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The Value and Cost of High-Quality Early Care and Education

2023





Introduction

High-quality early care and education prepares a young child for future success and also supports families who contribute to the economy and workforce. In 2002, Pennsylvania launched Keystone STARS, a Quality Improvement Rating System (QRIS), to expand and promote access to high-quality early care and education programs across the state of Pennsylvania.

While there is significant value in Keystone STARS, over 20 years after its creation, early care and education programs continue to encounter costly financial barriers to increasing and maintaining quality ratings. High-quality early care and education costs more because it requires multiple resources, including experienced and qualified teachers. The foundation for better child outcomes is a highly trained and qualified workforce. Insufficient funding and lack of program incentives can make high-quality ratings unattainable for early care and education programs across the state, limiting young children's access to a valuable asset during a critical developmental period.

There is bipartisan support for the belief that families should have an opportunity to choose quality care settings at an affordable rate with confidence that their children will be safe and engaged while in care.¹ In this policy brief, Start Strong PA emphasizes the value of high-quality early care and education that is propelled by Keystone STARS. This brief also includes stories from early care and education providers across the state whose voices are evidence of the value of investing in quality for the young children and families that they serve. Their experiences confirm what the data and research also indicate: There are costly financial barriers and a lack of program incentives to achieve and maintain high-quality.



The Important Role of Child Care Licensing Regulations

Child care programs must comply with licensing (certification) regulations as a necessary and essential way to ensure the health and safety of young children within early care and education programs. Research on the relationship between state regulations and child care supply shortages across all 50 states shows no correlation between regulation and limited child care supply.² Licensing regulations are imperative to protect young children across care settings and provide oversight of foundational areas of program infrastructure, such as:

- Facility safety standards (including building, classroom, playground)
- Teacher requirements
- Teacher-to-child ratios
- Supervision of children
- Nutrition and health³

The state submits a Child Care Development Fund Plan to the US Department of Health and Human Services every three years to outline how it is meeting basic health and safety standards and training professionals. This is an important component to continue receiving federal dollars. Solutions that suggest lowering the child care licensing regulations would increase the supply of child care providers are misguided and would have negative consequences for both children and educators. For example, if regulations were lowered by increasing the teacher-to-child ratios, educators' jobs would become more challenging because they'd be responsible for the health and safety of a larger number of young children. This would place an additional burden on an already fragile workforce and erode high-quality early care and education options for young children and families.



The History of Pennsylvania's Quality Rating and Improvement System

A state's Quality Rating and Improvement System (QRIS) builds upon child care licensing regulations by focusing more deeply on the key components of quality, including physical environment, instructional materials, program support structure, and most importantly, interpersonal relationships and daily interactions.

“High-quality learning experiences provide children with authentic opportunities to interact with the world around them...The most important factor in a program's quality is the staff. The program is only as successful as the staff that provide the care and education. A caring, well-trained staff member can reach children in a lasting and meaningful way.”

- **Amanda Anderson**, Bethany Childcare Programs (Wiggles and Giggles), Lancaster County

Pennsylvania was one of the first states to develop its QRIS, Keystone STARS, in 2002, and it is regularly updated to reflect advancements of the field. Keystone STARS, which stands for standards, training/professional development, assistance, resources, and support, is informed by researched-based practices that improve outcomes in young children.⁴ A key ingredient behind the components of a successful high-quality early care and education program is a well-trained and qualified workforce.⁵ Keystone STARS enforces this fact with a unique focus on what happens within a program — between educators and children — to

create high-quality early learning experiences. Keystone STARS is guided by three principles:

- A whole child approach to education is essential to meeting the holistic and individual needs of each and every child and family.
- Knowledgeable and responsive early care and education professionals are essential to the development of children and the support of families.
- Building and sustaining ongoing positive relationships among children, families, early care and education professionals, and community stakeholders is essential for the growth and development of every child.⁶

