

THE MORNING CALL

Your View on Pennsylvania's child care crisis: How will families return to work?

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The November general election is meaningful in many ways, but with a global pandemic blanketing our nation, a handful of issues has cropped up as urgent necessities in a successful recovery. Child care tops this list.

The Pennsylvania Association for the Education of Young Children recently convened meetings with Lehigh Valley legislators so they could learn more about this critical issue from child care providers and organizations such as Easterseals Eastern Pennsylvania.

Affordable high-quality child care is the centerpiece of Pennsylvania's early learning system, which includes evidence-based home visiting services and pre-K. Pennsylvania's child care providers have incurred devastating losses over the course of the pandemic. After more than two months of state-mandated closure, trying to maintain operations while facing impossible-to-predict financial losses and future demand continues to threaten these vital operations.

This storm of circumstance could collapse our early learning system, and it could create an insurmountable obstacle in our nation's post-pandemic economic recovery.

Pennsylvania's economy depends on working families, and working families

depend on high-quality child care and early learning. [The record number of child care providers permanently closing as a result of COVID-19](#) will create a crisis for families across every corner of the commonwealth when they try to access care.

The child care sector has been in crisis for decades. Chronic underfunding leaves child care providers operating on razor-thin margins. For years, providers have fought for increased public funding to provide access to more working families, livable wages for their highly trained workforce and workforce investments to expand the sector as demand for services increases. With limited access to flexible and affordable capital — during and after this crisis — there is a real risk that talented and capable early learning professionals will be pushed out of the sector by circumstances beyond their control. Without them, families cannot return to work.

Child care providers are also on the front lines of making sure developmental delays and disabilities are identified early. Because they have training and experience in child development, they are often in the strongest position to note if children in their care are not meeting the typical developmental milestones for their age.

Many child care providers partner with Easterseals and their Make the First Five Count program, which offers free developmental screenings for children age 5 and younger. The screening results are used to help parents understand areas of developmental concern and, more importantly, to help connect parents to local resources such as Early Intervention.

The first five years of a child's life are absolutely critical to his or her brain development. The importance of identifying delays early cannot be overstated. Early Intervention is proven to work, developing the brain during the most critical time in a child's life.

The flip side of not identifying delays and disabilities early is that they show up later, in kindergarten or beyond. By then, the best time to address these challenges has passed, and these children enter school developmentally behind their peers and may never catch up.

COVID has also seen fewer children referred to Early Intervention, and this is tied to the reduced use of child care, along with fewer wellness visits to pediatricians. We are very concerned about this reduction, as we know that there has certainly not been a reduction in the number of children who need Early Intervention, only in the number who find their way to it. Child care providers are a critical link to this essential need.

Child care providers also make up the largest cohort of publicly-funded pre-K sites in the commonwealth. In fact, 63% of [Pre-K Counts](#) kids are served by [STAR-3 and -4](#) child care providers — a really important piece connecting the state's early learning system.

The collapse of the child care system will create a ripple effect across the entire early learning infrastructure, risking the solid investments made to expand it over the past decade.

Early education is happening at child care centers, family child care homes, schools and through home visiting. Pennsylvania children need access to quality, affordable early childhood education opportunities from birth through kindergarten. And it should be a top political issue for legislators and any candidate running for public office this year.

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