

# Is This the Care We Need?

## An Examination of Childcare Policy in Pennsylvania

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*For many families across Pennsylvania, child care is an ever-present concern. Since the 1970s, when Richard Nixon vetoed a national childcare program, child care has received little time in the policy spotlight. Instead, funding for child care in the United States now comes from a mixture of federal, state, and local programs that do not help all families. This article explores childcare options available to families in the state of Pennsylvania and highlights gaps in the current system. Specifically, we examine the state of child care available to families in the Commonwealth in terms of quality, accessibility, flexibility, and affordability. We also incorporate survey data from a nonrepresentative sample of registered Pennsylvania voters conducted by the Pennsylvania Center for Women and Politics. As these results support the need for improvements in the current childcare system, we discuss recommendations for the future.*

**F**or working families with young children, child care is an ever-present concern. Parents need quality care that meets the needs of their children, accommodates their work schedules, and is safe and reasonably priced. Finding care that meets these criteria may be difficult and can be a significant burden on a family. This report outlines the state of this challenge for families in Pennsylvania. It examines the status of quality childcare access in the state, the challenges that exist, and the policies in place at all levels of

government. Furthermore, this report includes some insight, from a nonrepresentative sample of registered voters, into how Pennsylvanians assess the government's role in ensuring quality, affordable child care and offers responsible policy suggestions for improving care options for Pennsylvania's families.

Of course, the challenge of accessing child care is not limited to Pennsylvania. Families in every corner of the United States are in search of acceptable childcare options, which are becoming more difficult to find as the gap between costs and what families can reasonably afford widens. Childcare costs for one child can range from \$344 a month in rural South Carolina to \$1,472 in Washington, DC (Cooke and Gould 2015). In fact, just one year of child care, averaging \$10,000 in 2013, can exceed the cost of a year of in-state college tuition (The White House 2015). This is true in 33 states and the District of Columbia, with infant care costs exceeding the cost of in-state college tuition at public 4-year institutions (Cooke and Gould 2015). In Pennsylvania in 2014, center-based infant care cost an average of \$10,470 a year and \$7,943 a year in home-based care (Legislative Budget and Finance Committee 2015). For one four-year-old child, parents pay an average of \$8,727 a year for center-based care, and \$7,128 for home-based care (Legislative Budget and Finance Committee 2015). According to the national childcare resource Child Care Aware of America, in Pennsylvania the cost for a married couple with children averages almost 14% of the median income. For single mothers, the financial burden is particularly high, absorbing up to 40% of their annual income (Child Care Aware of America 2014). In addition, 40% greatly exceeds the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services recommendation of a 10% affordability threshold for child care (Cooke and Gould 2015). In fact, according to a report created by the Economic Policy Institute (EPI), in only a handful of the EPI's 618 family budget regions are childcare costs near the recommended 10% threshold (Cooke and Gould 2015). This is a major financial consideration for most families, and especially impacts low-income and single family households.

Pennsylvania ranks 22nd for least-affordable infant care<sup>1</sup> and 20th for least-affordable care of four-year-olds (Child Care Aware of America 2014).<sup>2</sup> Arguably, this major concern for parents has received minor public policy attention, and a complex web of public policy prescriptions at the national, state, and local levels offers only a weak network of support for parents who need help finding and affording care.

## Why Child Care Matters

Studies have shown that learning begins at birth, and during the first few years of life a child undergoes growth in cognitive skills, social skills, emotional skills, and patterns of engagement in school and learning (Florida's Office of

Early Learning 2012; ZERO TO THREE: National Center for Infants, Toddlers and Families 2014; Morin 2014). Early years are remarkably important; by four years of age, a child's brain is usually 90% developed (Winter 2010). High-quality child care is linked to school readiness, physical well-being, motor development, social and emotional development, and cognitive and language development (Brown 2002).<sup>3</sup> Furthermore, children who receive quality child care exhibit benefits in all stages of childhood and into adulthood. In elementary school, these children have improved math and language ability, fewer behavioral problems, fewer cognitive and social issues, and are less likely to have to repeat a grade (Reynolds et al. 2001; Schweinhart et al. 2005; Peisner-Feinbert and Yazejian 2004).

As children age, those who participated in preschool are more likely to graduate from high school and less likely to enter a juvenile detention program (Reynolds et al. 2001). As adults, these children are less likely to commit a crime or felony, less likely to rely on social assistance programs, and more likely to be employed in a high-skilled job (Schweinhart et al. 2005). Quality child care has also been linked to increased intellectual and language test performance, and higher median annual earnings (Schweinhart et al. 2005). On the other hand, studies have found that children who have experienced poor-quality child care may lack academic interest, adequate school skills, and exhibit heightened aggression (Helburn and Howes 1996).

