



Jefferson's Early Childcare Investment Policy Initiative

The Case for Investing in Erie's Childcare System

By Andrea Heberlein

**Executive Director, Pennsylvania Early Learning
Investment Commission (ELIC), and Member of the Early
Childcare Investment Policy Initiative**

March 2024

In February, [Policom](#), an independent economics research firm that specializes in analyzing the dynamics of local and state economies, posted its annual economic strength rankings of the 384 Metropolitan Statistical Areas (MSA) across the United States. Erie ranked No. 371, which is on the lowest tier of economic growth and standard of living. As a state, Pennsylvania didn't fare much better. Sixteen out of Pennsylvania's 18 MSAs have declined in the rankings over the past five years. In light of that, I couldn't help but to reflect on Gov. Josh Shapiro's 2025 fiscal year budget address when he reinforced that it is upon "educational excellence that we will build an economy that is a leader in economic development, innovation, and job creation."

Many people tend to think of educational excellence beginning in kindergarten or even Pre-K, but evidence and the science of brain development tells us that early learning begins at birth. There is an untapped and undebatable opportunity to bolster Erie's and Pennsylvania's economies by intentionally focusing on educational excellence for our youngest citizens. Early learning,

birth through age 5, occurs in quality settings and produces proven benefits for children, families, and employers.

The [Pennsylvania Early Learning Investment Commission](#) (ELIC), for which I serve as the executive director, is composed of senior-level business leaders across the state, including Erie, who understand the business case for increased public-private investments in early learning. Quality childcare provides critical early learning experiences for young children that set them on a strong path for academic and social-emotional success. Quality childcare also greatly increases a parent's ability to actively participate and advance in the workforce. Pennsylvania's communities need to recognize the significant benefits both in the short and long terms to be gained from a robust childcare system.

Stephanie Doliveira, executive vice president for People and Culture for Sheetz, serves alongside Lt. Gov. Austin Davis as co-chair for ELIC. Doliveira is part of a leadership team at Sheetz that acknowledges that investing in its workforce, including working parents, is a key component of its ongoing success. Sheetz has consistently made Fortune's list of the best 100 companies to work for. Among their many family-friendly benefits is an on-site childcare center at its corporate campus in Claysburg, Pennsylvania. Doliveira contends that ["Quality early learning and child care is a business imperative. Quality childcare and early education = stronger economy and stronger workforce!"](#)

On the flip side, we have the data to show what's happening now because of a historically underfunded and undervalued early learning system. [Pennsylvania loses approximately \\$6.65 billion annually in lost earnings, productivity, and tax revenue due to insufficient child care](#) (Ready Nation, PA ELIC, 2023). Childcare providers are leaving the field at an unprecedented rate due to low hourly wages averaging less than \$15 per hour. And Erie has over 740 children under the age of 5 on childcare waiting lists that cannot be served due to the staffing crisis (Northwest Institute of Research, 2024).

ELIC knows that the business community has an important role in advancing quality childcare in Pennsylvania's counties and through statewide efforts. When the business community understands the immediate and future impact that childcare has on Pennsylvania's economy and on their own bottom line, they are more likely to be vested and engaged in system-change solutions and to implement new benefits, strategies, and services within their own companies. It is also important to note that employers who offer childcare supports have distinct hiring and retention advantages over their competitors.

Statewide, regional, and local economic growth is dependent upon business growth and business growth is dependent upon the availability of a skilled workforce. Over the past decade, [Erie County's population has decreased 3.5%](#) while Pennsylvania's population growth rate continues its downward trend

(Center for Rural PA, 2024). A contributing factor is domestic outmigration, when residents leave Pennsylvania to live and work in another state. [In 2023, nearly 25,000 Pennsylvanians moved out of state; 73% of whom were young, working age adults](#) (Commonwealth Foundation, 2024). Reasons for outmigration include seeking states with lower cost of living, lower taxes, and better jobs and opportunities. Consider that childcare costs for one preschool age child in Erie are close to \$17,000 per year. Imagine the cost savings to families that live in states embracing universal pre-k, like New York, Colorado, New Jersey, and Washington, D.C. Now imagine how a strong, affordable, quality childcare system has the potential to incentivize workers to stay and even move into Pennsylvania.

Erie has a tremendous opportunity to reverse the city's downward trajectory of economic growth and standard of living by directing strategic resources to early education through quality child care. A thoughtful strategy encompasses the critical childcare needs in Erie today and, importantly, plans for the county's vibrant future.

Now is the time to have Erie's businesses, economists, educators, retailers, manufacturers, tech, agriculture, and nonprofit leaders, and parents and caregivers agree that an economic strength rating of 371 out of 384 is not acceptable. Investing in a quality childcare system is a "win-win-win-win" for children, working families, employers, and Erie's economy.

[Subscribe to JES Publications Emails!](#)

[Subscribe to Book Notes Emails!](#)

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Andrea Heberlein is a member of the Early Childcare Investment Policy Initiative and executive director of the Pennsylvania Early Learning Investment Commission (ELIC). The commission has 50 members, all senior business leaders from across the state who represent many of Pennsylvania's leading industries. It informs thousands of business and civic leaders annually about the critical importance of preparing all young children with the knowledge and skills required for success.

In Case You Missed It

[“Childcare Experts Present High Stakes, Make Case for Growing Erie, Pennsylvania’s Economy by Nurturing Our Children”](#) written by **Court Gould**

[The Wider World | Competition vs Conflict in a Complex World](#) written by President of DC Analytics **Diane Chido**

[Truth in Love | Cognitive Conception: When Men Become Fathers](#) written by Jefferson Scholar-in-Residence **Dr. Parris J. Baker**

[Be Well | Supercharge Brown Fat to Burn Calories](#) written by health and wellness expert **Debbie DeAngelo**

[Classic Book Notes #98 | Great Poems About Spring \(Part One\)](#) written by Jefferson Scholar-in-Residence **Dr. Andrew Roth**

[On the Waterfront | Our Neighbor Was a Yacht: Popular Mechanics Dreams](#) written by Jefferson Scholar-in-Residence **Dr. David Frew**

