



COVID'S IMPACT ON DELAWARE COUNTY CHILDREN

The Case For An Ambitious Rebound



***A Children First
Report on Delaware County
September 2022***

**children
FIRST**
THE ADVOCATE FOR KIDS
FORMERLY PCCY

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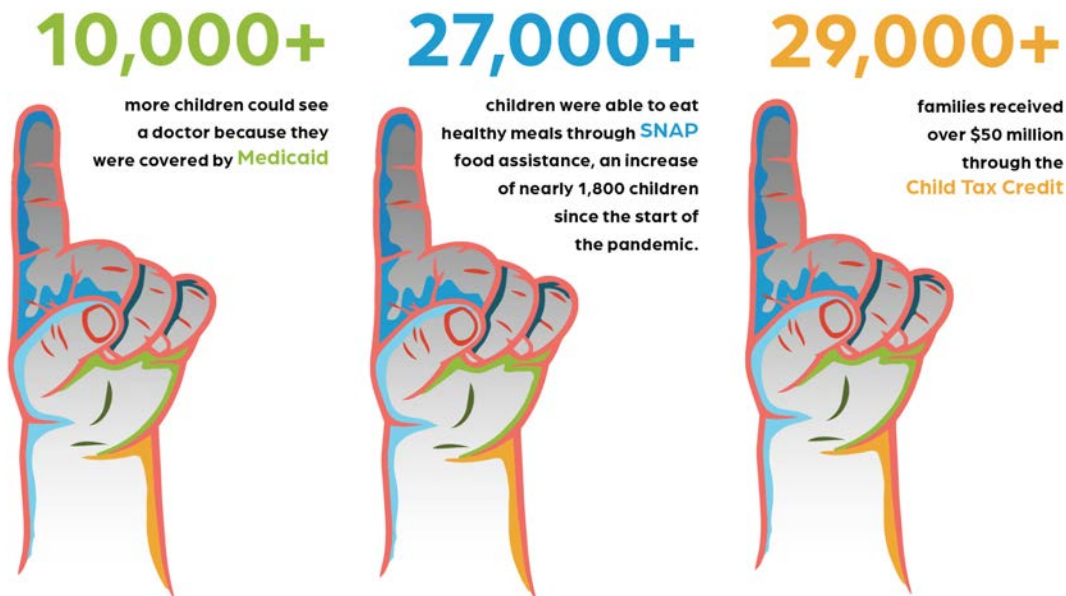
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Introduction

As we emerge from the turmoil and pain of the pandemic, parents in every corner of Delaware 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, nearly 1,900 Delaware 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 the hospital, pediatric health, education, early learning, child protection, and social support systems that partner with parents are exhausted. The staff are still recovering while having to make the extra effort to help children catch up and a critical partner, Crozier Health, closed a hospital and reduced child health services creating new barriers to health care for parents and children.

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, with communities of color being most affected. At the household level, the expiration of the Child Tax Credit is likely to mean that nearly 3,700 Delaware 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 Delaware 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. Fewer Children Were in Poverty – The one glimmer of hope during the pandemic was the impact of federal policy that lifted over 3,000 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, thousands of children are likely to fall back into poverty. That's got to change.

2. 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, 45% 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. Targeted efforts to recoup learning losses and push students ahead are urgently needed.

3. 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 Delaware County jumped by 43%.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.

4. Risk of Childhood Communicable Diseases Rose – Alarming, the percentage of younger children not fully vaccinated against COVID is 62%; 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.

5. Child Care Providers and Schools are Weaker – The dramatic economic changes have 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 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. In Delaware County, this challenge is particularly pronounced as the County is just beginning to build its health department. To be sure, the County is moving in the right direction. The County and local medical professionals will need to be focused on building and funding the 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 must ensure that its new Emergency Preparedness Coordinator will proactively put systems in place so that 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 Delaware 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 Delaware 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 Delaware 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.

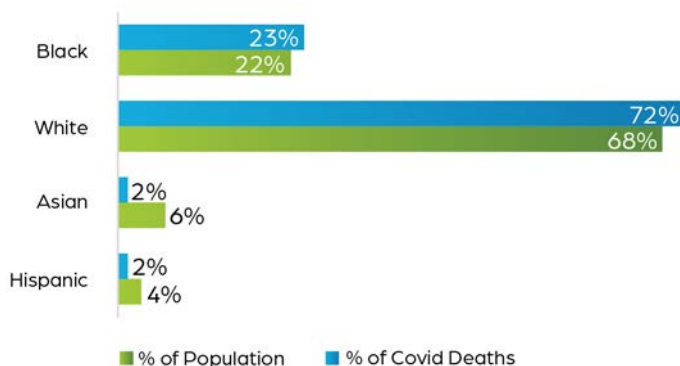
The Direct Impact of COVID on Delaware County

The Virus Took a Real Toll on the Health of Children

Tragically, nearly 1,900 Delaware County adults died from COVID.⁷ Among those adults who perished, the majority were White and the racial proportion of deaths to residents was remarkably similar to the demographic composition of the county.

