



Children First Testimony

Before the

Pennsylvania Senate Democratic Policy Hearing

Read to Succeed: Early Childhood and Its Effects on Childhood Literacy

November 17, 2022

Senators, thank you for the opportunity to testify at this important hearing today. Children First is pleased to offer this testimony tapping our expertise in leading large-scale efforts to boost early literacy as well as our knowledge of the challenges facing early learning programs that are undermining the contribution that they can make to the literacy skills of the state's youngest learners.

You've heard from my colleagues of the research that shows the extraordinary impact that high quality early learning programs have on brain development and a child's facility to learn the foundational aspects of reading. Let me begin by augmenting their contribution by pointing out that last Spring, the legislature amended the Pennsylvania School Code Section, adding 1205.8, requiring the Department of Education to deliver professional development resources this year to boost the share of certified teachers relying on proven reading instructional practices known in the field as "the science of reading, or structured literacy". That section requires that by 2024 Pennsylvania colleges and universities that prepare teachers for certification must ensure newly minted teachers can follow the evidence-based practices of "the science of reading."

I've attached the new school code language to this testimony. We are the organization that led the charge to put these requirements in state law so that students are increasingly likely to be taught by teachers who can build students' skills in the fundamentals of reading. The benefits of this new language will accrue to early childhood programs to the extent they are able to afford to hire teachers with bachelor's degrees in education with a Pennsylvania pre-k-4 certificate. I am grateful that you and the other Senators interested in boosting student success, supported this measure.

I believe that the new capacity the Department must create to prepare teachers to more effectively teach reading skills to young school-aged learners can readily be shared with the 40 to 45,000 educators and other staff working in the state's early learning programs.

The Office of Child Development and Early Learning can be directed to ensure that the essential methods used to prepare young children to be strong readers are available to all these staff via the state's early learning professional development system and perhaps it can use its federal quality improvement funds (from the Child Care and Development Block Grant) to incentivize early learning staff to secure Pennsylvania Quality Assurance System (PQAS) professional development credits by completing training options that prepare them to use the proven reading instruction strategies as defined in section 1208.5 of the school code.

It's clear, however, that independent of these new requirements, quality early learning is making a substantial contribution to boosting the literacy gains of children before they enter school. The challenge in Pennsylvania is that too few children start kindergarten with two or more years of learning in high quality programs.

Across the state as of the end of October about 48,000 children under five years old were in early learning programs where the state provided a subsidy for their care. About 21,000 of these children were in programs certified as high quality by the Keystone Stars program.

To be sure, some providers with lower STARS ratings are capable of boosting the developmental skills of young children, but they select not to seek a higher STAR rating because the financial payoff of doing so is not perceived as worth it given the paperwork and regulatory requirements. We can say for certain, however, that at the aggregate level, programs with high quality ratings prepare students for kindergarten success at higher rates than their peers with lower quality ratings.

The problem is that a majority of children who are in subsidized child care are starting kindergarten without having attended a high quality early learning program. That means that kindergarten and early grade teachers are not able to build on strong foundational literacy skills that a minority of the students are likely to possess, because they need to help those with less developed skills catch up. As a result, the students with stronger skills languish and to some extent those skills can atrophy.

We are not going to see strong system wide early literacy progress in our K-12 system until every child starting school has the strong reading foundational skills that high quality programs can impart.

I want to give you a bit more data about what is going on in the child care sector. First just to clarify, in Pennsylvania we have three publicly supported early learning options for young children. For children at 100% of the federal poverty level or below, with state and federally funds, approximately 43,500 children can enroll in Head Start Programs. Of course, the powerful research on the lasting impact of Head Start demonstrates it effectively develops those foundational skills needed for children to start school ready to succeed.

The state also provides funding sufficient for about 30,000 children to access Pre-K Counts programs that operate as schools do, partial day for about nine months a year. And, about 38,000 children can enroll in child care programs subsidized by the Child Care Works program. Keep in mind that some children attend Pre-K till 2:30pm and then attend another half day of programming paid for by Child Care Works. As I said, about half of the children, or 21,000 attending child care are in high quality programs.

Last spring our partners in the early learning advocacy sector, some of whom are here testifying today, fielded a survey of early learning providers across all three types of public programs, and programs that accept private payment from parents, to learn how COVID affected their enrollment. That survey found that across nearly 1,000 child care programs, nearly 7,000 positions were vacant resulting in more than 32,000 children languishing on waiting lists for child care.

