

Leslie A. Spina  
Executive Director  
Kinder Academy, Inc.  
March 29, 2023

I want to take you back to March 2020, to the start of the pandemic. Three years ago now. No one could have imagined the ways in which the world would change. This is especially true for the field of early childhood education, an industry already on the brink of collapse. My organization had 100 employees. On February 21, 2020, I used my house to secure a \$2 million loan to expand to a new facility that would support families in an area with very little high-quality early childhood education. We would hire an additional 30 employees. It would also be a hub for ongoing credentialing and degree attainment for upcoming early childhood professionals. This was the dream. The risk would be worth the reward. Unfortunately, the governor shut down everything before the first hammer was swung, before any teacher walked the halls. COVID-19 would dictate all of our next moves. One hundred exceptional, hardworking early childhood professionals would be laid off with no plan for a return.

As weeks passed, the world came to understand that Early Childhood was vital to the economy. Also essential to children and families. No one could go to work without a plan for their young children. Early Childhood had a moment in the sun. Everything could change, and as a society, we would commit to investing in Early Childhood, the children, and the professionals doing intensely difficult work. This could move the profession from the shadows to be on par with the K12 system. It seems that the sun has set on this moment, and we are perhaps in a more precarious position than in March 2020. How is this possible?

While the depth and breadth of the challenges to the field extend beyond the scope of this hearing, I aim to outline some of the core challenges that threaten to permanently change the landscape of the industry. Without intervention, the gap between high-quality programming for young children will widen, and again,

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those most in need and with the fewest resources will pay the highest price. We, as a society, will pay this price. Therefore, I challenge this delegation to consider Early Childhood and the impact of the following:

- Staffing Shortages
- Pay Parity
- Challenging Behaviors in the Classroom
- Insurance Industry Barriers

None of these exist in a silo but are more like a Venn diagram, overlapping and feeding on one another in the worst possible way.

### **Staffing Shortages**

Currently, there are nearly 4000 vacancies for teachers in the early childhood system across the Commonwealth. However, this does not give us insight into how many positions are filled with people who do not have the knowledge or experience necessary to run a classroom with twenty children and as many as 60 percent with identified special needs and only two staff. This situation contributes to a revolving door of staff. The work is challenging and, without the appropriate skills, nearly impossible. Not to mention the impact on children who face challenges and do not have adults that understand how to manage their needs and those of the other 19 children in the room. What is it, you ask, that is contributing to this staffing shortage? A shortage existed before the pandemic; it has been exacerbated in these last three years. Contributing factors include the following:

- Overall shortage of workers
- Exceptionally complex onboarding requirements (typical onboarding takes 2-5 weeks)
- Long hours and less-than-ideal work conditions

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- Demanding classroom environments (including child behaviors)
- Limited resources for in-class support
- Low opinion of the field as a profession
- Limited or no benefits
- low pay, lowest pay scale of all professional fields

If we had a system where we built a pipeline that helped people considering the field access this in a more reasonable and financially stable way, then we would eliminate the constant, tumultuous staffing turnover. There is a pathway; it can be built.

While pre-COVID health and safety standards helped us safely manage pandemic criteria, they frequently contributed to the challenges of attracting and retaining staff. There were compounding and confusing guidelines, changing without notice and vastly unadhered to by anyone outside the field. To add this to the challenges in the classroom, ongoing training, and development greater than that faced by K12, nonexistent benefits, and low wages, it does not make an appealing case for the industry. Indeed, many paths are easier to manage when searching for a job or career.

It must be emphasized that the staffing shortage is not solely related to teaching staff. There is a need for more administrative staff and support staff as well. All of these shortages create the perfect storm leading to further shortages. Teachers are not getting the help they need in the classroom because administrators are stepping in to cover teacher shortages in classrooms as well as managing their administrative work and other responsibilities. This desperate situation has led to leaders feeling they have no options, opening the door to

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hiring people we would have never hired in prior years. This puts us at greater risk for non-compliance, sinking quality, higher turnover, increased staff dissatisfaction, and so on.

