

Strategic Goal:

An expert policy resource in Western Pennsylvania and a leading advocate for high-quality early care and education in the state, mobilizing its network to take action on issues important to young children and their families.

A key component of Trying Together's advocacy effort is educating the community about the funding and policies that affect young children, families, and the early childhood education field and connecting them to the policymakers who vote on them.

While there were existing problems and challenges with the child care system—staffing, low wages, subsidy-reimbursement rates, inflation—the COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated them and shed a national spotlight on child care. That attention led to investments through the federal stimulus packages, which have helped providers stay open but are not sustainable. In response to these constraints, Trying Together pivoted to virtual advocacy efforts, including meetings, roundtable discussions, forums, and tours, to meet the needs of providers and families.

In the spring and summer of 2022, Trying Together returned to some in-person events and staff returned to the Capitol to meet with elected officials for the first time in two years. To help with the education of its various stakeholders, the Trying Together policy team also developed an [Early Childhood Funding Map](#). The map provides an overview of the complex early childhood system of programs and funding streams and illustrates how public investments flow from the federal and state levels to early childhood programs.

36





2021–2022 Public Policy Agenda

Trying Together released its third public policy agenda in the summer of 2021 with a sharpened focus on justice, equity, diversity, and inclusion. The policy agenda prioritized fair, just, and inclusive practices, resulting in a stronger vision for Trying Together’s policy efforts, particularly in elevating the early childhood workforce. The 2021–2022 Public Policy Agenda outlines four main priorities to:

- Invest significantly in and strengthen the early learning infrastructure
- Focus on equitable and developmentally appropriate care and learning
- Elevate the early childhood workforce
- Build connections and leverage partnerships to support health, wellness, and the community

In order to achieve its policy goals, Trying Together continues to collaborate with public, private, and philanthropic stakeholders to advocate for change at the local, state, and federal levels.

Voter registration, engagement, and education are important pieces of Trying Together’s policy and advocacy efforts.

To address these needs, the Public Policy team has created and conducted professional development for child care providers on how to educate and support families in registering to vote. Additionally, Trying Together has supported efforts to elevate child care, pre-k, and other issues impacting families and businesses in the election process. In late 2020, Trying Together worked with a child care provider to host two candidate conversations for House and Senate races and continues to share voter education information with providers and families ahead of the 2022 general election.

Increased Sustainable Investments

With early care and education being prioritized following the 2020 election, several proposals were made throughout policy discussions, ranging from the Biden Administration's American Families and Jobs Plans, which included a proposal of \$450 billion for child care and pre-k, to a Congressional budget resolution, including a proposal for \$400 billion directed to child care and pre-k.

In 2021 and 2022, Trying Together staff participated in the virtual NAEYC Public Policy Forum. Along with other partner organizations and providers, staff met with the Southwestern Pennsylvania Congressional Delegation and Senators to highlight how federal stimulus dollars were helping the field to survive, and discussed the need for continued sustainable investments. NAEYC asked Trying Together to participate in a pre-recorded session presenting the organization's advocacy fellowships, which aired during the 2022 Public Policy Forum.

Early Childhood League

Through the generosity of The Grable Foundation and a [Remake Learning TOMORROW grant](#), Trying Together facilitated the [Early Childhood League](#) from January through September 2021. The League served as a pilot project to bring together parents, caregivers, and leaders of community organizations to advocate for early childhood education. Members met monthly via Zoom to discuss communications techniques, community organizing strategies, early childhood education principles, and public policy processes. Trying Together brought in several experts to present, including federal advocates, state and local policymakers, and educational organizers.

Within smaller committees, the participants led and created their own resources for the community, including the:

- Mobilization Committee, which focused on grassroots policy issues for children and families and learned about the three ELPA campaigns and community organizing strategies
- Toolkit/Early Intervention Committee, which compiled a guide to support families with children with developmental concerns
- Policy Committee, which developed a report outlining the collective advocacy focus of the Early Childhood League

Through this training and their collaborative efforts, the Early Childhood League formed a [call-to-action campaign](#), produced an [Early Intervention Resource Guide](#), and developed a [policy report](#).

Family Care Act

Trying Together is a partner of the PA Family Care Coalition campaign supporting the Family Care Act, which aims to secure a paid family medical leave insurance fund for families statewide.

If Pennsylvania passes the Family Care Act, families will no longer have to choose between remaining financially stable in the workforce and caring for their young child in the most critical period of their life. Making paid family leave available is critical to healthy infant development, and a critical support for early care and education professionals who still do not have access to benefits. As Trying Together advocates for child care and early learning in federal reconciliation packages, it also supports the inclusion of paid family leave as the initial step for supporting families with infants.

