

Public Policy Agenda 2019-2020

Trying Together partners with education, government, business, nonprofit, and philanthropic stakeholders to promote our public policy goals throughout Southwestern Pennsylvania, with an emphasis in the City of Pittsburgh and Allegheny County. We work at all levels of government—local school districts, City Council, county commissioners, and state and federal policymakers—in order to advocate in support of the following public policy goals:

1

Do what's best for children

1 Advance the use of developmentally appropriate practices (DAP) in teaching and learning.

Play is the 'work of early childhood' and an avenue for learning at all ages. Children authentically learn cognitive, social, emotional, and physical skills through play. Trying Together supports a paradigm shift that acknowledges the role of play in children's learning and development. To accelerate this shift, Trying Together calls on early childhood teachers and administrators (for children from birth through grade four) to implement the following best practices for play:

- creating abundant and active exploration opportunities through hands-on activities;
- connecting new concepts to what children already know;
- engaging in projects that connect learning in multiple subjects;
- supporting social and emotional development along with physical and mental health;
- offering experiences that expand imaginations and provide challenges;
- providing time for free, unstructured, outdoor play and physical activity breaks in the classroom.

An initiative of Trying Together, the Playful Pittsburgh Collaborative supports these practices beyond the classroom. The Collaborative seeks to expand regional opportunities for play and co-convenes the recess advocacy team that looks at practices and policies for children in pre-k through sixth grade. Furthermore, Trying Together integrates DAP and associated research into our work with the Remake Learning Council and its efforts to make learning engaging, relevant, and equitable.

2 Acknowledge child development in setting expectations and responding to behaviors.

Children thrive and learn best when adults maintain appropriate expectations for both learning and behavior. The overemphasis of discipline for the purpose of control and compliance creates unrealistic expectations of young children and may damage teacher-student relationships. Positive interactions and trusting relationships are essential to respond to behaviors in a way that supports growth and learning.

Knowledge of child development is fundamental to establish preventative solutions and end suspensions and expulsions in early childhood education. Adults are responsible for setting developmentally appropriate expectations and teaching young children social and emotional skills. Just as students would never be punished for not knowing a specific cognitive skill, nor should they be punished for a social or emotional skill they have yet to learn.

Trying Together supports a system that provides interagency collaboration and necessary resources so that educators can respond in ways that are intentional, developmentally appropriate, culturally-competent, gender-responsive, and trauma-informed. This includes increased access to mental and behavioral health professionals who have knowledge and training in child development and specialize in working with infants and young children.

3 Make inclusive, diverse, culturally-responsive early childhood environments the norm.

Infants, toddlers, and young children of all genders, races, ethnicities, abilities, and backgrounds have the right to grow in an inclusive learning space, community, and society. Trying Together supports early care and education professionals intentionally promoting:

- Positive racial identity development;
- Appropriate supports for dual language learners and their families;
- Inclusion of children with disabilities alongside typically developing peers in all learning and social activities, utilizing individualized accommodations and modifications;
- Recruitment and hiring of staff who reflect the diversity of the student population in race, gender identity and expression, ethnicity, native language, and ability. When hiring a diverse staff is not reasonably achievable, programs should make conscious efforts to engage families and include positive representations of their students' and families' races, cultures, and abilities in program curriculum and activities.

Trying Together supports evidence-based strategies that provide culturally relevant experiences and early childhood professionals who foster the development of positive self-identity, a sense of belonging, and positive social relationships.



Invest adequately

4 Increase access to high-quality pre-kindergarten (pre-k) programs.

Pennsylvania families below 300% of the federal poverty guidelines qualify for publicly funded pre-k programs for children who are ages three and four. Due to limited funding, only 40% of eligible families have access to these programs. Trying Together supports increased state and federal investments to fully fund the Pre-K Counts and Head Start programs so all eligible families can access high-quality, publicly-funded pre-k programs. Trying Together also supports city and county policymakers' efforts to allocate funding that supplements state and federal programs.

5 Increase access to high-quality infant and toddler care.

Research shows that critical periods of brain development occur during the first couple years of a child's life. Positive interactions with consistent adult caregivers during this time optimize the development of brain pathways for the visual and auditory senses, motor and language processing, higher cognitive functioning, and emotional regulation. Trying Together supports high-quality care and learning environments with responsive caregivers for all infants and toddlers. This can be achieved by making paid family leave available, increasing the capacity of evidence-based home visiting programs, and expanding access to high-quality infant and toddler child care programs.

6 Elevate the early care and education profession.

Child care* and early learning professionals act as nation builders, responsible for raising tomorrow's workforce and future leaders. Trying Together supports initiatives that positively impact the public perception of these careers and encourages talented and ambitious individuals to enter and remain in the profession. This work should be accomplished through increased public investments that allow professionals to receive competitive wages and benefits, career opportunities that provide support and professional growth, and financial rewards for continuing education and leadership development.

Trying Together also supports measures to make academic programs specializing in early care and education careers more attractive and financially viable. This includes the addition of graduate and undergraduate coursework in leadership, advocacy, and civic engagement as part of the core curriculum for early education students. Finally, Trying Together calls for innovative teacher apprenticeship and mentoring programs that offer opportunities for continuous learning throughout an educator's first years in the field, along with practicum experience in all early childhood age groups (infant, toddler, pre-k, and K-4 classrooms).

* within child care, we include school-age child care, afterschool, and out-of-school time professionals.

8 Augment quality in school-age child care and out-of-school time programs.

Programs that care for children before and after the school day or school year in pre-k through grade six (or through age 12) should meet the same high-quality standards that we demand of early learning and pre-k programs, and school districts. Children do not separate their day into periods of "learning" and "non-learning." For children, every environment is a learning environment, and children deserve to be in programs that are high-quality regardless of funding stream, regulatory body, or household income.

Partnerships between schools and after-school programs can enhance the quality of children's learning and development. School districts need support for children's growth in social and emotional domains, as well as academic enrichment opportunities. Afterschool and summer programs need opportunities to collaborate with administrators, school leaders, and classroom teachers to enhance and support growth that occurs during the school day.

9 Expand maintenance and availability of data that informs access, affordability, equity, and quality.

Trying Together works to provide systems-level expertise on barriers to affordability, equity, quality, and access to a range of educational and human services for children and families. Data that is accurate and timely, as well as cumulative across programs and settings, is essential to inform systems that support children and families. Beyond early childhood, human services data systems should intentionally create opportunities for cross-program connections.

In particular, we encourage expanding available data on the enrollment of families and children in programs and services, the capacity and needs of early learning programs, and the education and compensation of early childhood professionals. We strongly support building capacity at the state level within OCDEL, at the regional level in ELRCs, and at the local level in counties, cities, and school districts to collect and monitor data that informs policy and practice.



3

Enhance quality

7 Ensure continuous high-quality early learning experiences in school districts serving children from birth through grade four.

Trying Together recognizes that every child deserves access to an excellent public school. Research shows the benefits of high-quality early learning experiences (birth through age five) reach their full impact when children continue in high-quality, developmentally appropriate kindergarten through grade four learning environments. We can achieve equitable access to excellence through increased knowledge and use of developmentally appropriate practices, abundant opportunities for play, and appropriate behavior expectations of teachers and school district administrators. We support effective transitions from early childhood programs to kindergarten, staffing classrooms and schools with effective educators and support services, and engaging families in the learning and development of their children.



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