In 2006, Keystone STARS was found to be a reliable indicator of quality early care and education programs. Programs with higher STARS ratings had consistently higher scores on the Environmental Rating Scale (ERS), a commonly used observational assessment that evaluates program quality.⁷ A 2016 research report on Keystone STARS examined three areas of the QRIS, including child outcomes, quality components, and systems approach to rating quality, and guiding improvements. When using the Work Sampling System, a performance assessment of young children's developmental skills, four-year-olds enrolled in STAR 3 or STAR 4 programs scored higher than those enrolled in STAR 1 or STAR 2 programs.⁸

In 2017, a revision of Keystone STARS resulted in the movement from a minimum-standard-based rating system to a points-based rating system. Additional revisions included having all licensed programs that meet the basic health and safety standards (certification regulations) receive a STAR 1 rating. Revisions also allowed for programs to update their rating less frequently (every three years, unless requested earlier) and use alternative accreditation standards to achieve a STAR 4 rating (including NAEYC, Montessori, and Head Start accredited programs).⁹ An additional revision of the standards went

into effect in July 2022 that included several updated STARS standards for the purpose of clarification. Effective October 1, 2023, several additional edits were made to the Keystone STARS Staff Qualification indicators based on feedback from the field related to professional development timeline requirements.¹⁰

Overview of Keystone STARS Ratings

All licensed early care and education programs receive a STAR 1 rating upon receiving their full license. The STAR 1 rating indicates that a program is licensed by the Department of Human Services, Office of Child Development and Early Learning and has met the required health and safety regulations. To promote continuous quality improvement, programs are encouraged to “move up” to a higher quality rating as demonstrated by their performance on standards across four categories.

Each category of program standards includes increasing and cumulative quality indicators as programs progress through STARS levels (beginning at STAR 1 and ending with the highest rating, STAR 4). The chart below outlines the four program standards and includes a brief description of quality indicators used to determine the quality rating.¹¹

| Program Standards | Overview of Quality Indicators |
|---|--|
| Staff Qualifications and Professional Development | Training, professional development (PD), PD registry, PD plans, PA Early Childhood Education (ECE) Career Pathway including staff professional degree and credentials |
| ECE Program | Develop a Continuous Quality Improvement (CQI) plan, create lesson plans based on PA Early Learning Standards, use of research-based developmental screening tool, adoption of developmentally appropriate curriculum, policies to support inclusion and reduce suspension/expulsion |
| Partnerships with Families and Communities | Family handbook, policies to support family engagement, offer family-teacher conferences, connection to community resources and supports |
| Leadership and Management | Operating budget, tracking illnesses, safety reviews, classroom observations, performance reviews, regular staff meetings |

“We decided to move to STAR 4 to be at the top-level as a child care center; to set high standards for our teachers, parents, and most importantly, our children.... Which requires a lot of tools to improve every single day and support the development of each child.”

- Wally Saleh, Funtastic Childcare Center, Montgomery County

Benefits of High-Quality for Children

High-quality early learning is associated with multiple positive outcomes. Perhaps one of the most well-known longitudinal studies of high-quality early learning is the Perry Preschool Project in Michigan. The two-year high-quality early learning program was initiated in 1962 and found improved outcomes for participants that lasted decades into the future, including better family environments, higher levels of education, better health, and less criminal activity. A more recent research update of this cohort from 2021 shows similar outcomes for the participants' children, providing evidence that high-quality early care and education programs can have positive intergenerational outcomes.¹²

Recent independent reviews of Pennsylvania's Pre-K Counts program reinforces the importance of high-quality early care and education in our own state. Research indicates that kindergarten-aged children who participated in Pennsylvania's Pre-K Counts had more positive outcomes in early language and math skills compared to young children who did not participate in a pre-kindergarten program.¹³

“High-quality early learning programs are valuable because our children are valuable. It takes a lot of time, effort, education, blood, sweat and tears to create an environment that allows children and families to experience wonderful, unique opportunities they would not receive elsewhere. To allow the children to learn through play and grow socially, academically and emotionally.... To provide a level playing field to ALL children and allow them to be unique and have a sense of belonging with their peers but also learn from their cultures and diversities.”

