



PENNSYLVANIA HEAD START ASSOCIATION

PARENTS, STAFF, ADMINISTRATORS AND FRIENDS AFFILIATED FOR CHILDREN

Beth White - Board President

Blair Hyatt - Executive Director

PHSA Public Policy Agenda 2023 Context

The pandemic has caused a disruption for children and families in the state of Pennsylvania. The most vulnerable families who qualify for Head Start and Early Head Start are feeling the greatest impact of the disruption. (or are disproportionately affected - experiencing illness, homelessness, and mental health crisis). In most cases Head Start is the primary advocate for the health and wellness of these children and their families.

Head Start and Early Head Start's is the cornerstone of early childhood education providing comprehensive services for children and families prenatal through age 5. This kind of programming is exactly what these families need to regain stability in their communities in order to move forward successfully. Consequently, it is PHSA's position that the legislature (federal and state) should provide significant funding increases to Head Start/ Early Head Start programs that will allow them to fully address the pressing needs of all of the children and families we have promised to serve.

Issues

Staffing Crisis

Early Head Start/Head Start is in a staffing crisis. The salaries of Head Start education staff are not competitive with school districts and other competing human service employers. We are unable to compete with fast food, convenience stores, large department store chains, and massive distribution centers recruitment tactics and hourly wages in our communities. We commend that Pennsylvania Legislature for its infusion of over \$19M into the HSSAP program in FY 22-23, and call for a proportional increase in federal funding from Washington DC.

Across the state, the lack of available, qualified early education teachers, caregivers and social workers has forced the closure of classrooms, leaving empty seats. Programs across the Commonwealth are underenrolled due to the staffing crisis. Without staff, Head Start programs cannot fully operate and serve the families who need it most.

The ongoing vaccine mandate adds to the many challenges Head Start programs have in hiring and retaining staff. Programs have proven that they can keep children safe without a vaccine requirement.

Fewer and fewer people are interested in being Early Education teachers, this is part of a larger trend where the numbers of people pursuing education degrees has been decreasing for several years now. There are not enough qualified ECE professionals to fill the staffing needs of Head Start programs.



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Recommendations:

Federal: Increase funding sufficient to raise Head Start salaries so they are competitive with school districts salaries.

Remove vaccine mandate.

Support Trauma Informed Classrooms (see below)

State and Federal

Build apprenticeship programs

Increase loan forgiveness funding and access

Increase availability and quality of online learning

Provide multi year emergency certifications

Provide scholarships for staff attaining degree/certification.

Early Head Start Expansion

Across the Commonwealth Early Head Start programming is available to less than 15% of the eligible families. Research shows that this is a key time in children's brain development and that high quality programs like Early Head Start significantly impact children's growth and future success in life. Our most vulnerable children ages 0 - 3 deserve access to Early Head Start programming.

Recommendations:

Federal: Increase funding to increase Early Head Start programming by 15%.

State: Explore creating State funding for Early Head Start,
Meet with Pre K and CC Campaigns
Consider a Early Head Start HSSAP Set a Side
Integrate EHS into any/all state initiatives for services to low income pregnant women, infants, toddlers and their families.



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Enrollment Challenges

Many Head Start programs are facing significant challenges with their requirement to be fully enrolled. As stated previously this is due largely to the staffing crisis. An additional significant factor is that the federal poverty guidelines are no longer an accurate measurement of whether a family is economically vulnerable. We support expanding the categories of who is eligible for Head Start services.

Recommendations

Federal: Continue flexibility with the enrollment requirements. Low enrollment is rarely due to poor performance by Head Start programs.

Make all WIC families Early Head Start/Head Start eligible.

State: Explore possible HSSAP eligibility expansion.

Facilities

Finding safe, affordable facilities for Early Head Start/Head Start programs is becoming increasingly difficult. Buildings are aging and schools are using classrooms for Kindergarten and PA Pre K Counts programs.

Recommendations:

Federal: Provide funding to programs for renovations/purchases of facilities.

State: Provide funding to programs for renovations/purchases of facilities.
Explore bank community investment funding.

Healthy Classrooms - Trauma Informed Work

The pandemic has highlighted trends that had begun well before the lockdown. Both parents and children have been exhibiting increasing amounts of challenging behaviors. More and more classrooms have significant numbers of children with disabilities and trauma related behaviors. The work of early childhood educators has changed dramatically. Trauma/behaviors are causing: teacher burnout, and parents to pull children from the program so it is affecting teacher recruitment and retention and affecting retention of students.



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Recommendations:

Federal: Grant programs the options of both smaller class sizes or lower staff to
& State child ratios as needed.