Across just the counties of the Senate Districts of the two co-sponsors of this hearing 164 providers responded to the survey, with at least 10% of the providers in each of these counties provided critical data.

**164 Child Care Providers in Senators Flynn’s and Muth’s Districts
Respond Start Strong Survey About the Child Care Staffing Crisis – March 2022**

County Name	Number of Survey Respondents	Share of Providers Responding to Start Strong Survey
Berks	41	22.91%
Chester	26	9.85%
Lackawanna	22	20.00%
Monroe	19	29.69%
Montgomery	53	11.65%

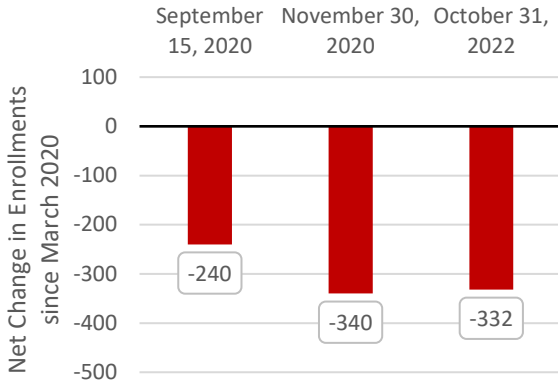
In just these two Senate Districts the survey found that nearly every provider was facing a staffing crisis with a low share of providers in Chester County reporting the crisis was affecting 92% of all programs and the highest response in Lackawanna County where 100% of the programs reported staffing shortages.

- The survey results also show that in Senator Flynn’s district there were 378 staff vacancies among the providers who responded resulting in the closure of 79 classrooms swelling the waiting list for child care to 1,703 children.
- The survey results in Senator Muth’s district, found that staff vacancies topped out at 1,008 causing 175 early learning classrooms to be shuttered, pushing more than 3,500 children onto waiting lists.

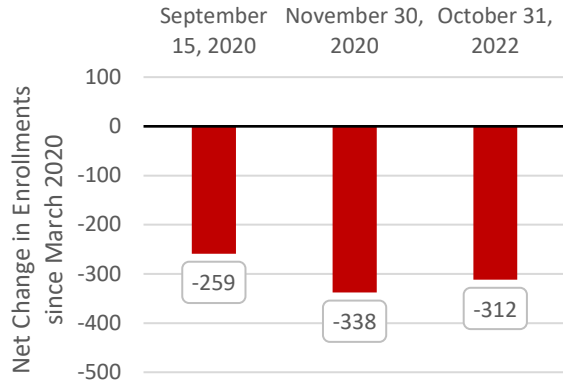
These survey responses explain why Child Care Works is serving 21,000 fewer children today compared to March 2020 just before COVID struck. Many of these children are shut out of after school child care programs, but 14,000+ are shut out of child care programs serving children zero to five, the most important years of a child’s brain development.

- Across just the two Northeastern counties represented by Senator Flynn, 644 low-income children are shut out of the child care programs which we know is likely to mean a significant share of these children start school with less developed early literacy skills.
 - In Lackawanna County, between March 13, 2020, and October 31, 2022, child care program enrollment for children ages 0 to 5 declined by -32.03%.
 - In Monroe County, between March 13, 2020, and October 31, 2022, child care program enrollment for children ages 0 to 5 declined by -39.38%.
- In Senator Muth's district alone, the number of children no longer enrolled in the child care subsidy system is nearly twice as high at 1,130.
 - In Berks County, between March 13, 2020, and October 31, 2022, child care program enrollment for children ages 0 to 5 declined by -9.03%.
 - In Chester County, between March 13, 2020, and October 31, 2022, child care program enrollment for children ages 0 to 5 declined by -30.01%.
 - In Montgomery County, between March 13, 2020, and October 31, 2022, child care program enrollment for children ages 0 to 5 declined by -22.40%.