- Eva Wood, Ligonier Valley Learning Center/Latrobe Kinder-Schull, Westmoreland County



Financial Barriers to Achieving High-Quality

The true cost of providing high-quality early learning can be a barrier for many early learning programs.¹⁴ When considering the diversity within the early care and education landscape it is important to remember that the following types of certified early care and education programs are all held to similar Keystone STARS quality standards regardless of their resources and revenue, which can vary widely across programs:

Child Care Centers: state-certified center-based programs providing care to seven or more children

Group Child Care Home: state-certified home or commercial-based program where care and education are provided for up to 12 children

Family Child Care Home: state-certified home-based program with one caregiver providing care and education to three to six children who are not related to them¹⁵

All early care and education programs, regardless of program type, have similar costs per child relative to operations. For example, the costs related to staffing (including wages and benefits) should be similar in Child Care Centers, Group Child Care, and Family Child Care Home settings.¹⁶ The funding for high-quality care and education is not sufficient for many programs to increase

quality and maintain high-quality standards, especially for home-based programs. Although several program types are eligible to participate in Keystone STARS, the standards and supports within the system may not be equitably aligned.

Insufficient Reimbursement Rates for Child Care

A primary source of funding support for early learning programs is provided through child care subsidy reimbursements. In Pennsylvania, the Child Care Works (CCW) child care subsidy is provided to families who are currently eligible and receiving TANF and/or SNAP benefits as well as former TANF families. CCW is also available to families whose incomes are at or below 200% of the federal poverty level. In addition to financial eligibility criteria, families must meet additional eligibility requirements, such as being a lawful resident of PA and meeting employment or education/training requirements.

Pennsylvania's Child Care Works (CCW) subsidy program is funded through state and federal dollars, including the following federal funding streams: the Child Care Development Block Grant (CCDBG), Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF), Social Services Block Grant (SSBG), and Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP).¹⁷ In order to support family choice and access, The Federal Administration of Children and Families (ACF) recommendation for subsidy reimbursement rates is that they be set at or above the 75th percentile of the market rate so that qualifying families have access to over two-thirds of program options in their community.¹⁸ The rate of the 75th percentile is equal to the cost that the lowest 75% of the child care programs report charging families for their services. Even at the recommended 75th percentile, one-quarter of programs operate at a financial loss when providing services for children who receive subsidies over families who pay the private tuition rate.¹⁹ Across the country, 18 states meet or exceed the federal recommendation of the 75th percentile of the market rate: Washington, Louisiana, Wisconsin, West Virginia, Utah, Wyoming, South Dakota, South Carolina, North Dakota,

North Carolina, Montana, Mississippi, Maine, Florida, California, Arkansas, Arizona, and Alabama.^{20, 21}

In Pennsylvania, CCW currently reimburses providers at the 60th percentile of the market rate, and pays programs based on child attendance versus enrollment. Early care and education is a historically underfunded sector in Pennsylvania. The reimbursement rate in Pennsylvania was frozen for 10 years until a small rate increase occurred in 2018. Prior to COVID-19 federal relief funding, the Child Care Works subsidy reimbursement rate was at the 25th percentile. Pennsylvania increased the reimbursement rate to the 40th percentile and later to the 60th percentile using one-time federal relief funds. Through the 2023-2024 FY budget, state funds are being used to keep the reimbursement rate at the 60th percentile. Yet, providers across the state continue to confront the harsh reality that the 60th percentile reimbursement rate is insufficient to support the true cost of high-quality early care and education and only maintains the status quo of a sector that is already on the brink of collapse. Some early care and education programs need to charge the difference between the CCW reimbursement and their tuition rate to keep their programs open. Unfortunately this means low-income families experience greater financial hardship. The burden of the insufficient subsidy reimbursement rate should not be placed on the family nor on the early care and education program.

