

Raising the Next Generation

Realities of the
Child Care Landscape
in Erie County



Submitted by:
2023 Jefferson
Civic Leadership
Academy

Executive Summary

The 2023 Jefferson Civic Leadership Academy (JCLA) 2023 cohort explored and analyzed Erie County, Pennsylvania’s resources for raising the next generation through its child-care infrastructure. Starting in June 2023, the JCLA cohort traveled across Erie County – in the northwestern corner of the state and home to about 267,000 residents – to learn the current state of child care in the county, as well as the success created and challenges faced by municipalities. Each member of the cohort assisted in narrowing the project focus from the overall raising of children to how infants and toddlers are cared for and are afforded the best chance of success in Erie County. Under the wide range of child care, the cohort identified four categories that intersect and connect at various levels to provide actionable data on this topic. These categories are:

- The cost of center-based child care within Erie County for children from birth to 3 years old. Center-based child care is provided in a non-home setting, in a facility with multiple and non-related children.
- Define, find, and access quality child-care services in Erie County.
- Identify training methods, workforce development, and retention for child-care workers.
- Examine the supply and demand for child-care services in Erie County.

After researching these areas for seven months, the cohort concludes that Erie County is on the brink of a child-care crisis that has only been delayed by declining population numbers coupled with a lower birth rate – factors that in themselves are cause for concern. This crisis is reflected by the mass drop in the supply of child-care options in Erie County, a smaller number of providers, and more home providers leaving the market. A drop in supply would further strain larger providers, increase waiting lists, and drive up already record high prices.

While these categories are the most important in the short and medium terms, child care is a complex subject bursting with cultural, generational, economic, political, and social differences that also prompt often different understanding of the term “child care.” The 2023 JCLA cohort has chosen to define child care as the following: the systemic processes of providing basic needs, (e.g., food, shelter, entertainment) and educational development to those under 12 in a home or non-home setting.

Since the Covid-19 pandemic, additional attention has been paid to child-care systems and the industry providing care to millions of children across the nation. For almost three years, parents and caregivers had to rely on their own support networks, or providers that remained open, to manage the care of their children. Work is being done to strengthen and expand child-care systems on international, national, state, and local levels, but a “one size fits all” plan will not work for the issues facing child care in the United States, Pennsylvania, or Erie County.

This project intends to provide targeted recommendations to ensure a stable, robust, and accessible child-care system for the residents of Erie County in the decades to come. After reading this report, a reader should be able to see the current state of child care in Erie County, which is currently on par with national standards, barriers to entry for parents, and barriers for providers to offer care. They should have a deeper understanding of how intergenerational cooperation and common sense can raise future generations to reach and achieve more than those who preceded them.

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I. Introduction

Amid the picturesque landscapes of rolling farms and vineyards and nearly 50 miles of Great Lakes waterfront coupled with denser population centers strewn throughout, a portrait of contract and connection in Erie County, Pennsylvania, exists and defines a distinctive region. Western Erie County features sweeping wooded areas bisected by highways leading to tight knit communities like Millcreek, Albion, Fairview, Girard, and Edinboro. Eastern Erie County presents a contrast in its rolling hills and farms of all sizes producing various crops that fuel the region's 200-plus-year agricultural history. Dotted with municipalities of varying sizes, all are connected by roots deep in the rich coastal soils of the county. In the north of the county is Erie – the county seat, largest city in the county, Pennsylvania's port on the Great Lakes, and home to nearly 100,000 residents. Despite the distances between each area and their demographics, a narrative unfolds within its neighborhoods – one that involves the development of its youngest residents.

In a county largely defined by its transition from a 20th century industrial economy to an emerging technology-driven manufacturing and service hub, Erie County's future rests first in the hands of child-care providers. These providers, the backbone of early childhood education, are members of a complex system of licensing, costs, supply and demand, and cultural expectations of the American family. This became clearly apparent with the abrupt closure of childcare centers across the state during the Covid-19 pandemic, a period that showed many the stark divide between their ideas of how a region worked and the reality of how neglect can cause any system to fail.

This essay tries to show both the strengths and challenges facing the child-care system, and to propose evidence-based recommendations to improve it.

II. Methodology and Limitations

A. Methodology

Before beginning research on the project, the JCLA cohort designed a mixed methodology for research and defined common terms based on the “Merriam-Webster Revised Edition 2022” dictionary and from experts in the child-care field:

- *Child care*: The care of children by a day-care center, babysitter, or other provider while parents are working.
- *Early Childhood Education*: informal and formal teaching of children from birth to 8 years old.
- *Child Care Center or Center-Based Child Care*: Care and education provided to more than seven children in a center that is certified by the Pennsylvania Office of Child Development and Early Learning (OCDEL).
- *Home-Based Child Care or Family Child-Care Homes*: One caregiver who provides care and education for three to six children who are not related to them in a home setting that is certified by OCDEL.
- *Group Child-Care Homes*: Care and education provided for up to 12 children in a home (or commercial setting) that is certified by OCDEL.
- *Non-traditional Child Care (NTCC)*: Childcare for parents and guardians working uncommon working hours or overnight care.
- *Pennsylvania Keystone Stars*: A responsive system to improve, support, and recognize the continuous quality improvement efforts of early learning programs in Pennsylvania with a five-star rating system.
- *Child Care Desert*: Occurs when there are over three times as many children as licensed child-care slots in an area.
- *Infant*: a child in the first months of life usually between birth and 1 year old.
- *Toddler*: a young child usually between 1 and 3 years old.
- *Older Children*: A young child usually age 3 to 10 years old.

Non-traditional Child Care and *Child-Care Desert* are relatively new terms,¹ which provide a look at the evolution of child care in American society and the impacts on raising children. As noted, it can be difficult to agree upon common definitions for emergent industry-specific terms, such as *child-care desert* and *non-traditional child care*, in general. That was no different among advocates, government agencies, and research sources. The cohort chose to use the most universally agreed upon definitions of each term for the purpose of this project. Many additional terms in the child-care industry exist; however, given the limited geographic scope and resources of this project, they are ignored here.

The term “child care” has a broad definition, meaning different things to different people. It can mean both care provided to children in a professional setting, as well as care provided in the home. Home-based child care is estimated to care for 6.5 million children in the United States as of 2019. While home-based child care is a common option, the number of children that are cared for by families, friends, and neighbors is not clear. For the purpose of this paper, child care is based on the setting in which it is provided: home-based and center-based.

