

A photograph of a woman with glasses and a grey t-shirt reading a book to two young children. The children are sitting on a blue couch, and the woman is smiling as she reads. The child on the left is looking down at the book, while the child on the right is looking up at the woman.

Public Policy Agenda 2021-2022

For more than a year, the COVID-19 pandemic has further exposed the fragility of and inequities in the child care system. Families were already struggling with a lack of accessible and affordable high-quality child care options while programs fought to retain a quality workforce that was sorely undercompensated and undervalued. Now programs face loss of enrollment, along with new federal and state health requirements. As such, our 2021-2022 agenda prioritizes fair, just, and inclusive policies and practices that address the inequities impacting children, families, and educators.

In order to achieve its policy goals at the state, federal, and local level, Trying Together collaborates with public, private, and philanthropic stakeholders to mobilize and demand change.

Justice, Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion Statement: Addressing Systemic Disparities In Early Learning

Early childhood education has long been pointed to as an opportunity to “level the playing field” through providing high-quality early learning experiences for children before they reach Kindergarten.

Trying Together recognizes the historical context of advocating for “equality,” while also acknowledging that there is more work to be done to address the systemic inequities that will make a lasting impact. Now with an explicit focus on justice, equity, diversity, and inclusion

in its 2021-2022 Public Policy Agenda, Trying Together calls upon all caregivers, community members, and early childhood educators to embrace the responsibility to ensure that each child and family is safe from racism and discrimination, and has equitable opportunities to thrive.

The COVID-19 pandemic has further exposed the fragility of and inequities in the child care system. While child care and education for young children remains essential to families, to communities, and to the economy, many programs are dealing with the loss of enrollment, along with new federal and state health and safety requirements. As these additional constraints have pushed the child care industry to the brink of collapse, the time for vast and immediate changes to early education policy is urgent.

1

Invest significantly in and strengthen the early learning infrastructure.

Trying Together supports high-quality care and education environments with responsive caregivers and educators for all children from birth through age nine. For children, families, communities, and the economy to fully benefit from the long-term positive impacts of high-quality early care and education, policymakers must make major investments at the local, state, and federal level. The future depends on increasing access to high-quality care and education that meets the cultural, geographic, linguistic, and socio-economic needs of children and families across the Commonwealth.

1 Advocate for investments to increase access and quality.

As a principal member of the Early Learning PA coalition, Trying Together advocates for increased investments in pre-k, child care, and evidence-based home visiting programs through the coalition's three campaigns - Pre-K for PA, Start Strong PA, and Childhood Begins at Home. Significant investments in early learning must be made for both access (serving more children) and quality (supporting teachers, optimizing learning environments, making resources available, and meeting basic program needs) to attain the goal of all children having access to high-quality early learning environments.

With these needs in mind, Trying Together supports:

- increasing state and federal investments to fully fund the Pre-K Counts and Head Start programs and working with city and county policymakers to allocate funding that supplements state and federal sources so all eligible children and families have access;
- providing sufficient funding from both the federal and state government to strengthen the child care infrastructure to ensure that every infant and toddler has an equal opportunity to a quality educational foundation before pre-k that will prepare them to grow, learn, and succeed;
- increasing investments in publicly funded, evidence-based home visiting models operating across Pennsylvania to offer two generational support and meet families where they are; and
- exploring the development of an Early Intervention (EI) advocacy campaign by its Early Learning PA partners.



2 Address the unique needs of all child care providers.

Pennsylvania's early learning landscape provides families with diverse child care options to best suit their personal needs and most importantly the needs of their children. These options include:

- Child Care Centers
- Family Child Care Homes
- Group Child Care Homes
- Relative Providers

Although each of these early learning spaces are different in terms of environment, funding, and size, all of them are expected to maintain a high-quality early learning experience. Trying Together acknowledges that even with the established support systems in place, many early childhood providers still struggle to achieve high-quality standards due to inequitable opportunities, lack of resources, and the fragility of the early childhood sector.

Specifically, Family Child Care Homes and Group Child Care Homes often experience ongoing operating struggles due to insufficient resources. Even through difficult times including during the COVID-19 pandemic, Family and Group Child Care Home providers continue to provide care to the most vulnerable children and families within the community. With unique strengths, these smaller, more intimate settings may be the preferred choice of many families and can quickly adapt their routines and educational practices to meet families' needs.

Trying Together will focus on bringing more visibility to the importance of all programs, and ensure that its advocacy and policy goals incorporate the unique needs of Family and Group Child Care Homes.

