



**Emily Neff, Director of Public Policy, Trying Together  
Written Testimony for the Basic Education Funding Commission**

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**Pittsburgh**

Chair Sturla, Chair Phillips-Hill, and members of the Basic Education Funding Commission,

Thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony focused on early childhood education.

Trying Together supports high-quality care and education for young children by providing advocacy, community resources, and professional growth opportunities for the needs and rights of children, their families, and the individuals who interact with them. Trying Together is pleased to partner with PennAEYC to support the Pittsburgh Chapter of PennAEYC. Additionally, Trying Together is a principal partner of the statewide coalition Early Learning PA (ELPA) which includes the Pre-K for PA, Start Strong PA, Childhood Begins at Home, and Thriving PA campaigns. The campaign priorities cover infant and toddler child care, pre-k, evidence-based home visiting, and early intervention. Regionally, Trying Together partners with the Allegheny County Department of Human Services and The Alliance for Infants and Toddlers to support the Early Learning Resource Center (ELRC) Region 5 in Allegheny County. ELRCs are single points of contact for families, early learning providers, and communities to access information and resources, including child care subsidies for families and quality coaching and technical assistance for professionals.

**Overview - Why ECE?**

The role of early childhood education must be addressed in adequate and equitable school funding to ensure all children in our state have the opportunity to start strong, succeed, and thrive beginning with high-quality pre-k.

Throughout public testimony regarding K-12 funding in Pennsylvania, access to pre-kindergarten has consistently been mentioned from educational researchers to administrators and teachers. Dr. Matthew Kelly pointed out the great need for pre-kindergarten in his testimony estimating it would cost an additional \$1.1 billion for school districts to serve three- and four-year olds who are eligible for pre-k but not served. Dr. Steven Barnett, founder and co-director of the National Institute for Early Education Research at Rutgers University presented research on the benefits of pre-k during the school funding trial - citing the gains and successes for students who had access to high-quality pre-k, especially for young children living in poverty. Superintendents shared that children entering kindergarten who did not attend pre-k struggled with foundational cognitive, social, and emotional skills compared to their peers who had the opportunity.

Additionally, the federal Every Students Succeeds Act (ESSA) envisions a pre-kindergarten through grade 12 continuum. ESSA encourages alignment and collaboration in the birth through third grade continuum by providing more flexibility for states and districts to use federal investments for evidence-based early education opportunities. The state ESSA plan includes pre-k, identifying it as a factor for students to become college and career ready. The state board's Master Plan for Basic Education also highlights the importance of high-quality pre-k and highly qualified teachers.



## **The Early Childhood Continuum**

Often early childhood education is characterized only as pre-k, however, the early childhood continuum is defined as birth through age eight.<sup>1</sup> In Pennsylvania the early childhood certification is for pre-k through fourth grade which is aligned with research-based child developmental periods. While my testimony will focus primarily on expanding access to pre-k for three- and four- year olds, pre-k is only one part of the early childhood continuum that begins at birth and spans into the early years of elementary school.

Early learning experiences are cumulative and serve as the foundation for all future learning. Research shows that the most rapid period of brain development occurs in the first five years.<sup>2</sup> Yet the way early care and education is structured and financed does not align with what we know about early childhood development. Unlike K-12 education, birth-to-five opportunities are not considered a “public good”.

Pennsylvania also has established the [Early Childhood Learning Standards](#) which are research-based standards that build off each other in age and developmental stages beginning with infants and continuing through second grade. The standards include foundational skills in the following areas: approaches to learning through play; language and literacy development; mathematical thinking and expression; scientific thinking and technology; social studies thinking; creative thinking and expression; health, wellness, and physical development; and social and emotional development. Hands-on, play-based experiences are how young children learn best. During these years, children master basic skills to lay the scaffolding for developing more complex academic skills throughout their educational journey.<sup>3</sup>

The benefits of high-quality early learning (birth through age five) reach their full impact when children continue in high-quality, developmentally appropriate early elementary school experiences. Most importantly, this includes developmentally appropriate, high-quality kindergarten. Currently, kindergarten is not mandatory in Pennsylvania and some districts still only offer half-day programs which can be as little time as two and a half hours a day.