This is an excellent opportunity to remind you that our children live and learn here. Is this the message we want to start an educational journey with?

### **Pay Parity**

Unfair pay, we should call it what it is; teachers in early childhood education classrooms seek the same educational attainment as those in K-12 classrooms, but we do not currently see pay parity. This unfair pay contributes to the destabilization of the industry. It forces professionals in the field to either “hop” to other jobs that pay more or to look outside the field for compensation that is more reasonable to their level of education. We did see a temporary stabilization of wages with the COVID-19 relief funds. However, with those dollars a thing of the past, we will see a resurgence in the exodus from the field. How can we blame these very dedicated women for searching for a way to provide for their children, to build the American dream of having a home, having a car, and having an expectation that they will be able to pay all of their bills and still love the profession they have trained for and committed to?

Increasing wages is exceptionally difficult in an environment where we go more than a decade between subsidized rate increases. Perhaps programs that operate with high levels of private pay families, those actually paying the true cost of care, find this easier to accomplish. Annual increases seem reasonable; all of our expenses increase annually. Every person employed in the private world expects a yearly pay increase; it is

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the norm, not the exception. Unfortunately, in programs that accept payment from the Commonwealth, the thought on this is different. Funding annual increases to Early Childhood has yet to have a champion or a voice that has been able to articulate the necessity of investing in the future in this way. Increases would not actually mean more money, but a reasonable way to keep even with the cost of living. We would never expect the contractors that fix the roads to settle for pay scales from 10 or 12 years ago. It should not be acceptable for the teachers in this industry with bachelor's and master's degrees to make less than half the salary of their counterparts that teach kindergarten.

We must contemplate using a system that considers the actual cost of care to underpin the industry, which leads to support for children, families, and working professionals in the early care and education system. We cannot expect the cost of childcare to continue to be supported by maintaining suppressed wages for those doing the work. We must remember that many of those people in the field are degreed professionals with college debt and adult responsibilities while living a life in which the decision to stay in their field of choice means either they will not be able to support their own children, they will have to get a second job, or they will have to leave the field and leave another hole to fill.

We need to consider what business could possibly compete or stay afloat without understanding the cost of care. Since the pandemic, the general public expects to pay more for everything, more for food, more for gas, and more for rent. Still, people absolutely cannot see paying any amount more for early childhood education. This is true for families but also, seemingly, legislative bodies. Raising the minimum wage is not the solution alone. Maintaining the status quo of compensating professional teachers at state-aligned minimum wages does not consider the investment that they have made in their education to do this work and the investment

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we should make as citizens in ensuring that there is a professional pathway including pay parity for early childhood teachers that is aligned with K12 teachers. Our youngest students deserve high-quality, educated, and experienced teachers. This is not a job of last resort; it is a career that contributes to the greater good of our Commonwealth. It should be treated as such.

### **Challenging Behaviors in the Classroom**

Following the continued outcry from the field, a group of early childhood leaders came together to compare stories and situations and discuss how we managed in this late phase of COVID-19. The topic returned again and again to the challenging behavior in the classroom and the lack of resources for children, but also for families and staff. It has reached epidemic proportions. There are no classrooms that are not touched by this. The consensus is our teachers are not trained as special education teachers; they are early childhood educators. Therefore, they do not have the necessary tools to manage this crisis. Teachers have climbed every mountain to stay in the field, but this may be the proverbial straw that breaks the camel's back. We are seeing teachers reach a level of frustration that they can not manage. The frustration often stems from the fact that they may have the skills to support children but not when the percentage of children with special needs exceeds 30% and often as much as 60%. Without additional support staff, these teachers cannot manage the needs of the children appropriately, leading to classrooms in chaos and opportunities lost.