A Better Way to Calculate the True Cost of Quality

Pennsylvania sets reimbursement rates based on a Market Rate Survey (MRS), which must be re-evaluated at least

every three years according to federal regulations. The MRS analyzes the rates charged by early care and education providers in an open market. In other words, the market rate reflects what programs charge families, which may result in lower rates in low-income communities based on what families can afford. Recently, numerous reports have shown that subsidy reimbursements are not sufficient to support high-quality programs, largely because Market Rate Surveys do not reflect the true cost of offering high-quality early care and education in any community.

The federal CCDBG regulations permit states to use an alternative option of setting rates based on “cost estimation modeling,” which better accounts for the numerous expenses necessary to operate high-quality programs, such as workforce, facilities, supplies, and materials.²² Currently, only the District of Columbia and New Mexico utilize cost estimation models versus reimbursement rates set on a market rate study. Additional states, including Delaware, Virginia, and Nevada are transitioning to cost modeling in the future. A 2023 report by PennAEYC and Start Strong PA recommends the shift to a cost estimation study for Pennsylvania. Upon completion of a comprehensive cost estimation study, it is further recommended for Pennsylvania to develop a new payment methodology and plan to fund the gap between current reimbursement payments and the true cost of providing high-quality early care and education.²³

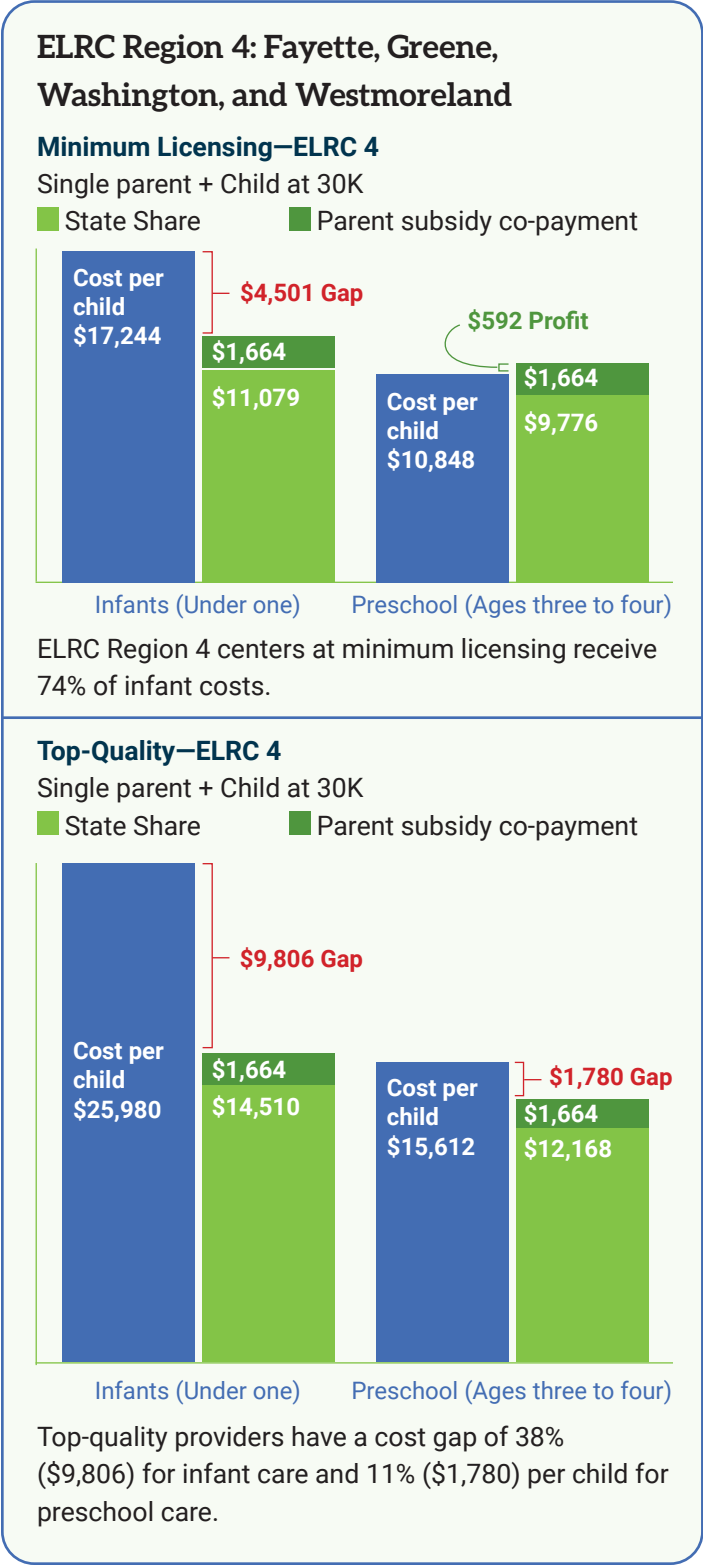
A program’s subsidy reimbursement is determined based on a number of different factors, including region, provider type, and child age. An example of the differentiated reimbursement rates across ELRC Region 4 (Fayette, Greene, Washington, Westmoreland) is shown below:

