



COVID'S IMPACT ON CHILDREN IN BUCKS COUNTY

The Case For An Ambitious Rebound



*A Children First Report
on Bucks County Children*

September 2022

children
FIRST
THE ADVOCATE FOR KIDS
FORMERLY PCCY

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4 Introduction**5 Executive Summary****7 Five Things to Do to Protect Children****8 The Direct Impact of COVID on Bucks County**

The Virus Took a Real Toll on the Health of Children

Chart: Deaths from COVID

Chart: Youth Suicide Calls Spike

Public Response to COVID Undermined Child Vaccine Adherence

11 A Reinforced Safety Net Reduced Child Poverty

Federal COVID Relief Funds Lifted Children Out of Poverty

Public Health Insurance Kept Children Healthy

Chart: Public Health Insurance Was a Life Saver

Abating Hunger Became a Priority

Chart: Child SNAP Enrollment

15 Troubling Signs on the Horizon for Those Who Teach Our Children

A Shortage of Child Care and Under-Resourced Schools Will Take a Lasting Toll on Children

Child Care Sector Suffers Long Lasting Impact of the Virus

Child Care Centers Cannot Afford the Price of Hiring and Retaining Staff

Chart: Child Care Wages Trail Retail Industry by More Than 31% Per Week

Schools Started Out Behind, Now Struggle to Catch Up

Schools Don't Have the Resources to Catch Up

Chart: New Teachers in Short Supply

Chart: A \$10,000 Per Student Gap in Educational Resources Compared to Some Districts

Chart: Highest Poverty Schools Linked to Lowest PSSA Performance

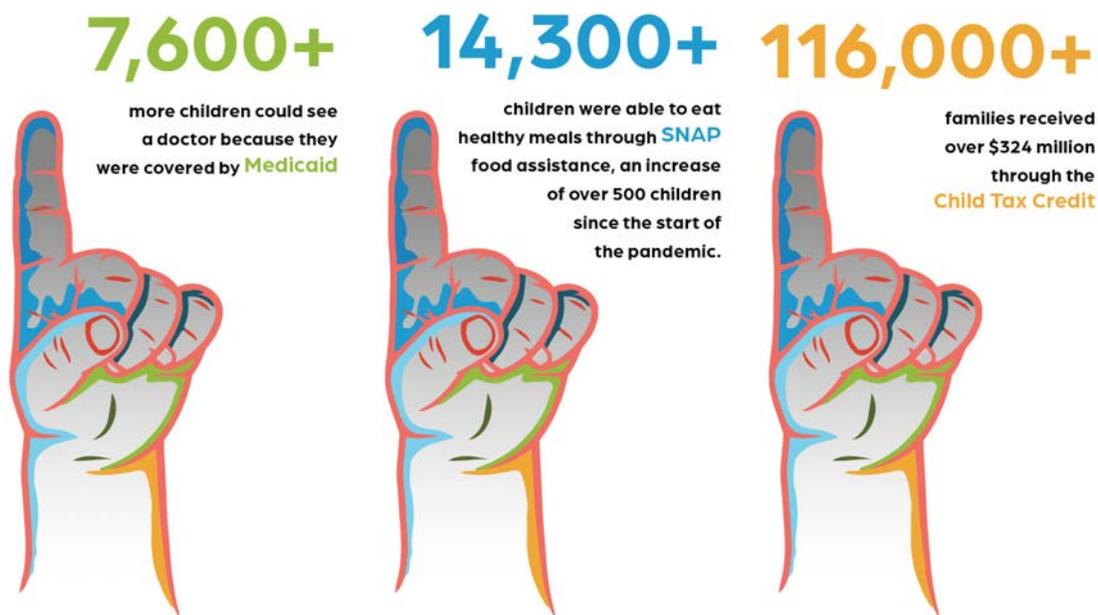
23 Recommendations**27 Endnotes**

Introduction

As we emerge from the turmoil and pain of the pandemic, parents in every corner of Bucks County continue to deal with the alarming effects of COVID on children. The community institutions that partner with parents to support their children's healthy development are also still reeling from the impact of COVID. Although not one child is known to have died from COVID in the county, over 1,900 Bucks County adults perished, often leaving children without grandparents, aunts, uncles, cousins, and worse yet, one or both parents.¹

The lives of children and families would have been much worse had good public policy not served as a life preserver. While parents were unable to work and schools were shuttered, federal flexibility and funds coupled with the Herculean efforts on the part of municipal, county, and school leaders provided extraordinary protections for children.

Federal COVID relief policies acted like a safety net, catching children so they didn't fall into an abyss of poverty, hunger, and sickness. In fact, the Child Tax Credit improved the lives of children, lifting thousands out of poverty.



However, children are still suffering from historic levels of anxiety and depression, and most are months, if not years, behind where they should be in school. Meanwhile pediatric health, education, early learning, child protection, and social support systems that partner with parents are stretched thin or exhausted. The staff of these critical child-serving partners are themselves still recovering while having to make the extra effort to help children catch up in every way.

To make matters worse, the staffing crisis in public schools and child care centers means that far fewer families will be able to rely on these essential institutions to be ready and able partners to help our children recover. At the household level, the expiration of the Child Tax Credit is likely to mean that over 2,000 Bucks County children will fall back into poverty, further compounding the impact of COVID on their lives.²

Healing from this pandemic will take much more than a medical solution. It will require federal, state, and local policies and resources to cure the lasting effects of the pandemic on children, and such measures must ensure that the disproportionate needs of children of color are taken into consideration and addressed.

Executive Summary

Without question the pandemic made the lives of every child of Bucks County harder in the short-term; for far too many, the long-term consequences are likely to stunt opportunity throughout their lives. Among the myriad of impacts, five key indicators point to the need for robust new policies and resources.

1. Students Fell Further Behind in School – National research makes a compelling case that nearly every student will complete the 2021-22 school year behind due to the many months of virtual and regularly interrupted instruction. Before COVID struck, 37% of the county’s public school students were already unable to meet basic English and math targets.³ Worse yet, the very schools that educate the majority of these children are the schools with the least resources to help their students catch up, like Bristol Township School District and Morrisville School District. Targeted efforts to recoup learning losses and push students ahead are urgently needed.

2. Children Are Less Healthy – We know that the pandemic harmed the mental health of children. Pennsylvania’s statewide Safe2Say hotline fielded more suicide-related calls from students across the state during COVID, yet the number of these calls from youth in Bucks County jumped by 20%.⁴ Certainly, the feelings of loneliness, hopelessness, fear, and depression reached far and wide across the county and they are likely to continue to affect the lives of thousands of children. Dramatic new supports to improve the mental wellness of children are long overdue.

3. Risk of Childhood Communicable Diseases Rose – Alarming, the percentage of younger children not fully vaccinated against COVID is 66%; among teens, it’s 42%.⁵ Moreover, there’s been an erosion in the share of children starting school with required inoculations. Public health measures once thought of as routine are now in need of fortification.

