July 10, 2026 Comments:

Trying Together supports high-quality care and education for young children by providing advocacy, community resources, and professional growth opportunities for the needs and rights of children, their families, and the individuals who interact with them.

As a regional early childhood intermediary committed to supporting the adult caregivers in young children's lives **we support the paid parental leave proposal in Allegheny County** – for birth, foster, and adoptive parents. We believe a true continuum of care begins with paid parental leave and continues with the availability of high-quality infant child care.

Child care providers overwhelmingly recognize the value of paid parental leave, however, there are unique operational and financial constraints that make implementing extended paid leave especially challenging. Child care programs operate with limited financial reserves while maintaining strict state-required staff-to-child ratios for the health and safety of young children. When a teacher takes extended leave, providers often must continue paying the employee while simultaneously paying overtime, hiring substitute staff, or reducing classroom capacity if qualified staff cannot be found. Unlike many businesses, child care programs cannot simply increase production or temporarily reduce staffing levels without affecting families' access to care.

Trying Together submits comments in strong support of the Allegheny County Board of Public Health paid parental leave proposal. We've also included important considerations of the child care sector, a critical piece of the infrastructure in supporting babies and families in the county, and the next essential caregiving support following parental leave. Below we highlight the questions and concerns that have risen from the field, offer general policy considerations for the proposal and tangential policy and implementation recommendations, and elevate the systemic challenges impacting families and providers to bring the full context of the child care sector's perspective.

Trying Together supports paid parental leave

We envision a future in which all caregivers feel valued. Parents are children's first and most important teachers. Paid parental leave is critical community infrastructure for families and babies to thrive. The first few months of bonding with a new baby following a birth, adoption, or foster placement are essential to the health and wellness of the child and parents. The transition to parenthood is met with both joyful and challenging moments which requires dedicated time and attention.

The financial aspects of growing a family should not create additional strain and stress during one of the most transformative milestones in life. The establishment of paid parental leave would ensure no parent has to choose between a medical appointment or a missed paycheck, and that they can be present during the most formative weeks without the threat of financial ruin.

We agree with the pursuit of a paid parental leave policy in the county to solve a public health crisis where the data clearly shows infant mortality rates slightly higher than the state with alarming racial disparities. We recognize that only 42 percent of individuals in the county have access to some form of paid parental leave and with maternal complications rising paid family leave isn't just 'nice to have' – it's a health necessity. It provides moms the essential time required for physical recovery and healing following labor and delivery, and in some cases major abdominal surgery. As you know, research shows a decrease in maternal and infant mortality and more time off is linked to longer breastfeeding periods, which strengthens a child's immune system. Furthermore, access to leave is a proven intervention for protecting the mental health of mothers during the postpartum period. In the case of foster placement or adoption, paid parental leave offers additional mental health benefits with time for children to bond and develop trust with new parents.

Quality care for infants begins with parents being able to stay home for the first few months of a child's life. Most child care providers do not enroll infants until they are at least six weeks old. Even then, infant care is the hardest for parents to find. Given the lack of availability of infant care and the constraints on the child care system, paid parental leave for 18 weeks could be transformative for families and caregivers in the county. Creating policies that support parents to be home ensures babies are nurtured and cared for by their primary caregivers in the most rapid period of developmental growth.

Perspective: The Child Care Sector

The child care community is made up of small businesses and non-profits operating in commercial and home-based settings. There are 608 licensed programs in Allegheny County with a diverse range of staffing. For instance, programs operating out of a home may only have one employee in addition to the owner, while some multi-site programs include directors at each location with dozens of employees across sites. Most providers are single-site community based settings with around 15 employees.

Whether for- or non-profit, child care programs have been historically underinvested in leading to limited cash flow, operational challenges, and financial constraints. The largest revenue stream coming into a child care program is tuition from families. Often these families are earlier in their careers at the lower end of their earning potential – this is especially true during the child-bearing years. Parents already pay nearly as much of their mortgage for child care, and programs are hesitant to increase tuition as they know how hard rising costs are hitting families.