2

Focus on equitable and developmentally appropriate care and learning.

High-quality care and education requires educators to meet children where they are to support them in their cognitive, emotional, physical, and social development. This includes ensuring equitable access to quality learning environments and experiences with a foundation of developmentally appropriate practice. Young children thrive from positive relationships and inclusive environments that meet their needs.

3 Prevent and reduce the use of harmful, exclusionary discipline practices.

Beyond doing what's best for children, addressing the use of exclusionary discipline is a critical matter of equity and justice within the early childhood field. High-quality early care and education promises long-lasting, positive benefits; however, the disproportionate impact of exclusionary discipline on Black and brown children undermines the equity in these opportunities. Removal from classrooms and programs due to behaviors threatens children's wellbeing during a critical period of learning and development.

Trying Together understands in order to eliminate suspensions and expulsions and disrupt the preschool-to-prison pipeline, there must be alternatives for educators and families along with meaningful support and resources. While individuals who work with young children have a responsibility, the system must support them.

Trying Together will advocate for the necessary policy changes at the federal, state, and local levels to provide this support. Along with public policies, individual program policies matter too, as do the expectations and rules in classrooms.

Trying Together commits to addressing the professional development needs of early educators and exploring policies that provide caregivers and educators with necessary resources including anti-bias and anti-racism training to give children equitable access to opportunity.

4 Promote anti-racist, culturally- and linguistically-responsive, equitable, and inclusive early childhood environments.

Infants, toddlers, and young children of all abilities, backgrounds, ethnicities, gender identities, and races have the right to grow in an inclusive and equitable learning space, community, and society. Trying Together commits to supporting and advancing policies and practices that intentionally promote:

- 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;
- anti-racist personal and professional reflection, resources, and tools for teaching children and families;
- trauma-informed care and connections with mental and behavioral health supports; and
- the recruitment and hiring of diverse staff in ability, ethnicity, gender identity and expression, native language, and race.

Early learning programs should make conscious efforts to engage families and include positive representations of their students' and families' abilities, cultures, and races in curriculum and activities.

With input from professionals and families to strengthen its understanding of the best way to support system policies, Trying Together will monitor the local, state, and federal guidelines and policies that directly work to achieve equity and inclusion.



5 Advance developmentally appropriate practice in culture, learning, and teaching.

Developmentally Appropriate Practice (DAP) refers to educational and caregiving strategies that support strengths-based approaches to meeting children's needs for optimal learning and development. This includes practices that are ability, culturally, and linguistically appropriate for individual children from birth through age nine. Trying Together supports meaningful learning experiences that focus on the whole child, such as:

- creating abundant and active exploration opportunities through hands-on activities;
- connecting new concepts to what children already know;
- supporting social and emotional development along with physical and mental health;
- providing time for free, unstructured, outdoor play and physical activity breaks in the classroom;
- setting age-appropriate expectations and responding to behaviors in a restorative and teachable way; and
- seeking to gain understanding of children's cultures and identities and incorporating these into the classroom environment and curriculum.

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. Through community partnerships with Hi5!, Trying Together supports effective transitions to Kindergarten and collaborates with school districts to strengthen the early learning continuum through the early elementary grades.

6 Elevate the critical role of play in children's development and learning.

Play is the “work of early childhood” and an avenue for learning at all ages. Children authentically learn cognitive, emotional, physical, and social skills through play. Trying Together supports a paradigm shift that acknowledges the role of play in children's learning and development, and explores play as a matter of social justice and equity. Play is how children make sense of the world around them; their mental health depends on it, and no child should be deprived of playful experiences.

An initiative of Trying Together, the Playful Pittsburgh Collaborative supports these practices both in and beyond the classroom. Along with Trying Together, the Collaborative co-leads the Recess Advocacy Team, which educates and advocates for the importance of physical, unstructured play during the school day. The Recess Advocacy Team will continue to engage with stakeholders across local school districts to elevate the importance of unstructured, free play and promote research-based strategies and practices for implementation.

Additionally, the Team will: continue to seek opportunities for statewide policy change; explore the barriers to play that exacerbate inequity; and research how cross-cultural play can bridge language and social norms, include children with disabilities, and empower the voices of children, families, and educators.



Elevate the early childhood workforce.

Early childhood educators deserve to be acknowledged and celebrated for their critical work with the youngest children; and this work should be reflected in the compensation, professional growth opportunities, and respect of the profession. Not only are early childhood educators crucial to achieving equity within the field, the respect and compensation of their role is also a matter of justice. Despite the significant responsibility of caring for and educating children, the undervalued social stigmas related to the early childhood profession are not a new occurrence.