Child care matters not only to parents and their children but (as it should) to U.S. businesses as well. In the United States, businesses lose "\$3 billion annually due to employee absenteeism as a result of childcare breakdowns" (Child Care Aware of America 2015). In a six-month timeframe, 45% of parents miss at least one day of work due to a failure of childcare plans. Additionally, 65% of parents reported having to make adjustments to their work schedules due to the challenges of child care (Child Action n.d.). In 2014, problems related to child care prevented 6.2% of families from spending more time at work (RegionTrack Inc. 2015). Many parents have few options but to stay home when a child is sick or schools are closed. This situation also presents challenges for employers. In a 1992 survey, nearly 30% of workers knew employees who quit their jobs due to inadequate child care (Economic Opportunity Institute n.d.). The ability to retain employees is important to companies and affects their bottom line (Abbasi and Hollman 2000). Yet, when a company has to hire and train a new employee it costs them 150% of a salaried employee's annual pay and 75% of an hourly employee's annual salary (Child Action n.d.). Visible costs of replacing an employee include things such as recruitment, hiring, and orientation, while hidden costs include things such as disruption of work flow, vacancy until the job is filled, and disruption of customer relations (Abbasi and Hollman 2000).

Research conducted by the Families and Work Institute, found that employers find substantial benefits of childcare programs (Department of Treasury n.d.). In a survey of more than 1,100 companies, more than two-thirds of respondents reported that the costs of childcare programs are outweighed by the benefits, or that the programs are at least cost-neutral (Department of Treasury n.d.).

The availability of quality child care provides both short- and long-term economic benefits. In the short term, an increase in childcare centers has the potential to provide jobs and, in turn, allow employees to spend wages and pay taxes. Centers also purchase goods and services, and company sponsored childcare centers enable employers to attract and retain employees and increase productivity (Calman and Tarr-Whelan 2005). In the long term, the benefits children receive from quality child care cause the economy to experience a boost due to the lowered cost for remedial and special education services, more school completion and increased skills, better job preparedness and ability to meet future labor demands, higher incomes and tax payments, lower criminal justice costs, and fewer welfare payments (Calman and Tarr-Whelan 2005). In Pennsylvania, a report using Impact Analysis for Planning (IMPLAN), an economic modeling system often used to analyze economic impact, looked at how the childcare industry impacts the state. IMPLAN revealed that, in Pennsylvania, each additional dollar that is invested in early child care and education contributes \$2.06 to the state's economy. Thus, while providing access to quality child care for children within Pennsylvania<sup>4</sup> would require \$2.2 billion in investment, the investment would yield \$2.4 billion in additional sales in Pennsylvania's economy. The \$2.2 billion price tag would also generate 75,000 jobs, an estimated 17,000 of which would be found in other economic sectors (America's Edge 2011).

### **Policy: An Inadequate Patchwork**

But these investments receive little serious consideration in either the public or private sector, leaving families to rely on a weak and often inadequate system of public and private solutions. In 1971, there was much promise as the United States seemed to be moving toward universal child care when the Comprehensive Child Development Act was proposed. This legislation would have mandated that childcare programs be available to all children regardless of race, economic status, and family background (Cohen 1996). While the act passed through Congress, President Richard Nixon vetoed it, and there have been no subsequent serious attempts at providing universal child care. Instead, funding for child care now comes from a mixture of federal, state, and local programs.

## Federal

At the federal level, existing programs are typically implemented at the state and/or local level and combine financial resources as well. These programs include the Childcare and Development Block Grant (part of the Childcare and Development Fund),<sup>5</sup> Head Start and Early Head Start, Childcare Means Parents in School Program (CCAMPIS),<sup>6</sup> Child and Dependent Care Credit (CDCC),<sup>7</sup> and Childcare Works.<sup>8</sup> The Childcare and Development Fund provides subsidies to assist low-income families in paying for child care. Parents are provided either a slot at a contracted care provider or a voucher that can be used at any provider that meets state requirements (National Center for Children in Poverty 2014). States have some flexibility in setting income eligibility requirements and parental co-payment fees (Assistant Secretary for Planning and Evaluation 2015), though requirements include a maximum income eligibility limit of 85% of the state median income (National Center for Children in Poverty 2014). In Pennsylvania, as of 2013 for a family of three, the 85% threshold equates to \$4,675 a month or less (Office of Child Care n.d.).<sup>9</sup> As of September 2015, 92,800 children in Pennsylvania were being served under this program (Child Care State Systems Specialist Network 2015). The federal expenditure under this program was \$339 million, while the state's contribution was \$97 million (Childcare State Systems Specialist Network 2015). The Childcare and Development Block Grant is used as a supplement for state funds for childcare assistance (FederalGrantsWire 2015).