The death toll may have been much higher had county leaders not rapidly contracted with the Chester County Health Department to help curb contagion and rapidly connect infected individuals to medical care. The expeditious decision by the County Council also enabled residents to benefit from urgently needed public health resources that ensured hospitals, schools, and child care centers had support to contain the virus, comply with state requirements, and access contagion prevention resources made available by the state via local health departments.

Deaths From COVID

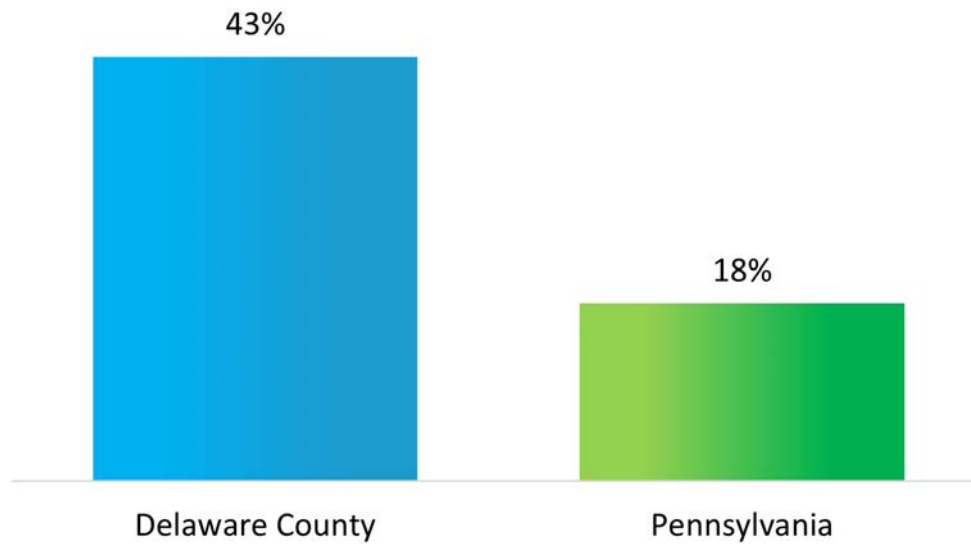


In consort with the resources from Chester County, Delaware County officials also deployed county resources to purchase and distribute personal protective supplies to child-serving professionals and provide COVID testing and vaccines at 11 locations across the county. While the county was certainly hamstrung by the absence of a local health department when the pandemic struck, the partnership with Chester County and the measures the County took on directly had an immeasurably positive effect on containing the virus and saving lives. Now that the County has officially opened its health department, residents can expect a new layer of local protection should another health care crisis emerge. However, the County's best efforts will be more complicated due to Crozier Health's closure of one hospital, the termination of mental health services, and reductions in pediatric, OB/GYN, and behavioral health services.

Children Spared from the Immediate Impact but Suffer the Mental Health Consequences

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

Youth Suicide Calls Spike



Source: Safe2Say Something, Annual Reports 2018 – 2020

Although children mostly escaped the virus' direct physical impact, the the pandemic itself caused a mental health crisis for children that continues unabated. Nationwide, 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 in the previous few years, between Feb 2019 to Feb 2021.⁹ This national 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 a “life safety matter,” meaning a student's immediate physical well-being or safety is at risk.



While statewide the Safe2Say hotline saw an 18% increase in calls relating to suicide from school years 2018-19 to 2019-20, Delaware County saw a 43% increase over the same period.



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 calls relating to suicide from school years 2018-19 to 2019-20, Delaware County saw a 43% increase over the same period.¹¹