Programs may also receive public funding including the Child Care Works (CCW) subsidy. Programs are only reimbursed at the 75th percentile of the region's market rate (average tuition), resulting in a substantial financial deficit.

- The math of child care is broken. Providers intentionally price their tuition costs below the actual cost of care to keep it affordable for families (although tuition still remains a top expense for families). The subsidy reimbursement rates are based on these below-cost tuition prices and fall even shorter of what it actually costs to deliver quality care. Providers are essentially operating at a loss across the board.
- The daily reimbursement rate for an infant in center-based care in Early Learning Resource Center (ELRC) Region 5 (Allegheny County) is $66.33 per day, and it is even lower for home-based providers.

- If a child attends every weekday, the reimbursement rate for one child is roughly $1,459 per month.
- On top of reimbursement rates that don't cover the full cost of care, subsidy payments are sent to programs at the end of the month and only for the days children attend. However, programs must still staff classrooms to meet enrollment numbers regardless of attendance.

Programs typically use 70-80% of their budgets on personnel costs and must maintain adult-to-child ratios for the health and safety licensing regulations for the children in their care. We hear stories of programs investing in teachers for onboarding training and clearances, only to have them not show up on the first day or quit after a week. Some programs support teachers to earn higher credentials only to have them leave for a school district once the degree is completed. Recruitment and retention remain the number one challenge for programs. According to a 2026 Start Strong PA survey, a snapshot of 126 licensed programs in Allegheny County reported 302 unfilled positions.

The most common question we have received from child care providers: How will we pay for this? There is also the concern of how they will pay for a teacher to take paid time off, find a qualified substitute, and pay that person as well. Another concern is the minimum 30 days of employment.

While the child care sector is made up of small businesses with financial constraints including high staff turnover and recruitment and retention struggles, the early childhood educator workforce (like any other workforce) deserves the opportunity to take care of their babies, given they have dedicated their lives to taking care of all or our children.

Policy Considerations & Questions

Based on the feedback and questions from the child care sector, Trying Together recommends the Board of Health and the County review and consider the following recommendations for the policy, communication, and implementation:

- ***Add an element of social or private insurance to the proposal to ensure a funding model and structure.*** Of the 14 mandatory programs in the country, all except one use a social insurance program to implement paid family and medical leave. Thirteen states designed a social insurance policy that funds the benefits through a pooled payroll tax on employees and/or employers. New York, the one exception, uses a private insurance model which requires employers to purchase paid family and medical leave plans from a private insurance market. The state government oversees and regulates the system, determining benefit levels, premium rates, and even has a state-run insurance fund to offer coverage.
  - While we recognize the county is restricted in its ability to create a social insurance design through a new tax, we urge continued advocacy for the passage of the Family Care Act in the state. Senate Bill 906 proposes a state-run insurance program funded by employee payroll deductions capped at no more than 1% of a worker's wage. House Bill 200 mandates that employers cover partial wage replacement for qualified employees, and proposes a grant program to help small businesses offset the costs.
  - ***Create an option for child care programs/ small businesses to buy into private group insurance.*** Whether it's short-term disability and/or parental leave, we recommend reviewing the possibility of a county supported private insurance option for small businesses to pool risk, increase buying power, and reduce administrative burden.

Consider opportunities for further financial support to keep costs low for providers.