Figure one shows the estimated April 2022 population demographics for Erie County, and the approximate number of children under 5 in households.²

Population Estimates, July 1, 2022 (V2022)	267,689
Population estimates base, April 1, 2020 (V2022)	270,869
Population, percent change - April 1, 2020 (estimates base) to July 1, 2022 (V2022)	-1.20%
Population, Census, April 1, 2020	270,876
Population, Census, April 1, 2010	280,566
Persons under 5 years, percent	5.10%
Persons under 18 years, percent	20.60%

Figure 1: U.S. Census Bureau data on population demographics in Erie County

To gain a thorough understanding of the topic areas, the cohort gathered qualitative and quantitative data from a wide range of sources, both primary and secondary, which informed the research and data collection process. Primary sources include site visits and lectures, as well as interviews with experts in the field of child development, child care, and public policy. Literature from secondary sources, such as government agencies, think tanks, academic studies, and demographic sets, were also reviewed.

B. Limitations

The primary limitations of this project’s methodology are outreach and county- and municipal-level research on topic areas. Due to ethical concerns and limited capacity, the cohort chose not to conduct or incorporate surveys of the region. Cohort members were able to interview four dozen individuals between JES-sponsored events and primary research efforts. Given additional time and resources, these methodologies could produce further focused and detailed data on these issues.

Due to the academic makeup of the 2023 JCLA cohort, we were unable to conduct in-depth primary research with parents who engage with the child-care system as customers. Information on parent usage of child care was pulled from secondary sources. *Figure 2* provides a list of primary research interviews conducted by the cohort.

Session Dates	Location(s)	Speaker Name and Title
June 5 and 6, 2023	Harrisburg	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Judge Victor Stabile, PA Superior Court ● Ryan Bizzarro, PA House of Representatives, 3rd District ● Patrick Harkins, PA House of Representatives, 1st District ● Robert Merski, PA House of Representatives, 2nd District
June 22, 2023	Erie County (History)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Pat Cuneo, director of Publications at the Jefferson Educational Society ● Judy Lynch, former Erie County executive and scholar-in-residence at Jefferson Educational Society
July 20, 2023	Erie County (Economy)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Kenneth Louie, director of the Economic Research Institute of Erie ● Perry Wood, Erie County Gaming Revenue Authority executive director
August 17, 2023	Erie’s Urban Core - Millcreek and Harborcreek townships	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Kim Clear, Millcreek Township supervisor ● Dean Pepicello, Harborcreek Township supervisor

		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● United Way of Erie County
September 7, 2023	Erie County (Government)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Brenton Davis, Erie County executive ● Lana Rees, Erie County Department of Human Services, Office of Children and Youth ● Judge John Trucilla, Erie County Court of Common Pleas, 6th Judicial District
September 22, 2023	Erie County	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Anna Schaack, Northwest Institute of Research ● Chuck Lytle, Early Learning Resource Center provider quality care manager
September 27, 2023	Eastern Erie County - City of Corry, Union City and North East boroughs	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Patrick Gehrlein, North East Borough manager ● David Robinson, Union City Family Support Center, board of directors ● Matthew Platz, Corry Higher Educational Council executive director
October 6, 2023	Erie County	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Emily McKain, program manager, JumpStart, University of Pittsburgh
October 26, 2023	Erie County	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Melissa Navatmack, executive director of Mercyhurst Child Learning Center ● Tiffany Ciminella, Associate Director of

		Mercyhurst Child Learning Center
November 16, 2023	East Erie County - Albion Borough & Fairview Township	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Albion State Correctional Institution Staff ● Fairview Township
December 7, 2023	Erie County - City of Erie	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Rina Irwin, CEO of Child Development Centers ● Susannah Faulkner, City Council Member ● Emily Fetchko, Erie Downtown Partnership ● Mayor Joseph Schember, City of Erie

Figure 2: Primary research interviews from which qualitative data was gathered

Erie County has 38 municipalities and over 260,000 residents. The JCLA cohort met with representatives of nine municipalities, three members of the state House of Representatives, one state senator, and several Erie County government officials. These meetings and interviews provided perspectives on policy development in Pennsylvania and informed the cohort of the intricacies of the public policy process.

III. Cost of Child Care

A. Raising Costs: A nationwide trend affecting Erie County

Center-based child care features classrooms organized by age, ensuring that infants, toddlers, preschoolers, and school-age children receive age-appropriate education and care. Each classroom has different needs, regulated ratios of caregivers to children, and varies in cost based on those needs.

The cost of center-based child care is a significant concern, both nationally and in Erie County. Between 2018 and 2022, the annual value of earnings, productivity, and revenue lost due to a lack of child care options rose from \$57 billion to over \$122 billion. In Pennsylvania, the loss was estimated to be \$4.5 billion in economic impact in this same time period.³ Child-care costs have risen to historic highs for several reasons, such as increased prices for basic goods and services due to inflation. At the same time, the industry has experienced a steep decline in supply with a rising demand and has faced mass closures of facilities during the Covid-19 pandemic and a shrinking child-care workforce overall.

The situation has placed many parents in a position of deciding between work or staying home to provide home-based child care – a factor that disproportionately affects mothers. A 2021 study from the Data Research Firm Clutch, found that mothers spent an average of 7.1 hours per day caring for their children, in addition to their jobs, compared to 4.9 hours for fathers. [000]

The United States Department of Health and Human Services provides guidelines of the average household spending 7 percent of its annual income on child care to be considered affordable.⁴⁵⁶ The cost of child care helps provide a number of other benefits to a parent or guardian, such as knowing their child has a secure facility, quality staff to provide care and education, and is given nutritious meals. According to the U.S. Department of Labor, the average annual cost for center-based child care for an infant is a staggering \$28,767 in the United States, while the average real median income for a combined household in 2022 was \$74,580.⁷ Given those figures, the average American family is spending 38.5% of its yearly income on child care in a center-based environment.

The numbers are somewhat more favorable in Erie County but still substantial, with average cost per year at \$15,080 for center-based care and \$12,241 for home-based care. Looking at a wider picture, the U.S. Department of Labor lists the median family income in Erie County at \$63,909, meaning the average family spends 16.3% of its yearly income on center-focused child care, compared to 12.2% of its yearly income on home-based care. It should be noted that large metropolitan areas can cause the nationwide averages to be higher than averages in smaller metropolitan areas, such as Erie County and the city of Erie.

Bright Wheel, a child-care center management software, shows the average cost in areas of the United States. In Los Angeles, for example, the average child-care costs range from \$268 to \$4,220 per month.⁸ In Philadelphia, monthly care the cost ranges from \$467 to \$2,271.⁹ Lower cost of living, a smaller and decreasing population, and a healthy demand have kept the cost in Erie County lower than the national average, but these are variable, not fixed, numbers and circumstances.