4. Fewer Children Were in Poverty – The one glimmer of hope during the pandemic was the impact of federal policy that lifted nearly 1,300 Bucks County children out of poverty in the first year of the shutdown.⁶ Given the lifetime consequences of growing up in poverty, this shift out of poverty had the potential to be a gamechanger for these children. The tragedy is that with federal policy no longer in place, over 2,000 children are likely to fall back into poverty. That's got to change.

5. Child Care Providers and Schools are Weaker – The economic turmoil caused a hollowing-out of schools and child care centers where both sectors are facing severe labor shortages with insufficient funds to compete for qualified staff. As a result, young children, particularly children of color, are losing access to the crucial development benefits of great child care and pre-k, and public-school students will face greater hurdles with larger classes and fewer professionals to support their development.

The lessons learned from the virus are many. First among them is the need to ensure every county and the state has capable public health infrastructure. There is ample research indicating that more lives could have been saved if the nation's public health infrastructure had been more prepared to respond to the sweeping COVID contagion. The County and local medical professionals must continue to fund and strengthen the county health department so it can aptly respond and protect residents every day and during the next horrific crisis.



Five Things to Do to Protect Children

Put Children First in a Crisis – The County should proactively create a structure that ensures children are better protected the next time a public health emergency strikes.

Invest in Students So They Can Get Ahead – The citizens and elected leaders of Bucks County must focus on boosting the state share of funding for public schools so that all public schools in the county have the resources to help students catch up and excel.

Close the Gap in Behavioral Health Services for Children and Youth – The County and its citizens must pressure the state to ensure that public and private health care insurers are making it possible for children to readily access quality behavioral health services and remove barriers to mental health first aid, preventative supports, light touch counseling, and intensive best practice therapy.

Protect Children from Poverty – To sustain the reduced levels of child poverty achieved during the pandemic, citizens of Bucks County must push their federal lawmakers to reenact the expanded Child Tax Credit. Further, support must be rallied to continue the flexible enrollment policies in Medicaid, CHIP, and SNAP that protect children's health and ensure their nutrition is never at risk.

Curb the Impact of Inflation on Families by Making Child Care More Affordable – The citizens of Bucks County must increase the efforts made on their behalf in Washington and Harrisburg to deliver more resources so that families can afford high-quality, affordable child care and pre-k.

The Direct Impact of COVID in Bucks County

The Virus Took a Real Toll on the Health of Children

Fortunately, the virus mostly spared children from the level of death and illness suffered by over 100 million fellow Americans. Fortunately, no Bucks County child is known to have died as a result of contracting COVID, but over 1,900 adults did, often leaving children without grandparents, aunts, uncles, cousins, and worse yet, one or both parents.⁸

Although children mostly escaped the virus' direct physical impact, the pandemic itself caused a mental health crisis for children that continues unabated. Across the country, mental health related emergency department visits spiked 31% for adolescents ages 12 to 17 from March 2019 to March 2021. Worse yet, emergency rooms treated 51% more teenage girls for attempted suicide than normal between February 2019 and February 2021.⁹ This data from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) is sufficiently alarming to require substantial policy change.

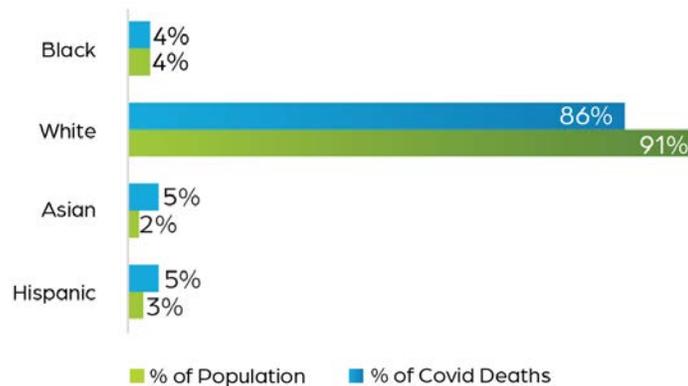
The CDC also found that tens of thousands of children did not seek medical care for mental stress, but 44% of high school students reported feeling "persistently sad or hopeless" during the past year. This may be due to the fact that 29% of student respondents reported a parent or adult living in their home lost their job during the crisis.¹⁰

These findings may explain the latest data from Pennsylvania's Safe2Say hotline which provides students a confidential call for help when they are at risk of bullying, self-harm, drug use, or committing suicide. Prior to March 2020, 17% of tips received by the hotline for the 2019-20 school year were deemed "life safety matter," meaning a student's immediate physical well-being or safety is at risk.

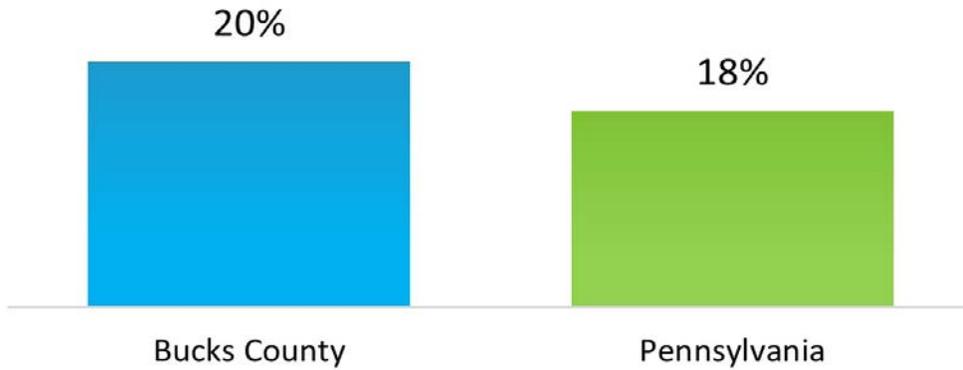
During the remaining months of the 2019-20 school year, 37% of tips were life safety matters, demonstrating the mental strain the pandemic put on students. While statewide the hotline saw an 18% increase in tips relating to suicide from school years 2018-19 to 2019-20, Bucks County saw a slightly higher increase of 20% over the same period.¹¹

The availability of quality, culturally responsive mental health services was in short supply for children, especially for those insured by Medicaid or CHIP. The pandemic

Deaths from COVID



Youth Suicide Calls Spike



Source: Safe2Say Something, Annual Reports 2018 – 2020

and its after effects have exposed the inadequacies of the national, state, and local behavioral health systems, all of which are taking a sustained toll on our children.

Urgent Recovery Need: County, state, and federal partners must assemble a team to remove payment and access barriers to mental health services for children and youth and reach agreement on quality standards so that children and youth can receive culturally competent preventive mental health services, mental health first aid, and intensive services for children suffering with mental illness.

