities in pre-kindergarten access. The report recommends that the number of Pre-K Counts programs in historically marginalized communities should be increased, and policies should reserve a certain amount of funding for providers located in areas more likely to serve Black children⁶.

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 Thriving PA campaign 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 focuses on enhancing the child's physical (including vision and hearing), cognitive, communicative, social, emotional and adaptive development while providing parent education and support as appropriate. EI

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

⁶ https://cecr.ed.psu.edu/sites/default/files/CECR.ECE.Report_2.14_FINAL.pdf

enhances the family's capacity to meet the developmental needs of their child in the family's natural setting, places with settings such as the child's home, child care program, Head Start program, etc. Investments in EI reduces the need for special education services in the future.

The program is divided into two parts, Part B (Preschool), serving children from age three until they enter school, and Part C (Infant/Toddler), serving children from birth until their third birthday. The Thriving PA Campaign is currently focused on Infant/Toddler EI, with plans to address preschool EI in the future. In 2022-2023, 48,199 children were served in the Infant/Toddler EI program in Pennsylvania, and 64,155 children were served in the preschool program. The Infant/Toddler program is overseen by OCDEL and run by individual county agencies, a system that can create geographical disparities and inequitable access.

Priority advocacy strategies are:

- Serving all children who can benefit from Infant/Toddler EI through outreach, referral and enrollment
 - Continuing to collect data from OCDEL to better understand the Infant/Toddler EI program and advocate for additional data collection needed.
- Ensuring Infant/Toddler EI services offer the quality needed to make a difference
 - Ensuring all counties are consistently using Informed Clinical Opinion as a way to determine children eligible for the program.
 - Advocating for increased budget funds to provide program funding to counties to increase the quantity, quality and sustainability of services.
- Achieving equitable access in Infant/Toddler EI
 - Increase the availability and the collection of county-level data to better understand and address inequitable access to EI for infants and toddlers, whether through language spoken, race, geographic location or other factors.
- Addressing mental health needs of infants and toddlers in Infant/Toddler EI
 - Ensuring county agencies responsible for Part C and mental health/behavioral health (MH/BH) services are creating a clear pathway to services, through Infant/Toddler EI and/or MH/BH.
- Partnering with Medicaid to improve Infant/Toddler 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 and potential solutions, with a 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 and 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.

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.

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.***