B. Cost Factors: Inflation, Staffing, and Lacking Growth

Compounding the cost issue is the makeup of the industry, which consists primarily of small, single-location businesses that rely on private financing.¹⁰ So it is in Erie County, based on the number of licensed child-care centers accepting new clients and the unknown number of unlicensed day-care operations in the county. According to the Pennsylvania Department of Health and Human Services, there were 133 licensed child-care facilities in Erie County as of October 2023, with a maximum capacity of 10,267 children ranging in age from 1 month to 15 years¹¹. Of the 133 child-care providers, both center- and home-based operations, only three are actively enrolling new children. Even at full capacity, it is estimated there are nearly 3,000 children whose parents are unable to access child-care services from a licensed provider. As of the publishing of this paper, all child-care options are privately owned in Erie County.

Additionally, costs have been driven up by a lack of adequate staffing, forcing child-care providers to prioritize slots for lower cost and higher profit care options, typically children over the age of 5, primarily because fewer staff are required to serve older children. A 2022 survey study by the Penn State Harrisburg Institute of State and Regional Affairs of over 6,600 child-care providers in Pennsylvania found that 54.1% of home- and center-based operations had unfilled staff positions, which reduced the number of children they could receive.¹² The cohort was unable to conduct a large-scale survey of Erie County child-care providers to determine how staff vacancies have impacted their capacity, but statewide evidence strongly suggests this trend is true in Erie County.

In the same study, it was found the average cost of care for all ages of children was \$290 per week per child, with higher quality programs averaging \$390 per week per child. It was also found that care for infants was, on average, 30% higher than all other age groups due to state mandated worker-to-children ratios.¹³

Figure 3 shows these ratios. To place in perspective, if a child-care provider wants to have five infants in one room, they need two staff members, which makes taking higher-cost children cost prohibitive without a full-sized group. Pennsylvania operates an “opt-in” quality care program, meaning child-care providers are not required to participate, but participation does offer advantages. Providers that participate in Keystone STARS (Standards, Training/Professional Development, Assistance, Resources, and Supports) receive higher reimbursement rates because

they meet higher standards for care and provide early childhood development. The Keystone STARS program reflects research-based practices that have been shown to provide positive outcomes for childhood education. Child-care providers are ranked from one to four stars, with a higher star rating yielding a higher reimbursement rate.¹⁴

Child Age	Staff	Children	Maximum Group Size	Staff Required for the Maximum Group Size
Infant, 0 - 1 year	1	4	12	3
Young Toddler, 1-2 years	1	5	12	3
Older Toddler, 2-3 Years	1	6	12	2
Preschool, 3 years - K	1	10	12	2
Young School Age, K - 4th Grade	1	12	12	1
Older School Age, 4th grade to 15 years	1	15	15	1

Figure 3 shows child-to-staff ratios as regulated by Pennsylvania

The rising cost of child care has coincided with a variety of other factors, such as inflation in the aftermath of the pandemic, lower or stagnant wages, and increasingly limited spots in child-care programs. Data released by the U.S. Bureau of Economic Analysis found that real income rose 5.6% during 2021 in Erie County, while inflation rose 7.1%. Additionally, Erie County real income numbers are approximately 15% lower than the national average.¹⁵

C. Past, Present, and Future

The impact of the Covid-19 pandemic cannot be underestimated in driving prices and enrollments in the child-care industry. Child-care centers, which often operate with slim profit margins, were significantly affected by mandated closures that lasted for over 90 days. Research conducted by the Institute of State and Regional Affairs at Penn State Harrisburg and the Consortium for Policy Research in Education at the University of Pennsylvania estimated that in 2020, 4% of all childcare centers in Pennsylvania were permanently shuttered.

Further, between April and May 2020, nearly a quarter of all child-care providers – whether center-based, family-based, or home-based – experienced a complete loss of revenue. A sudden and rapid change in care models for parents from 2020 to 2022 resulted in parents seeking non-traditional care options, in lieu of traditional center-based child care. Additionally, about 30% of children under 6 in the United States live with parents who work non-traditional hours, nights, rotating shifts, or weekends,¹⁶ and less than 13% of child-care centers in Pennsylvania offer non-traditional hours.¹⁷ Most often, those working non-traditional hours live at or below the poverty line, are more likely to be minorities, and head single-parent households.¹⁸

The cost of child care has been an enduring struggle for middle- and lower-income families in the United States since the 1970s, when Americans first saw their standard of living challenged by inflation and the rise of a globalizing economy. According to the National Bureau of Economic Research, the 1970s were marked by an average inflation rate of 6.8% due to raising costs of food prices, energy prices, and the end of wage-price controls.¹⁹ Some parallels from the '70s can be seen in the 2020s, though the current era is certainly nothing like the 16 percent interest rate on real estate seen in the late 1970s and early 1980s.

A new system almost emerged in the early 1970s. In 1971, Congress drafted the Economic Opportunity Amendments, which included the Comprehensive Child Development Act that would have implemented a multibillion-dollar national day-care system modeled after the Department of Defense's Military Child Care program. A bipartisan congressional group created the act to provide working parents access to affordable child care, and thus reduce reliance on social assistance programs, such as food stamps, social security, and tax programs.²⁰ After passing both the Senate and House in five days with a majority of both parties supporting it, the Economic Opportunity Amendments were vetoed by then-President Richard Nixon, citing his objection with the CCA. Nixon saw the idea of a federally run, subsidized day-care system too close to socialist countries' policies of child care, claiming that a national day-care system had "family-weakening implications."²¹

With the CCA vetoed and Congress unable to gain a super majority to override it, a well-funded, sustainable, and accessible nationwide child-care system never materialized. But since then, states and the federal government have stepped into the void to provide some affordable child-care options. In Pennsylvania, the Child Care Works program is a collaboration of federal and state funds that provides direct payments to child-care providers for parents who meet income, work, and/or education guidelines. In Erie County, about 4,637 children are not served by CCW, according to Start Strong PA, even though their families are eligible for funding.²² Families of a certain size are eligible when they meet income levels and are either working 20 hours per week or are enrolled in a training program/school at least 10 hours a week.

About 70% of child-care providers participate in CCW, and the provider is directly reimbursed for the care provided. Eligible parents also receive a co-pay amount to make up the difference in the cost of care, ranging from \$5 to \$50 per day.

On the surface, CCW looks to be the perfect program to help parents meet the needs of working and raising a family. However, recent years have yielded statistics that show weaknesses in CCW as some complain it is harder to access and manage than handling normal out-of-pocket expenses.²³ Spotlight PA reported in March 2022 that enrollment in CCW was down by 25,000 children statewide. Enrollment dropped from 114,000 in March 2020, to 89,000 in March 2022 – a 22% decline.²⁴ Then-Pennsylvania Gov. Tom Wolf provided hundreds of millions in additional funding, increased reimbursement rates for providers twice in a one-year period, as well as lowered co-pays, but enrollment has not shown signs of improvement.