Public Response to COVID Undermined Child Vaccine Adherence

On the health care front, the one shred of good news is that Bucks County residents heeded the advice of the CDC to get vaccinated. In fact, the percentage of county residents fully vaccinated is eight percentage points higher than the statewide average full vaccination rate.¹²

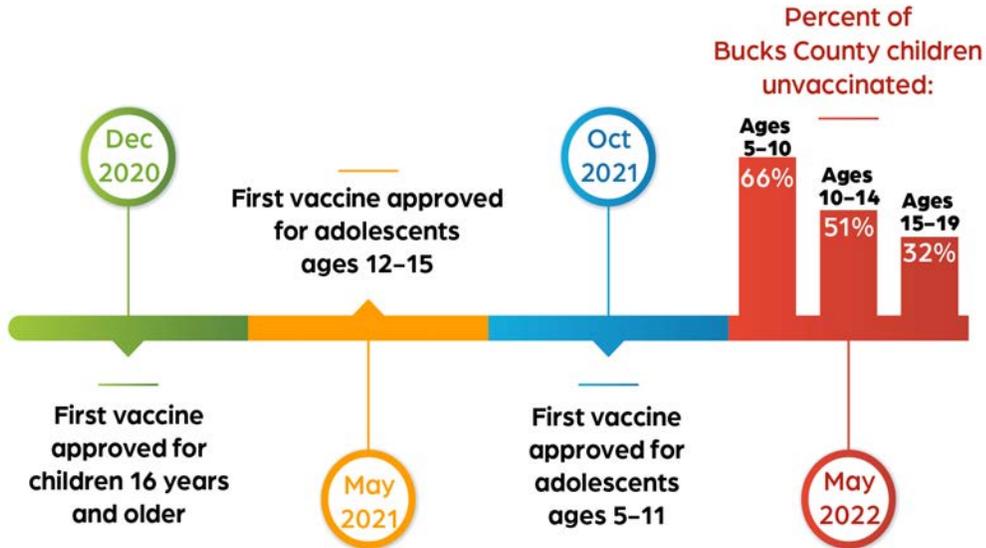
Yet, as of April 2022, 42% of county children over ten years old and 66% of children ages five to nine years old were not fully vaccinated.

Additionally, Black residents of all ages are 23% less likely to be fully vaccinated than White residents, while Asian residents are 25% less likely to be vaccinated than White residents.¹³



“If you’re not mentally well, you won’t be able to focus on school. We need to focus on providing holistic well-being in our schools; we need to keep children centered in the discussion and not our interests. A lot of students do not feel seen or heard and that’s a problem.” - Adrienne King, Parent





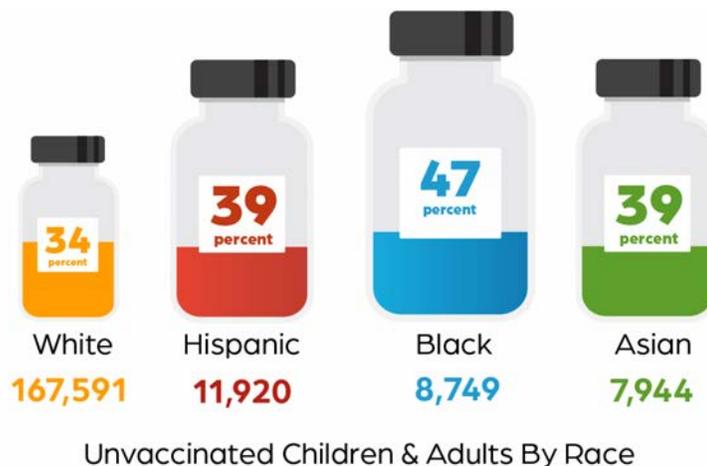
To make matters worse, the ill-informed anti-vaccination campaign orchestrated across the country had an alarming impact on parental comfort with childhood immunizations. Approximately 380 Bucks County children were enrolled in the 2020-21 school year with an exemption from required immunizations due to philosophic objections, a 52% jump in the number of children exempted from basic immunizations compared to the 2018-19 school year. Also troubling is that over twice as many children, about 1,400 students, started school in a provisional status because they did not have the full complement of required vaccines.¹⁴

As the public health emergency wanes, parents will need much more guidance on the urgency, or lack thereof, to ensure their children are fully vaccinated against COVID. Time is of the essence when it comes to childhood disease prevention.

Urgent Recovery Need:

The Bucks County Health Department must ensure parents understand and embrace vaccine expectations so that all children in the county can be protected against preventable contagious childhood diseases. Further, the Department must carefully track COVID trends and work proactively to protect children from the virus and its mutations.

Anti-Vax Campaigns Led To Low COVID-19 Immunization Rates

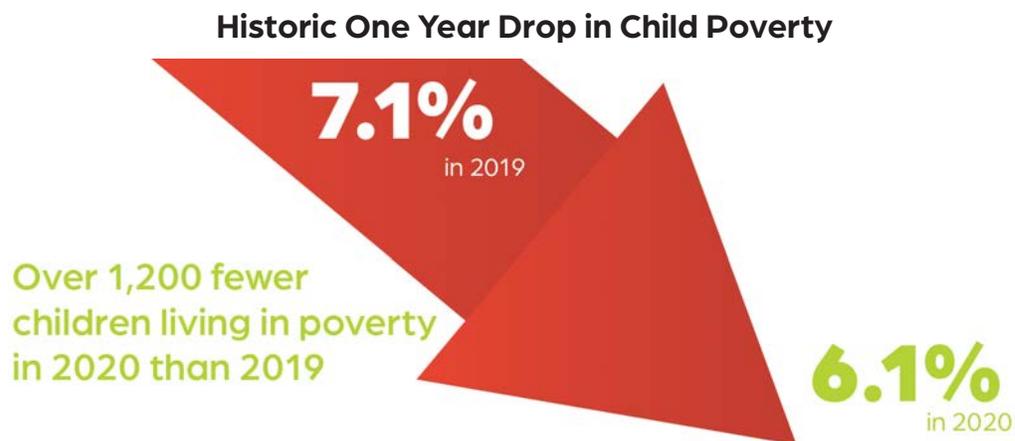


A Reinforced Safety Net Reduced Child Poverty

Federal COVID Relief Funds Lifted Children Out of Poverty

Over the two years living with the contagion, and within months of the pandemic shuttering the economy, Congress authorized a robust set of direct payments to families to support them during the crisis. Without question, these extraordinary and necessary resources for families staved off widespread homelessness, hunger, and deprivation.