Both the federal Head Start and Early Head Start programs promote school readiness in young children from low-income families. They focus on five domains, including language and literacy, cognitive and general knowledge, approaches to learning, physical development and health, and social and emotional development (Early Childhood Learning and Knowledge Center 2015). Head Start is administered by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services; however, the \$7.2 billion in federal funding is filtered to states to implement these programs (Head Start 2014). Despite ever-present need, Pennsylvania received 14.9% less federal funding for the Head Start and Early Head Start programs in 2015, and 26.5% fewer children were served (Head Start 2014; Child Care State Systems Specialist Network 2015).

The Childcare Access Means Parents in School (CCAMPIS) program provides child care for low-income parents who are also eligible for the higher education Federal Pell Grant (U.S. Department of Education 2014). The funds help support campus-based child care for primarily low-income students enrolled in institutions of higher learning (U.S. Department of Education 2014). In 2014, \$15 million was allocated for CCAMPIS grants (U.S. Department of Education 2014). Three grant recipients were located in Pennsylvania:

Northampton County Area Community College, Pennsylvania College of Technology, and Slippery Rock University of Pennsylvania (Childcare Access Means Parents in School Program 2014).

Childcare Works also allows states to combine federal funding with their own contribution (Department of Human Services 2015). In Pennsylvania, the program supports residents who require care in order to work at least 20 hours a week or participate in an education program (Department of Human Services 2015). Income qualifications stipulate that a family's income must be 200% or less of the Federal Poverty Income Guidelines (Department of Human Services 2015). For a family of three in Pennsylvania, this equates to less than \$40,320 annually (Families USA 2016). In 2008, Pennsylvania was allocated \$1.8 million in federal funding to help remove children from their Childcare Works waiting list, but the waiting list continues to grow (Pennsylvania Office of Child Development and Early Learning 2009). In 2014, Childcare Works served approximately 160,000 children in Pennsylvania, only 22% of those who qualified (Legislative Budget and Finance Committee 2015). The programs described offer some insight into how difficult it can be for families to understand what program they qualify for because the federal programs have different income requirements and are funded in different ways.

Federal employees are also eligible to receive affordable child care at the Academy for Early Learning, which is managed by the General Services Administration (Academy for Early Learning 2015). For civilian workers, this child care is paid for by the Childcare Subsidy Program, while for military personnel, funding is provided by the Army Fee Assistance program (Academy for Early Learning 2015).

Finally, the federal government also uses tax credits to help families in the form of the Child and Dependent Care Credit. To qualify for this credit, an individual must have paid someone to care for their child in the last year, the child must be 12 or younger, and the care must have been provided so you could work or look for work. The credit may be up to 35% of the qualifying expenses depending on adjusted gross income (Internal Revenue Service 2011). In 2012, more than 228,000 Pennsylvanians claimed this credit on their federal income taxes, which amounted to \$121 million in tax credits (Legislative Budget and Finance Committee 2015).

## State

At the state level, Pennsylvania enables several unique child programs, though in many cases the state pulls from federal funds not otherwise earmarked

for the programs described above. Governor Tom Wolf's 2015–2016 budget,<sup>10</sup> proposed \$35 million in federal funds to be invested in childcare programs, including \$18 million for providing childcare assistance (Wolf 2015).

The state is primarily responsible for regulating care quality. In Pennsylvania, the Keystone STARS program measures the quality of Pennsylvania's childcare facilities on a scale of one to four stars. Keystone STARS was created as an initiative of the state's Office of Child Development and Early Learning (Pennsylvania Early Learning 2009). The program measures staff education, learning environment, leadership management, and family and community partnerships. The program is voluntary for providers, but can allow families to measure quality of the care they use or seek (Pennsylvania Department of Human Services n.d.). As of March 2011, 978 programs in Pennsylvania had a top Keystone STARS rating of 3 or 4—a 10% increase from 2010 (Keystone STARS 2011). However, only 20% of participants in the Childcare Works program, for instance, received care at a highest-rated provider (Pennsylvania Partnerships for Children 2013).

Pennsylvania also created the program Pre-K Counts,<sup>11</sup> which is a public-private partnership designed to help expand high-quality child care for three- and four-year-olds (PSEA Education Services Division 2008). With a combination of both public tax dollars and support from prominent Pennsylvania foundations, Pre-K Counts offers free, high-quality pre-kindergarten that is available for either full- or half-day classes. Income eligibility is more inclusive than many other programs, as a child's family must be under 300% of the federal poverty level, or be a language-minority, or demonstrate cultural or special needs (PSEA Education Services Division 2008). The program is state funded through grants, with Pennsylvania allocating \$82.8 million to fund the program in 2012–2013 (Pre-K for PA 2014). The program has over 300 childhood programs and many school districts currently participating (PSEA Education Services Division 2008).