We identified a trend, now to take our thoughts out to the further field. No one was surprised to see that leaders were identifying this situation as untenable to the ongoing operations of their programs but also detrimental to

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the health and safety of the children in care. We convened a group of policymakers and early childhood leaders to outline the situation, identify areas of improvement, and recommend short- and long-term solutions. The Powerpoint to this presentation is included in these materials. We would be happy to present this at your request. At all levels, the people doing this work are overwhelmed by the challenging behaviors in the classroom and also by the problematic behaviors of adults. These adults have not been able to manage the mental health or developmental health system in a way that supports their children. Many have faced repeated expulsion from programs. The situation continues to spiral down for everyone involved. The ability to not expel children is directly linked to our ability to hire people who know how to manage the behaviors of children and to fortify the families so that they can continue going to work every day and doing what they need to do. We must invest in this system or process through additional infrastructure that would support teachers enabling them to manage classroom environments more effectively.

We want to reduce expulsion rates but lack resources to support teachers and families. This is absolutely necessary if we hope to help children on their journey through the educational system that begins in early childhood education and also if we hope to keep highly qualified and experienced staff in the classroom doing this work with our youngest citizens. In addition, we have seen an increase in separation from the field or profession due to challenging behaviors in the classroom. Administrative staff indicate the following as contributing factors:

- Lack of support for new (unskilled / inexperienced) staff
- The disappearance of historical knowledge related to skills, appropriate expectations, and trauma-informed practices

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- Broad swaths of new staff have a limited inventory of skills for managing challenging behaviors
- Staff are not experienced in relationship building with families

Low wage scales compound the situation. When wages remain relatively equivalent to those of six years ago, but the incidences of challenging behaviors and children that require, but do not have, support services on-site increase, and the lack of support to manage this crisis situation exists, job satisfaction rapidly decreases.

Everyone loses. Some recommendations to address the gap we are facing today include the following:

- Collaboration between mental health /behavioral health agencies, pediatricians, and other specialists
- Remove barriers to accessing behavioral health services and provide adequate support for children in the classroom
- Ongoing training and one-on-one coaching for staff
- Allocate funding to recruit and sustain staffing across the board
- Collaboration with Policy Solution to gather data on the prevalence and impact of challenging behavior in the Commonwealth's early childhood education field
- The creation of Best Practices guidance on the delivery of behavioral health services and successful implementation, including support to families and providers
- Funding and support for families with children who are experiencing challenging behaviors (Including families without insurance)
- Funding support and/or legislation to address the high cost of liability insurance



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### **Insurance Industry Barriers**

Moving on to insurance industry barriers seems to be a bit of a disconnect. The other challenges faced by the industry, outlined here, had a seemingly more internal focus on operations where insurance seems something akin to a vendor issue. We are all surprised that this has arisen as a real and formidable problem. We are hearing from our colleagues that insurance companies are dropping them with little or no reason or increasing rates beyond those reasonable to this type of industry. Many insurance companies are opting out of providing coverage for this industry at large.

Indeed, we want businesses of all kinds to operate with appropriate insurance. Childcare centers are legally mandated to have general liability insurance. Operating without insurance is a non-starter. We fear that private insurance companies will price providers out of the market, making it impossible for them to continue operations.

The field of early childhood education is complex and multifaceted. I have the great joy and the privilege of dedicating my life's work to this field. My commitment is to not only children and families but the dedicated professionals, primarily women, that show up daily, ensuring that our community's children have access to the best possible environments and experiences. The people that do this work have unparalleled dedication. It is my greatest hope that the Commonwealth step in and step up advocating for investment at all levels for the industry. This work is a common good and should be viewed as such. It is part of the education system of our cities, towns, boroughs, and urban, suburban, and rural areas. Early childhood education programs are a part

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of the fabric of America. Parents of young children can only go to work with reliable child care. This work is not babysitting; it is partnering with parents to invest in positive educational experiences from the onset.

We are on the roof after the storm, begging to be rescued, knowing we will return and help our communities rebuild. It does not matter the situation; Early Childhood professionals step in first when it is time to rebuild. COVID-19 is the most recent example but not the only one. After every disaster, we see women come forward to care for the children, our eyes always on the future.