The Child Tax Credit alone had an extraordinary positive impact, with nearly 1,300 of the county's children rising out of poverty between 2019 and 2020. While this trend was consistent among all of the five southeastern Pennsylvania counties, Bucks County had an astonishing 14% decline in the number of children in poverty, the fourth largest reduction in the region.¹⁵ In fact, the Child Tax Credit significantly increased the purchasing power of parents by putting an estimated \$325 million into their hands in 2021 than before the pandemic.¹⁶



On top of these payments to parents, the federal pandemic relief extended and enhanced unemployment payments that included a guaranteed \$600 a week for workers who were laid off due to COVID.¹⁷ The CARES Act also reimbursed employers for leave taken by employees who had to take care of a sick child or other dependent, marking the first-ever federal enactment of paid leave policy for parents. Nearly all these benefits are no longer available, and, in most cases, their expiration makes sense. That's not the case though for the Child Tax Credit, which came to an end on December 15, 2021. Its expiration is likely to mean that in 2022, over 2,000 children across the county, from Quakertown to Bristol, will likely fall back into poverty.¹⁸

Meanwhile, data shows that men returned to work at three times the rate of women within the first twelve months of the pandemic.¹⁹

As of February 2022, there were approximately 2,500 fewer women working in the county, mirroring the “she-cession” widely reported across the country, while the number of men working increased by about 1,500 compared to February 2020.²⁰ These trends are especially troubling because, before the pandemic, about 75% of families had all present parents in the workforce, meaning 25% of the county’s families had only one or no source of income for their household.²¹

Urgent Recovery Need: Child poverty stunts the healthy development of children with lifelong consequences that will be exacerbated by the pandemic’s effect on children’s lives. For this reason alone, all policy makers should agree that the Child Tax Credit must be reenacted.

Public Health Insurance Kept Children Healthy

Similarly, sound federal and state policies increased access to health insurance coverage for parents and children, providing a life preserver for parents who lost their job and, as a result, their health care coverage.

In fact, to meet the burgeoning health care needs of all residents, Medicaid enrollment rose by 26% in the county compared to the pre-pandemic level. While reliance on public insurance is and should be a last resort, during COVID, employment related health care coverage rapidly evaporated as parents lost their jobs and employers cut costs. With federal aid, Pennsylvania was able to make sure children didn’t fall through the cracks by expanding health care coverage via Medicaid to 200,000 more children, representing a 17% increase from February 2020 to February 2022.²² Now, Medicaid is the single largest health insurer for Pennsylvania children, with approximately 41% of all children living in the Commonwealth covered by its comprehensive health benefits, according to Pennsylvania Partnerships for Children.²³

In Bucks County during the pandemic, over 7,600 children were newly enrolled in Medicaid on top of the approximately 36,000 Bucks County children already insured by the program. This represents a 21% expansion in public health insurance coverage for children.²⁴

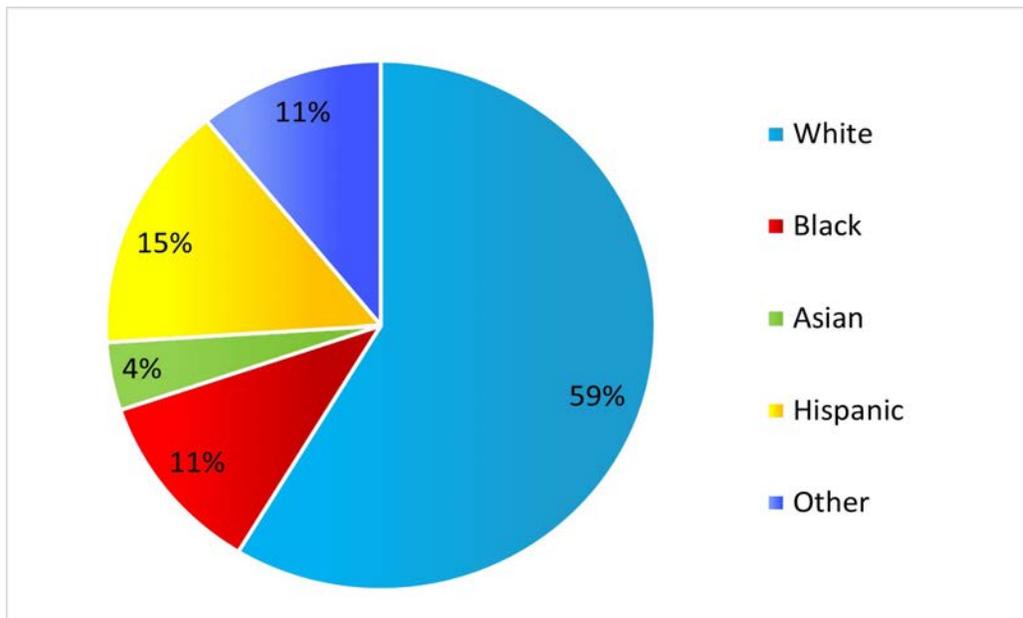
What lies ahead for these children is unclear. Some parents who lost health coverage due to COVID-related layoffs may return to jobs that don’t offer health insurance.



“During the pandemic, I was laid off from a job I had for a decade. Once I was laid off, it created a healthcare insurance gap for my son and me. I have a new job now, but I do not receive healthcare benefits from my current employer. I’m a single parent and I do everything alone. Qualifying for Medical Assistance granted me relief and provided me with the support I need to ensure my son receives the care he needs.” - Jillian Burns, Parent



Medicaid was a Lifesaver for Bucks County Children



Many parents are already struggling to make ends meet due to the dual effects of temporary job loss and inflation, making it harder to cover household expenses and pay for health insurance.

Meanwhile, in response to the government largess offered during COVID, some state lawmakers are looking for ways to drive down government spending by shrinking the number of children and parents who can rely on Medicaid for health care coverage. Children of all races benefitted from the expansion, and four in ten children enrolled in Medicaid are children of color.²⁵

Urgent Recovery Need: Moderate- and low-income parents need the assurance that their children can rely on Medicaid, thus state and federal funds must continue to be available to ensure the continuity of their health care coverage.

Abating Hunger Became a Priority

Federal flexibility enabled schools to provide school breakfasts, lunches, and snacks to children at home for the period of remote instruction. Where schools had to close or parents chose not to send their children to in-person instruction, parents were encouraged to come to the school to pick up meals. Some school districts also set up additional school meal distribution sites. Although children weren't attending in-person school for several months, over 340,000 Pennsylvania children had a midday meal thanks to the school lunch program and 210,000 started their day with free school breakfasts.²⁶

Additionally, for parents with young children not school-aged, food distribution programs like Fresh Connect, a collaboration of Bucks County Opportunity Council, Philabundance, Rolling Harvest Food Rescue, St. Mary Medical Center, and United Way of Bucks County were lifesavers, providing 81,507 family meals during the pandemic.

Child SNAP Enrollment



Source: Pennsylvania Department of Human Services. Medical Assistance, Food Stamps, and Cash Assistance Statistics Report, February 2020 – February 2022.

Families also benefitted from new federal flexibility that permitted them access to the SNAP program to purchase food for themselves and their children. Hundreds more Bucks County children were enrolled in SNAP, bringing childhood hunger relief via SNAP to over 14,000 children in the county.