Pre-K Counts appears to be quite successful. For instance, a 2010–2011 evaluation of the program indicated that nearly every child (99%) showed age-appropriate or emerging age-appropriate language, math, and social skills after their time in the program (Pennsylvania Pre-K Counts 2011). Unfortunately though, in 2010–2011 the program served only 11,500 children in 62 counties, representing only 4% of the preschoolers in the Commonwealth. More than 4,500 children were on the wait list for the program (Pennsylvania Pre-K Counts 2011). Students on the wait list are eligible for assistance but, because of limited funding, are admitted only as spaces become available.



## Local

At the local level, many different types of unique programs vary by county, and even municipality, within the state. This variation creates substantial disparities in access to affordable child care and childcare assistance throughout the state and there is no comprehensive approach to how, to whom, or where these programs do exist. Many of these programs are initiated and run by nonprofit organizations and have a variety of funding sources—including grants from federal and state funding sources that are not a part of other federal and state childcare programs.

In Pittsburgh, for instance, one local program is Angels' Place: A Place to Grow. This nonprofit organization provides single, low-income full-time students with free child care and family support programs to help them complete their education (Angels' Place 2012). The child care provided is flexible, Monday–Friday, year round, and is provided for children between birth to five years. In 2013–2014, 71 parents participated and 91 children benefited from the program. Angels' Place (2012) reports 86% of the participating children obtained age-appropriate skill levels or higher. Furthermore, Pittsburgh Public Schools Early Childhood Education Department provides children birth to five years with a flexible program that is funded through a combination of government funding sources (Pittsburgh Public Schools n.d.). For income-eligible families there is no cost, and for families whose income is 300% or more than the poverty level there is a fee-for-service model (Pittsburgh Public Schools n.d.). If there is more interest in one site than spots available, a lottery is held and the remaining children are placed on a wait list (Pittsburgh Public Schools n.d.).

The YMCA in both Pittsburgh and Philadelphia also provide child care using an income-based scale. For instance, in Philadelphia, rates usually fall between \$208 and \$235 a week (Philadelphia Freedom Valley YMCA 2015). The YMCA programs are funded by a combination of charitable contributions, membership dues, program dues, and fundraising. The nonprofit's program at the Roxborough Center has earned a 4-STAR rating and is also a Pre-K Counts site (Philadelphia Freedom Valley YMCA 2015). In Philadelphia, the School District of Philadelphia also directly provides preschool to more than 9,500 children through its Bright Futures program (combined with a federal Head Start Program) (School District of Philadelphia n.d.).

A sprinkling of other programs is available throughout other counties, including the Childcare Scholarship Fund in Butler County, the Community Action Program (CAP) Childcare Center and Lancaster Early Education Center, the West Chester Area Day Care Center, the Elizabethtown Childcare



Center, and the Cambria County Child Development Corporation program. The Childcare Scholarship Fund in Butler County administers aid for low-income families and aims to provide 50 families an average of 58 days of care (United Way of Butler County 2015). In Lancaster, the CAP Childcare Center provides full-time care, for which families pay using their CCIS subsidy plus a daily \$5–\$25 co-pay (Community Action Program of Lancaster County 2015). Costs at the Lancaster Early Education Center are subsidized in part by donations, private contributions, and fundraising activities (Lancaster Early Education Center n.d.).

The West Chester Area Day Care Center is a nonprofit program that does not impose caps on how many children on subsidies can enter the program and offers scholarships for families in financial crisis. The program has a STAR 3 rating and is funded by state and county subsidies, private fees, the United Way and Food Program Grant, and parent co-pay (West Chester Area Day Care Center 2015). The Elizabethtown Childcare Center provides care for infants to school age children up to fifth grade. The center is a nonprofit organization that is funded through community and corporate donations as well as fundraising. Tuition assistance is provided on a sliding fee scale based on income (Elizabethtown Childcare Center n.d.). In Cambria County, the Child Development Corporation Program of Cambria provides before and after school care for infants, toddlers, and preschoolers for \$20 per week for five hours of care plus \$4 an hour per child past 5 hours. The program is funded by the Pennsylvania Department of Education and the 21st Century Community Learning Centers Grant (Cambria County Child Development Corporation 2013).

These are just some examples of local Pennsylvania programs that offer child care to moderate and low-income families. Other options can include having a friend or family member care for the child or receiving noncenter care in a private home. A parent can also remain home with the child, though for financial reasons, this option is not available to many. Yet while a range of local, state, and federal childcare options are available, a number of obstacles may hinder a parent's ability to use them, as described below.

## **Status of Care in Pennsylvania: Challenges**

Many challenges stand in the way of obtaining quality care in Pennsylvania. The patchwork of care that is currently available is far from systematically covering all families. Some options are unaffordable for many families. Quality of programs varies significantly and may be hard to assess, since childcare programs are not required to participate in the Pennsylvania Keystone STARS

program. Families also face issues with accessibility; more children need care than there are available spaces. Furthermore, parents who work nontraditional schedules must face a lack of programs offering more flexible hours. These challenges, discussed in the next section, stand in the way of providing quality child care for all of Pennsylvania's children.