Research published by the Pennsylvania Early Learning Investment Commission in March 2023 found that 60% of parents in Pennsylvania reported being late for work or missing work due to a lack of child care. Additionally, 27% reported quitting their job to care for their child. Even with an established system, issues remain that have at best forestalled a crisis in Pennsylvania's child-care system, Erie County included. In October 2023, Melissa Navatmack, executive director of the Mercyhurst Child Learning Center, told the cohort that the number of children receiving assistance in the center has dropped significantly in recent months. With what was once almost 50% of the children they service receiving ELRC, they are now caring only for 15 children on subsidized tuition.²⁵

A recent survey demonstrated that 45% of mothers with children 5 and under who left the workforce during the Covid-19 pandemic cited child care as a major reason for their departure. Just 14% of fathers reported the same. Additionally, 24% of the mothers with children 5 and under said they considered reducing their hours or moving to a part-time schedule, compared with 18 percent of the fathers.

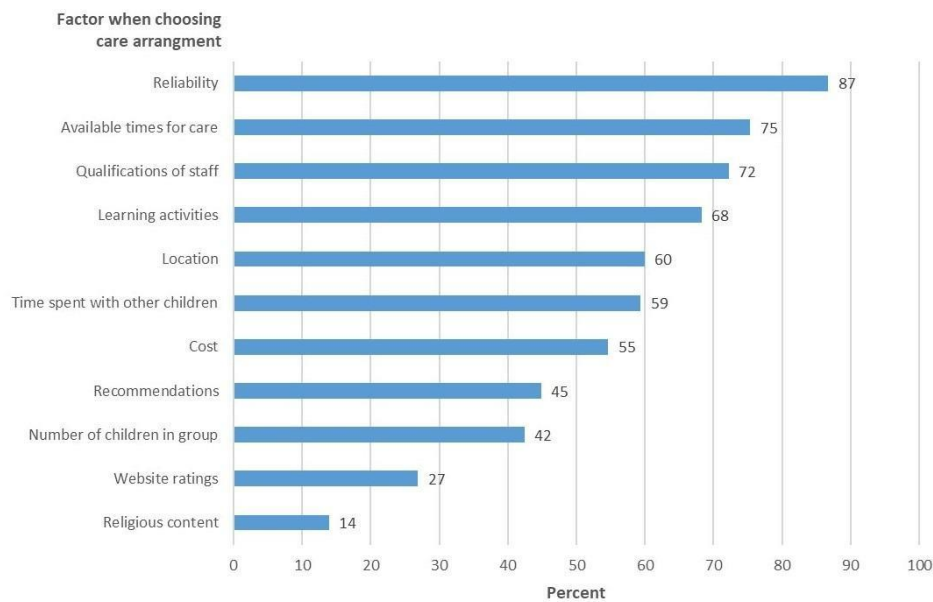


Figure 4: Among children 5 and under who were not yet in kindergarten and were in at least one weekly care arrangement, percentage whose parents indicated that the factor was “very important” when choosing child’s care arrangement. From the National Center for Education Statistics²⁶

Three major factors have contributed to rising costs. First, state subsidies from CCW have not kept pace with the actual costs, nor do they accurately reflect the current state of needs. As Rina Irwin, chief executive of the Child Care Development Centers, stated, “Subsidy rates need to increase or smaller providers will be faced with tough choices to stay open.”

Irwin elaborated on how her organization, which provides care to over 2,000 children in Erie, Crawford, and Venango counties, has to worry about interfering with revenue streams from the state and federal programs. According to the 2022 Pennsylvania Department of Health and Human Services Market Rate Survey, the average reimbursement for a child-care provider in northwestern Pennsylvania ranges from \$24 to \$40 per day, while the average cost to provide care is \$50 per day.²⁷

State Rep. Pat Harkins (D-1st Dist.) discussed some of the funding ideas the House has explored to create a line item in the budget establishing a reliable funding stream, such as taxing tavern gaming machines or placing fees on purchases at the county level with assistance from county government. Additionally, Harkins said if Pennsylvania would ever adopt universal Pre-K, it would take, in his estimation, cooperative efforts from the House, Senate, and Shapiro administration.²⁸

Second, state and federal child-care funding programs seem to be competing with one another and often forcing providers to pick one stream over the other. For example, the state-funded Pre-

K Counts program provides reimbursements to child-care providers for parents that are at 0% to 100%²⁹ of the poverty rate, while federal programs, such as Head Start, provide reimbursement to child-care providers for parents that are at 131% to 300%³⁰ of the federal poverty guidelines. The gap between Pre-K Counts and Head Start has burdened child-care providers forced to choose one funding stream over the other, and if they do not fill slots for either program, a provider is required to return funds.³¹

Third, parents and providers have been affected by rising costs on basic goods. While the United States was least affected by worldwide inflation in the wake of the Covid-19 Pandemic and global instability,³² price increases varied widely by region in the United States. For providers, inflation, especially in 2022, affected food prices and real wages for employees, with an average increase in food costs and wage costs ranging from 3.2% to 10% depending on food stuff.

Smaller providers were hit most by this situation.³³ Inflationary increases led to increasing costs of child care, as noted by the Washington Center for Equitable Growth, which published research showing child-care costs rising to their highest rates in 30 years, while wage increases did not keep pace. A mix of inflation, increased child-care costs, and lagging wages have forced parents to examine how they use child care and providers to search for every penny of savings they can find to stay profitable.

IV. Retention

In "Worthy Work, STILL Unlivable Wages: The Early Childhood Workforce 25 Years after the National Childcare Staffing Study,"³⁴ Marcy Whitebook highlights key problems for retention and stability in the child-care industry: teachers' education demands, wages, and turnover. Despite being published in 2014, its findings resonate in today's industry as the child-care industry continues to struggle with pay, education, and burnout.

Over the past 50 years, a significant change in child-care employment is the rising need for post-secondary education. Child-care workers are no longer just caregivers, but also teachers. To remain competitive and meet funding requirements, providers increasingly require employees to have post-secondary degrees. Yet, current pay rates for child-care workers do not reflect the acquired education.

In Pennsylvania, the average wage for a child-care worker ranges from \$10.04 to \$17.09 per hour, and in Erie, it is between \$9.49 and \$14.30.³⁵ Despite the rising demand for post-secondary education, these wages place child-care workers just below the poverty line, contributing to persistent staffing shortages and operational challenges.