In fact, 7% more Bucks County residents and 4% more county children relied on SNAP during the pandemic compared to pre-pandemic enrollment. As a result, in Bucks County, \$215 million in SNAP funds went to families so they could purchase food during the pandemic.²⁷

Urgent Recovery Need: Although unemployment is low and wage rates are increasing, given the rapidly rising inflation rate, public policies that ensure no child is hungry must be maintained and invigorated. Congress must ensure continued access to food resources for children.

Troubling Signs On The Horizon For Those Who Teach Our Children

A Shortage of Child Care and Under-Resourced Schools Will Take a Lasting Toll on Children

It's safe to say that the county's economic recovery was fueled by the grit and determination of employers and employees who, on top of keeping local businesses viable, were caring for their children at home while schools and child care centers were shuttered.

Sadly, 40,000 Bucks County residents resigned or lost their jobs in the first three months of the pandemic.²⁸ To some extent, these job losses were a result of approximately 150 business closures across the county at the onset of the pandemic.²⁹ Parents also left their jobs to care for children because there was no one else to tend to the first priority in their lives – their children. Once schools and child care centers reopened, thousands of parents were still unable to return to work because of health risks to them or a family member.

In large measure due to extraordinary federal and state financial supports for businesses, as of September 2021, Bucks County has seen over 500 businesses open since the initial closures at onset of the pandemic.³⁰ And the official unemployment rate returned to the county's pre-pandemic level of 4.4% by October 2021.³¹

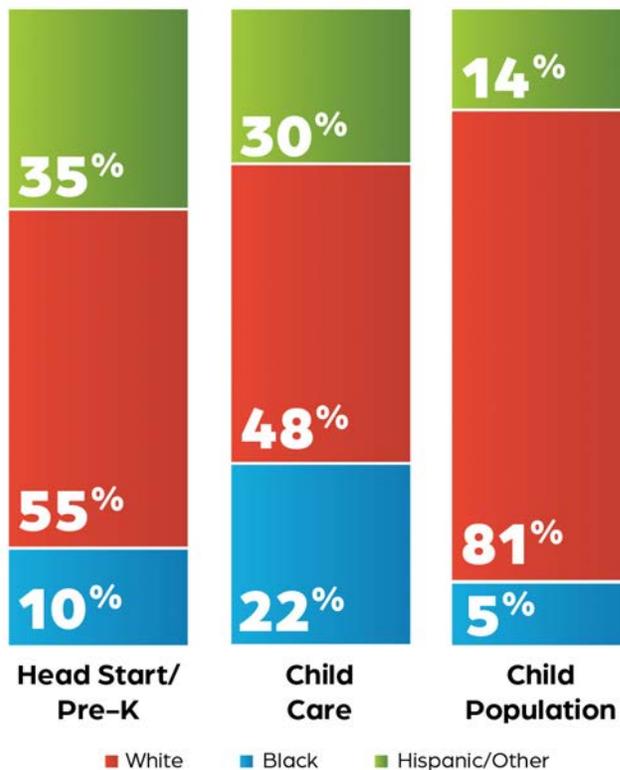
These traditional macro-economic indicators of economic recovery starkly contrast with the economic stress that families are feeling due to inflation and the weakened state of the critical partners they rely on to safely raise their children – child care centers and public schools.

Child Care Sector Suffers Long Lasting Impact of the Virus

The expiration of federal assistance and rising inflation means that more parents must work more to stay above water. Yet the shortage of child care is making it very hard to work more hours, or even simply go to work.

The average cost of full-time child care across the state is at least \$12,530 a year for infants or toddlers, \$10,640 for pre-school aged children,

Early Learning Programs Serve Strong Proportions of Children of Color



and \$9,800 for afterschool and summer care, and these costs are expected to continue to rise in 2022.³² Even at the current costs, a year of child care is likely to be more expensive than a year at a Pennsylvania state college or university.

Federal and state policymakers recognized the essential role of the child care sector by authorizing funds to subsidize child care program operations during the pandemic when programs were closed and/or had very low levels of enrollment. The goal of these funds was to avoid the permanent closure of programs since the supply of child care was already insufficient before the pandemic.

Yet, temporary federal and state policies were not robust enough to stem closures. Since the start of the pandemic, child care supply in the county has decreased 15% as of March 2022. Over the same time, 46 providers closed, including seven high-quality programs.³³ Simply put, the child care sector has been decimated.

Child Care Centers Cannot Afford the Price of Hiring and Retaining Staff

Child care costs are expected to keep rising as child care centers close due to the gap between what families can afford to pay, and in turn, what child care providers can afford to pay their staff. As of September 2021, there were approximately 540 fewer child care workers in Bucks County compared to the pre-pandemic level. This massive exodus is a result of low wages coupled with the risk and stress of caring for children during the pandemic. In that same period, average wages for all workers in the county rose by approximately 5%, but the median wage for child care staff has remained stubbornly low. As of September 2021, child care staff were earning 31% less than employees at big box retail stores or fast food franchises.³⁴

If child care centers increase the tuition charged to parents to cover the rate of pay needed to attract qualified staff, it will put the cost of child care further out of reach for families and drive down enrollment.

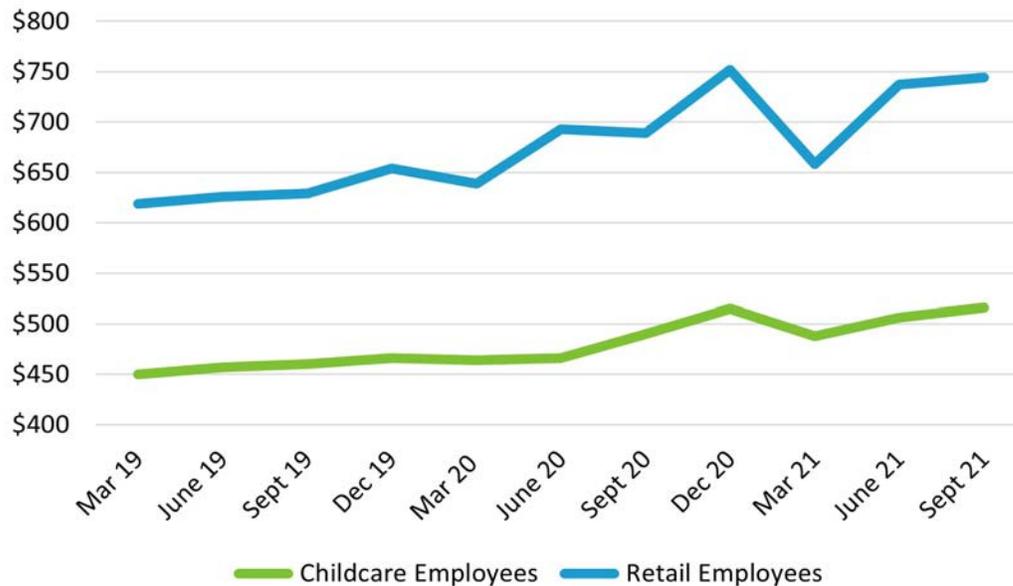
Child Care Supply Plummet



“The bottom third of Americans are struggling mightily. We are not helping people - it is disgraceful! The most important investment we can make is in education, specifically 0-3 education. If the proper investments are not made, they will likely show up in my office and I’m a criminal defense attorney.” - Ettore Angelo



Child Care Wages Trail Retail Industry By More Than \$200 Per Week



Source: U.S. Department of Labor, Bureau of Labor Statistics. Quarterly Census of Employment and Wages, 2019 – 2021.

