

June 16, 2021

Dear Members of the Pennsylvania General Assembly:

In the years from birth to age 5, children develop one million brain synapses per second. When “hard-wired” through high-quality early learning and proficient parenting, these connections become the building blocks of future learning, achievement, behavior and physical health. The absence of structure and nurturing and stimulating environments can put children at-risk of dropping out of school, developing behavioral and mental health issues, lacking respect for others, and many other challenges that increase the risk of future criminality.

Throughout the pandemic, Pennsylvania's early care and education system has faced enormous challenges. Pre-K Counts and Head Start classrooms as well as evidence-based home visiting models have implemented flexible delivery options to operate in a virtual environment as well as ensuring safe practices for those continuing to meet face-to-face. After the initial shutdown where roughly 80 percent of Pennsylvania's child care/early learning providers shut their doors, many providers continue to struggle with reduced enrollment and paying competitive wages. As such, more than 500 child care providers have closed their doors permanently since March 2020.

Federal CARES Act and other economic stimulus funding have helped; however, additional action is needed to further stabilize the Early Care and Education sector and grow access to these essential services for more of Pennsylvania's working families when our economy fully reopens.

As part of the 2021-22 final state budget, we encourage you to:

- 1) Increase high-quality pre-k line items by \$30 million to serve 3,271 new children (\$25 million in Pre-K Counts to serve 2,800 children and \$5 million in the Head Start Supplemental Assistance Program to serve 471 children).
- 2) Maintain the rate increase provided to Pre-K Counts and Head Start Supplemental Assistance Programs in FY 2020-21 to support increased operating costs.
- 3) Level-fund the Child Care Services and Child Care Assistance state line items in the Department of Human Services—supplanting state resources with federal funds is not allowed.
- 4) Dedicate federal child care funds to:
 - a. Serve at least 3,000 additional infants and toddlers in new high-quality contracted slots to get more parents back to work and move towards providing more stable funding for programs. (Estimated \$48 million)
 - b. Restore and fully-fund Education and Retention Awards for child care teachers and directors that are achieving higher degrees and credentials, recognizing highly-qualified professionals are key to maintaining and building high-quality programs for children. (Estimated \$30 million)

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5) Child care is an essential component to our economic recovery. Please work with the Start Strong PA campaign in which Fight Crime: Invest in Kids is a partner to ensure federal stimulus funds are invested wisely to strengthen the system as we move out of the pandemic and support working families.

6) Support more pregnant women and families with young children by providing for a collective \$6.3 million increase in funding for evidence-based home visiting with \$3.9 million allocated for the Community-Based Family Center line and \$2.4 million allocated for the Nurse-Family Partnership line, both in the Department of Human Services.

These actions will provide much needed resources to preserve and strengthen the Commonwealth's existing early learning system and ensure the healthy development of more young children.

Thank you for your consideration of this proposal and for everything you are doing to keep Pennsylvania safe!

Respectfully,

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