The transition to kindergarten marks a critical point in the lives of children and families and serves as a bridge for children and families between the birth-to-five system and the K-12 system. Hi5!, led by the United Way, Allegheny Intermediate Unit, and Trying Together, engages with nearly all 43 school districts in Allegheny County to ensure on-time kindergarten registration and supports schools to implement effective kindergarten transition activities. Through our work with Hi5!, kindergarten teachers and elementary school principals have shared that children who have mastered basic social, emotional, and communication skills in pre-k are ready to begin mastering the core academic skills needed to read by third grade. A survey of kindergarten teachers found that 96% agree that students who attend a high-quality pre-k program are set up for success in kindergarten.<sup>4</sup>

## **Pennsylvania’s Early Care and Education Landscape**

High-quality pre-k builds on high-quality infant and toddler child care. It’s important to acknowledge how pre-k exists within the early care and education system. The Office of Child Development and Early Learning (OCDEL) administers birth-to-five programming and is jointly overseen by the Department of Human Services and the Department of Education.



As one part of the early care and education system, pre-k is offered in various settings known as a mixed delivery system. This includes child care centers, group child care homes, family child care homes, public schools, and private schools. The options of a mixed delivery system offer parental choice and meet the needs of families. Early care and education is a complex market and system that is mostly private-pay with many families paying nearly as much as their rent/mortgage and in-state college tuition. While Pennsylvania provides income-eligible families with public funding for early care and education programs, there is still a great deal of unmet need for families and the reimbursement rates don't cover the full cost of care for early learning programs.

**State funded birth-to-five programs include:**

- Child Care Works - subsidy program for families with an income at 200% of the Federal Poverty Level (FPL) or below and who meet the work requirements; for children ages birth through age 12
- Pre-K Counts - state funded high-quality pre-k program for three- and four-year-olds from families with an income at or below 300% of the FPL
- School district pre-k
- Head Start Supplemental Assistance Program - additional state funding to federal grantees to serve three- and four-year-olds living in families at or below 100% of the FPL
- Evidence-Based Home Visiting - Services include in-home prevention services to support and empower families with children from birth to age five funded through the federal Maternal Infant Early Childhood Home Visiting Program (MIECHV), State Family Centers, and Nurse Family Partnership
- Early Intervention - provides special education and intervention services for children ages birth through five; Part C (infants and toddlers) & Part B (preschoolers)

Unfortunately, not all children have access to high-quality early learning experiences. Only 65,922 eligible children attend high-quality, publicly funded pre-k, while more than 87,000 eligible children are unserved. An additional 4,364 pre-k classrooms are needed to serve the remaining eligible children based on the criteria above. If the state wants to provide high-quality pre-k for all three- and four-year-olds across Pennsylvania, an additional 6,451 classrooms are needed.<sup>5</sup> Currently, there are 350 school districts without a public pre-k program.

Established in 2014, the Pre-K for PA campaign has a vision that every three- and four-year-old in Pennsylvania will have access to high-quality pre-k. The campaign supports the need for continued investments to provide our youngest children access to a quality early childhood education.

**Pre-K for PA defines high-quality, publicly funded pre-k as:**

- State- and Federal-Funded Head Start
- Pre-K Counts
- School district pre-kindergarten
- Philadelphia pre-k (PHLpreK)
- Child care provided in Keystone STAR 3-4 centers and group child care homes participating in the Child Care Works subsidy program for preschool-age children



**Four types of high-quality providers are eligible to receive Pre-K Counts funding to support their pre-kindergarten program including:**

- Head Start grantees
- Keystone STAR 3-4 child care centers and group child care homes
- private academic nursery schools
- school districts

The mixed-delivery system of pre-k programming is a strength of Pennsylvania’s current ECE system, and offers the potential to expand access for families with a variety of options. For example, a pre-k program may run for as little as three hours a day and as long as six, however, most families need at least eight hours of programming for their child to align with their work schedule. Child care providers offer the before and after care (wraparound services) to supplement the pre-k program. The majority of Pre-K Counts providers are in high-quality child care programs, accounting for 46% of the Pre-K Counts locations across the state.<sup>6</sup> As access to pre-k is considered as a factor for an adequate and equitable education, pre-k expansion must occur across all settings in order to meet the needs of three- and four-year-olds.