It's a vicious cycle that is devastating the child care sector, making it very difficult for parents to earn a living and for employers to hire the workers they need.

The economic prospects of Bucks County parents, like parents across America, are suffering due to the absence of sound public policies that ensure high-quality child care is available to fully spur economic recovery and growth.

Urgent Recovery Need: Increases in federal, state, and county funds are essential to expand access to great child care that parents can rely on so they can work sufficient hours to support their families.

Schools Started Out Behind, Now Struggle to Catch Up

One of the biggest shocks ever to the American public education system occurred when schools were shuttered to avoid COVID contagion, and 52 million Americans reported their children were attending school virtually, accounting for 67% of all K-12 students.³⁵ The abrupt shift to virtual instruction was hard on faculty, parents, and students. Children suffered from social isolation and their academic and social development suffered.³⁶ While these trends were universal, some students had it worse than others.

In Bucks County, every school district closed for most, if not all, of the period of March to June 2020, with some districts still mandating temporary closures into the 2020-21 school year. However, some districts were able to rapidly rely on virtual instruction because their students already had school-issued computers to take home.

Other districts, such as Morrisville School District, had neither the inventory of computers nor the tech capacity to make that shift quickly, causing far too many students to lose at least three months of learning in the 2019-20 school year.

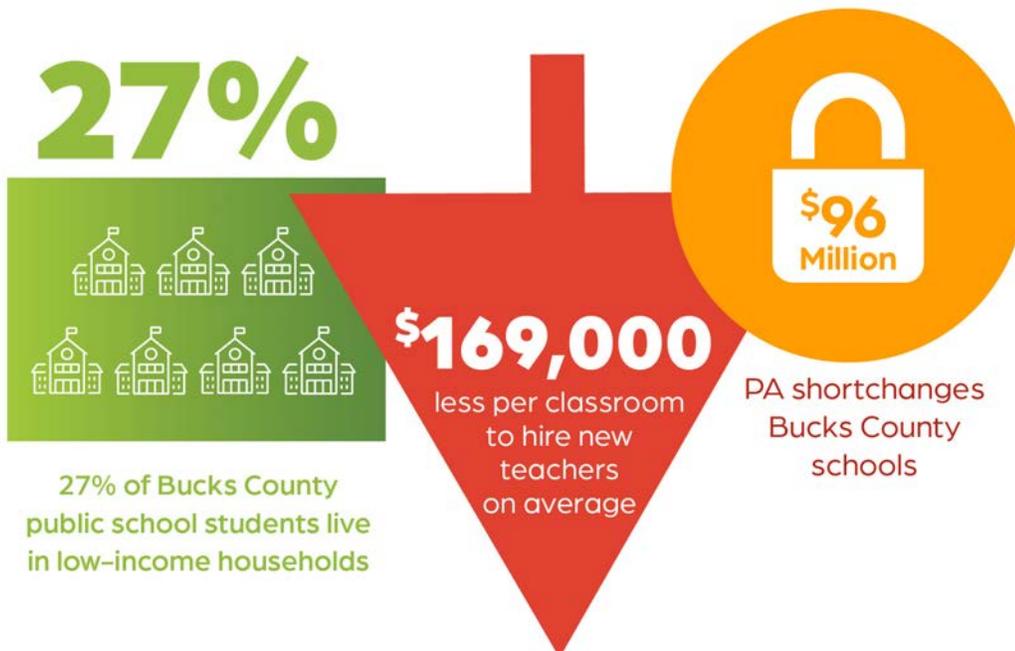
In large measure, successful virtual learning became dependent on a parent's income. Startling national data indicates that 40% of American parents were responsible for the cost of buying a computer for their child's virtual learning.³⁷

In nearly every school in the county, consistent with national trends, parents had to pay for internet access so their children could attend virtual classes. With 7% of Bucks County children experiencing poverty when the pandemic struck, it's likely that many students were not sufficiently able to attend classes while instruction was virtual.³⁸

However, it's widely accepted that COVID exacerbated the already existing academic divide due to the funding disparities between school districts. According to estimates based on a Pew Research study, about one in four students in the Bristol Borough School District, where 73% of students are from low-income households and 54% are students of color, do not have high speed internet access, compared to only one in 30 students in the much more affluent New Hope-Solebury School District, where 9% of students are low-income and 19% are children of color.³⁹ These students are more likely to experience learning loss because they are on the wrong side of the digital divide.



“We need fair school funding - the differences that are spent per school district are vast. Let's be honest, we will be paying the price for years to come if we don't fight for them now; the pandemic really highlighted those inequities and the kids that too often get left behind.” - Ross McLennan, Parent



The interruption of learning compounded the already dire educational gaps across the schools in the county. Before COVID struck, 37% of public school students were failing to meet basic English and math targets at the key 3rd and 8th grade benchmarks.⁴⁰ It's safe to say that things got worse for these students during COVID.

There is a dearth of reliable data to prove that children lost ground. Pennsylvania required public schools to participate in the state assessments in 2021. However, tens of thousands of students were exempted from the tests because their schools were still closed for in-person instruction. As a result, the Pennsylvania Department of Education cautioned policymakers, school leaders, and parents to not rely on the results as a valid measure of school or student performance.

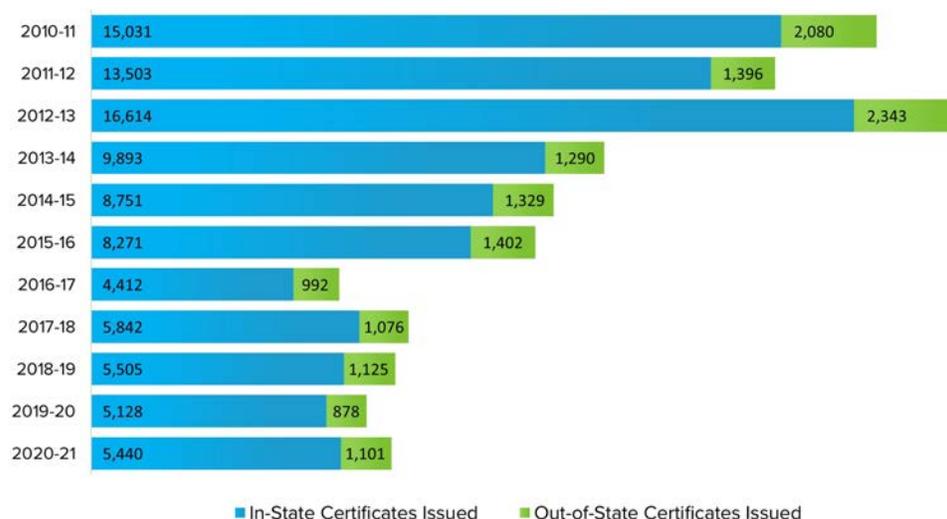
However, an educational assessment of 1.6 million students across the country found that, on average, students had fallen five months behind in math and four months behind in reading by the end of the 2020-21 school year.⁴²