The challenge of inequity for the early childhood workforce is an issue that has existed throughout generations. The work of child care is primarily done by women, and disproportionately by Black and brown women. Black female educators make up 40% of the early care and education field; however, they only earn 84 cents for every dollar compared to their white counterparts. This wage disparity places Black and brown women at an economic and professional disadvantage by preventing them from continuing their education which would likely enable career advancement within the field. In order for children to receive high-quality care, equitable compensation is essential, especially for Black and brown women. Bridging this wage gap would help to rebuild the education system and workforce.



7 Advocate for family thriving compensation.

Early childhood education is among the lowest paying professions in the United States, yet the country's workforce is dependent upon the field to support and nurture their children while they are at work. In the state of Pennsylvania, the average earning wage of a child care worker is \$9.71 an hour which fails to give them the ability to support their own children and families. The severity of the low wages paid to these educators leaves them at risk of experiencing the adverse effects of poverty, which in turn has the ability to affect their capacity to deliver high-quality care and impede their professional growth. The turnover rate is high due to low pay, which creates an unstable environment for other staff and children.

The retention and recruitment challenges have placed the industry in the middle of a hiring crisis. The scarcity of qualified educators remaining in the field presents many issues for access to high-quality care which leaves early learning programs, families, and communities at a loss.

Through advocacy efforts and elevating the voice of early childhood educators, Trying Together will continue to push for a compensation that allows early childhood professionals and their families to thrive.



8 Support professional growth opportunities.

The field of early childhood education is constantly evolving, and in order to maintain high-quality environments, the education of the practitioners in the field is imperative. Regular professional development provides early childhood educators with the tools they need to support their classroom environments and helps to ensure that each child is receiving a quality early learning experience.

Just like children and families, early childhood educators need access to high-quality learning experiences. In a field that is driven by women (specifically Black and brown women), it is important to create opportunities for further education and career advancement to those who may not otherwise have the resources. To meet this need, Trying Together supports the funding of higher-education and financial assistance programs that provide affordable options and tuition assistance for educators to further their professional growth including:

- Child Development Associate Programs
- Early Childhood Apprenticeship Programs
- Rising Stars Tuition Program
- T.E.A.C.H. Scholarship Program

In addition, Trying Together facilitates opportunities for professional development through its: community-based Child Development Associate (CDA) Credential program; role as the quality partner for Early Learning Resource Center (ELRC) Region 5 in Allegheny County; professional development catalog; UnConference series; and other professional opportunities for early educators.

9 Expand diversity within leadership roles.

Representation matters in all roles of education. Culturally responsive and inclusive environments develop from exemplary behavior, depiction, and modeling of those in leadership. Diversity in leadership roles is essential in the field of early childhood education. As many frontline educators battle bias and racism, early childhood professionals are teaching young children the importance of embracing the differences of others through equity and inclusion. Increasing diversity within early childhood leadership roles offers the potential to elevate the voice and ideas of future leaders within the Western Pennsylvania region.

Through this work, it is important that children see diverse representation in the leaders of their learning environments. Keeping in mind that a goal for increased investments is to improve the odds of positive childhood outcomes, it is necessary that classrooms and other early learning environments have a diverse ethnic and socio-economic composition. Placing a variety of people in positions of leadership sets the stage for acceptance of culturally diverse learning practices for children and families.

In addition, shifting the stigma of leadership roles within the field has been difficult for Black and brown women to achieve and has the potential to combat the current deficit of practitioners entering the early childhood field. If there is equal opportunity for growth for all, there is a strong potential that more educators would be willing to stay in and enter the field. Cultivating true diversity for early childhood leaders will create spaces that empower and inspire the next generation of educators.

10 Engage and mobilize early childhood professionals and families.

Whether it is visiting with legislators, submitting a Letter to The Editor, sharing stories online, voting, or even completing the Census, engaging with both families and early educators is an essential part of the public policy work at Trying Together.

Early childhood educators are experts in their field and their voices should be heard by policymakers. They also have trusted relationships with families with their own early childhood education story. Child care providers need families; their knowledge, their lived experiences, and their partnership to best support their child. When families and educators advocate together on behalf of children, they ensure that each child has an equal opportunity to thrive.

Trying Together commits to facilitating opportunities to activate parents, early educators, and other caregivers in order to create a better future for themselves and the young children they care for and educate.