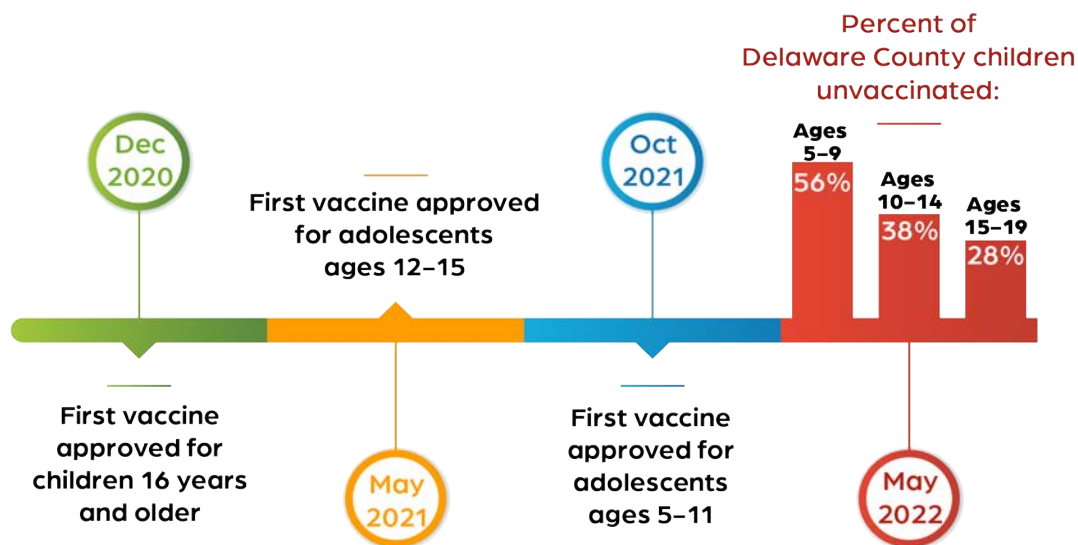
The availability of quality, culturally responsive mental health services was in short supply for children, especially for those insured by Medicaid or CHIP. The mental health services formerly delivered by Crosier Health will need to be rebuilt. The termination of these services is contributing to long waiting lists for mental health services for children. The pandemic and its aftereffects 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: The 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

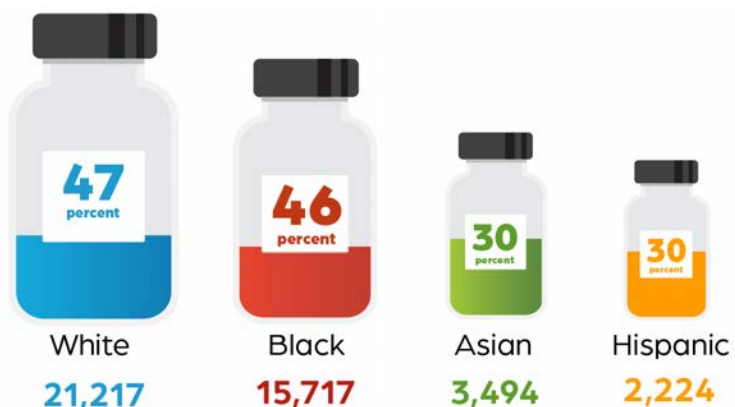
The one shred of good news is that Delaware County residents heeded the advice of the CDC to get vaccinated. In fact, the percentage of county residents fully vaccinated is 17 percentage points higher than the statewide average full vaccination rate.¹²

As of April 2022, 42% of county children over ten years old and 62% of children ages five to nine years old were not fully vaccinated. Additionally, Black residents of all ages are 25% less likely to be vaccinated than White residents, while Asian residents are 35% less likely to be vaccinated than White residents.¹³



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 108 Delaware County children were enrolled in the 2021-22 school year with an exemption from required immunizations due to philosophic objections, a 15% jump in the number of children exempted from basic immunizations compared to the 2018-19 school year.

Anti-Vax Campaigns Led To Low Immunization Rates



Unvaccinated Children & Adults By Race

Also troubling is that nearly twice as many students started school in a provisional status because they did not have the full complement of required vaccines compared to the prior year.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 new Delaware County Health Department must ensure parents understand and embrace the benefits of complying with vaccine regimens 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.

A Reinforced Safety Net Reduced Child Poverty

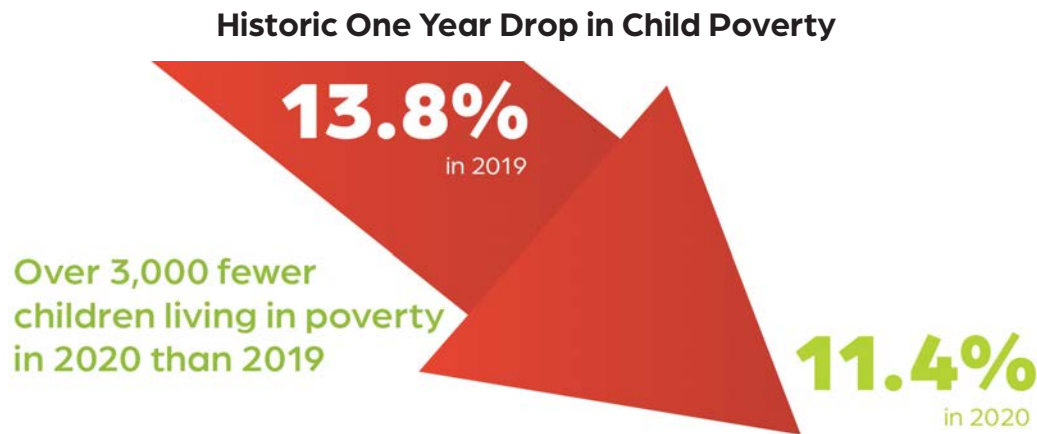
Federal COVID Relief Funds Lifted Children Out of Poverty