### Affordability

Despite the importance of early child care for development, current programs are not keeping up with the need. Low-income and single-parent homes are especially affected, with many parents unable to afford the child care they need. These families, already at or close to the poverty level, are not guaranteed government assistance.

In 2012, the Bureau of Labor Statistics reported that over 10 million people were considered to be among the "working poor" (BLS Reports 2014). In Pennsylvania, more than a quarter of children under six and almost 18% of older children live below the poverty line. However, due to a lack of federal funding, in 2011, only 17% of the estimated 14.3 million children who would qualify for federal childcare assistance received it, with assistance in 2013 at its lowest levels since 1997 (National Women's Law Center 2015a).

In terms of specific programs, in 2015, estimates suggest that Head Start, which provides care and education for low-income children under the age of five, reached only half of eligible children, while the Early Head Start program reached only 5% of the eligible infants and toddlers nationally (National Women's Law Center 2015a). Nationally, the Childcare and Development Fund served only an estimated 12%–15% of eligible children in recent years (Administration for Children and Families 2000). Out of children who received funding in 2011, most funding went toward younger children (Assistant Secretary for Planning and Evaluation 2011). Demand far exceeds the available support in Pennsylvania, as well; with limited funds and lengthy waitlists, programs cannot support every needy child. Instead, only some of the neediest receive care, and the rest often slip through the cracks.

### Quality

Even when families can afford care, a lack of quality childcare facilities poses a challenge. One Cost, Quality, and Child Outcomes study focused on child care across four states, including California, Colorado, Connecticut, and North Carolina (Helburn and Howes 1996). Examining 401 childcare centers, researchers found that 86% of the centers provided mediocre or poor-quality

services, while only 14% of centers met levels of process quality high enough to support the emotional development of children.

But studies like this reveal little about the unregulated environments where an abundance of children receive care. In Pennsylvania, when care is provided in the home to three or fewer children, it is left up to the parents to monitor the child care provided, and quality varies. In those settings that are regulated, very few meet Pennsylvania's Keystone STARS<sup>12</sup> requirements for four-star facilities.

For Pennsylvania, the most recent process quality study was conducted in 2006 using the Early Childhood Environment Rating Scale, Revised (ECERS-R) and Family Day Care Rating Scale (FDCRS) (Pennsylvania Office of Child Development 2006). The study looked at 356 childcare centers, 81 group homes, and 135 family childcare homes (Pennsylvania Office of Child Development 2006). The ECERS-R measured program quality using seven subscales including things such as program structure, activities, and personal care routines (Pennsylvania Office of Child Development 2006), whereas the FDCRS measured the quality of family childcare programs using seven subscales including things such as basic care, adult needs, and social development (Pennsylvania Office of Child Development 2006). Quality of child care in Pennsylvania has increased over time, primarily due to participation in the STARS program (Pennsylvania Office of Child Development 2006). Compared to the previous study, conducted in 2002, in 2006, family and group practitioners rated higher in quality according to the FDCRS, and childcare centers rated higher according to the ECERS (Pennsylvania Office of Child Development 2006). Moreover, facilities rated as 2 STARS or higher were rated significantly higher in quality than they were in 2002 (Pennsylvania Office of Child Development 2006).

Nonetheless, provider standards are mandated and enforced by the state, and each year many childcare facilities are found in violation of standards. For group childcare homes and childcare centers inspections occur when a facility first opens and annually after that. Every year, 15% of family childcare homes are randomly selected for inspection (Pennsylvania's Promise 2016). Some recent violations included broken glass found in play areas, unfenced pools, and leaking ceilings (Parks 2015).

The rating system and monitoring does not appear to help Pennsylvania's national reputation on child care. The National Institute for Early Education (NIEER) measures the quality of pre-k programs across the country using criteria such as early learning standards, teacher qualifications, and class sizes. NIEER gave Pennsylvania a seven out of 10 quality score for providing merely 10% of three-year-olds and 2% of four-year-olds quality pre-kindergarten

education (Pre-K for PA 2014). This places Pennsylvania behind states such as Oklahoma which provided 14% of three-year-olds and 87% of four-year-olds pre-k through Head Start, and the District of Columbia, which served 96% of three-year-olds and 100% of four-year-olds pre-k (Pre-K for PA 2014). In another area, licensing inspection, Pennsylvania was ranked 14th in the nation, on the basis of factors of oversight and regulation (NACCRRRA 2016).

### Accessibility

Even when families are eligible for childcare subsidies, they are not guaranteed assistance. In 2014, 18 states had either waiting lists or were no longer accepting names even for the waitlist for assistance. In some states, families are placed on a waiting list for quite some time with lists in some states reaching into the thousands (National Women's Law Center 2015b).

