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## Jefferson's Early Childcare Investment Policy Initiative

### Workforce Behind the Workforce: Early Child Care Conference in Erie

By Court Gould  
April 2024

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On Saturday, April 6, Tiffany L. LaVette produced an informative HER P.O.W.E.R. conference – the 10th annual installment. This year's event, titled “It Takes a Village,” focused on Erie, Pennsylvania's child-care community.

The day was programmed with breakout sessions and an inspiring plenary address by Shante' Brown, deputy secretary of the Pennsylvania [Office of Child Development and Early Learning](#) (OCDEL). This office reports to both the PA Departments of Human Services and the Department of Education. OCDEL strives to build a strong foundation for children, starting at birth through age 5. The success of its efforts today will translate into a brighter tomorrow, with citizens who are strong, independent, and well-prepared for the future.

During her inspiring remarks, Brown noted that women often represent the majority in the child-care business. “They work many long hours without rest,” she told the audience. “They make sacrifices opening their facilities early and closing them late because they are the workforce behind the workforce. Without them people cannot go to work.”

Brown added that, “Child care and early learning providers are vital to the community. Despite the sacrifices being made every day, wages for child-care

providers remain low. There is still a gap between our subsidy and our private pay rates, and we continue to fight for wage and rate increases for this sector even though when the world stopped (Covid-19 pandemic) child-care workers kept going.”

Brown compelled the crowd to unite to tell the appropriate stories about early learning in Pennsylvania – to share the benefits and share the sacrifices.

As part of the conference, the [Early Childcare Investment Policy Initiative](#) (ECIPI) provided a panel discussion. From the conversation I moderated, here are several key takeaways that the policy experts noted:

- The first 1,000 plus days (birth to 3 years) of human development casts the die such that school really begins at birth.
- Child-care workers are professional teachers, not babysitters. They are child developers. The majority of individuals working in the child-care industry are credentialed, degreed, and certified teachers.
- Having access to affordable child care often determines if a parent goes to work or stays home to care for children.
- [Child care is economic development](#) – near and long term. It is on par with economic infrastructure, such as broadband Internet and public transportation.
- According to the [Pennsylvania Partnerships for Children](#), 70% of the city of Erie's infants and toddlers live in households that are below 200% of the poverty rate (approximately double that of Pennsylvania at 35.5% and the nation at 38%). This suggests the city of Erie's parents of infants and toddlers are working at similar rates but are not receiving commensurate rates of compensation to pull them out of the low-income bracket.
- Today's infants and toddlers are perceived to be more developmentally challenged than previous generations due to the strain on families, community, and economy stemming from the pandemic and intensified poverty in Erie.

The topic of childhood trauma was the focus of breakout sessions led by Dr. Adrienne Dixon. Upon exploring the science and sociology of resilience in children, Dixon noted that while our “village” of supports has shrunk, “Among protective factors, one strong relationship with a parent or caregiver is extremely powerful for a child.” She said children need safety (emotional and physical) and secure relationships that are genuine, authentic, and reflect the stability of caregivers. “If someone is struggling, then the system is struggling.”

Tiffany LaVette, host of the conference, owner of ABC Child Care, and policy expert participating in the ECIPI, spoke to current research she is conducting to

evaluate the number of BIPOC child-care providers and the certified quality levels of their centers compared to other racial communities. The initiative, which is being advanced in partnership with the [Early Learning Resource Center – Region 1](#) (ELRC headquartered in Erie) is aimed to secure valid evidence to support the case for interventions to increase the supply of quality child care owned and operated by people of color in particular in service of the BIPOC demographic in areas known as child-care deserts.

Elana Como, who leads the ELRC Region 1 and is a policy expert participating in the ECIPI, noted that the staffing crisis caused by low rates of compensation for child-care workers is directly causing too many infants and toddlers to be turned away from care and in turn is placing undue strain on care providers, families, and employers who depend on working parents. She added that even families who are eligible for partial state subsidy for their children to attend licensed child-care programs cannot take advantage of the financial support due to lack of available slots among providers.

Such hardship is felt even more deeply by parents who work second or third shifts as the scarcity is elevated after hours. A hitch in the subsidy eligibility system is that the well-intended state requirement that parents be working or in workforce training creates a Catch-22. Without child care, it is hard to engage in either. The state does have workarounds to ease the transition for parents but it is complex and not widely known.

Rina Irwin, the CEO of Child Development Centers (CDC), Inc. and another policy expert participating in the ECIPI, is the Head Start grantee for Erie. CDC has 659 children in that program. She reports that 13% of the children in their care have severe tooth decay. In response to the elevated rate of childhood trauma, CDC maintains a full medical team to assess and care for all enrolled children. The innovative program also includes three healthy hot meals a day. “We know our children will not be able to learn if they are in pain from ailments or empty bellies,” Irwin told attendees.

LaVette summarized the community awakening to the imperative of child care in reprising the economic epiphany during the pandemic. “When the pandemic hit, when everything got shut down, it might have been only 24 hours for the governor to issue a waiver to early child-care providers to stay open,” she said. “How quickly it was realized that if the child-care centers closed, then everything comes to a standstill. None of our nurses, our doctors, our machine operators, our drivers, that is, the essential workers who depend on child care for their children could get to work.” The pandemic opened eyes to just how important child-care providers and workers are to the overall economy.

The tenor of the conference (of which the Jefferson Educational Society was a sponsor) was well-summarized in pronouncement by a member of the audience – that if children in a community are thriving, then the community is going to thrive, and people will want to move here. The commentary continued with the sentiment that if children are put first, then everything else will fall into place. And that Erie can win the competition for growth if every infant and toddler has access to affordable, quality child care. Employers will flock to Erie.

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#### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

A featured JES contributor, Gould served 20 years as founding executive director of Sustainable Pittsburgh. After three years with the Erie Community Foundation as vice president of Community Impact, he is a sustainable solutions consultant and certified professional coach.

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