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 was a big help for my family and me! My son is autistic and he requires specialized care. The CTC helped us mend the gap for the sacrifice we had to make for our child. We were hoping the CTC would be permanent.”
- Brittney Williams, Parent





The Child Tax Credit alone had an extraordinarily positive impact, with over 3,000 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, Delaware County had an astonishing 18% decline in the number of children in poverty, the largest reduction in the region.¹⁵

In fact, the Child Tax Credit significantly increased the purchasing power of parents by putting an estimated \$315 million into their hands in 2021, which equates to over a \$100 million raise for families compared to 2019.¹⁶

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, more than 3,700 children across the county will fall back into poverty.¹⁸

Meanwhile, data shows that men returned to work at three times the rate of women within the first 12 months of the pandemic.¹⁹ As of February 2022, there were approximately 2,200 fewer women working in the county, mirroring the “she-cession” widely reported across the country, while the number of men working increased by about 1,100 compared to February 2020.²⁰ These trends are troubling because, before the pandemic, nearly 79% of families had all present parents in the workforce, meaning 21% of the county’s families had only one or no source of income for their household.²¹

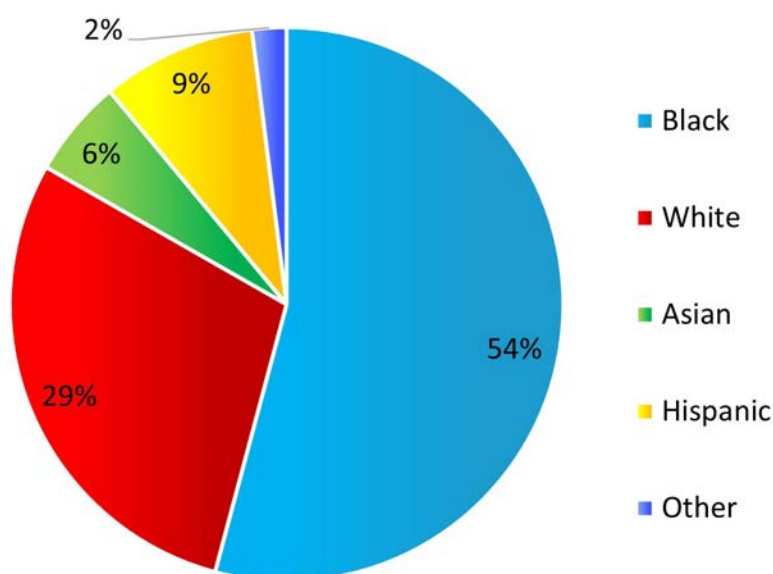
Urgent Recovery Need: Child poverty stunts the healthy development of children with lifelong consequences that will be exacerbated by the pandemic’s effect on children’s lives. For this reason alone, all policy makers should agree that the Child Tax Credit must be reenacted.

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 27% 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.

Medicaid Was A Lifesaver for Children



Source: Pennsylvania Department of Human Services

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 Delaware County during the pandemic, over 10,000 children were newly enrolled in Medicaid on top of the approximately 52,000 Delaware County children already insured by the program. This represents a 19% expansion in public health insurance coverage for children.²⁴



“Because of COVID, I lost my job and had to relocate. I needed insurance and so did my child. Fortunately, we qualified for Medical Assistance and were able to get my child the glasses they needed.”
- Dawn Hylton-Robinson, Parent



It also serves as an important resource for children of color, since over half of all children who get their health care through Medicaid in 2022 are Black (54%). 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.

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. While children of all races benefitted from the expansion, Black children are at the greatest risk from a policy reversal. Over 7,000 more Black children in Delaware County gained access to health care through Medicaid since 2019, more than any other race.



Over 7,000 more Black children gained access to health care through Medicaid since 2019, more than any other race.



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.

Child SNAP Enrollment in Delaware County Up 7%



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

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.²⁵

Families also benefitted from new federal flexibility that permitted them access to the SNAP program to purchase food for themselves and their children. Nearly 1,800 more Delaware County children were enrolled in SNAP, bringing childhood hunger relief via SNAP to over 27,000 children in the county. In fact, 10% more Delaware County residents and 7% more county children relied on SNAP during the pandemic compared to pre-pandemic enrollment from February 2020 to February 2022. As a result, in Delaware County, \$402 million in SNAP funds went to families so they could purchase food during the pandemic.²⁶

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, 38,000 Delaware County residents resigned or lost their jobs in the first three months of the pandemic.²⁷ To some extent, these job losses were a result of approximately 100 business closures across the county at the onset of the pandemic.²⁸ 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.