Schools Don't Have the Resources to Catch Up

Most of the onus to respond to the months of lost learning falls on public schools. Yet school districts entered the 2021-22 school year with record high teacher resignations and too few newly trained teachers to take their place. This teacher shortage crisis had been getting worse over time and was dramatically accelerated by the pandemic. National data indicates that 48% of school districts struggled to hire enough full-time teachers, while 55% struggled to hire paraprofessionals, and 77% struggled to find substitute teachers, according to a 2021 EdWeek Research Center survey.⁴³

Add to that challenge the fact that far fewer newly trained teachers are entering the field.

New Teachers in Short Supply



Source: Pennsylvania Department of Education, Educator Preparation and Certification Report, 2010 – 2021.

In fact, since the 2013-14 school year, Pennsylvania has seen a 42% decline in new teaching certificates and a 425% increase in Type 1 emergency teaching permits. Type 1 emergency permits are issued in response to a “vacant teaching position with an educational obligation to pursue.”⁴⁴

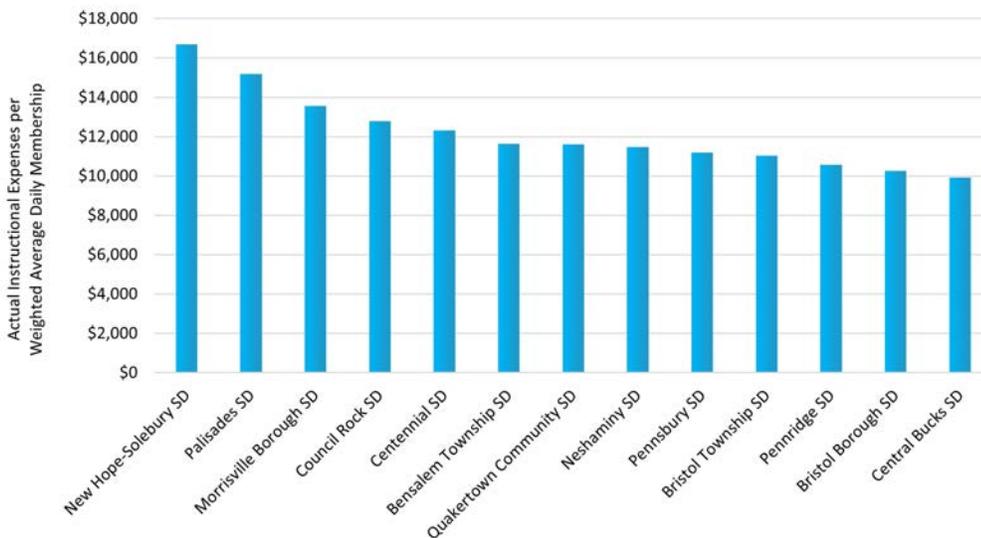
Teacher salaries are highly dependent on the wealth of the local community in Pennsylvania because the amount that a school district can spend is so heavily dependent on property taxes.

That means that staffing shortages are likely to be most severe in districts that are lower wealth communities. These districts are not likely to be able to offer a competitive salary to attract sufficient teachers to fill their vacancies.

In Bucks County, based on funds available for instruction, the gap between the district with the most and least resources is almost \$170,000 per classroom (of 25 students).⁴⁵ The schools with less funding will likely have to increase class sizes because they won't have sufficient funds to hire new teachers, given the shortage. The resource gap has the most severe impact in districts that have the least resources and educate high concentrations of low-income students.

For instance, the Bristol Borough School District has about \$10,000 per student for instruction. Its students are eight times more likely to be low-income and almost three times more likely to be students of color than their counterparts in New Hope-Solebury, which has almost \$17,000 per student to educate its pupils.⁴⁶ This illustrates the irrational methodology used to fund public education in Pennsylvania.

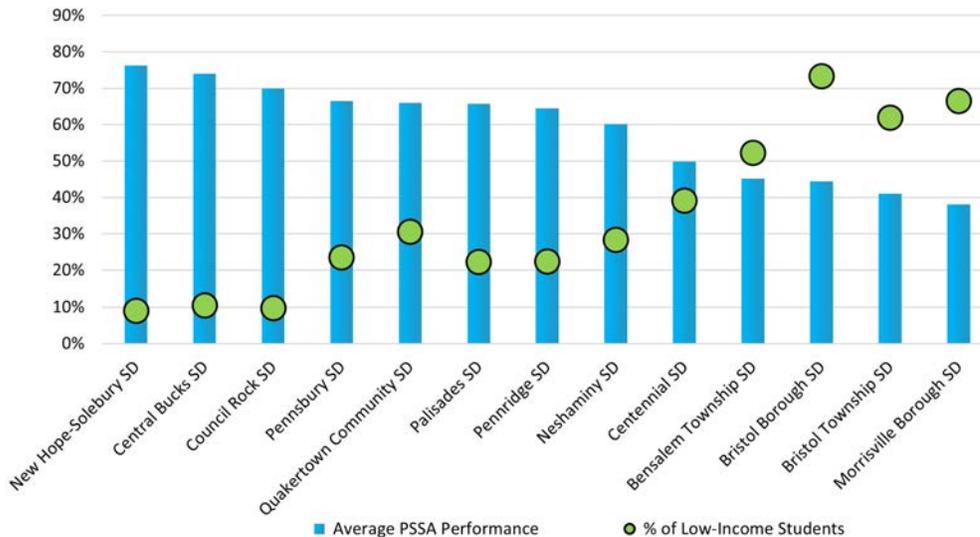
A \$7,000 Per Student Gap In Educational Resources Compared to Some Districts



Source: Pennsylvania Department of Education. Annual Financial Report Data, Expenditure Data, 2015 – 2019.

These financial and economic disparities were pronounced before COVID where students in the Bristol Borough School District were also, unsurprisingly, much further behind academically than the students in New Hope-Solebury or any of the districts with more resources in the county. This trend holds true across all the districts in the county – the higher the poverty rate of the district, the fewer resources schools have to educate their students, and the further behind the students are academically.