Expanding access to high-quality pre-k provides an opportunity for a more equitable approach to early learning experiences. A recent report from Penn State University found that white preschoolers accounted for the majority of program participants in Pre-K Counts, and white children were increasingly more likely to be enrolled in a high-quality pre-k program compared to Black children. White children were enrolled in high-quality programs at higher rates than Black children.<sup>7</sup> Recommendations called for Pennsylvania to increase funding for pre-k access and to serve more Black children from urban and high-poverty communities.

Currently, full-day Pre-K Counts slots are reimbursed at a base rate of \$10,000, and half-day slots are reimbursed at a base rate of \$5,000. HSSAP slots are reimbursed at a base rate of \$13,413. Child care programs participating in public pre-k programs rely on the reimbursements to help supplement the high cost of caring for infants and toddlers, and to operate their programs, and retain staff. Continuing to invest funding for increased rates will help to stabilize the sector and help address the ECE workforce crisis which is essential in expanding access for young children.

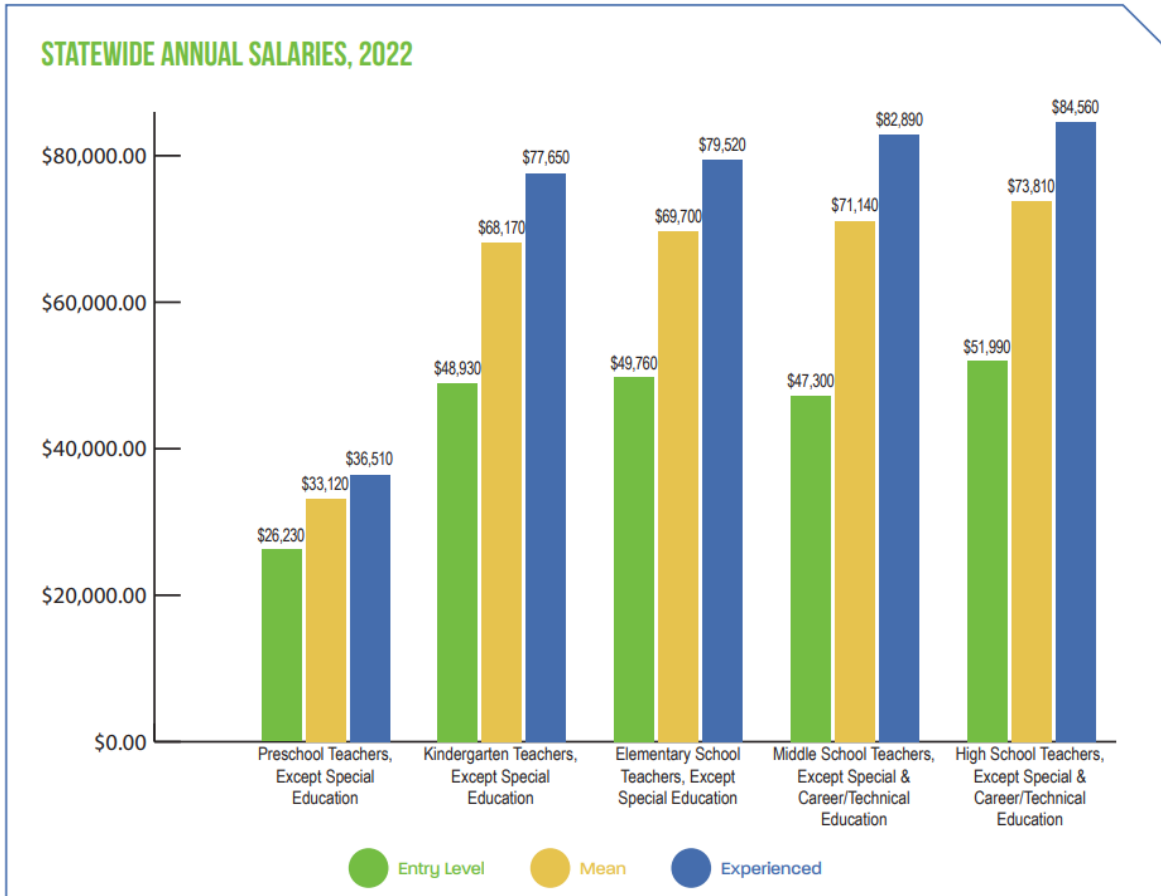
**The Importance of Early Childhood Educators**

I recognize there have been questions and concerns raised about 2,800 unfilled seats in the Pre-K Counts program. Any account of unfilled seats is a point in time snapshot and the number fluctuates over the year, just as an elementary school’s enrollment may change. However, the number of unfilled pre-k seats does not paint a full picture of the current situation and misses the root cause and solution for serving more children. We know the demand for high-quality pre-k is high and the majority of eligible children remain unserved. The reality for families is that they are stuck on a waiting list for high-quality pre-k while the nearby child care program has closed classrooms because there aren’t enough qualified staff. This is an issue of supply of high-quality teachers.