“My baby started child care last August and in September the infant care classroom closed due to a lack of staff. I went to several child care centers and was placed on the waiting list for five centers and was told there would be no openings for infants or toddlers ‘till October. Juggling care for my baby and my job for a year was hard. I could make it work because I have the sort of job where that’s possible. But so many other mothers I know have jobs where taking your baby to work is simply impossible”
- Dr. Monica Taylor, Parent, and County Council Chair



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, the number of Delaware County businesses has grown by 2% since the onset of the pandemic.²⁹ And the official unemployment rate returned to the county's pre-pandemic level of 4.4% by December 2021.³⁰

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.

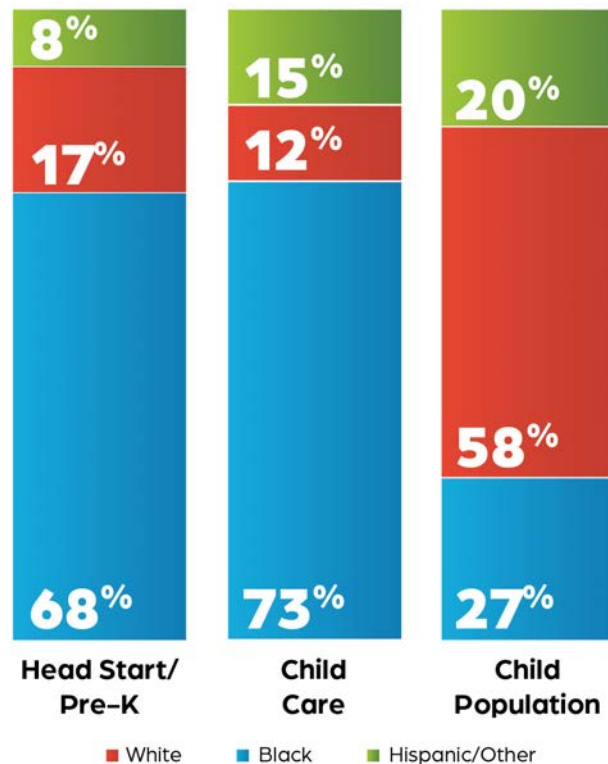
Child Care Sector Suffers Long Lasting Impact of the Virus

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.

Given the robust enrollment of Black children in child care and other publicly supported early learning programs in the county, more children of color will be affected by the child care shortage.

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, and \$9,800 for afterschool and summer care, and these costs are expected to continue to rise in 2022.³¹ Even at the current costs, a year of child care is likely to be more expensive than attending a year of college at West Chester University.

Early Learning Programs Serve Strong Proportions of Children Of Color



Child Care Supply Plummets



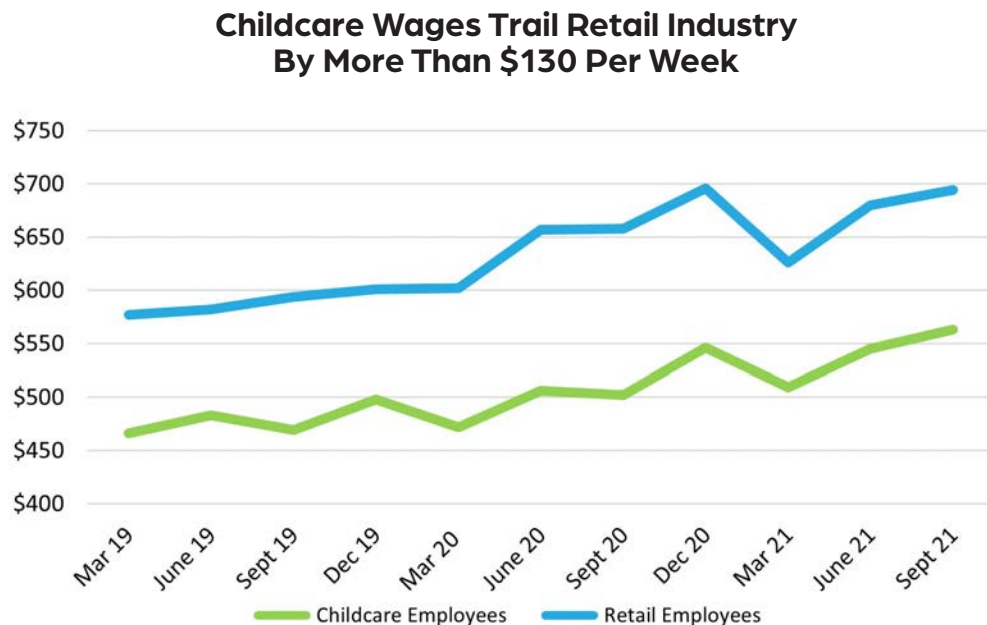
Federal and state policymakers recognized the essential role of the child care sector by authorizing funds to subsidize child care program operations during the pandemic when programs were closed and/or had very low levels of enrollment.

