



Pennsylvania

Innovation Brief: Pennsylvania's New Initiative Makes Bold Asks for Infants and Toddlers

OVERVIEW

Start Strong PA, a coalition of early childhood advocates, launched a multi-year, statewide initiative in January 2019 to secure new investments for infants and toddlers. The group collected data and engaged the business community and providers to inform its efforts. After a 2% net increase in child care funding in 2019 due to federal investments, the coalition brought forward a bold ask of \$280 million, split evenly between state and federal funds, for high-quality infant and toddler child care. Start Strong PA will continue to support a bold approach for infants and toddlers.

THE PURPOSE

In Pennsylvania, only 34% of infants and toddlers currently receiving child care subsidies are in a high-quality child care program. Early childhood leaders in Pennsylvania recognized inequities in the system and gaps in meeting the needs of families. Start Strong PA is working to build on the state's previous successes with Pre-K and show state and community leaders that a stronger early childhood support system for infants and toddlers from prenatal to three can help solve a number of challenges currently facing young Pennsylvanian families.

To best address the need for more high-quality child care, state leaders knew they needed to gather more data. In 2017, they formed a coalition of ten partners and turned their attention to infants and toddlers in the state. The group gathered data on existing services and consulted with child care providers spending nearly a year and a half

holding a series of focus groups, face-to-face meetings, summits, webinars, conference calls, and meetings with individual providers. In many cases, this was the first time providers had been asked for their opinions, said Diane Barber from the Pennsylvania Child Care Association (PACCA), a coalition partner that represents business providers around the state.

"We had a long conversation with the actual providers of child care services to get their input as to what our goals and our strategy would be," Barber said. "How could we improve the system of child care beyond just needing more money? We hoped having that investment with providers from the very beginning would continue to motivate them to advocate for themselves once the initiative actually started."

In 2018, Philadelphia-based organization Public Citizens for Children and Youth (PCCY) commissioned a cost study for infant and toddler care. According to PCCY, the study found that the gap between the cost of high-quality child care and the subsidy received was especially large for infants (\$7,601 higher than the current subsidy rate). Furthermore, the supply of high-quality centers in Philadelphia was low, which meant that parents receiving subsidies had more incentive to place their children in a lower-quality center.

In addition to the qualitative information gathered from providers, the PCCY Philadelphia study provided the quantitative data needed to help Start Strong PA make a data-rich case to lawmakers. The coalition was able to use the Philadelphia numbers to scale



up to a statewide level. Their cost modeling showed that \$100 million per year over a period of ten years would be needed to bring Pennsylvania's early (0-3) child care services in line with the quality of Pre-K and Kindergarten services.

THE PROPOSED APPROACH

The initiative will focus on four issues:

1. Access to high-quality care for low to middle income families
2. Sufficient funding for infant and toddler care that reflects the true costs of high-quality
3. Adequate caregiver compensation
4. Oversight, accountability, and evaluation of the system

Fortunately, public support surrounding these issues is strong. The coalition found that a large majority of Pennsylvania residents support subsidies for child care. A 2018 survey indicated 77% of Pennsylvanians supported increased funding for high-quality child care, and 82% believed the government needed to do more to make high-quality programs affordable for families in the state.

Cost modeling was just a first step in what will undoubtedly be a long process of bringing infant and toddler care up to the same level of investment as Pre-K or Kindergarten care in Pennsylvania. "It's good to put the big numbers out there and make the case for why caregivers should be paid well," said Simon Workman, who worked on the Philadelphia cost-of-care study, "but also be realistic about the fact that you're not going to change the subsidy rate or the pay of teachers overnight. So, set that long-term goal but have a few points to get there along the way."

Start Strong PA will be a multi-year effort. "We're beginning this as a five-year initiative," explained Jen DeBell from the Pennsylvania Association for the Education of Young Children (PennAEYC), one of the Start Strong PA partners who represents individual early learning professionals in the state. "We know the funding needed to give infants and

toddlers access to high-quality care will require significant investment each year. We aren't putting a final figure on it, but for the next three years we are proposing an increase of \$280 million, with the goal of securing an equal commitment from our state administration and General Assembly as well as the federal government."

WHAT THE EFFORT HOPES TO ACHIEVE

The Start Strong PA initiative will continue to rely heavily on the precedents and successes used in earlier Pre-K initiatives, according to DeBell, "We are building the structure and strategies by looking at our own Pre-K initiative and learning from that and leveraging its successes." This includes continuing to use Pennsylvania's existing QRIS, the Keystone STARS system. All certified providers (centers and home-based) are currently rated on quality indicators, and subsidies for eligible children are scaled accordingly.

The state's 2019 budget included the allocation of \$27 million in federal resources to expand access to high-quality child care for infants and toddlers. In addition to the infant and toddler child care effort, there was also a \$5 million increase for evidence-based home visiting

According to DeBell, one barrier to fully funding a statewide child care subsidy program may have been a misunderstanding regarding the nature of Pre-K services. DeBell noted that Pennsylvania lawmakers and policy leaders were often very enthusiastic about Pre-K funding but much less supportive of child care subsidies, even though the two issues are often intertwined.

In fact, DeBell said, many decision-makers are not aware that nearly half of the preschool services in Pennsylvania are being provided in high-quality child care centers. This can mean preschool teachers are paid higher wages than infant/toddler teachers in the same facility. "It is critical we invest in the continuum of early care and education moving forward to ensure children and families can access affordable, high-quality services and the programs and professionals are adequately supported."



Barber further explained the existing focus on Pre-K funding was turning 0-3 child care into a battle against Pre-K. “There wasn’t enough money for everybody, and that created a competition between centers serving higher-income families who had to pay for their own child care and centers that were getting more subsidies for preschoolers. Some high-quality providers actually went out of business because of that competition,” Barber said. This is one of the reasons the Start Strong PA initiative chose to focus on infants and toddlers.

WHAT YOU SHOULD KNOW

Barber suggests that advocates need to arm themselves with data and facts before they meet with their legislators. Furthermore, the issue needs to have local importance for those legislators. “They need to understand not just the data around your issue, but how it affects them and their constituents.” DeBell added, “It is critical that legislators understand the unmet needs in their district. Hearing that from the people they represent has a lasting impact.” Start Strong PA leaders learned many lessons from their Pre-K work. Not only have they solidified their relationships with certain legislators, they have also worked on

developing relationships with business leaders who are willing to meet directly with legislators. “Those individuals come from a different perspective and impact a legislator in a different way,” DeBell said.

Both DeBell and Barber emphasized that the success of Pennsylvania’s nonprofit coalition was not an overnight phenomenon. Organizations had been working together for decades, learning lessons, and revising strategies. If the Start Strong initiative is successful, it will be due to all the work that has come before it. “The success and momentum of all these years are what has moved this work forward,” DeBell noted.

SOURCES AND FURTHER READING

Pennsylvania Child Care Survey

<http://www.pennaeyc.com/wp-content/uploads/2017/10/Pennsylvania-Early-Childhood-Learning-Survey-Summary-052918-RELEASE.pdf>

Pennsylvania Office of Child Development and Early Learning (OCDEL), PA Department of Education

<https://www.education.pa.gov/Early%20Learning/Pages/default.aspx>

“Keystone STARS,” The Pennsylvania Key

<https://www.pakeys.org/keystone-stars/>

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