The disparity is underscored by "O*net information,"³⁶ which reveals that preschool teachers earn \$14.67 on average in Pennsylvania, and child-care workers earn \$12.57, while the median hourly wage for all occupations in the state was \$18.99 in 2019. High costs for schooling and lower wages create a challenging business model for child-care providers.



Figure 5: Average Wages for Child-Care workers in 2022, according to O Net

"Pennsylvania's Child-care and Staffing Crisis, By the Numbers" (Nov, 2021)³⁷ highlights a 5% decrease in nonfarm jobs and an 8.5% decline in child-care jobs in Pennsylvania between October 2019 and October 2021. Child-care providers, struggling to meet current demands, have

made difficult choices, such as closing classrooms, reducing operating hours, and serving fewer children. A survey of over 1,100 childcare providers revealed nearly 26,000 children on waiting lists, revealing the urgent need to address workforce shortages in the child-care sector.

Examining the landscape of early childhood education reveals that the qualifications and financial realities for professionals in this field are multilayered, and often present significant challenges. The spectrum of qualifications, ranging from a high school diploma to a master's degree, reflects the diverse pathways individuals take to contribute to the growth and development of children. Qualifications vary depending on what services a child-care provider offers, and state and federal funding streams.

In a search on the Indeed job site, it is evident that child-care workers in the local market need at least a Child Development Associate (CDA) degree. All jobs listed were between \$10 to \$20 an hour, placing at least half of the full-time workers under Pennsylvania's poverty line. The average cost for a CDA is about \$1,200, excluding the additional financial commitment for the registry exam, which costs \$445 for an online exam and up to \$500 for a paper exam.³⁸ For a bachelor's degree in early childhood from a state school, the cost is around \$7,716.

National estimates for Childcare Workers:

Employment estimate and mean wage estimates for Childcare Workers:

Employment (1)	Employment RSE (3)	Mean hourly wage	Mean annual wage (2)	Wage RSE (3)
459,460	2.1 %	\$ 14.22	\$ 29,570	0.5 %

Percentile wage estimates for Childcare Workers:

Percentile	10%	25%	50% (Median)	75%	90%
Hourly Wage	\$ 10.22	\$ 11.31	\$ 13.71	\$ 16.28	\$ 18.79
Annual Wage (2)	\$ 21,250	\$ 23,530	\$ 28,520	\$ 33,870	\$ 39,090

Figure 6: Wages estimates from Bureau of Labor and Statistics

All Head Start and Pre-K Counts teachers are required to have at least an associate's degree in early childhood education or a related field, with some cases requiring a bachelor's degree.

Assistant teachers are typically required to have a Child Development Associate (CDA) credential or an equivalent credential. Keystone Stars requirements state that STAR 1 may require a minimum qualification of a high school diploma or equivalent; STAR 2 may require an associate degree or higher in early childhood education or a related field; and STAR 3 and 4 may require a bachelor's degree in early childhood education or a related field. Each program ties funding levels to the education of staff, creating an important feedback loop for staff retention.

Many feel the education of staff should not be the only factor that funding is tied to. These programs are designed to be comprehensive, considering curriculum, environment, and ratio as well as working with children and families. The table from *Figure 6* is from Head Start (OHS), Administration for Children and Families (ACF), and the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS).³⁹

Degree	HS Teacher	EHS Teacher	Asst. Teacher	Home Visitor	Family <u>Child</u> <u>Care Provider</u>
Advance	\$36.24	\$36.24	\$30.80	\$36.24	\$36.24
BA	\$32.95	\$32.95	\$27.35	\$32.95	\$32.95
AA	\$26.36	\$26.36	\$21.88	\$26.36	\$26.36
CDA	\$23.06	\$23.06	\$19.14	\$23.06	\$23.06
No credential	\$19.77	\$19.77	\$16.41	\$19.77	\$19.77
Weighted Average	\$31.11	\$25.56	\$19.87	\$28.66	\$24.24

Hourly wage Targets by Credential Wage-Parity (constant 2023 dollars)

Figure 7: Wage targets from Head Start (OHS), Administration for Children and Families (ACF), and the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS).

Professions in the caregiving sector, such as nursing, social work, and teaching, grapple with significant challenges related to turnover and burnout, primarily stemming from the pervasive issues of “compassion fatigue” (CF) and “secondary traumatic stress” (STS).⁴⁰ Compassion fatigue is characterized by emotional and behavioral repercussions from prolonged exposure to others’ suffering, and STS is associated with emotional distress as a result of others’ traumatic experiences.

The role of child-care workers, akin to their counterparts in nursing and teaching, involves the physical, mental, and emotional needs of the youngest learners. It also puts the worker at risk of burnout, necessitating a comprehensive support system. Child-care workers require not only organizational strategies and self-care practices but also ongoing training and awareness programs. These initiatives can empower them to recognize, cope with, and prevent the adverse effects of CF and STS, fostering a resilient and supportive environment in which they can continue to provide quality care without compromising their own well-being.

Ongoing research plays a crucial role in retention efforts. Yet cultivating a workplace to increase compassion and satisfaction takes time and energy from both staff and supervisors who are already struggling to meet the demands of a difficult job.⁴¹

The child-care industry also continues to be challenged by constant employee turnover. Many reasons contribute to the situation, such as job dissatisfaction, burnout, and the pursuit of better opportunities. Throughout social work, however, a facility offering better pay typically draws workers from those facilities that don't. Thus, while advancements are being made to enhance working conditions and provide necessary support systems, a deeper understanding of the root causes of turnover is essential to finding sustainable solutions.

Employment in the child-care industry still has not reached pre-pandemic levels.⁴² However, the industry has seen gradual growth in the aftermath of the pandemic. Efforts to retain skilled and experienced professionals, therefore, should encompass not only immediate concerns, such as compensation and educational provisions, but also consider overall job satisfaction. Together they would create a more motivated and stable workforce.