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 plummeted by 30% as of March 2022. Over the same time, 52 providers closed, including ten high-quality programs.³²

Parents report waiting lists for infant toddler care that exceed one year in certain areas of the county. Simply put, the child care sector has been dessimated.

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 Delaware County compared to the pre-pandemic level.



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

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 23% less than employees at big box retail stores or fast food franchises.³³

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. 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 Delaware 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 and state 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.³⁴ 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.³⁵ While these trends were universal, some students had it worse than others.

In Delaware 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 had neither the inventory of computers nor the technical 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.³⁶



“Child care is over \$800 a month for us. We make things work, but affordability is the real problem here and we need progress”

- Charles Muvera, Parent

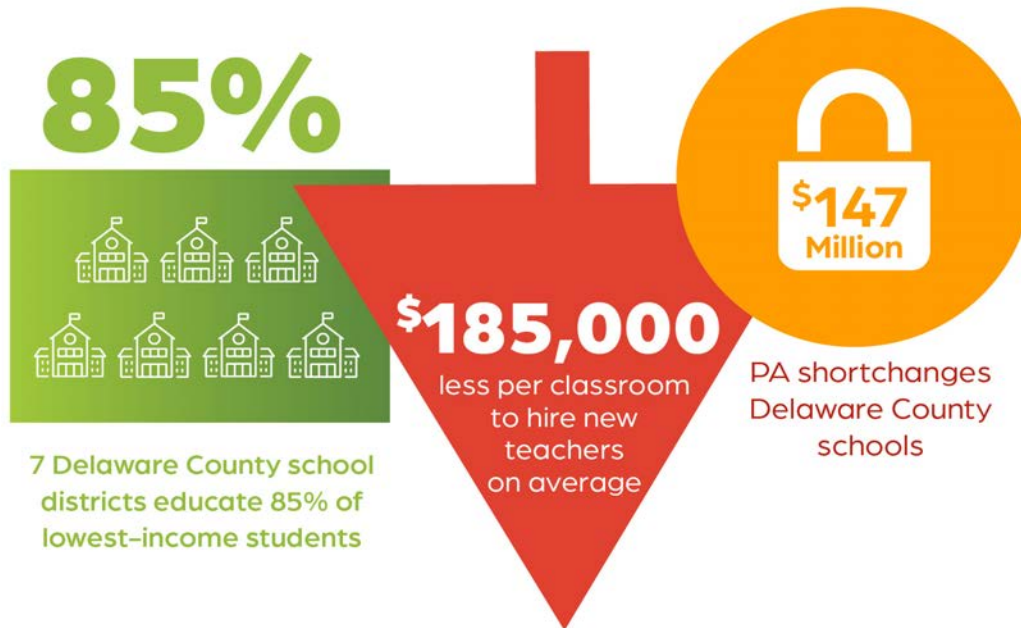


“I’m a registered nurse and I worked night shift during the pandemic so I could be home with my kids during the day to keep them accountable to school. However, it was tough for me to stay up during the day and be my child’s teacher too. Now we are playing catch-up this school year.”

- Sabrina Witherspoon, Parent



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 11% of Delaware County families with children experiencing poverty, it's likely that many students were not sufficiently able to attend classes while instruction was virtual.³⁷ 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 William Penn School District, where 75% of students are from low-income households and 96% are students of color, do not have high-speed internet access, compared to only one in 20 students in the much more affluent Wallingford-Swarthmore School District, where 13% of students are low-income and 27% are children of color.³⁸

These students without access are more likely to experience learning loss because they are on the wrong side of the digital divide. The interruption of learning compounded the already dire educational gaps across the schools in the county. Before COVID struck, 45% of public school students were failing to meet basic English and math targets at the key third and eighth grade benchmarks.³⁹ It's safe to say that things got worse for these students during COVID.