As of February 2014, 2,651 children were on the wait list for childcare assistance in Pennsylvania (Schulman and Blank 2014). Families are told that wait times can vary, and are usually at least several months or longer. As of January 2015, it was estimated that those eligible in Pennsylvania would wait at least four months for Childcare Works funding. This delay could pose significant challenges to families whose members need to maintain jobs or go to school in the meantime. Also, some programs allow applications before babies are even born, though there is no guarantee a spot is available when the baby is born. Furthermore, while prices do become more affordable as children get older, almost 30% of children in Pennsylvania six years and older live in a one-parent working household and nearly 40% live in a two-parent working household (Child Care State Systems Specialist Network 2015), a majority of which require some before and/or afterschool and summer care. Generally, the need for assistance far outweighs the availability of assistance available.

### Nontraditional Schedules

Another problem that families face is lack of child care for nontraditional schedules. Families of all incomes work nights or weekends, rather than a typical nine-to-five schedule. As many as one-third of working-poor mothers and more than one-quarter of working-class mothers work on weekends (Hofferth 1996),<sup>13</sup> and half of working-poor parents work a rotating schedule, potentially requiring them to work weekends. Despite this, only 10% of centers and 6% of family day-care homes provide weekend care (Vandell and Wolfe n.d.). While studies have mostly focused on those of lower income, nontraditional schedules can impact any family with young children. In addition, working

overtime may not be an option for families who have to juggle child care and work, placing a further financial disadvantage on families.

## Public Opinion on Child Care

While public opinion is notoriously subject to change, public policy can be much slower to change—which has clearly been the case in the realm of child care (Cassese and Barnes unpublished). Americans have consistently supported greater federal and state assistance for child care. In a national study of 1,500 voters conducted by EDK Associates, the majority of voters expressed support for public financing of child care, while six in 10 voters expressed support for a significant proposal meant to make quality child care affordable, and 67% favored a more limited package (Klein n.d.). A 2000 poll by the Opinion Research Corporation International found that 68% of respondents rated “providing access to after school programs and early childhood development programs like Head Start as a higher priority than cutting taxes” (Sylvester n.d.). In 2002, 80% of Washington State voters agreed that tax dollars should be used to support early learning programs for children, while 76% favored providing funds for all-day kindergarten accessible by all children, and 75% supported funds for high quality preschool for all three- to four-year-olds (Economic Opportunity Institute 2002). As these large majorities suggest, support for developing public policy to improve early learning cut across income, age, geography, party affiliation, and gender (Economic Opportunity Institute 2002).

In 2010, Child Care Aware conducted multiple national surveys hoping to better understand what parents needed and wanted out of their childcare options. The organization found that parents’ top two concerns were quality of child care (38%) and cost (20%) (National Association of Childcare Resource and Referral Agencies 2011). Furthermore, 73% of all parents supported paying \$10 more in taxes a year to improve childcare quality, and 65% supported paying \$10 more in taxes a year to reduce the cost of child care (National Association of Childcare Resource and Referral Agencies 2011). Emphasizing how crucial child care is to working families, 31% of respondents in another survey rated affordable child care as the most important factor affecting families (National Association of Childcare Resource and Referral Agencies 2010). Of significant concern were the 20% of parents who reported using their savings to pay for child care and the 10% who reported either removing their children from a formal arrangement, moving closer to relatives, or moving their children to a care center of lesser quality in order to save money (National Association of Childcare Resource and Referral Agencies

2010). Those parents who are earning low incomes were more likely to say that they changed childcare arrangements due to not being able to pay (35%) and were more likely to support the use of federal funds to reduce the cost of child care (59%) (National Association of Childcare Resource and Referral Agencies 2010). Last, a 2015 *Washington Post* report found that 37% of mothers rated their cost of child care as very expensive (*Washington Post* 2015). Parents were also asked to rate how easy or difficult it was to find child care in their area that was both affordable and high quality. In this case, mothers rated finding child care as very difficult 28% of the time. When asked how satisfied parents were with the flexibility in their work schedule after their first child, only 56% of mothers were satisfied. Many parents even reported quitting their jobs or switching to a less demanding (and often lower paying) job in order to manage childcare concerns (*Washington Post* 2015).

These various reports demonstrate that the majority of people within the United States support increased federal and state funding for childcare programs. Moreover, women appear to be especially vulnerable to a lack of child care, quitting or changing their jobs to accommodate their children. Many households are willing to tolerate a small increase in taxes to help establish quality childcare facilities as well as making child care more affordable.

### Pennsylvanian Attitudes on Childcare Issues

In 2015, the Pennsylvania Center for Women and Politics commissioned a survey of voters in the state to examine how public opinion around issues of child care matched up with the patchwork of policies described above. We use this data to specifically examine whether voters' preferences and perceptions around issues of child care align with the provision of childcare policy in the state. The survey asked voters of the Commonwealth to report their impressions of childcare options available to Pennsylvania families—revealing whether they see the options as adequate on measures of accessibility, affordability, and safety. The survey also asked them to provide some feedback on what child care should look like in Pennsylvania. Should, for instance, families pay more or less than they currently do for care? What level of government should be most involved in providing care subsidies or regulations?