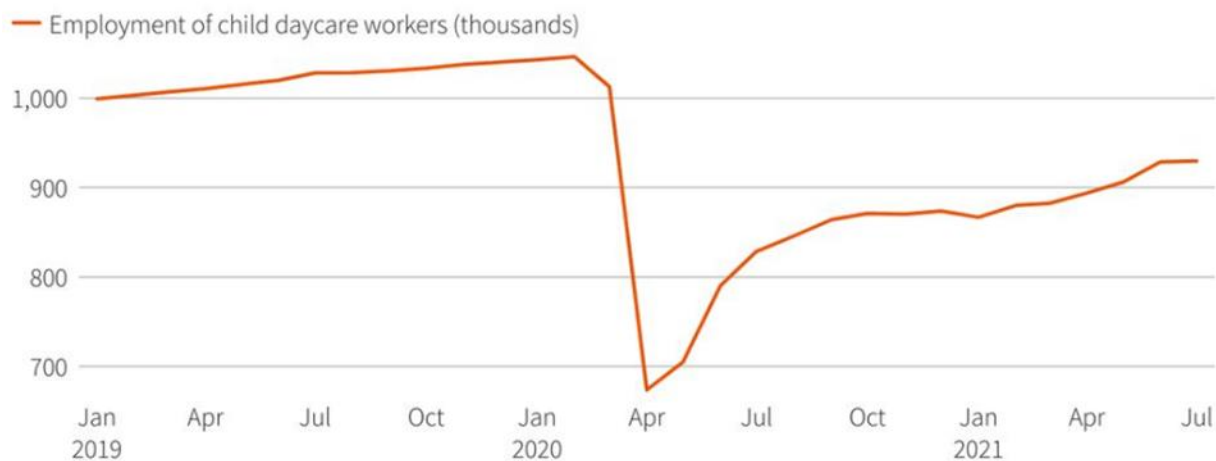


Figure 8: Child Care Employment numbers before and during the Covid-19 pandemic from the U.S. Department of Labor

The cohort concludes that adequate compensation, accessible training opportunities, and a supportive working environment are essential components of a thriving early childhood education system. It is time to prioritize the well-being of those who lay the foundation for our children's success and, by extension, the success of American society.

V. Supply and Demand of Child Care in Erie County

As mentioned, Erie County currently has 133 licensed child-care providers, with approximately 107, or 81%, in the city of Erie. The remaining 25 (or 19%) child-care centers are spread across Erie County. This geographic disparity becomes more apparent when examining 2022 census estimates. Erie County's population is 266,096, including the city of Erie (92,732) and its estimated child-care population of 16,757. In the city, there are about one child-care provider for every 156 children, while areas outside of the city have about one child-care provider for every 670 children.

Initial research indicates that cost alone is not sufficient to account for the number of parents unable to access child-care services. In a study by McKinsey & Company in spring 2021, lack of access to child care ranked third as a barrier to mental and economic well-being, only surpassed by the lack of healthcare and the cost of health insurance. (Dua, 2021) The study reported that, "16% of the U.S. workforce – about 26.8 million people – are dependent on child care in order to work." (Gitlin, 2022)

A. Training and Work Force Development:

In the United States today, early childhood educators are 97% women, including 38% minorities. Non-Hispanic white men account for 1.3%, and male minorities represent less than 1%. (Coffey, 2022) Regardless, low wages, lack of employer-based health insurance, and few retirement plans are significant factors affecting job retention. Another is to give the workers the respect they deserve.

Developing a registered apprenticeship program has proven effective as they allow on-the-job training from mentors in real time while the student earns credits toward Childhood Development Associate (CDA) credentials, an associate degree, or bachelor degree. (Lieberman, 2023) In the process, the apprentice's earning potential is increased without accruing student loan debt from traditional education avenues.

Thirty-five states have apprenticeship programs while seven others are developing them. Registered apprenticeships are required to have a sponsor, such as a business, community college, or nonprofit. (Smith, 2023) This also creates community stakeholders invested in the success of the program. Early childhood workers clearly need opportunities to increase their competencies, build their knowledge, and practice new skills. Registered apprenticeships are also an effective recruitment tool. (Smith, 2023)

Pennsylvania has a registered apprenticeship program with a goal to address the teacher shortage in ECE. (District 1199C Training & Upgrading Fund, 2021) Among the goals is to build a standardized system statewide to give the ECE workforce a path to higher wages, worker

retention, and job satisfaction. Six statewide intermediaries, or hubs, organize education and employment partners in their regions.

In their agreement, employers allow their apprentices time during work hours to attend classes and complete coursework. Apprentices take up to two courses a semester and are required to earn a “C” or better. Eighteen credits may be earned toward their degree in this program. Tuition is greatly reduced through the T.E.A.C.H. (Teacher Education and Compensation Helps) program, which pays 95%, while the employer and apprentice pay \$500 each. (FirtstUp.org, 2020) Scholarships also are available for tuition and books.

Cohort research discovered that government officials, child-care staff, and the residents generally agree that every family deserves and should have access to quality child care. However, across Erie County, there has been a significant decline in the number of available openings for children in child-care centers. This supply and demand discrepancy has caused parents to be increasingly concerned over finding care for their children. The Covid-19 pandemic further exposed this child-care shortage, particularly in high-poverty areas.

B. The Balancing Act

Clearly, employers are trying to balance the cost of operating a child-care center with providing quality services. Without offering competitive wages, it is difficult to retain workers in any industry, but especially in this one with its high degree of burnout. Nearly 50% of worker survey respondents say they do not plan to be in their jobs in five years.⁴³

Regarding government assistance, the state has imposed regulations on child-care centers that make operating costs higher. This can often standardize the regulations in child-care centers and local communities, but the initial implementation can cause a shock in the community, especially in communities that experience higher levels of consistent poverty or have a lower, average income per family, per capita. Some of these regulations include classroom ratios, Keystone STARS requirements,⁴⁴ and continuing education for staff.

Often, smaller centers find themselves struggling even more. While safety and child well-being cannot be compromised, state review boards could assist centers by providing classes in financial planning or consider providing funds upfront rather than as reimbursements. State-imposed ratios on childcare classrooms also make it more difficult to fill classrooms, as more staff are needed to adequately operate the center.

On the family side, financial pressures are constant. As families struggle to cover the cost of child care, waiting lists grow for lower-cost centers. Higher-end centers can also price themselves out of the market. As mentioned, the cost of services can greatly impact whether families are able to take advantage of child-care services. For example, in 1995, the Mercyhurst

Child Learning Center left operations on the campus of Mercyhurst University for an off-site location. Since that move, fewer faculty and staff take advantage of workplace accessible child care, and the children attending this center typically come from all over the area, according to Tiffany Ciminella, Assistant Director at Mercyhurst Child Learning Center.

C. Cost of Opening a Center

As the waitlists for various centers grow across the state, a common sentiment is “Why not open more?” That’s easier said than done. The cost of opening a child-care center is only growing. There are many factors that influence the cost, including zoning, permits, and licensing.⁴⁵ Due to these factors, the initial cost of opening a center ranges from \$10,000 to \$50,000,⁴⁶ before even discussing the cost and training of a workforce or any curriculum or education that may be considered.

The teaching and child-care professions are also becoming less populated. According to a 2023 briefing from the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, while the number of child care programs in the U.S. has increased, the number of employees has decreased.⁴⁷ Many states are experiencing professional personnel shortages.