# MANAGING CHALLENGING BEHAVIORS IN EARLY CHILDHOOD SETTINGS

March 11, 2023

# WELCOME AND PURPOSE

Khadijah Sabir,  
Early Childhood Education Advocate

Khadijah is a support staff member for Stars of Tomorrow, an Early Childhood Education Provider Member, and an Early Childhood Provider Council Member.

# MANAGING CHALLENGING BEHAVIORS IN EARLY CHILDHOOD SETTINGS

Sharon Neilson, Facilitator

Sharon is a consultant with EC Provider Council, the Voice of Early Childhood Education member, Reinvestment Fund staff member, and support staff for Woodland Academy a subsidiary of GPHA Inc.

# THE CHILDCARE SETTING: A DEEPER DIVE

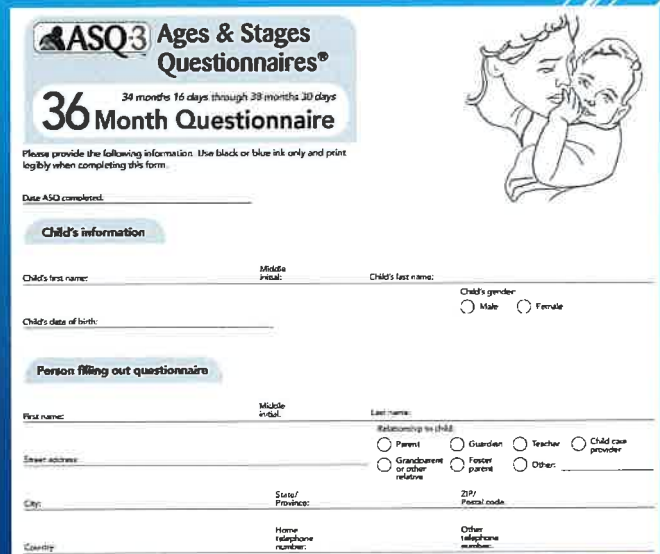
Dr. Leslie Spina  
Advocate and Educator

Dr. Spina is the founder and Executive Director of Kinder Academy, Inc and currently operates five STAR 4 childcare centers in Philadelphia. Kinder Academy serves over 500 families and employs 100 early childhood professionals.

# THE CHILDCARE SETTING: A DEEPER DIVE

## SCREENING

- ASQ-3 and ASQ:SE Domains
- ASQ-3
- Communication
- Gross motor
- Fine motor
- Problem solving
- Personal-social
- ASQ:SE
- Social-emotional development



**ASQ-3** Ages & Stages Questionnaires®  
36 months 16 days through 39 months 20 days  
**36 Month Questionnaire**

Please provide the following information: Use black or blue ink only and print legibly when completing this form.

Date ASQ completed: \_\_\_\_\_

**Child's information**

Child's first name: \_\_\_\_\_ Middle initial: \_\_\_\_\_ Child's last name: \_\_\_\_\_ Child's gender: ☐ Male ☐ Female

Child's date of birth: \_\_\_\_\_

**Person filling out questionnaire**

First name: \_\_\_\_\_ Middle initial: \_\_\_\_\_ Last name: \_\_\_\_\_ Relationship to child: ☐ Parent ☐ Guardian ☐ Teacher ☐ Child care provider

Street address: \_\_\_\_\_ ☐ Grandparent or other relative ☐ Foster parent ☐ Other: \_\_\_\_\_

City: \_\_\_\_\_ State/Province: \_\_\_\_\_ ZIP/Postal code: \_\_\_\_\_

Country: \_\_\_\_\_ Home telephone number: \_\_\_\_\_ Other telephone number: \_\_\_\_\_

# THE CHILDCARE SETTING: A DEEPER DIVE

## Assessment

- Professionally conducted for all children
- Multiple assessments per year
- Conducted in partnership and with feedback from families
- Designed to support collaboration with outside agencies

