

Quality Child Care: Southeastern Pennsylvania's Efforts to address the crisis in Child Care Quality
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Good Morning. On behalf of the Board of Directors and the 1600 members of the Delaware Valley Association for the Education of Young Children (DVAEYC), I am honored to be here today to speak to you about the educational needs of young children in our community. Today in America, more than two-thirds of preschoolers spend a significant part of their day being cared for in non-parental settings – for these children, child care can be either custodial – tending to their basic needs for health and safety (we could appropriately call this babysitting) – or it can provide developmentally appropriate educational support that takes advantage of the tremendous learning window that occurs in the early years of life.

As you have heard, more than 40 years of research tells us that children fare better, and we all reap the financial rewards when early experiences support growth and learning. But for far too many children, child care settings are not taking full advantage of their learning potential. Too many child care programs struggle to offer children experiences that optimize their development, helping them to be not only academically ready when they enter formal schooling, but socially and emotionally able to relate positively to others.

Most child care providers want to offer a high quality program, but find it very difficult to hire and retain qualified staff with compensation just barely above minimum wage. For more than a decade, DVAEYC has sponsored the "Worthy Wage Campaign" – an effort to organize workers and build support for deeper investments in the child care workforce. Several years ago we made a documentary video about the movement and our work; one particularly poignant moment was footage of a sign at a McDonald's restaurant in the Philadelphia suburbs advertising jobs that were paying \$2-3 more an hour than the child care teachers making the video were earning.

Despite the lack of respect for the profession, despite the low wages and the lack of benefits such as paid time off, health insurance and retirement plans, despite the long hours of demanding work –up to 12 hours a day/ 12 months a year for home-based child providers – despite all of this, DVAEYC has found both willingness and ability in the child care community for programs to move well beyond custodial care to meet high quality standards. In 1995, when I began my work as DVAEYC's first full time Executive Director, there were 13 child care programs in the entire region that had reached the highest level of program quality – national accreditation. This number represented less than 1% of programs in our region.

Today, there are over 150 accredited programs – both centers and homes. While some programs have been able to achieve accreditation on their own with existing resources, programs in low income communities, serving children who have the most to gain from high quality programming, typically benefit from outside assistance to reach accreditation standards. In Southeastern Pennsylvania, the philanthropic community led the way in the mid-90's as Foundations including the William Penn Foundation and the Pew Charitable Trust invested significant grant dollars into quality improvement efforts. Partnering with United Way of Southeastern Pennsylvania and other corporate and foundation funds, these private efforts offered on-site, customized technical assistance, college scholarships funds, and classroom grants to purchase equipment and materials to support an educational environment. Since 1997, the private foundation community has invested more than \$30 million in funding for these services – resulting in a ten-fold increase in the number of accredited programs.

These programs – such as Child Care Matters, TEACH, and Early to Learn – have demonstrated something VERY IMPORTANT. Given the resources, child care providers can and will meet the highest standards in the field.

But perhaps even more significantly, these initiatives were all linked with public policy work that has consistently built support for greater public investment in early education. Private efforts demonstrated that and how quality improvement could work – and then public funds were used to take these efforts to scale. These important initiatives laid the foundation for Keystone STARS, TEACH, Education and Retention Awards and ultimately, Pre-K.

Fortunately for all of us, privately funded investments have continued to grow. This year, United Way of Southeastern Pennsylvania along with many local foundations and corporations, will invest more than \$3 million dollars in quality improvement work. Additionally, Keystone STARS will provide publicly funded quality improvement services as well as financial supports for programs that achieve higher STAR levels.

And the best news of all is that PreK funding makes high quality programming sustainable – protecting the investment being made into improving quality. That is another way of saying, PreK funding supports the cost of highly qualified teachers in classrooms of 3 and 4 year olds – ensuring that whether they are held in child care centers, private nursery schools or public school settings – all PreK classrooms are providing high quality programming that supports children's optimal development.

Here are the key points for you as policy makers to take away:

- There is a significant resource gap which keeps many child care programs from achieving the high levels of quality they desire and children need

- Through public and private investments, we have been chipping away at this problem in the Delaware Valley in recent years – we now have 7% of our programs accredited and over half of our child care programs working on quality issues through Keystone Stars
- Pennsylvania needs to continue to grow its investment in early education funding – increasing the investment in PreK Counts and expanding investments in programs for children birth-3

Investing in high quality early childhood programs will require a re-ordering of our priorities in the Commonwealth. But whether you measure this investment in terms of financial return, unleashing human potential, or improving the overall quality of life in our communities, there is simply no better way for us to spend taxpayer money. It's not just the right thing to do – increasingly we are learning – it's the smart thing to do!