Among the cohort’s interviews was with Emily McKain, a program manager with JumpStart at the University of Pittsburgh. She said the number of students pursuing work in the child-care field has dwindled, meaning that training programs for providers, such as JumpStart, has also decreased. JumpStart services in the Pittsburgh area child-care centers would ideally host five to nine members working in a class, but lack of student engagement has left classrooms with as few as two JumpStart members.

The number of program managers has also fallen. The 2023-24 program has 35 students working with two managers. However, two managers could typically oversee up to 80 students, and in years past, they had three managers with up to 120 students.

In another interview, Mercyhurst Child Learning Center Executive Director Melissa Navatmack discussed how staffing has been a consistent issue at the center. Without a full staff, the center could not operate a full day and be forced to shut its doors at 3:30 p.m. rather than the scheduled 5:30 p.m.⁴⁸ Though the situation has improved recently, another Covid outbreak can affect many people who rely on that care. An outbreak in fall 2023 left the center staffed at half capacity, forcing it to close early and, in turn, leaving parents who rely on the care without options.

D. Childcare Deserts

After the initial and jarring Covid-19 pandemic, an increasing number of families found themselves living in “child-care deserts.” By definition, child-care deserts are census tracts with more than three children under 5 for every licensed child-care slot.⁴⁹ More than half of American

families with young children live in a child-care desert, and over 57% of Pennsylvanians live in a child-care desert.⁵⁰

Two main factors contributing to the development of child-care deserts in Pennsylvania are affordability and the cost of operating a center. In February 2023, Start Strong PA partners conducted a survey that details the current childcare staffing crisis in Pennsylvania. They took a snapshot of each county's childcare, Pre-K Counts, and Head Start supplemental programs and their effects on working families' access to care. (PA Child Care Crisis, 2023) The results from the Erie County survey were alarming. Eighteen programs responded to the survey and 89% said they have a staffing shortage. They cited low wages and lack of benefits contributing to 90 open staff positions. If these programs were fully staffed, they would be able to add 689 children. A survey responder noted, "Our economy can't recover if child care is not available to support the workforce." (PA Child Care Crisis 2023 Individual County Survey Fact Sheets, 2023)

After examining child-care accessibility in the United States as a whole, the report will focus on Pennsylvania and Erie County. The 2022 statewide summary from Child Care Works (CCW) asserts there are 180,480 children under 5 living in families eligible for CCW subsidy programs while only 25% are receiving assistance. Only 45% of those enrolled are in high-quality child care. (PA Partnerships for Children, 2022) More than 35,500 children are waitlisted for childcare, which affects their families' ability to work steadily and also creates a domino effect on the area's economy. (PA Partnerships for Children, 2023)

The cohort concludes that adequate compensation, accessible training opportunities, and a supportive working environment are essential components of a thriving early childhood education system. It is time to prioritize the well-being of those who lay the foundation for our children's success and, by extension, the success of American society.

The following data reflects the barrier for families accessing CCW services and/or the sector's supply and demand issues.

ACCESS

	Under 5 years		Infants and toddlers	
	County	PA	County	PA
Child population	16,757	681,354	9,893	399,126
Eligible for Child Care Works (CCW)	5,890	180,480	3,480	105,720
Eligible children enrolled	1,253	44,579	615	22,294
Unserved, eligible children	4,637	135,901	2,865	83,426
Percent unserved	79%	75%	82%	79%

Pennsylvania's child care system has a staffing shortage resulting in more than 35,500 children sitting on wait lists making it difficult for parents to work. This child care crisis costs working families, employers, and taxpayers \$6.65 billion annually in lost wages, productivity and revenue. The key to increasing working families' access to child care is addressing the child care staffing crisis.

QUALITY

	Under 5 years in Child Care Works		Infants and toddlers in Child Care Works	
	County	PA	County	PA
Children enrolled in high-quality	63%	45%	57%	42%

Figure 9: Start Strong PA from March 2023 survey of children in CCW Programs⁵¹

As the cost of living rises, child-care centers struggle with maintaining enough staff to be fully operational. As a result, families are left on extensive waitlists. Staffing ratios imposed by the state also make it more difficult for centers to accept more students.

E. How to Bridge the Supply and Demand Gap

Childcare in Erie County suffers from long waitlists, staffing crises, and operating costs. Across Erie County, families are struggling to find quality child care within their budget. Ultimately, there are opportunities in the community to bridge this gap and assist in growing the number of available centers in the area.

For example, state funding from the Head Start program, which totals over \$263 million each year, is available to assist centers in maintaining and growing their staff numbers.⁵² Providing more funding and grant money to childcare workers would assist in helping centers maintain their staffs. High staffing turnover can be mitigated by better pay. Providing better zoning and funding for child-care centers also can help offset high operating costs. This may also help child-care directors and entrepreneurs maintain their centers or open new ones.

VI. Analysis

The nation, state, and Erie County are facing a child-care crisis. It is clear that if left unchanged, the crisis will only get worse.

First, the cost of child care is outpacing parents' ability to pay for care. This is even more striking in rural areas where wages have lagged behind those in urban centers. Despite real or perceived economic growth in Erie County, it has not translated into real income gains for families until the middle of 2023, according to economic analyses in early 2024. Meanwhile, child care is increasingly taking up a greater share of household budgets, perhaps to the point that families are putting off purchasing homes, gaining further education, or having more children, according to some feeling the pinch. Providers also struggle with costs to provide care, having to balance the need for higher wages to retain staff with other cost increases and coping with sometimes conflicting funding rules.

Second, child-care providers across the nation – including Erie County – have staff shortages. In Pennsylvania, child-care providers are required to have certain ratios of children to staff depending on children's ages and needs. The pressures are even greater on smaller providers to maintain profitability. Increased demand for advanced certifications and degrees to comply with federal and state funding programs has also created an environment in which highly educated individuals are making at or below poverty wages. Years of under-investment as well as governments and societies seeing child care as an unskilled labor force have driven hundreds of thousands of child-care workers from the industry.

Third, across Erie County parents are faced with long waiting lists to access child-care services, some waiting years for an opening. Centers are faced with providing not only for the physical needs of children but also their developmental needs. Coupled with the high costs to open a child-care center and numerous regulatory requirements, smaller providers are in danger of shutting down, while larger centers increasingly are faced with providing more care with fewer resources and staff. Additionally, Pennsylvania is faced with widening child-care deserts. Fifty-seven percent of Pennsylvanians, or approximately 5.8 million adults, live in an area with little to no access to child-care options.

The JCLA cohort discovered that the challenges and issues facing the child-care industry are interconnected, forming a web of dependencies. One example is the interconnectedness of staff retention and training costs for child-care providers. The cost of retaining and training staff is a significant cost to child-care providers, and it is often reflected in greater fees for parents. Providers increasingly find themselves in a balancing act, as any necessary increases in staff wages or education costs prompts higher fees for child care.