Maximum Child Care Allowance Full-Time Tuition Rate (Daily)

Effective March 1, 2023 in ELRC Region 4 ²⁴

| | Infant | Younger Toddler | Older Toddler | Pre-School | School-Age |
|------------------------|---------|-----------------|---------------|------------|------------|
| Child Care Center | \$49.01 | \$46.37 | \$45.66 | \$44.00 | \$41.34 |
| Group Child Care Home | \$36.23 | \$35.41 | \$34.55 | \$34.27 | \$33.51 |
| Family Child Care Home | \$40.16 | \$39.78 | \$39.38 | \$38.02 | \$37.19 |

Looking in greater detail at the impact of subsidy rates on a program's budget, operating costs, and revenue, the following chart illustrates the gaps in the cost of infant care and preschool age care in child care programs in ELRC Region 4 for a parent earning \$30,000 per year. The charts include cost gaps for programs meeting minimum licensing standards and those that have reached the highest level of STARS quality.²⁵



“... neither private tuition nor CCW is covering the true cost of care. It’s always difficult to plan a budget around CCW funding because CCW funding can be inconsistent... I feel that the staffing crisis and the lack of livable wages for childcare teachers is the biggest barrier to quality.”

- STAR 4 Early Learning Program Director, Indiana County

Impact on the Early Childhood Workforce

The impact of insufficient subsidy reimbursement rates is often felt most directly by the child care workforce.²⁶ Early childhood teachers are the key ingredient to high-quality. However, the profession is widely and historically undercompensated, leading to high turnover rates and challenges retaining high-quality teachers. A 2023 wage report by Children First and Start Strong PA revealed that early childhood teachers earn an average of \$12.43 per hour or less than \$25,844 annually.²⁷ These earnings fail to meet the cost of living across every county in the state of Pennsylvania. Low wages and high rates of turnover often result in programs being understaffed, which directly impacts families’ ability to access quality care. When programs are understaffed, they are unable to operate at full capacity, which results in families being turned away and fewer children receiving high-quality care.

According to a 2022 statewide early care and education staffing survey, 91% of respondents indicated that they have unfilled teacher positions resulting in a staffing shortage.²⁸ When looking at the operating budget of programs, approximately 73% of a program’s operating budget goes to the cost of personnel.²⁹ This reinforces the importance of teachers being a key component to the functioning of an early care and education program. Program quality is measured in part by staff qualifications, and professional development training is one of the categories of quality indicators.