Grasstops Leadership

Trying Together continues to collaborate with grasstops leaders, such as business and philanthropic stakeholders.

In October 2021, Trying Together began compiling early childhood education policy briefs to share with grasstops leaders on a monthly basis, which has led to more connections and important conversations to elevate early childhood across the region. From February through June 2022, Trying

Together hosted monthly calls to provide state budget updates and share opportunities to participate in policy actions. Additionally, policy staff have been joining the weekly ELRC Region 5 Director Roundtable to present a mobilization moment and provide updates on local, state, and federal policy and ways child care providers can take action.



Early Learning PA Coalition

As solutions to child care continue to be framed around equity barriers in systemic problems, Trying Together has compounded its advocacy efforts with partners across the state and country. Trying Together continues to be a principal partner in the statewide Early Learning PA (ELPA) Coalition. In addition to Start Strong PA, Pre-K for PA, and Childhood Begins at Home, a fourth campaign—Thriving PA—launched in 2021, and a process to focus on Early Intervention advocacy has begun.

Throughout 2021, ELPA partners—including Trying Together—engaged in training with School Readiness Consulting centered on race equity and how it shows up internally across lead organizations and campaigns, as well as within external policy and advocacy work. Trying Together is leading the ongoing equity efforts for ELPA, which includes drafting the campaign’s first Statement of Commitment to Racial Equity.

40

Start Strong PA

The statewide child care advocacy campaign, Start Strong PA, which Trying Together is a partner of, held [12 virtual forums](#) in April and May of 2021 to engage provider and family voices around how ARPA funding could best be spent. Trying Together led two forums—one for Allegheny and another for the surrounding Southwestern Pennsylvania counties—with more than 170 participants. Start Strong PA also sent a survey to collect written feedback and received more than 1,000 responses.

Based on the forums and survey feedback, the campaign provided recommendations to the administration and General Assembly including:

- Payments for providers to use for recruitment and retention or staff
- Elimination of copays for families
- Advertisement of the child care subsidy program
- Paying providers on enrollment versus attendance
- Expanding infant and toddler contracted slots

In addition to collaborating on the Start Strong PA campaign, Trying Together leads the campaign’s communications and policy committees. Through this role, Trying Together produced a [story collection project](#) to capture videos of providers sharing how the staffing crisis impacted their businesses and abilities to serve children and families. To help illustrate the staffing shortages faced by providers, Start Strong PA conducted a survey quantifying Pennsylvania’s current child care crisis, which threatens parents’ ability to work and the overall economy. The first survey, conducted between August 30 and

September 8, 2021, detailed the child care staffing crisis in 1,163 Pennsylvania child care programs across 63 counties and its effects on working families' ability to access care.

A follow-up survey, conducted between March 8 and April 3, 2022, demonstrated the continued impact of classroom closures and the ability of programs to serve children.

According to the respondents of the survey:

- Nearly 32,500 children sat on waiting lists.
- More than 30,000 additional children could have been served at respondents' sites if they were fully staffed.

- 91% of respondents reported staffing shortages.
- Programs need to fill nearly 7,000 open child care positions.
- 48% of respondents have closed at least one classroom.

On April 12, 2022, Trying Together participated in Start Strong PA's press conference in the Pennsylvania Capitol Rotunda to release the results from this 2022 staffing survey.

Another key element in reducing the inequities within the field surrounds providing care during non-traditional hours (NTH), or outside of Monday through Friday from 6 a.m. to 6 p.m.



As part of its research deliverables for Start Strong PA, Trying Together authored the campaign's first policy brief on NTH child care titled *Policy Brief: Overview of Non-Traditional Hour Child Care*. The brief discussed the definitions of NTH hours in the child care sector, highlighted the research on family needs, and put forth recommendations to strengthen NTH care within the sector.

On April 22, 2022, Trying Together partnered with the Westmoreland Chamber of Commerce to [host a discussion](#) about the impact of child care needs on the business community, with a specific focus on non-traditional hours. Westmoreland County providers, business leaders, and elected officials joined the discussion to share challenges and brainstorm solutions. Trying Together is committed to more efforts for unique offerings like non-traditional hours as part of its commitment to fair, just, and inclusive policies, as Black, Latinx, and low-income children under six disproportionately have parents working non-traditional hours.

Currently, Pennsylvania is utilizing ARPA discretionary child care funds for rate incentives for providers that offer child care during NTH. These funds will support add-on incentives to Child Care Works (CCW) base rates for child care providers that offer at least two hours of care during non-traditional hours.