### Developmental Checklist

#### I. Personal and Social Development

##### A. Self-Concept

1. Demonstrates self-confidence
2. Shows some self-direction

##### B. Self-Concept

1. Follows simple classroom rules and routines
2. Manages transitions

##### C. Approaches to Learning

1. Shows eagerness and curiosity as a learner
2. Attempts to seek and seeks help when encountering a problem
3. Approaches tasks with flexibility and inventiveness

##### D. Interaction With Others

1. Interacts easily with one or more children
2. Interacts easily with familiar adults
3. Participates in the group life of the class
4. Identifies some feelings and responds to those of others

#### II. Speaking

1. Speaks clearly enough to be understood without conversational cues
2. Follows rules for conversation
3. Uses expanded vocabulary and language for a variety of purposes

#### III. Reading

1. Begins to develop knowledge of letters
2. Demonstrates phonological awareness
3. Shows appreciation and understanding of books and reading
4. Recounts some key ideas and details from text

#### IV. Writing

1. Represents ideas and stories through pictures, discussion, and play
2. Uses letter-like shapes, symbols, and letters to convey meaning
3. Understands purposes for writing

#### V. Mathematical Thinking

1. Begins to make sense of problems and

Developmental Checklist accessed in the PMRN under the WSS tab or TAM Appendix p. 50-51



# THE CHILDCARE SETTING: A DEEPER DIVE

## Staff Supports

- Increase Credentialing Attainment Pathways
  - Financial Access
  - Educational Support
  - Alternative Pathways
- Access to Professional Development
  - Specific to Early Intervention Practices
  - Follow- up Support / Coaching Onsite
- Conferences with Early Intervention Tracks
- Regular Onsite Access to Early Intervention Professionals

## Potential Outcomes

- Deeper understanding of positive inclusion practices for early childhood professionals
- Potential for earlier diagnoses and delivery of services
- Positive practices in classrooms
- Reduction of suspension

# THE CHILDCARE SETTING: A DEEPER DIVE

## Family Supports

- Three Conferences Per Year
  - Additional Conferences as Necessary
- Onsite Workshops and Trainings
  - Specific to Family Needs and Student Interests
- Family Guidance for Parenting Challenges
- Kindergarten Transition Supports
- Social Services Supports
  - Food Insecurity
  - Housing Insecurity
  - Mental Health Supports (Children and Families)
  - Navigating Access to State Supports
- Partnership to Deliver Quality Care For All Situations

### Potential & Ongoing Outcomes

- Partnerships Lead to Understanding & Empathy
- Potential for earlier diagnoses and delivery of services
- Positive practices in classrooms
- Reduction of suspension

# MESSAGES FROM THE FIELD

## Teachers

- Earlene Pine Head Start Teacher Children's Playhouse



# MESSAGES FROM THE FIELD

## Teachers

- Rasheeda Brown-Hayes  
PHLPrek Teacher Children's  
Playhouse Newbold



# MESSAGES FROM THE FIELD

## What Families are saying

- Parent of PreK Child
- Grays Ferry Early Learning Academy



Our Colleagues in  
Attendance



## MESSAGES FROM THE FIELD

# MESSAGES FROM THE FIELD

## Teachers

- Ms. Rachael  
Grays Ferry Early Learning  
Academy





# MESSAGES FROM THE FIELD

## Teachers

- Khari Collins  
PreK Counts Teacher  
Children's Playhouse  
Whitman





## MESSAGES FROM THE FIELD

Office of Child Development and  
Early Learning (OCDEL)

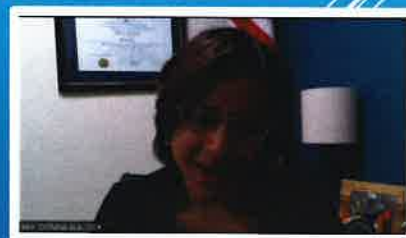
- Shante' Brown
- Deputy Secretary



# MESSAGES FROM THE FIELD

## Pennsylvania House of Representatives

- Donna Bullock
- Chairwoman House Children and Youth Committee (D)
- House Ethics Committee
- 195th Legislative District



# **PRESCHOOL EARLY INTERVENTION DATA 2020-2021**

Unis Bey

Unis is CEO and Executive Director of Gray's Ferry Early Learning Center a STAR 4 facility serving 30 children and employs 7 early childhood professionals.