Current and Past Program Incentives for High-Quality

Pennsylvania rewards programs with high-quality ratings through the receipt of a tiered reimbursement “add-on” to their CCW payments. All programs who choose to participate in CCW and reach a STAR 2 or higher are eligible for a tiered reimbursement rate. The reimbursement rates are standard across the state and reflect STARS level and children’s ages, as shown in the table below (note: all add-on rates are daily and are paid based on child attendance versus enrollment):³⁰

| | STAR 2 Full-Time | STAR 2 Part-Time | STAR 3 Full-Time | STAR 3 Part-Time | STAR 4 Full-Time | STAR 4 Part-Time |
|----------------------------|---------------------|---------------------|---------------------|---------------------|---------------------|---------------------|
| Infant | \$2.00 | \$1.20 | \$8.70 | \$4.15 | \$13.20 | \$5.25 |
| Toddler | \$1.85 | \$1.10 | \$8.45 | \$3.95 | \$12.95 | \$5.00 |
| Preschool to School-Age | \$0.95 | \$0.45 | \$5.90 | \$2.50 | \$9.20 | \$3.20 |

“We participate in CCW, and the [tiered] reimbursement rate helps because we can use the money we get back to help cover teachers’ salaries, materials used in the classrooms for student activities, and paper products. We can also use [the tiered reimbursement rate] to help pay for education training for our staff. The more money we receive, the better training for staff; it helps maintain educated, trained staff.”

- Ashley Garrett, Owl Hill Learning Academy, Lancaster County

The quality add-on rates are only available to programs who accept CCW and have increased their quality rating. There is not a program incentive or financial support for programs as they work to increase quality. While the add-on benefits programs that achieve and maintain high-quality ratings, many STAR 1 programs serve a higher number of children utilizing subsidies, and the reimbursement rate falls

short of covering the cost of care. This means that many programs serving a higher proportion of children using CCW lack the financial resources to invest in improving their quality rating, which is counterproductive to what the research shows about the benefits of high-quality early learning having a greater impact for children from lower-income backgrounds.



“The rates for STAR 2 vs STAR 3 or 4 are very different. If we can make it to 3 or 4 it will be an awesome incentive, but with the frequent changes in the STAR standards and the additional observations and documentations, along with the struggle to find good, quality staff – it is not much of an addition to our operating budget.”

- STAR 2 Early Learning Program Director,
Westmoreland County

The chart below shows the percentage of young children (infants, toddlers, and preschoolers) receiving subsidies at licensed early care and education programs across the state (note: “No STARS Rating” indicates a temporary status for providers whose license is being processed).³¹

| STARS Level (May 2023) | # Children Receiving CCW | % Children Receiving CCW |
|------------------------|--------------------------|--------------------------|
| No STARS Rating | 2,250 | 4.27% |
| STAR 1 | 16,370 | 31.04% |
| STAR 2 | 10,364 | 19.65% |
| STAR 3 | 3,361 | 6.37% |
| STAR 4 | 20,405 | 38.69% |

Across the state, only 45% of children under age five who currently receive CCW are enrolled in a high-quality program. Based on the number of high-quality programs that currently accept CCW across the state, Pennsylvania only has the capacity to serve 46% of children under age five who receive CCW at these programs.³² This means that the majority of young children across the state do not have the opportunity to receive high-quality care through CCW.

Regional and Local Support for Quality

In addition to CCW funds, some local funding has been available to support quality improvement. For example, the Child Care Quality Fund (CCQF) provided grants

to early learning programs located within the City of Pittsburgh to cover the up-front cost of facility and/or program improvements. Expenses associated with quality improvement, such as classroom materials, building safety needs, and professional development, could be covered by the grant.³³ Similar grant opportunities are also available to support quality improvement to early care and education programs in Philadelphia through the Reinvestment Fund.³⁴ While local initiatives can be helpful in supporting high-quality care and education, their capacity and reach is limited.

