

Jefferson's Early Childcare Investment Policy Initiative

Too Many Erie Infants, Toddlers Lack Child Care
Profound Opportunity Awaits in Solving Enduring Problem

By Michelle Harkins
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Child care is a critical component of our society, providing support and opportunities for young children to learn, grow, and flourish in a safe and nurturing environment. Although brain growth and development continue through age 25 (Sowell), a great deal of brain growth is shaped during the first 1,000 days of a child's life. Notably, [over 1 million neural connections are formed in a young child's brain each second](#), building the foundation upon which future development occurs.

Noting this, it is no wonder that high-quality child care improves the outcomes for infant and toddlers as they prepare for kindergarten and life by improving positive growth in cognition, language, social, and emotional development. It also leads to greater success rates in school, society, and even in the future workforce (Lally).

Quality early learning is especially impactful for marginalized children, as it helps mitigate poverty's long-term consequences providing them the best opportunities for success throughout their lifetime (Bustamante). This benefit of early learning is particularly relevant given the economic straights in which too many of Erie, Pennsylvania's residents struggle. According to the [U.S. Census](#), the city of Erie has a poverty rate of 24.3%.

Many child-care centers in Erie presently have waitlists to serve more infants and toddlers. The mismatch between supply and demand is exacerbated by Erie's (and Pennsylvania's) growing child-care staffing crisis that has worsened due to the Covid-19 pandemic.

What's more, shortages of qualified educators and high staff turnover rates continue to grow, and educator scarcity cripples child-care centers. This shortage affects the quality and availability of child-care services causing many centers across the state to permanently close.

A survey in September 2023 by the [Children's Hospital of Philadelphia's Policy Lab](#) found that 26,000 additional children could be served if child-care centers were fully staffed and, that due to the staffing shortage, over 900 classrooms had been closed. Like all communities across the state, Erie faces those challenges. As child-care options for working parents shrink, our local workforce is directly affected. Families cannot go to work or begin working if they do not have stable and affordable care for their children.

Time is ripe for Erie to shape the future of its children and economy by serving more infants and toddlers so that more families in the city can work. There is work to be done locally and at other levels too. At the state level, there have been proposals to address the staffing crisis and improve access to child-care services overall. One measure would increase funding for child-care subsidies. Subsidies are paid to child-care programs to help low-income working families pay for child care. By expanding the access to child-care subsidies, Pennsylvania could help more families receive the care they need for their infants and toddlers, while also providing financial support to child-care providers to improve the quality of their services. But we fall short in subsidy payments and solutions that are on the table for the state budget, as they do not begin to cover the true cost of child care, leaving child-care centers who rely on subsidized payments underfunded.

This issue of deficient funding has ripple effects. Included in the wake is difficulty in financial ability to attract and retain early child-care educators. In Erie, there are numerous classrooms waiting to be filled with our youngest learners, but without staff, they remain empty.

Some may think that centers should just raise their hourly rate of pay for their workers, and interested applicants will follow. As the executive director of [Early Connections](#), I wholeheartedly agree that child-care workers need to be paid more. Our educated, compassionate child-care teachers have a difficult but rewarding job. It is important to note, however, that the current rate at which Erie's early child-care centers are reimbursed via state child-care subsidy negates their ability to raise the hourly rates they pay to their employed child-

care professionals. State reimbursement rates fall far short causing a cost gap between child-care subsidy payments and the actual cost of quality child care.

As shared in Start Strong and PennAEYC's policy brief and subsequent [Cost Gap Charts for ELRC Regions 1-5](#), the difference between the true cost of care for children in the Erie County area (Region 1) leaves a cost gap that ranges from 19% (\$3,039) for preschool care to a cost gap of 40% (\$10,456) for infant care per child. Erie's child-care centers that depend on child-care subsidy payments currently cannot afford to pay their workers more. And as leaders at the state level search for ways to address this subsidy reimbursement issue (and find consensus), centers will continue to struggle (and more classrooms close or shut their doors permanently), and more children in the city will be without care. Their families will be unable to work.

Federally, there are proposals to fund quality child care for families with a household income level up to \$200,000, providing child-care workers sustainable wages, and even to fund universal preschool. But this hoped-for remedy seems unlikely given the tightly politically divided Congress.

While the child-care staffing crisis continues to worsen and child-care centers weaken, the city of Erie cannot wait for, or expect, the state and federal government to fix the challenges present. Working together to act at our local level holds more promise for immediate and impactful changes than waiting for other government entities to intervene. Additionally, local involvement can help to build a stronger sense of community and ownership over the issue of child care, leading to more sustainable solutions in the long term.

For Erie to double down now on addressing the early child-care crisis would follow solid investment put in place not long ago. In 2011, due to many preschool-aged children not being served, [Erie's Future Fund](#) (EFF) was created. Created by business, community leaders, and philanthropists throughout Erie County, EFF presently provides scholarships for qualified children from low-income families to attend a high-quality preschool program of their parent's choice. This scholarship program is a good model for replication to serve infant and toddlers while providing parents a diverse choice of centers. EFF receives funding through individual donations, cause-related marketing, and PreK Educational Improvement Tax Credits and can contract with all high quality, (STARS 3 & 4 or NAEYC) accredited centers throughout Erie County. EFF serves children at various locations, such as the YMCA's multiple sites, St. Martin Center, St. Benedict Child Development Centers, The Learning Ladder, Erie First, and many other quality centers. EFF is administered by Early Connections. It is a successful example of how we have worked together to improve our community now and in the future.

The [JES Early Childcare Investment Policy Initiative](#) team, of which I am a member, has been working to find viable solutions to serve additional children throughout the city of Erie and sees ways to do so in practical and equitable manners.

Erie, together we can do better.

The Early Childcare Investment Policy Initiative's findings and recommendations will be presented on Aug. 14 from noon to 1:30 p.m. at the Jefferson Educational Society, 3207 State St. We look forward to reviewing the steps Erie needs to take to foremost stabilize the precious but limited early child-care capacity currently in place and to eliminate the waitlist of infants and toddlers that need to be served. And where there continues to be a need to enroll more children, we will present ways to expand options for increasing enrollment capacity within the city.

Central to these capacity opportunities is the need for more qualified teaching staff. Indeed, there are child-care centers now that would welcome the opportunity to open their empty classrooms and serve more infants and toddlers if only they could hire more educators. Teacher pipeline innovations will also be a focus of the presentation. The solutions that will be presented are a road map to rebuilding the crippled child-care structure that plagues our city while providing parity to our existing centers.

In Erie, as in many communities across Pennsylvania, the need for quality child care is urgent and cannot wait for government programs to find a solution. The future success and well-being of our children, our workforce, our community, depends on it.

Sources

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Building a Financially-Stable, High-Quality Child Care System for Pennsylvania's Children and Families: Improving Subsidized Child Care Rate Setting; and Cost Gap Charts ELRC Regions 1-5 May 2024. Available [here](#).

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