Prior to the pandemic, most of the school districts in the county were struggling to help students boost their skills so they could reach grade-level benchmarks on the state's assessments called PSSAs. Only five out of 15 school districts were making progress in boosting the share of students performing at grade level at either third or eighth grade English before the pandemic.⁴¹

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 not to 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.⁴⁰

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.⁴²

Add to that challenge the fact that far fewer newly trained teachers are entering the field. In fact, since the 2013-14 school year, Pennsylvania has seen a 42% decline

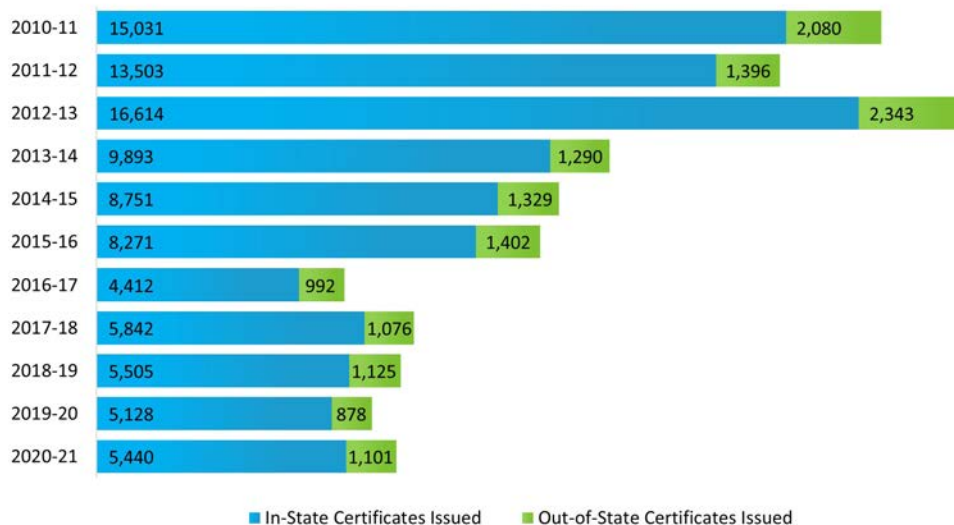


“We need pandemic therapy for kids and we need these supports in schools. I have witnessed so many young people failing to thrive because of the lack of adequate mental health supports. Bottom line – we need to be proactive.”

- Maya Noy, Parent



New Teachers In Short Supply

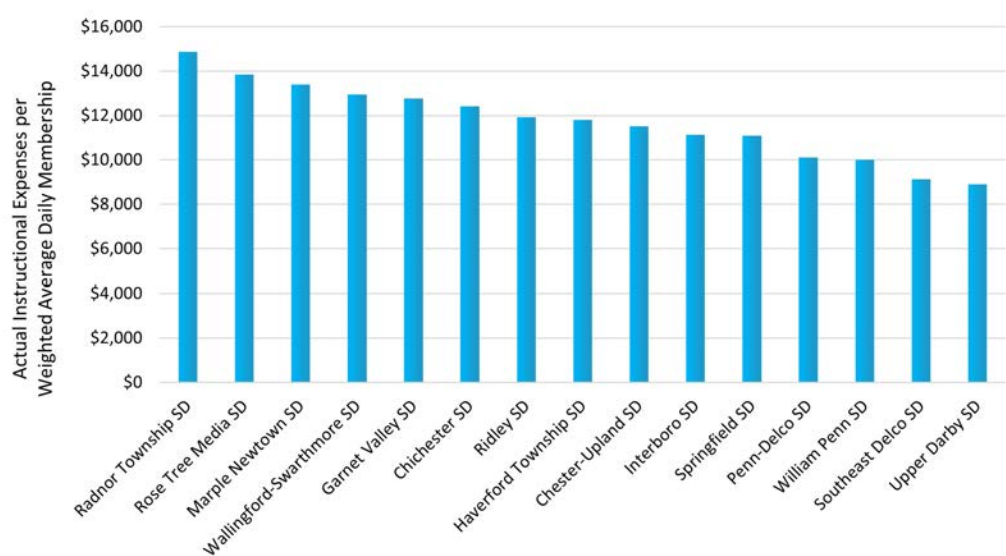


Source: Pennsylvania Department of Education, Educator Preparation and Certification Report, 2010 – 2021.

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.”⁴³ 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.

A \$6,000 Per Student Gap In Educational Resources



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

In Delaware County, based on funds available for instruction, the gap between the district with the most and least resources is almost \$150,000 per classroom (of 25 students).⁴⁴ 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.