- ***Develop and maintain a county child care substitute pool to ensure programs remain staffed.*** Whether a teacher is on vacation or on extended parental leave, programs must remain in classroom ratio to best serve the children in their care. This presents a challenge as providers already struggle to maintain staff. Many states have created child care teacher substitute pools to support programs with placements of needed classroom substitutes. Federal and state regulations define the background checks, clearances, and credentials necessary to care for and teach children in licensed child care programs. A county supported substitute pool that includes a directory of vetted substitutes who meet the requirements would address one of the top concerns for the child care sector.
- ***Increase the 30 day qualification requirement.*** This has raised concerns with providers because they experience high turnover rates with classroom teachers. The onboarding process of new hires in child care requires background checks and clearances which often take more than 30 days. Federal FMLA requires 12 months of employment to qualify. The Family Care Act in both the Senate and House require employment for 18 weeks. Employees typically need to work for at least 90 days to qualify for paid time off in most organizations and companies. Consider altering the proposal to align with one of these examples. This ensures more employee engagement with a stronger likelihood of returning after parental leave.
- ***Consider a scaled approach for implementation.*** Most child care programs are small businesses or non-profits with fewer than 25 employees. A tiered rollout for smaller organizations would provide more time for child care owners and directors to figure out how to make the policy work for their program.
- ***Educate the community on how the county policy will interact with other policies like FMLA and short-term disability.*** There has been confusion as to how the county policy will work with other laws and current practices like FMLA and short-term disability. Whether it's in the amendments or included in communications materials (like FAQs), include how the county paid parental leave policy will be implemented in practice with other existing policies.
- ***Explore a partnership with local philanthropy.*** Allegheny County has an opportunity to demonstrate a new model for policy implementation by convening local philanthropy to establish a temporary Child Care Workforce Stability Fund. Rather than replacing the County's policy, the fund would help providers successfully implement it during the transition period and could focus on the implementation costs programs are least able to absorb like temporary substitute staffing, overtime costs, classroom stabilization, recruitment of temporary educators, and staff retention supports. By bringing together government, philanthropy, and the early childhood community, Allegheny County can create a model for implementing family-supporting policies that strengthens both workers and the essential services on which those workers rely.

Other systemic needs for providers to feel more financially secure and stabilized

Paid family leave and a strong child care system are complementary investments. Families benefit from paid leave immediately after the birth or adoption of a child. They also depend on a stable child care system when they return to work. Supporting child care providers during paid parental leave implementation ensures these two public priorities reinforce one another rather than compete.

As outlined above, the child care sector faces many systemic challenges to operate and invest in their staff. Many providers expressed their support for paid parental leave but are worried about how to pay for it when there are so many financial challenges they are navigating. We are grateful to the Allegheny County Executive for the Forward with Families initiative that also includes investments in child care expansion. We also know there are state and federal policy and system level changes that will improve the financial outlook for programs enabling them to be more stable which include:

- Shift the Child Care Subsidy payments to enrollment-based (rather than attendance) and pay providers at the beginning of the month.
- Raise income limits for child care subsidy and Pre-K Counts to 400% of the Federal Poverty Line, approximately $132,000 for a family of four. This supports low- and middle-income working families that are struggling with affordability on many fronts.
- Fund a study that establishes a new permanent, fair rate-setting system based on the actual cost to provide high-quality care and education.
- Raise state child care subsidy reimbursement rates to match the private market rate to help providers meet rising costs.
- Increase Pre-K Counts and Head Start Supplemental Assistance Program rates to ensure those programs can meet costs and provide appropriate compensation for the teachers.
- Continue investments in the Child Care Staff Recruitment and Retention program to provide bonuses to educators in licensed child care programs.

We must address the perception problem of child care. Child care teachers are not simply "babysitting or watching children." The most rapid period of brain development occurs before the age of five and early experiences lay the foundation for all future learning and development. Young children require educators with complex skill sets and competencies gained through formal education, training, and experience.

We need to create a sustainable pipeline of passionate and dedicated early childhood educators who feel equipped with the knowledge and skills to teach a classroom of young children and elevate how this profession can be a viable and joyful career choice. Ultimately, this means increased compensation and benefits like paid parental leave.

Trying Together enthusiastically supports paid parental leave for 18 weeks. The child care community is not asking whether paid family leave should exist; it is asking how we can collectively implement it in a way that strengthens families without unintentionally weakening the child care system those same families depend upon.

We are committed to supporting the child care sector and families to make this workable – establishing systems that are best for babies, families, and early childhood professionals.

Respectfully submitted,

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