Using the 2014 Qualified Voter File of registered voters in Pennsylvania, 2000 voters were randomly selected to receive a mail survey in June 2015 via the U.S. Postal Service. A follow-up postcard was also sent in early August 2015 offering an online version of the survey. Eighty-six respondents returned their mail surveys, and five completed the online version, for a total response

rate of 4.5% ( $N = 91$ ). While this response rate is low, it is not surprising (Dillman 2011). Americans have grown increasingly skeptical of “junk mail” and are accordingly less and less likely to complete mail surveys. Nonetheless, the small sample of respondents still provides a unique perspective of Pennsylvanians, albeit a nonrepresentative one. That said, to our knowledge these data are the only public opinion data of their kind that are specific to Pennsylvania.

Of the respondents, more than 90% described themselves as white, which is somewhat higher than the 2014 U.S. Census report that about 83% of Pennsylvanians are white (U.S. Census 2014). The average age was 55 years, with ages ranging from 21 to 85 years old. Likely due to the topic of the survey, a majority of the respondents were women (74%) and most had college or advanced degrees or had attended some college (82%). Most participants were either married or in a long-term committed relationship (65.9%). The mean household income was in the range of \$30,000–\$52,500. The sample skewed somewhat more Democrat (46% Democrat, 30% Republican, 24% independent) (Pennsylvania Department of State 2014).

According to our survey data, voters are not necessarily opposed to child-care policy manifesting in the form of the patchwork described here. Despite the limitations within the current system, a plurality of Pennsylvania survey respondents (36%) indicated that funding and regulation for programs should be the responsibility of multiple levels of government—potentially expressing approval for the current system of shared responsibility.

Of the survey respondents, 42% reported that they believe quality of child care in the Commonwealth is average or better. Partisan differences were also common on this measure, though many Republicans in the sample indicated that they either “didn’t know” or had “no opinion” of the quality of care available (see Table 1).

<b>Table 1. Survey Respondent Perception of Quality, by Political Affiliation</b>					
	<b>Quality</b>				
	<b>Poor</b>	<b>Below Average</b>	<b>Average</b>	<b>Above Average</b>	<b>Excellent</b>
Democrat	1	8	14	4	1
Independent	0	5	7	1	2
Republican	2	1	6	6	0
<b>Total %</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>14</b>	<b>27</b>	<b>11</b>	<b>4</b>
<i>Note:</i> (1) As a consequence of “no response” and “don’t know” answers, percentages do not equal 100%. (2) $N = 91$ .					
<i>Source:</i> Pennsylvania Center for Women and Politics Child Care Survey 2015.					



The survey data respondents did, however, seem to have other concerns similar to those reflected in national public opinion. In particular, respondents with household incomes under \$30,000/year were more likely to express concerns about affordability and funding of child care. Most respondents indicated that they view costs for child care in the state as being “average,” but Democrats and independents were more likely to express more concern about the cost of care (see Table 2).

It is also possible to see evidence of concerns around issues of flexibility and availability of care in the survey data. Very few respondents expressed that they thought access to or flexibility in options was “excellent,” and while most rated these criteria as “average,” notable minorities gave “below average” or worse ratings for both accessibility and flexibility (15% and 17%, respectively). (See Tables 3 and 4.)

<b>Table 2. Survey Respondent Perception of Affordability, by Political Affiliation</b>					
	<b>Affordability</b>				
	<b>Poor</b>	<b>Below Average</b>	<b>Average</b>	<b>Above Average</b>	<b>Excellent</b>
Democrat	4	10	13	1	0
Independent	1	2	12	1	0
Republican	1	0	10	1	2
<b>Total %</b>	<b>6</b>	<b>12</b>	<b>35</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>2</b>
<i>Note:</i> (1) As a consequence of “no response” and “don’t know” answers, percentages do not equal 100%. (2) $N = 91$ .					
<i>Source:</i> Pennsylvania Center for Women and Politics Child Care Survey 2015.					

<b>Table 3. Survey Respondent Perception of Accessibility, by Political Affiliation</b>					
	<b>Accessibility</b>				
	<b>Poor</b>	<b>Below Average</b>	<b>Average</b>	<b>Above Average</b>	<b>Excellent</b>
Democrat	2	7	10	11	0
Independent	2	1	12	1	0
Republican	0	1	6	6	4
<b>Total %</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>10</b>	<b>27</b>	<b>18</b>	<b>4</b>
<i>Note:</i> (1) As a consequence of “no response” and “don’t know” answers, percentages do not equal 100%. (2) $N = 91$ .					
<i>Source:</i> Pennsylvania Center for Women and Politics Child Care Survey 2015.					