“It’s often forgotten how tough business stabilization is for programs like ours, so funding that seeks to help level the playing field is very helpful to us because we can’t pass the cost along to our families. The City [of Pittsburgh] investing in early childhood education gave us the boost we needed and gave us the freedom to use other financial resources to retain staff. We didn’t have to choose between paying a fair wage and getting renovations done.”

- Early Learning Program Owner and Child Care Quality Fund Grant Recipient, Pittsburgh



Together with funding support to help programs reach higher quality ratings, all licensed programs are assigned a “Quality Coach” through their local Early Learning Resource Center (ELRC). Quality Coaches are an important resource to early learning programs, as their primary function is to engage with early learning programs on continuous quality improvement.³⁵ Quality Coaches are a critical support for early care and education programs, but they often carry high caseloads of programs across their ELRC region, which may limit their capacity to adequately support programs as they attempt to increase their quality rating.

Early Childhood Educators: The Key Ingredient for Quality

In order to increase and maintain high-quality, programs must also create professional development plans and support their teachers as they progress along the PA Early Childhood Education (ECE) Career Pathways. Professional development and continuing education are critical components of quality, yet this is another area that can lead to costly barriers. Education and Retention Awards (ERAs) were previously provided as a financial award to highly-qualified directors and/or teachers in programs that achieved a STAR 2 or higher rating. ERAs were calculated based on the program’s STARS level as well as the educator’s specialized degree, credentials, and credit-based professional development. Unfortunately, these awards were discontinued in 2020, and no similar program incentives have been offered since, other than the temporary workforce grants provided by one-time federal relief funding. Early childhood teachers may be eligible for financial assistance for continuing their education toward additional degrees and credentials through programs such as Rising STARS Tuition Assistance and T.E.A.C.H. Early Childhood® Pennsylvania Scholarship Program.³⁶

Early care and education providers across the state widely agree that additional program investments and incentives are necessary to hire and retain high-quality staff. With tight operating budgets, programs are often unable to provide staff with annual cost-of-living raises or merit-based bonuses. Many early care and education program directors report that ERAs were once a beneficial program incentive to help acknowledge, reward, and retain high-quality teachers. Early care and education cannot compete with the many other sectors that can pay higher salaries to those with the same credentials. Providers fear that without securing and maintaining additional funding to fairly compensate high-quality teachers, the staffing shortage will only worsen, leading to less high-quality options and more families on waiting lists.

Conclusion

As outlined in this brief, the value of high-quality early learning is clear. Since 2002, Pennsylvania has implemented Keystone STARS to build the state's capacity for high-quality early learning. While some initiatives to support high-quality early learning already exist, the funding is not sufficient. Early care and education programs are understaffed, and high-quality early learning is suffering.

For many programs, the ongoing staffing crisis, high turnover, and inability to pay teachers a livable wage creates a barrier to increasing their quality rating. Additionally, for programs who have achieved high-quality, many are now decreasing how many children they have the capacity to serve, directly impacting access to high-quality early care and education.

There are additional ways that policymakers can provide meaningful support to help more programs reach high-quality, which in return will increase access to quality programming for young children.

Policy Recommendations:

Further research inequity within Keystone STARS to better determine possible future revisions and/or additional supports to help all certified provider types achieve high-quality.

Replace the market rate survey with a cost estimation study using an approved cost modeling tool to ensure Child Care Works' reimbursement rates meet the cost of care. Even with add-ons, the current reimbursement is not sufficient to support quality.

Increase program incentives within Pennsylvania's Quality Rating and Improvement System, Keystone STARS, to expand the number of high-quality providers across the state.

Invest in additional supports and resources, including grants that could provide financial assistance to programs working to increase their quality (vs. relying on inconsistent and insufficient reimbursement rates and add-ons once they achieve quality).

Improve advertising of Keystone STARS so that families can be better educated about the values of Keystone STARS as they are choosing an early learning program for their child(ren).

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