Build connections and leverage partnerships to support health, wellness, and the community.

Studies show that the conditions in which people learn, live, play, and work impact their long term health. Trying Together recognizes that education and health are inherently interconnected, and that children are impacted by adults' decisions and the environments in which they live. Trying Together's commitment to equity includes supporting and following the public health policy issues that can help children, families, and communities thrive.

11 Support mental health programming and services for children and families.

Research has shown that children who experience increased toxic stress and trauma are at greater risk for chronic disease, including poor mental health outcomes. Infant and early childhood mental health includes building socio-emotional skills, learning to express and regulate emotions, and forming close and secure relationships in supportive environments. These environments support the child's learning, helping to address any existing trauma, as well as building resilience to address future challenges.

Supportive environments include the parent and caregiver, therefore, caregiver mental health is also important. This two-generation approach is even more necessary because parenting with a history of trauma can impair a parent's ability to regulate emotions and lead to maladaptive coping strategies. In addition, addressing a caregiver's mental health must be inclusive of addressing personal, generational, and community trauma, toxic stress, postpartum depression and anxiety, and more.

Through robust trauma-informed programming and services for children and families, Trying Together believes a more equitable and resilient future can be built where children feel supported, adults feel capable, and communities thrive.



12 Support the economic stability of families and communities.

Studies show that low-income children are behind their middle income peers as soon as age two in areas such as oral language and cognitive processing. Children and families living in poverty are at higher risk of chronic disease and have a lower life expectancy. The economic stability of the family as well as the community in which they live is also linked to food access and security, and nutrition among children and youth.

Trying Together seeks to support and advocate for policies that allow for the economic self-sufficiency of families.

13 Connect with pediatricians to ensure regular well-child visits and developmental screenings.

Pediatric appointments such as well visits in the first three years of care follows the American Academy of Pediatrics recommendations for every child. These visits should include the identification of developmental delays or disability, and a referral with the appropriate follow-up. Screenings can also be conducted through a home visiting program such as the Nurse Family Partnership or Early Head Start by a nurse or paraprofessional. All of these are essential for the health and wellness, as well as the eventual growth and learning of every child. Screenings and early identifications of delays can lead to needing fewer, less expensive services down the road for many children.

Trying Together will continue to strengthen its connections and relationships with medical professionals as they are important stakeholders in supporting the well-being of young children.



14 Collaborate with organizations focused on health insurance coverage.

Trying Together acknowledges that the expansion of insurance coverage for children allows for the necessary developmental screenings and pediatric and well-child visits to occur that ensure a child is staying healthy and meeting milestones for typical growth and development. For example, expanding the Children's Health Insurance Program (CHIP) is one way to cover insurance for many children who do not currently have access to the health care they need in the Commonwealth. While Trying Together does not lead on health insurance, collaborations with regional and statewide partners will increase its ability to support the whole child and their families.

15 Support Paid Family Medical Leave.

Paid Family Leave policies have a number of potential benefits for children and families. Ideally, all new parents would have the time and income to be at home with their child during this essential bonding period. As appropriate, paid maternity leave allows for a longer breastfeeding period, which can extend the building of immunities of the child. Currently, proposed legislation for a statewide insurance fund would also ensure paid leave for family members to provide care for elderly family members, to care for children with a serious illness, and for major surgery which would also help many of the professionals in the early childhood workforce.

16 Strive for lead free environments.

Lead is a serious threat to the health of children in the Pittsburgh Region as there is no safe exposure level for children. Although major legislation has reduced lead exposure over many years both locally and federally, through sources such as gasoline, paint, and plumbing, some environmental exposures remain through historical use of the substance. In 2017, an Allegheny County Task Force determined that a primary source for concern locally was pre-1978 rental housing, and that prevention to exposure was the best strategy to reduce children's blood lead levels to protect and support their long-term development.

Trying Together will continue to be involved in conversations that address these concerns that are essential to children's health through strategies such as increasing the supply of lead-free housing and supporting remediation efforts in existing child care, housing, and schools.

The 2021–2022 Trying Together Public Policy Agenda prioritizes more just and inclusive policies and practices at the individual, program, and system levels. These policy priorities will guide Trying Together’s engagement and mobilization efforts for the children, families, and early care and education professionals most impacted by them. This Agenda also offers a road map for administrative and legislative policy efforts, as well as professional growth opportunities and research.

To join Trying Together in advancing these priorities and supporting the work of early childhood, please sign-on to receive public policy alerts via email at tryingtogether.org.





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