



Written Testimony

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“Making Child Care Affordable” Public Hearing**

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Good morning. Thank you, Chairman Rowe and honorable members of the committee for the invitation to speak to you today on the important topic of child care affordability. And thank you to Representative Klunk for hosting the committee here in York County.

My name is Julie Wheeler, and I serve as President Commissioner on the York County Board of Commissioners. I am pleased to speak to you today regarding the need for affordable child care in Pennsylvania, both for childhood development and for economic development reasons.

Early childhood education is not simply a service. It is essential infrastructure for our community. Investments in childcare and early childhood education are investments in our families, our workforce and our economy. Over the past year, York County residents participated in a comprehensive Quality of Life Survey to help guide future decision-making and provide point in time understanding of where we are as a community.

The results of that survey were clear: Families want safe, affordable, high-quality childcare that is accessible and located where they live and work. And they affirmed what statistics have shown, which is that access to quality, affordable child care is essential to better economic outcomes in our community.

When families cannot find affordable, reliable care, parents leave jobs. Employers struggle with absenteeism, high turnover rates and recruitment challenges. That, in turn, hinders economic growth for the community. But, when we invest strategically in early learning, we unlock opportunity – both for our children and our economy. And that’s what we’ve been doing in York County – both through the Early Childhood Educator Award Program and the Every Child Has Opportunities program, or ECHO.

Both of these programs were launched in the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic. I want to be clear: Access to quality and affordable childcare has been a barrier in York County long before the pandemic, but the pandemic certainly made an existing problem worse. Prior to 2020, York County had 220 Early Education Centers. Following the pandemic, that number dropped to 170 – a decrease of 22 percent. Essentially, one in five of our early childhood education centers closed. Making matters worse, we saw a mass exodus of educators from the workforce. And those centers that remained were operating at approximately 85 percent teacher capacity. Due to student/teacher ratios, that means fewer students could be served. While I’m outlining the situation here in York County, it’s important to understand that this is a problem that spans all across Pennsylvania.

The York County Early Childhood Educator Award Program was launched in 2022 with a goal of improving teacher retention and education levels, while also increasing the capacity and quality of child care programs in the county. Research shows that tenure and education level of teachers positively impacts outcomes for children. As you are aware, the average early educator in Pennsylvania earns an average of \$12.10 an hour, or approximately \$25,000 per year. In most cases, the Early Educator retention program granted an average of \$2,000 – or about 8 percent of an average annual salary – to retain these educators. Ask any center director, and they’ll tell you – it is incredibly difficult to retain a teacher at \$12 per hour when your local Sheetz is paying \$17.

Early childhood education centers cannot simply raise salaries because we have a broken childcare model. Centers cannot charge the true cost of care, and as such, they cannot compensate at market rates.

York County is proud to support the Early Childhood Educator Award annually, including with an initial investment of \$750,000 in ARPA funding to start the program. This is aligned with our Economic Action Plan and the YoCo Strong Recovery Task Force, both of which identified child care access as a barrier to stable employment in York County. Since the program launched, over \$1.6 million has been awarded to over 1,000 educators serving over 12,000 children. In 2024, over \$674,000 was awarded to 404 staff at 67 programs throughout York County serving 4,561 children.

But investing in our teachers is only part of the equation. The ECHO program aims to address York County's child care issue for what it is – an economic challenge. ECHO's investments are intentionally focused on the root of the child care problem – provider access and affordability. Led by Community Connections for Children and the York County Economic Alliance, the ECHO program utilizes a coordinated, data-informed approach to expand access to high-quality early childhood education, particularly for children from low-income families.

ECHO Innovation Grants are awarded to providers for innovative projects that expand the number of children and families served and increase the quality of care and education provided. The BLOOM Start-Up Child Care Forgivable Loans, a program of York County Economic Alliance's BLOOM Business Empowerment Center, offer loans to help launch new early childhood education businesses across York County.

ECHO also offers Professional Development Mini Grant Grants for early childhood educators to build their professional skills and increase their knowledge, while the ECHO Teacher Aide Program offers an early learning apprenticeship for individuals seeking to gain experience in the early childhood education field.

Since its launch two years ago, ECHO has invested over \$3.4 million to boost York County's early childhood education system. And the results speak for themselves. The ECHO program has helped increase access to childcare, creating nearly 1,700 new childcare seats since 2024. In addition, these investments have helped bring more than 300 early childhood educators into the workforce. And we've seen 24 early childhood providers launch since the ECHO program started.

The goal of ECHO is to serve as a community catalyst for innovation and collaboration to address the structural challenges limiting opportunities for children, families and early childhood educators.

The program was born from necessity, as our early childhood system in York County – and indeed, across the Commonwealth – is in crisis. In the last five years, York County has lost nearly half of our early childhood education providers. We do not have enough providers to meet demand. We have 21,600 children under the age of 5 in York County, but just a little more than half of those children have access to a childcare seat. Current providers are operating on average at 85 percent of typical enrollment due to teacher and workforce shortages. Early childhood education program waitlists average 50 to 75 children, and many have stopped adding to their lists.

It's a problem that affects families, employers and our economy. When parents cannot find reliable child care, they cannot fully participate in the workforce. Expanding access to high-quality early learning is not just a family issue – it is an economic imperative. Our York County Economic Alliance, which serves as a countywide chamber and economic development corporation, is engaged in this issue primarily due to the fact that access to childcare is the Number 1 reason cited for workplace absenteeism. This statistic was backed up in surveys by the Pennsylvania Chamber of Commerce, the United Way of Pennsylvania, and our own local York County survey. In fact, it is estimated that our Commonwealth loses out on more than \$6.6 billion in economic productivity, earnings, and tax revenue due to inadequate childcare.¹

¹ PA Partnerships for Children: [New Report Reveals Pennsylvania's Early Childhood Education System in Crisis - PA Partnerships for Children](#)

York County is stepping up to meet that need through ECHO. But it's not just the economic alliance and Community Connections for Children. It's also our generous business and philanthropic community – including significant support from the J. William Warehime Foundation, Powder Mill Foundation, WellSpan Health, Kinsley Foundation, United Way of York County, and York County Community Foundation.

We've seen what can happen when a community comes together to solve difficult challenges. That's what we do here in York County. We collaborate, we innovate, and we activate our community to achieve real solutions that work. In fact, if imitation is the greatest form of flattery, York County is mighty flattered now that the Commonwealth has launched both the Childcare Staff Recruitment and Retention Program with \$25 million budgeted in 2025, and a pilot Innovation Grant program for Early Childhood Education centers. Clearly, they are watching what we are doing in York County, seeing the success and replicating it.

York County is positioning early childhood education as a cornerstone of regional workforce strategy. Research from the Federal Reserve Bank of Minneapolis shows that every dollar invested in high-quality early childhood education yields as much as \$16 in value for the community by increasing the economic mobility of future generations and reducing societal costs by lowering the crime rate and improving health outcomes.

But beyond return on investment, this work is about something even more – helping families achieve the American Dream of providing a better life for their children and grandchildren. Together, we are building a stronger foundation — for families and for our economy today and for generations to come.

Thank you.