<b>Table 4. Survey Respondent Perception of Flexibility, by Political Affiliation</b>					
	<b>Flexibility</b>				
	<b>Poor</b>	<b>Below Average</b>	<b>Average</b>	<b>Above Average</b>	<b>Excellent</b>
Democrat	2	8	12	4	0
Independent	1	2	8	0	2
Republican	0	2	4	5	0
<b>Total %</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>13</b>	<b>24</b>	<b>8</b>	<b>2</b>
<i>Note:</i> (1) As a consequence of “no response” and “don’t know” answers, percentages do not equal 100%. (2) <i>N</i> = 91.					
<i>Source:</i> Pennsylvania Center for Women and Politics Child Care Survey 2015.					

Despite the seeming limitations of child care in Pennsylvania, survey participants’ ratings of quality, affordability, flexibility, and safety were mostly favorable. Most who felt they had enough knowledge to rate child care in these areas ranked the state’s options as being “average” on each of the above metrics. Furthermore, those with children, tended to offer better ratings, a perhaps encouraging perspective. However, very few respondents viewed child care in the state as “excellent” on any measure.

## **Conclusion: Addressing Inadequacies**

Despite legitimate concerns around policy and public opinion about policy highlighted in this report, few attempts have been made to change our current system. At the state level, legislation has been consistently introduced, but with little success. A recent exception of incremental reform was HB1322 in December 2015. Governor Tom Wolf signed into law the bipartisan sponsored bill, which addressed issues of potential fraud in subsidized care and upgraded state programming that provides child care for low-income parents seeking training or education.

While Pennsylvania seems slow to make changes, other states have had greater success. Florida, New York City, Vermont, and Washington, DC, provide free pre-kindergarten to all resident children (National Education Association n.d.). The programs vary in daily length of program, number of free hours provided, and in some cases provide after school care for older children. Each program incorporates a curriculum and quality requirements, making high-quality child care affordable to all.

Suffering from chronically poor education performance, Mississippi, in 2013, introduced a new pre-k program to serve 15,000 children throughout

the state. The legislation also established requirements for teachers to hold degrees in early childhood education, independent program evaluation and reporting, and implementation of an early childhood tax credit (Mississippi First n.d.). Colorado also extended their childcare assistance eligibility to parents taking unpaid leave from work due to the birth of a child, and in 2014 modified their Child Care Assistance program by capping co-payments for low-income families to no more than 1% of their income. Recognizing that some families with income too high to qualify for assistance may also struggle to afford care, the state also established a tiered co-pay structure to offset costs for families with financial need (Colorado Office of Early Childhood n.d.). In 2015, California provided supplemental funding to qualifying California state preschool programs on the condition that they provide parenting education and staff development for teachers (California Legislative Information 2015). And, in Nebraska, eligible parents now receive up to 24 consecutive months of child care or until their family income exceeds 185% of the federal poverty level—even after they exceed the standard 140% cut off (National Women’s Law Center 2015b).

These examples name just a few ways states have attempted to manage issues around child care in their states. In sum, in the absence of a national childcare program, states have acted in varied ways to attempt to meet the needs of families. While other states have shown leadership on these issues, Pennsylvania has lagged behind, and with serious budget issues continuing to be the norm and large-scale acts of bipartisanship rare, child care is not likely to be addressed in any comprehensive way any time soon.

## NOTES

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1. For center-based care.
2. Also based on center-based care statistics.
3. Some studies argue that children who don’t obtain quality child care are able to catch up, in the later years, to their peers who do (Lipsey et al. 2015).
4. Children from birth to four years.
5. The grant was first established in 1990 and was reauthorized in November 2014.
6. Amendments made in 1998 to the Higher Education Act of 1965 authorized the Childcare Access Means Parents in School program. Funding began in 1999.
7. The child and dependent care credit was first created as a deduction in 1954. In 1976 the deduction became a credit.
8. Also sometimes called Childcare Information Services, CCIS goes back to 1970 and moved into its own office in 1993.
9. In 2013, if a family of three made 100% of the state median income for Pennsylvania, it would make \$5,500 monthly. At 85% it would make \$4,675, and at less than 85% it would make \$3,255.

10. At this writing, this budget is still under consideration by the state legislature. The 2015–2016 budget, due to severe revenue shortfall, not only added no additional funding, but required cuts to these programs. As of this writing, it appears another failed attempt at balancing the state budget will mean the same in 2017–2018.

11. Pennsylvania Pre-K Counts was established by Act 45 in 2007.

12. The Keystone STARS program was first piloted in 2002.

13. Hofferth (1996) defines the working poor as individuals whose income was less than the poverty line, and she defined working-class individuals as those who had incomes that were above poverty level but less than \$25,000.

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