In June 2022, Trying Together and Start Strong PA released *Elevating the Early Childhood Workforce*, a report that highlights the historical and current context for the underinvestment and undervaluing of the early childhood field. This report summarized the details of the staffing crisis while also offering pathways toward a more equitable, high-quality early learning system through elevating the value of

the profession and increasing provider compensation. The report was presented virtually on June 9, 2022, to child care providers, families, advocates, policymakers, and community members to discuss the struggles early childhood educators are facing.

The necessity of the campaign continues to be evident as the state administration and legislature has level funded child care for three years. Since fiscal year 2019-2020, the child care services line item has remained at \$156.5 million and child care assistance at \$109.9 million, despite 80% of Pennsylvania children who are eligible for subsidy not being served.

Start Strong asked advocates to "Raise Child Care" to elevate the impact of the child care crisis on employees, working families, and young children. The Raise Child Care mini campaign within Start Strong PA took significant steps toward advocating for increased wages. These efforts were ultimately met by the General Assembly in the 2023 state budget, with \$90 million in appropriations toward one-time bonuses for child care teachers.

To date, 398 organizations and 13,262 individuals have signed on as Start Strong PA supporters.

Pre-K for PA

The Pre-K for PA campaign works to ensure that every child in Pennsylvania enters kindergarten ready to succeed. State funding for pre-k has significantly increased since the 2014 inception of the campaign. Following a year of no increase due to budget shortfall, the 2022 fiscal year saw a \$30 million increase (\$25 million for Pre-K Counts and \$5 million for Head Start Supplemental Assistance Program), bringing the total investment to \$311.5 million. Currently, the programs provide high-quality pre-k education for 33,445 three- and four-year-old children across Pennsylvania.

As the Commonwealth continues to increase public dollars for early childhood education, it is imperative that investments go toward increasing rates for publicly funded programs to pay providers closer to what high-quality pre-k costs. In March 2021 Trying Together released the report *Invest in Quality: A Case for Paying Closer to What High-Quality Pre-K Costs*. Improving quality through rate adjustments in both Pre-K Counts and the Head Start Supplemental Assistance Program ensures these programs can maintain high-quality early learning experiences for children and families, and a skilled and stable teaching workforce maintains a high-quality early learning environment. While quality expects and demands the appropriate knowledge and credentials of professionals, the compensation for pre-k teachers remains significantly lower than their colleagues in K-12 settings.

In the 2023 budget, pre-k received \$60 million in additional funding for the state's Pre-K Counts program and \$19 million in additional funding for the Head Start Supplemental Assistance

Program. Together, this \$79 million expansion will serve over 2,300 additional young children and increase rates for providers to support the early care and education workforce and address rising costs.

To date, more than 681 organizations and 20,934 individuals have signed on as Pre-K for PA supporters.

Childhood Begins at Home

The unmet need for home visiting services in Pennsylvania is 95%. In 2021, Childhood Begins at Home released the report *Forward Thinking: Diversifying Funding to Grow and Sustain Evidence-Based Home Visiting in Pennsylvania*, which provided an overview of funding streams that support home visiting and made recommendations for potential new funding. Trying Together participated in the research and review of this report.

In Pennsylvania's 2023 fiscal year budget, Childhood Begins at Home received an increase of \$15 million in the Community-Based Family Center line item to serve an additional 3,800 pregnant women, young children, and their families with evidence-based home visiting services. Additionally, the Nurse-Family Partnership line item received \$1 million to serve 200 more families in the Commonwealth. This was an important win for children and families, as evidence-based home visiting had not received an increase in a few years.

Early Intervention

ELPA is in the process of assessing early intervention (EI) issues to inform development of a statewide legislative and administrative action agenda for implementation via a policy advocacy campaign. Trying Together participated in the advocate focus group in late 2021 to offer perspective to inform the development of the strategy and recommendations for policy goals. Trying Together also recruited families and EI professionals to participate in the process. The EI efforts are focused on the infant/toddler program (known as Part C) and the transition to the preschool program.

Following several focus groups and community feedback sessions, the EI campaign will likely focus on:

- 44
- Serving all children who can benefit (outreach, referral, enrollment)
 - Ensuring Part C EI services offer the quality needed to make a difference
 - Achieving equitable access in Part C EI
 - Addressing the mental health needs of infants and toddlers
 - Partnering with Medicaid to improve Part C EI

Implementation of this campaign will begin in early 2023.

Public Policy Impact

**Over
\$1.5B**

in Federal Relief and Assistance
Funding to Pennsylvania to support the
child care field

\$16M

in increased state
investments for home visiting

80+

meetings with state legislators in
district offices, Harrisburg, virtual
visits, and child care tours

17

Early Childhood
League Members

\$109M

in increased investments for pre-k

\$90M

toward one-time bonuses to child care staff

\$25M

in increased state investments
to child care

3,168

actions taken by advocates