[In a February 2023 survey from the Start Strong PA campaign, statewide early learning programs reported that they had nearly 4,000 open staffing positions resulting in more than 38,300 children on waiting lists.](#) Programs in Allegheny County reported more than 500 open positions leaving 5,581 children on waiting lists.

Early childhood education is among the lowest paying professions in the United States, yet the country’s workforce is dependent upon the field to teach and care for their children while they are at work. In the state of Pennsylvania, the average hourly wage of an early education teacher is \$12.43 an hour which equates to under \$26,000 annually.<sup>8</sup> The retention and recruitment challenges have placed the industry in the middle of a hiring crisis. The current public funds do not enable child care programs to pay a livable wage and many owners/directors have shared that they “can’t compete with the hourly wages at Target or Sheetz.” Programs also can’t continue to raise the rates of middle-class working families enough to cover the cost of wages. Parents can’t afford to pay anymore and child care providers won’t survive with the current funding system.

The scarcity of qualified educators remaining in the field presents many issues for access to high-quality care and education which leaves early learning programs, families, and communities at a loss. The graph below is pulled from Pennsylvania Partnerships for Children’s 2023 [State of Early Care and Education](#) report and compares the earnings of early childhood teachers to their counterparts in K-12 (using Pennsylvania Department of Labor & Industry data from Occupational Employment and Wage Statistics).





A skilled and stable teaching workforce maintains a high-quality early learning environment. While quality expects and demands the appropriate knowledge and credentials of professionals, the compensation for pre-k teachers remains significantly lower than their colleagues in K-12 settings. The following table\* compares lead teacher education and training for Head Start, Pre-K Counts, and elementary school teachers with a Pre-K-4 teaching certificate.

Head Start	Pre-K Counts	PK-4
<p>Education: Associate's, Bachelor's, or advanced degree in child development or ECE- or in a related field with coursework equivalent to a major relating to ECE and experience teaching preschool children</p> <p>Complete a minimum of 15 clock hours of professional development per year</p>	<p>Education: Bachelor's degree and ECE certificate</p> <p>Must complete a minimum of 24 post baccalaureate credits to convert from Instructional Level I to Level II within six years</p> <p>Participate in a PDE approved teacher induction program</p> <p>150 hours of Act 48 approved professional development every five years to maintain certification</p>	<p>Education: Bachelor's degree and ECE certificate</p> <p>Must complete a minimum of 24 post baccalaureate credits to convert from Instructional Level I to Level II within six years</p> <p>Participate in PDE approved teacher induction program</p> <p>150 hours of Act 48 approved professional development every five years to maintain certification</p>

\*Retrieved from the Pre-K for PA and Trying Together report [Invest in Quality: A Case for Paying Closer to What High-Quality Pre-K Costs](#).

Regarding concerns about funds for the unfilled seats, programs are still spending the funds on the current children in the program to ensure high-quality care and education, just as school districts do when student enrollment declines. While teachers are the center of quality, and personnel accounts for the majority of costs at early learning programs, basic expenditures such as rent, utilities, classroom materials, and food also impact the quality of care and education provided. Well-equipped and resourced facilities play an important role in developing the cognitive, social, emotional, and physical skills of children. No program is sitting on funds, they are investing in their staff, in quality environments, and ultimately making good use of the funds to meet the needs of the children in their care.

**Short- and Long-Term Academic, Health, Social, and Economic Benefits**

Regardless of family income, research has shown both short- and long-term academic and health benefits for children who attended high-quality pre-k. The impacts are even greater for children facing systemic economic and social challenges, helping to reduce achievement gaps between low-income and affluent children.<sup>9</sup> Over the course of the academic career, benefits include reduced grade repetition, reduced special education placements, and increased graduation rates. Health impacts such as reduced heart disease, depression, substance use, and diabetes have also benefited participants over their lifetime.<sup>10</sup>



Specifically, a 2021 study of Pennsylvania’s Pre-K Counts program by the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, found children who participated in the program had higher levels of language and math skills and gained between four and five months of learning compared to children who did not participate.<sup>11</sup>

In addition to academic and health benefits, there are economic and societal benefits for investing early. The return on investments estimates range from \$2 to \$17 for every dollar spent on high-quality pre-k programming.<sup>12</sup>

The early care and education field is the workforce behind the workforce and a critical piece to economic recovery. Pre-k is not only essential to supporting the growth of our youngest learners, it also serves as part of the infrastructure for getting families back to work.