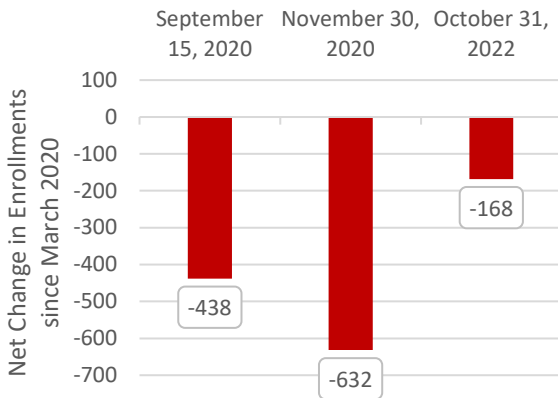
Child Care Enrollments Have Not Rebounded Pre-Covid Levels in Monroe County



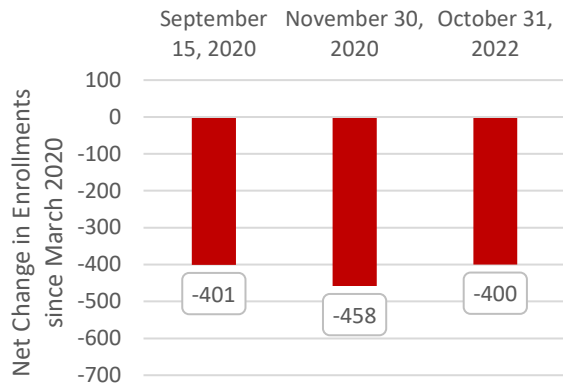
Child Care Enrollments Have Not Rebounded to Pre-Covid Levels in Lackawanna County



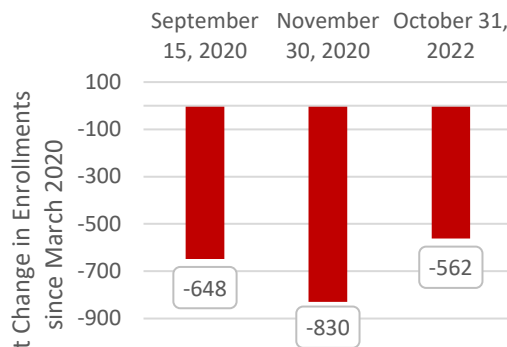
Child Care Enrollments Have Not Rebounded to Pre-Covid Levels in Berks County



Child Care Enrollments Have Not Rebounded to Pre-Covid Levels in Chester County



Child Care Enrollments Have Not Rebounded to Pre-Covid Levels in Montgomery County



It's important to note that before COVID struck, far too many children in the state were failing to meet the state's benchmarks for successful third grade reading proficiency. Over half, or 51.3%. of third grade children statewide failed to meet the state's benchmark for proficiency according to the last valid year of PSSA results in 2019. Across the five counties of the Senators hosting this hearing, even in the highest performing county, Chester County, a quarter of third grade children are failing to meet these benchmarks.

Even in High Performing Counties Nearly 30% of Students Not Prepared to be Good Readers by the End of Third Grade

County	Basic & Below Basic
Berks	41.0%
Chester	25.5%
Montgomery	27.4%
Lackawanna	41.6%
Monroe	35.4%

Average County Share of 3rd Grade Students Who Scored Either Proficient & Advanced or Basic & Below on the English Language Arts (ELA) PSSAs 2019

Finally, clearly, children in your counties are harmed by being shut out of child care programs in general and high quality programs, specifically. We know that growing up as a young child in poverty can significantly stunt brain development. That's why it's so alarming that more children are now likely to be in families that are facing new or persistent financial hardship because these parents can't accept new or higher paying job as a result of the child care shortage.

Every Pennsylvania county continues to boast strong job openings with an estimated total of 367,000 openings across the state. These jobs represent economic opportunity for families that can lift them out of poverty and spur healthy brain development. In the counties that just you two, Senators Flynn and Muth, represent there are 70,000+ jobs waiting to be filled.

Estimated 70,000+ Job Openings by County in Just Five Counties

County	Estimated Number of Job Openings
Berks	10,644
Chester	15,583
Montgomery	31,809
Lackawanna	5,965
Monroe	3,491

Estimated number of jobs openings by county calculated by multiplying the overall number of job openings (not adjusted seasonally) in Pennsylvania by the county share of PA employment, August 2022 BLS data.

To take one of these jobs, parents with children under five, need affordable child care and the supply of affordable high quality child care was insufficient before COVID and now the shortage is causing dire consequences for parents, their children and future of the state.

PA School Code – Amended July 7, 2022

Section 1205.8. Teacher Support in the Structured Literacy Program.--(a) (1) It is the intent of the General Assembly that teachers be equipped to facilitate high-quality reading instruction grounded in structured literacy and intervention services to address student reading needs.