Provide funding and support for staff:
Recognition
Appreciation

Require staff PD time sufficient to prevent burnout

Funding to provide trauma informed classrooms

Develop trauma informed care credentials for all staff

Pre K Counts Rebid

The PKC grants are being rebid during FY 2023-24. An accurate assessment of where pre-k classrooms are needed across the commonwealth is essential for planning and awarding grantees. Too often, new grantees have proposed providing pre-k classrooms without consulting or collaborating with the already established pre-k providers and are still being funded by OCDEL. These new grantees often have overestimated the need for pre-k classrooms in a particular location, creating enrollment issues. As pre-k funding has increased over the years, competition challenges between enrollment and providers are becoming more prevalent. In some cases, Head Start programs have stopped offering HSSAP and/or federally funded Head Start classrooms, as Head Start classrooms must maintain 100% enrollment or they are at-risk of losing their funding. This results in a reduction in the overall availability of high-quality pre-k being offered. The state cannot afford to lose federal funding for Head Start. The rebid process for early childhood programs is not conducive to providing stability for our staff, families, and children. High performing programs should not have to compete for their grants. If staff are not guaranteed to have employment at the end of a 5 year grant cycle, it further exacerbates our ability to hire staff. Also, building relationships with families is crucial and if the same entity is not providing early childhood services, it is too confusing to families and hard for them to trust organizations.

Recommendations

State: Only approve PKC grants that use a shared assessment of need by all the PKC/Head Start providers in the service area.



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Only approve PKC grants that have signed letters of support by all the PKC/Head Start providers in the service area that approves the proposed classroom locations.

If a PKC grantee proposes changing a classroom location after the RFP has been submitted, they should be required to get a signed letter of support from all the PKC/Head Start providers in the service area for the change.

When a PKC grant is awarded, the grantee should be required to inform all the pre-k providers in the service area of the locations of the classrooms they will be opening ASAP.

Prioritize funding to PKC grantees who will be using a shared, collaborative recruitment and enrollment process designed to minimize competition, maximize the use of pre-k resources and promote the value of Head Start for our most vulnerable families.

Equity

Head Start has always been about equity, working to serve all of the nation's most economically vulnerable children and their families.

PHSA conducts all of our advocacy work using our advocacy campaign's ELPA equity framework and commitment:

Structural racism and a history of under investment in Black and Brown communities has created inequitable access to these critical (early learning) opportunities.

ELPA is committed to prenatal-to-age-5 policies and practices that advance equity. Centering Black and Brown families and professionals in the development of policies and campaign advocacy strategies is critical to ELPA's mission and future. ELPA understands this involves continuous evaluation of campaign structures, members and norms so we can effectively work on behalf of systematically excluded communities. An equitable and comprehensive system of high-quality care and education will eliminate disparities for all children and secure their right to learn.



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PHSA and the Early Childhood Campaigns

PHSA is an active member and supports the work of the Early Learn Pennsylvania (ELPA) coalition and the four campaigns (Pre K For PA, Start Strong, Childhood Begins at Home and Thriving PA) PHSA promotes the campaign's budget requests and advocacy. We believe that the problems that Head Start program's and their families have are very significant, and require significant funding increases to be addressed effectively.

State Funding

Recommendation Access: Fully fund HSSAP to serve every Head Start eligible child and their families with wages comparable with school districts.

Rationale: Currently at least 40% of Head Start eligible preschool aged children, those whose families live at or below the federal poverty level, are NOT able to access Head Start comprehensive, early childhood education and family services. PHSA believes that the highest priority for early learning funding should be access for our most vulnerable children, who are at greatest risk for future failure and costly remediation without early, continuous, comprehensive, high quality intervention. Fully funding HSSAP is an equity issue. Fully funding HSSAP is the most impactful action the Commonwealth can do to work to create educational equity for young children and their families.

Recommendation Sustainability: Increase HSSAP funding levels sufficient to improve payscale for all Head Start employees so that programs can recruit and retain employees and expand facilities.

Rationale: The Covid -19 pandemic has shed a light on a chronic workforce problem and has reached crisis proportions. Without significant, retained increases so that the early childhood and social service workforce can be reshaped to a viable career opportunity, and provide parity with similarly qualified school district and county human service's scale, the Head Start and early care community will not be able to provide high quality services or any services at all.

Recommendation: Increase the quality funding of PA Pre K Counts program so that salaries are competitive with school districts and other early learning providers.

Rationale: Without significant, sustained increases that provide parity with school district scale, and provide adequate facility costs, the provider community will not be able to respond to opportunities for expansion to serve more eligible children. As research shows, The PA Pre K counts program must maintain high quality, in order to have the desired impact. Without the appropriate cost per child investment to adequately pay education staff, and provide environmentally safe, accessible and healthy classrooms, quality will be impacted.



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State Policy Work

Support for Low Income workers

Low Income workers, including many Head Start staff, struggle to be self-sufficient. The United Way of Pennsylvania's reporting on ALICE (ALICE stands for Asset Limited, Income Constrained, Employed) workers documents these struggles.

<https://www.uwp.org/alice/about-alice/>.

PHSA is partnering with UW of PA in their advocacy to establish State Funding to provide Income stability and family self-sufficiency by breaking the cycle of poverty with a state Earned Income Tax Credit to benefit ALICE workers.

Federal Funding

Secure Increased Federal Head Start Funding in FY 2024 Budget

Secure in the FY 2024 budget funding that at minimum includes an additional \$2.5B to raise Head Start/Early Head Start salaries so that programs can provide the high quality services Head Start/Early Head Families deserve, and a COLA that provides funding increases that keep pace with the inflation experienced in that past two years.