Highest Poverty Schools Linked to Lowest PSSA Performance



PSSA Performance = Average percent of third and eighth grade students earning advanced or proficient on English or Math PSSA exams from 2015 through 2019. Source: Pennsylvania Department of Education. Annual Financial Reports, Expenditure Data, 2019 – 2020. Public Schools Percent of Low-Income Reports, 2019 – 2020.

The eight school districts that educate 77% of the county’s lowest income students and 67% of the county’s students of color have, on average, about \$109,000 less to spend per classroom (of 25 students).⁴⁷ Just as the pandemic has taken a toll on the academic achievement of students with lower incomes than their peers, the teacher shortage and insufficiency of state funding for lower-wealth school districts means students in high poverty districts will continue to fall behind.

Urgent Recovery Need: There is no temporary solution to the learning loss for students in Bucks County. One-time grants for tutoring to help students catch up are a short-term fix and will leave far too many future graduates unprepared for a real-world job or college. State funds to close the educational resource gap are urgently needed to solve the city’s root educational disparity.

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Recommendations

Federal, state, and local vigilance flattened infection rates which thankfully protected children and most of the adults in their lives. Throughout the crisis there were obvious missed opportunities to meet the needs of children and, as the crisis abates, its lingering effects on children still warrant the attention and action of federal, state, and county officials. To this end, we recommend the following:

Put Children First During a Crisis. Bucks County used a small portion of the federal pandemic relief allocated to the county to improve access to distance learning technology for families housed in the county's homeless shelter, cover the costs of basic supplies for the Valley Youth House, and provide masks and related PPE to child care centers at the onset of the pandemic. However, compared to Montgomery, Delaware, and Philadelphia counties, Bucks County has allocated less of its pandemic relief funds to meet the needs of children and has been slower to expend the funds in general despite the documented needs of children and the entities that serve and educate them across the county.⁴⁸

Because children are especially vulnerable and have such a broad set of needs, the county would have been well served by appointing a full-time, top-tier county administrator to address the needs of children in the event of a crisis. School districts, local social service agencies, and county offices must operate more efficiently and proactively to meet the needs of children in a time of crisis and county leadership is essential to making that happen.

Recommendation: The County should craft a strategy and designate a structure now that ensures children are better protected the next time a public health emergency strikes. There should be a transparent process created to continuously hear more directly from service organizations, who are working on the ground serving Bucks County's most vulnerable residents.

Make a Great Public Health System A Priority. One of the lessons learned from the pandemic is the need to rally behind the critical role that public health systems play and continually invest in keeping those systems modern and ready to respond in the time of crisis.

Recommendation: The County Commissioners must direct the Health Department to prepare now so it is ready to respond and protect children better when a public health crisis emerges. Further, the County must also continue to track the continuous impact of COVID on children to address troubling trends and proactively implement strategies that boost child vaccination against COVID and other diseases.

Close the Gap in Behavioral Health Services for Children and Youth. Nearly one in five children suffer from a mental, emotional, or behavioral disorder. Alarmingly, less than half of these youth receive treatment, with children of color receiving the least access to care for their conditions according to the National Institute of Mental Health.⁴⁹ Further, recent survey data on youth finds that 37% of the responding teens said they had poor mental health during the pandemic and 44% said they felt “persistently” sad or hopeless.⁵⁰ At these rates, upwards of 14,000 teens in Bucks County are likely to need mental health support, and the sooner they receive it, the less likely it is for their mental health issues to develop into chronic conditions.

Recommendation: The County, District Attorney, Intermediate Unit, and school leaders must work together and enlist the support of the state and its Medicaid behavioral contractors to invest in building a robust school-based behavioral health system. Schools (which are educating a significant share of children insured by public health insurance) and county leaders must work with local health systems and insurers to provide accessible, culturally responsive preventative mental health resources, mental health first aid, and therapeutic support to children and youth in their communities.

Protect Children From Poverty. Before COVID struck, two in ten families were earning too little to cover the basics of raising and caring for their children, according to the 2019 Children First report, *Underwater: What's Sinking Families in Bucks County*.⁵¹ In the midst of COVID, the United Way of Pennsylvania surveyed families and found that 64% of families who were struggling to secure basic needs, housing expenses were among their biggest concerns.⁵² To make matters worse, families also faced the economic shock of the pandemic, causing inflation to jump by over 11% between February 2020 and February 2022.⁵³ Today, nearly one-quarter (24%) of Bucks County homeowners and nearly half (46%) of renters spend 30% or more of their income on housing.⁵⁴

Without question, parents earning less than the median wage have far less purchasing power. That is why the federal Child Tax Credit, lifting nearly 1,300 Bucks County children out of poverty, was crucial in enabling families with limited incomes to meet more of their immediate household expenses.⁵⁵

Recommendation: To sustain the reduced levels of child poverty achieved during the pandemic, citizens of Bucks County and every elected leader at the state and local level must push their federal lawmakers to reenact the expanded Child Tax Credit.

Curb the Impact of Inflation on Families by Making Child Care More Affordable

The child care crisis is directly affecting the economic stability and growth of Bucks County. As of December 2021, an estimated 24,500 jobs were unfilled in the county.⁵⁶ Even if parents want to take these jobs, there simply isn't enough child care capacity to enable them to do so.

In many ways, the child care sector is the canary in the coal mine with respect to expected trends post-COVID. Substantial COVID relief was available to help child care programs remain open during the pandemic. Now, without those resources the child care sector is collapsing. To help parents return to the workforce, public policies must support the rebuilding of the child care infrastructure lost during the pandemic.

Recommendation: The citizens of Bucks County must increase the efforts made on their behalf in Washington and Harrisburg to ensure more resources are made available so families can afford high-quality, affordable child care and pre-k.

Invest in Students So They Can Get Ahead Most students are still behind in school because of COVID. Prior to the pandemic most school districts in the county were struggling to help all students meet basic academic benchmarks, so students entered the pandemic shutdowns already far behind. When COVID struck, 26% of students could not read at the third grade level when they entered fourth grade, and 29% could not read at the eighth grade level when they entered ninth grade.⁵⁷

Recommendations: The citizens of Bucks County must unite and demand that state lawmakers deliver sufficient funds so that every school can afford to hire an ample supply of teachers, provide every student with a computer and, where necessary, free or affordable internet access. To achieve these goals, every state lawmaker should be on the record for supporting an end to the school funding crisis in the Commonwealth and supportive of a strategy to close the state's \$4.6 billion school funding deficit.

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Children First, formerly known as Public Citizens for Children and Youth (PCCY), serves as the leading child advocacy organization working to improve the lives and life chances of children in southeastern Pennsylvania.

Children First undertakes specific and focused projects in areas affecting the healthy growth and development of children, including child care, public education, child health, juvenile justice, and child welfare.

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Children First serves the families of Bucks, Chester, Delaware, Montgomery, and Philadelphia counties as well as children across the Commonwealth. We are a committed advocate and an independent watchdog for the well-being of all our children.

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