(2) The program provided in this section will assist participating school entities in providing professional development for teachers in foundational skills and instructional interventions based on structured literacy and providing opportunities for school personnel to serve as reading coaches to support teachers in delivering high-quality reading instruction.

(b) (1) Beginning with the 2022-2023 school year, the department shall establish a program of professional development and applied practice in structured literacy for school personnel that includes in-class demonstration, modeling and coaching support to improve reading and literacy outcomes.

(2) School personnel selected by the participating school entity to serve as professional coaches for this program must have at least five years of experience in teaching of reading and be able to demonstrate their skills in the instruction of and intervention with students, including those with dyslexia and other language-related disabilities.

(3) The department may contract with multiple service providers, including school entities and institutions of higher education with demonstrated experience in structured literacy, to develop and implement the program so that experienced support is available locally.

(4) A service provider, including a school entity or approved educator preparation program that demonstrates successful implementation of literacy outcomes, is eligible to provide professional development and onsite demonstration and coaching support in the program.

(5) A participating school entity shall adopt high-quality instructional materials grounded in scientific-based reading research in accordance with the State academic standards approved by the State Board of Education.

(c) (1) The continuing professional education plan of each school entity shall satisfy the continuing education requirements of 22 Pa. Code § 49.17 (relating to continuing professional education), including training in structured literacy for professional employees who hold instructional

certificates in early childhood, elementary-middle level, Special Education-PK-12, English as a second language and reading specialist. To ensure that school personnel have the knowledge and skill to teach all students to read, including students with dyslexia and other language-based learning disabilities, training shall address, but shall not be limited to:

(i) Evidence-based intervention practices on structured literacy.

(ii) Explicit and systematic instruction in phonological and phonemic awareness.

(iii) The alphabetic principle, decoding and encoding, fluency and vocabulary.

(iv) Reading comprehension and building content knowledge.

(2) School employees required to undergo continuing professional education under section 1205.2 or 1205.5 shall receive credit toward the school employee's continuing professional education requirements if the training program has been approved by the department.

(d) The department shall create and provide guidelines to describe the standard components for professional development needed for structured literacy instruction, including required content knowledge, and establish criteria by which reading and literacy outcomes may be measured.

(e) The department shall develop reading literacy skills standards for use by educator preparation programs that prepare candidates to earn an instructional certificate in early childhood, elementary-middle level, Special Education-PK-12, English as a second language and reading specialist. The standards shall include, at a minimum, instruction on the following:

(1) Effectively teaching the reading literacy skills of phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary and comprehension.

(2) Differentiating instruction for teaching students with advanced reading skills and students with dyslexia or other language-based learning disabilities.

(3) Identifying and teaching students with dyslexia and other language-based learning disabilities using appropriate scientific research and brain-based multisensory intervention methods and strategies.

(4) Implementing reading instruction using high-quality instructional materials.

(5) Using developmentally appropriate supports to ensure that students can effectively access reading instruction.

(6) Administering universal reading screeners to students.

(f) Beginning August 1, 2024, an approved educator preparation program shall provide candidates seeking certification in early childhood, elementary-middle level, Special Education-PK-12, English as a second language and reading specialist with training on reading instruction focused primarily on the reading literacy skills standards developed under subsection (e).

(g) As used in this section, the following words and phrases shall have the meanings given to them in this subsection unless the context clearly indicates otherwise:

"Approved educator preparation program." A sequence of courses and experiences offered by a preparing institution or alternative provider that is reviewed and approved by the department.

"Chief school administrator." The superintendent of a school district, executive director of an intermediate unit, administrative director of an area career and technical school or chief executive officer of a charter school, cyber charter school or regional charter school.

"Department." The Department of Education of the Commonwealth.

"Participating school entity." A school entity that elects to take part in the Structured Literacy Program.

"School entity." A school district, intermediate unit, area career and technical school, charter school, cyber charter school or regional charter school.

"Structured literacy." Systemic, explicit instruction that:

(1) provides a strong core of foundational skills in the language systems of English;

(2) integrates listening, speaking, reading, spelling and writing; and

(3) emphasizes the structure of language across the speech sound system, the writing system, the structure of sentences, the meaningful parts of words, the relationship among words and the organization of spoken and written discourse.

(1205.8 added July 8, 2022, P.L.620, No.55)