



**Testimony on Universal PreK**  
**Zaina Cahill, Early Childhood Education Policy Director**  
**Children First**  
**March 3, 2026**

My name is Zaina Cahill and I am the Early Childhood Education Policy Director at Children First in Philadelphia. I am a certified teacher, and the parent of a 4-year-old. My teaching and administrative background is in child care, private school, and public school settings.

I want to thank Representative Tarik Khan and Representative Sean Dougherty for convening a hearing on Universal Pre-K. Working parents struggle in Pennsylvania from the second they find out they're pregnant, due to the cost of healthcare, a lack of paid family and medical leave, and the high costs of child care and Pre-K. This is a great opportunity for Pennsylvania to lead for families with young children.

As of 2025, there were 665,910 total children under 5 across the Commonwealth, with 274,450 of them preschool aged, or age 3-5.

The average cost for one child in a preschool classroom in Pennsylvania is just over \$12,000 annually. In my own experience, as the mother of a 4-year-old in a Pre-K classroom in Philadelphia, I currently pay \$15,600 per year for a STAR 1 program, while the high-quality programs in my neighborhood average over \$20,000 per year. For families who are above the income limit for Child Care Works, Early Head Start, Head Start, or Pre-K Counts, this is a bill that often is equivalent to, or exceeds families' highest monthly costs, like rent or mortgage payments. This limits low- and middle-income families' opportunities for economic growth and mobility, as many are forced to make impossible choices. Like choosing between working or staying home to care for children, or choosing between staying at a poverty-level income to maintain benefits or increased wages that would limit their ability to participate in these programs. These costs also contribute to families' decisions about whether to have additional children, or any children at all.

Low- and middle-income families should not have to choose to limit their economic mobility so that they can afford early education for their children. A few years ago, a friend of mine, who qualified for child care subsidy and was able to place her infant son in high quality child care (infant care averages \$13,254 annually in Pennsylvania, and increases based on quality level), was offered a modest raise by her employer.

990 Spring Garden Street  
Suite 600  
Philadelphia, PA 19123

Office 215-563-5848  
Fax 215-563-9442  
Email [info@childrenfirstpa.org](mailto:info@childrenfirstpa.org)

Web: [childrenfirstpa.org](http://childrenfirstpa.org)  
Social: [childrenfirstpa](https://www.facebook.com/childrenfirstpa)

She had to turn it down. This raise would have placed her income above the cut-off for Child Care Works, dramatically increasing her monthly costs beyond their current level, leaving her more financially unstable. So, she opted to forego her raise to maintain her eligibility. Universal Pre-K would take away the financial constraints of the cost of preschool for the families of over 250,000 children across Pennsylvania, promoting increased economic mobility for Pennsylvania's families.

Currently, the commonwealth faces an annual economic loss of \$6.65 billion, with some experts positing that number to be even higher. Some of this is attributed to adults not participating in the workforce to care for young children, including their lost wages and the commonwealth's lost tax revenues. This can be mitigated by ensuring that early childhood education is affordable for working families through strategies like expanding the income threshold for Child Care Works subsidies and eventually moving toward a well-planned universal system for all families to access.

Additionally, Universal Pre-K promotes integration of children in school, regardless of their race or socio-economic status. Pennsylvania's current structure of early childhood funding streams promotes segregation of children by socioeconomic status, which often reflects racial divides. In fact, early childhood education is 20% more racially and ethnically segregated than K-12 schools due to the nature of its funding streams. A small percentage of providers intentionally abate this practice through braided funding, a financial strategy of combining funding sources for early childhood education while still maintaining distinct requirements and reporting for each funding source, but most are not utilizing this practice. Therefore, a system that integrates children, regardless of socioeconomic status, promotes higher social capital and social mobility. Studies show that preschool children in economically mixed classrooms demonstrate more empathy, and show greater growth in language skills, larger test score gains for low-income children, and increased graduation rates. Thus, Universal Pre-K has the potential to create another pathway to economic mobility for low-income families.

This past year, New Mexico became the first state in the country to offer Universal Child Care for children from birth- age 5 across the state, funded through a trust designated for early childhood education.

This was achieved in phases, starting with gradual increases in the eligibility cap for access to child care subsidy from 200% to 400% of the federal poverty level, before fully achieving Universal access. It is important to note that New Mexico has prioritized increased quality in child care throughout this process, in addition to increased access. This ensures that children can reap the proven benefits of high-quality early childhood education, including strong foundational cognitive skills that lead to long-term academic success.

When New Mexico began the exploration of this initiative, Universal Pre-K was the focus; however, they quickly realized that working families' needs were beyond Pre-K, and instead, they needed full day, full year care for children from birth to age 5. For context, traditionally, Pre-K mirrors the time frame of K-12 schooling, lasting approximately 6 hours per day for 10 months of the year, and for many families, this still must be supplemented by wraparound care. Conversely, child care offers hours that extend before and after traditional schooling time, and this care is offered year-round. As such, it would behoove Pennsylvania to explore the full extent of child care needs for families with young children across Pennsylvania.

Here in the Commonwealth, we have a unique opportunity to scale up a Universal Pre-K or child care system, as we have a mixed delivery system for early childhood education. This means that we are not dependent exclusively on schools or private programs to deliver high quality early childhood education, but rather that we have a variety of programs to meet this need- school districts, private providers, non-profits, and a variety of high-quality program types, including family child care providers. This would mean that families would still be able to access pre-K through their preferred or needed type of early childhood provider. Furthermore, Pennsylvania has a Quality Rating and Improvement System (QRIS), Keystone STARS, with high-quality performance standards across domains that are built on the minimum health and safety requirements for child care certification in our state.

In conclusion, I applaud the initiative to take on the work of planning for and moving toward the implementation of universal early childhood systems in our state and support the exploration of how to achieve this moving forward.

#### Resources

1. Bipartisan Policy Center. [National and State Child Care Data Overview](#).
2. Center for American Progress. [The True Cost of High-Quality Child Care Across the United States](#).
3. The Century Foundation. [We Must Seize the Opportunity for Integration in Universal Pre-K](#).
4. Learning Policy Institute, The Century Foundation, New America, & Southern Education Foundation. Webinar: [Fostering Integration in Early Childhood Settings: Implications for Policy](#).
5. New Mexico Early Childhood Education & Care Department. [Universal Child Care Brief](#).
6. Pre-K for PA, Pennsylvania Partnerships for Children, Start Strong PA. [2025 State of Early Care and Education in Pennsylvania: A Sector in Crisis is Impacting Critical Education for Young Children](#).
7. ReadyNation. [\\$6.65 Billion: The Growing, Annual Cost of Pennsylvania's Child Care Crisis. Start Strong PA](#).
8. Start Strong PA. Fact Sheet: "[Facts About Child Care- Pennsylvania](#)".