For nearly 20 years, Pennsylvania has continuously invested in high-quality pre-k for eligible three- and four-year-olds through Pre-K Counts and the Head Start Supplemental Assistance Program. In the 2022-23 budget, policymakers supported a historic investment of \$79 million, increasing the total investment to over \$390 million, thanks to bipartisan support. Unfortunately in the most recent budget, pre-k did not receive an increase and 33 counties lost Pre-K Counts seats, including 101 in Allegheny County.

[In a report published by Pennsylvania Partnerships for Children in 2022, Pennsylvania ranks 14th in per capita state spending compared to the other 26 states with similar quality ratings for their pre-k programs.](#)

The state’s per capita spending is \$1,103, far less than neighboring West Virginia, which spends nearly 2.5 times the amount of Pennsylvania per capita on high-quality pre-k education.

## **Closing**

The evidence is clear that access to high-quality early childhood education provides a strong foundation and offers a pathway to future success. Unfortunately, Pennsylvania currently falls short in providing these opportunities and investing in our early care and education workforce.

I appreciate this opportunity to testify and share more about why early childhood education is an important factor for a comprehensive and equitable education. The rapid brain growth in the early years demonstrates the need to ensure all children have access. High-quality early learning opportunities are the basis for future learning and skill development.

A coordinated and connected early childhood continuum involves early childhood programs, school districts, families, and stakeholders in the community, and local, state, and federal government. The need for a mixed-delivery system and pay parity cannot be overstated as a foundation for success in pre-k expansion. Pennsylvania has the infrastructure to work towards providing every child—regardless of race, ethnicity, geography or income—access to high-quality early care and education. Thank you for your consideration of early childhood education in the review of basic education funding.

## Sources

<sup>1</sup> National Association for the Education of Young Children. Appendix B:Glossary.

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<sup>2</sup> Center on the Developing Child, Harvard University. (n.d.). InBrief: The Science of Early Childhood Development.

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<sup>3</sup> National Association for the Education of Young Children. (2020). Developmentally Appropriate Practice Position Statement.

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<sup>4</sup> Pre-K for PA. (2019). Ready to Succeed: Kindergarten Teachers Support Investments in High-Quality Pre-K.

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<sup>5,6</sup> Pennsylvania Partnerships for Children (2022). High-Quality, Publicly Funded Pre-Kindergarten, 2023.

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<sup>7</sup> Babbs Hollett, K. & Frankenberg, E. (2022). Racial Disparities in Preschool Access: Differences in Enrollment and Quality within and between Two State Programs in Pennsylvania. Center for Education and Civil Rights and Penn State College of Education.

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<sup>8</sup> Children First and Start Strong PA (2023). The Cost of Working in Early Childhood Education.

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<sup>9</sup> Washington Center for Equitable Growth. (2021). A Cost-Benefit Analysis of the American Families Plan's Proposed Investment in a Nationwide Public Preschool Program.

<https://equitablegrowth.org/a-cost-benefit-analysis-of-the-american-families-plans-proposed-investment-in-a-nationwide-public-preschool-program/>

<sup>10</sup> Gibbs, H. & Malik, R. (2022). Child Care Spending Generates Massive Dividends. Center for American Progress.

<https://www.americanprogress.org/article/child-care-spending-generates-massive-dividends/>

<sup>11</sup> Pennsylvania Partnerships for Children. (2021). The Results Are In: Pennsylvania's Pre-K Counts Program Makes a Big Difference.

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<sup>12</sup> Meloy, B., Gardner, M., & Darling-Hammond, L. (2019). Untangling the evidence on preschool effectiveness: Insights for policymakers. Palo Alto, CA: Learning Policy Institute.

### **Additional Resources**

[Early Care and Education Landscape](#)

[Pre-K and Child Care Public Funding](#)

[Trying Together Public Policy Agenda](#)