# PRESCHOOL EARLY INTERVENTION DATA 2020-2021

- ▶ Elwyn
- ▶ Montgomery County
- ▶ Chester County
- ▶ Delaware County

# Recommendations

THE CREATION OF AN  
EARLY CHILDHOOD  
EDUCATION BEHAVIORAL  
HEALTH OVERSIGHT  
COMMITTEE



Stakeholders to include  
a contingent of the  
following:

- Current Early Childhood Education Behavioral Health Providers
- OCDEL- Office of Child Development and Early Learning
- Childcare Providers
- Families
- Health Care Insurance Providers
- Early Learning Resource Center -ELRC
- Public Health Management Corporation- PHMC

## Recommendations (con't.)

THE CREATION OF AN  
EARLY CHILDHOOD  
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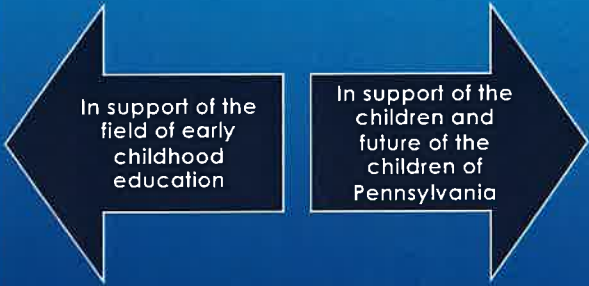


Stakeholders to include  
a contingent of the  
following:

- Behavioral Health Providers
- Office of Early Intervention
- Office of Mental health & Substance Abuse Services -OMHSAS
- Early Intervention Technical Assistance- EITA
- Infant Early Childhood Mental Health - IECMH

## OUR ASK

- ▶ Collaboration between mental health /behavioral health agencies, pediatricians, and other specialists
- ▶ Remove barriers in accessing behavioral health services and provide adequate supports for children in the classroom
- ▶ On-going training and one-on-one coaching for staff
- ▶ Expanding the delivery behavioral health supports and services
- ▶ Rework of OCDEL's expectation on Early Childhood Education providers response to behavioral health challenges



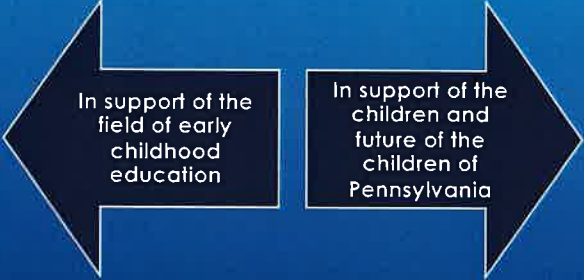
In support of the field of early childhood education

In support of the children and future of the children of Pennsylvania



## OUR ASK

- ▶ Allocate funding to recruit and sustain staffing across the board
- ▶ Collaboration with Policy Solution to gather data on the prevalence and impact of challenging behavior in the Commonwealth's early childhood education field
- ▶ The creation of Best Practices guidance on the delivery of behavioral health services and successful implementation including supports to families and providers
- ▶ Funding and support for families with children who are experiencing challenging behaviors (Including families without insurance)
- ▶ Funding support and/or legislation to address the high cost of liability insurance



In support of the field of early childhood education

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# QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS





## NEXT STEPS

- Facilitate access to individual members of city and state elected officials
- Support a platform to testify before Philadelphia City Council, as well as Commonwealth Senators and Representatives
- Convene a group to create a working advisory council and participate in this group
- Create a system to support early intervention needs for children, families, and the field of early childhood education that is fully funded and can be duplicated across cities and states

# THANK YOU!

**Masjidullah Community Center**

**Those who could not be with us but  
submitted video testimony**

**Home Grown Organization**

**Elected Officials**

**Childcare Providers and Families**

**Early Childhood Education  
Stakeholders**