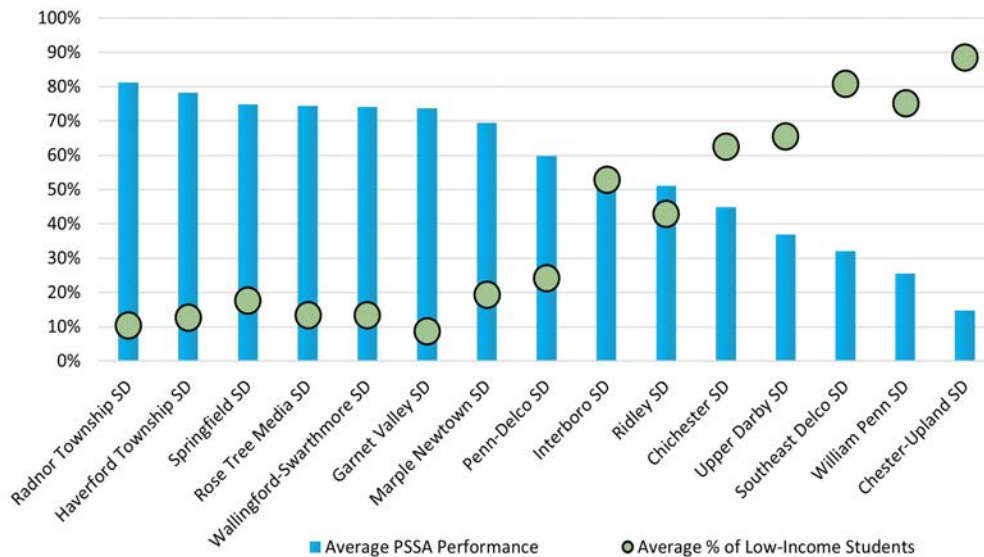
The resource gap has the most severe impact in districts that have the least resources and educate relatively high concentrations of low-income students and students of color. For instance, the William Penn School District has \$10,000 per student for instruction. Its students are seven times more likely to be low-income and three times more likely to be students of color than their counterparts in Radnor, which has over \$14,800 per student to educate its pupils.⁴⁵



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Highest Poverty Schools Experience 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.

This illustrates the irrational methodology used to fund public education in Pennsylvania. These financial and economic disparities were pronounced before COVID where students in the William Penn School District were also, unsurprisingly, much further behind academically than the students in Radnor 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. The seven school districts that educate 84% of the county's lowest income students and 76% of the county's students of color have, on average, about \$185,000 less to spend per classroom (of 25 students).⁴⁶

Just as the pandemic has taken a toll on the academic achievement of students with lower income 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 Delaware 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 county's root educational disparity.

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. Because children are especially vulnerable and have such a broad set of needs, the County's new Emergency Preparedness Coordinator should immediately begin 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. While building on the effective practices deployed in the pandemic is a good start, much more planning will need to be done to ensure that families with pre-school aged children and the community service providers supporting these families are factored into the county's response plans.

Recommendation: The County should craft a strategy and designate a structure now that ensures children (0 to 18 years-old) are better protected the next time a public health emergency strikes.

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. Delaware County has already moved in the right direction in this regard by establishing its new health department.

Recommendation: County leaders and local medical professionals will need to be vigilant as they build and support the new health department so it can protect and provide care for residents every day and during a crisis. 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. Alarming, 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.⁴⁷ 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.⁴⁸ At these rates, upwards of 14,000 teens in Delaware 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. In response to this burgeoning need, key Delaware County leaders embarked on a strategic plan, released in February 2022, engaging more than 6,000 students, 2,000 family members, and 600 school staff members across a majority of Delaware County school districts to create a blueprint to meet the mental health needs of the county’s children by 2030.⁴⁹

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 the activities outlined in the plan and lead the effort to build robust school-based behavioral health services that are culturally responsive, offer preventative mental health resources, mental health first aid, and therapeutic supports.

Protect Children from Poverty. Before COVID struck, four 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 Delaware County*.⁵⁰ 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.⁵¹ 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 2022.⁵² Today, nearly one-quarter (24%) of Delaware County homeowners and nearly half (48%) of renters spend 30% or more of their income on housing.⁵³

Without question, parents earning less than the median wage have far less purchasing power. That is why the federal Child Tax Credit, lifting more than 3,000 Delaware County children out of poverty, was crucial in enabling families with limited incomes to meet more of their immediate household expenses.⁵⁴

Recommendation: To sustain the reduced levels of child poverty achieved during the pandemic, citizens of Delaware 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 Delaware County. As of December 2021, an estimated 21,000 jobs were unfilled in the county.⁵⁵ 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 Delaware 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. Yet prior to the pandemic, most school districts in the county were struggling to help all students meet basic academic benchmarks, so they entered the pandemic shutdowns already far behind. When COVID struck, 32% of students could not read at the third grade level when they entered fourth grade, and 38% could not read at the eighth grade level when they entered ninth grade. Far too many of these students were students of color who disproportionally accounted for 58% of the fourth graders who started behind and 51% of the eighth grades who were struggling to learn.⁵⁶

Recommendations: The citizens of Delaware 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.

Through thoughtful and informed advocacy, community education, targeted service projects, and budget analysis, Children First watches out and speaks out for children and families.

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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