The interconnected nature of these challenges extends beyond the providers' operational concerns and directly influences parents' decisions. Price increases may prompt parents to reevaluate the affordability of child care in relation to their income. Prohibitive prices may prompt the parent to remove their child from care, and one parent may be forced to leave the working world to care for the child. This, in turn, also results in reduced income for the child-care business.

Addressing specific issues, such as child-care worker pay, the cost of care, staff retention, or accessibility, can provide temporary relief. However, sustainable solutions require a comprehensive approach that involves nearly simultaneous reform in all identified areas. Recognizing and addressing the interconnected nature of these challenges is crucial for developing strategies that promote the long-term viability of the child-care industry.

VII. Recommendations

A. Further Research Needed

To reiterate, the cohort's research was limited by time, resources, and expertise in conducting large-scale research. In our research and interviews, it became clear that the depth of the issues facing the child-care industry in Erie County have not been fully explored. Additional data and observations can be gathered by a comprehensive survey of Erie County's child-care providers to determine the full extent of the issues facing them. Throughout the development of this project, higher quality and more recent data was available for urban areas as opposed to rural areas, as well as a lack of data on the issues facing parents and children in Erie County. It is our recommendation that this research continue to provide a more detailed look at the child-care industry in Erie County.

B. Countywide Advocacy

That said, some things are readily apparent. Bringing together municipalities in Erie County to advocate for increased funding from the state or elsewhere is needed, along with clarification of current funding programs. State and federal programs are at odds in some ways that force child-care providers to choose funding sources. By educating municipal leaders on the scale and severity of the issues facing parents and child-care providers, we believe greater action can be taken. Leaders can work to spur legislation, persuade the Legislature to closely examine the needs of this industry, and address the following issues:

- Stagnant child-care subsidies to providers.
- Working to change PA Pre-K Counts funding models to align with Federal Head Start funding models.
- Examine current local and state child-care regulations to find areas that are overburdening providers.
- Adapt current state models of minimum wages for child-care workers.

C. Research and Adapt Existing Models

States and communities across the country are finding ways to make high-quality child care accessible to their residents. In Louisville, Kentucky, for example, state officials recently launched a bipartisan program called the Employee Child Care Assistance Partnership to encourage employers to pay for a portion of their employees' child-care costs while the state would contribute another portion to reduce a family's child-care cost by two-thirds. For example, for a family's child-care cost of \$1,200 a month: The employer and state each pay \$400, leaving the family with a cost of just \$400.

This pilot program is authorized for one year with an allocation of \$15 million. So far, 88 children are benefitting, and 17 employers are participating. Four other states have similar

employer-based matching systems including Iowa, Michigan, North Dakota, and Wisconsin. (Otis, 2023)

These new assistance programs target middle-income families who do not qualify for traditional subsidies. The Kentucky program does not aid low-income families who utilize Kentucky Child Care Assistance Program (CCAP). CCAP is a federally funded program that pays for all (or almost all) of a family's child-care costs if they meet income requirements. Depending on the success and data from the pilot program, low-income families may benefit from it in the future. (Otis, 2023)

State Rep. Pat Harkins (D-1st Dist.) noted that funding ideas for Pennsylvania include taxing tavern gaming machines. This could be included as a line item in the Pennsylvania budget. Harkins also remarked that to adopt a Universal Pre-K program in Pennsylvania, it would take the cooperation and input of the House, Senate, and Shapiro administration.

D. Public Awareness and Education

Research has shown that early intervention and developmental education provided by trained child-care workers leads to better outcomes for children. Further work is needed to shift the perceptions of child care from a no- or low-skilled job to a valued and integral part of American society.

Despite these challenges, there is hope. The growing acknowledgment of the critical role played by early childhood educators is translating into increased attention and, hopefully, increased financial support. As we recognize the importance of nurturing the minds of the future, a reevaluation and potential reform of funding structures become imperative. A comprehensive approach must consider not only the educational qualifications of staff but also the economic sustainability of their roles.

VIII. Conclusions

Since the start of the 2023 JCLA cohort in June 2023, members have worked to understand both the inner workings and struggles of the child-care industry in Erie County. Its research focused on four key areas: cost of child care; accessing quality care; training and retention of child-care workers; and the supply and demand for child care. These areas were examined across Erie County based on eight municipalities visited in this session: Albion Borough, city of Corry, city of Erie, Fairview Township, Harborcreek Township, Millcreek Township, North East Borough, and Union City Borough.

The cohort concludes that the child-care industry in Erie County is nearing a crisis that, without proper intervention, will lead to a potentially troubling decline in both the quality and availability of care. Rural areas are already experiencing the first signs of this with centers operating at half-capacity due to costs and lack of staff.

While debate can address how to define quality child care, there can be no doubt that providers are running out of options to continue meeting the needs of parents in Erie County. Work to address the issues outlined in this paper has been ongoing for decades, but a lack of urgency and respect for the child-care industry have not seen improvement or reform. Initiatives to increase subsidies, provide universal care, increase wages for child-care workers, and provide quality child-care options are stalled at various levels of state and federal government.

It is the belief of this cohort that progressive change in the identified problem areas is possible with the unified efforts of local leaders and residents.

¹ [Here](#) Child Care Desert is derived from the term “Food Desert” which describes a scarcity of fresh foods or a lack of access to grocery stores in a geographic area.

² [Here](#)

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⁷ [Here](#)

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¹⁰ [Here](#)

¹¹ [Here](#)

¹² [Here](#), Staff vacancies were reported most often at center-based care options, which is the most common form of child care in the state.

¹³ [Here](#)

¹⁴ [Here](#)

¹⁵ [Here](#)

¹⁶ [Here](#)

¹⁷ [Here](#)

¹⁸ [Here](#)

¹⁹ [Here](#)

²⁰ [Here](#)

²¹ Richard Nixon, Veto of the Economic Opportunity Amendments of 1971 Online by Gerhard Peters and John T. Woolley, The American Presidency Project [Here](#)

²² [Here](#)

²³ [Here](#)

²⁴ [Here](#)

²⁵ Melissa Novatnack, October 26th, 2023. Interview conducted by Sarah Morrison

²⁶ [Here](#)

²⁷ [Here](#)

²⁸ Representative Pat Harkins, October 27th, 2023, Interview conducted by Sarah Morrison.

²⁹ [Here](#)

³⁰ [Here](#)

³¹ Rina Irwin, December 7th, 2023, JCLA Cohort Presentation.

³² <https://www.houstonchronicle.com/politics/texas/politifact/article/fact-check-biden-inflation-18369348.php>

³³ [Here](#)

³⁴ [Here](#)

³⁵ [Here](#)

³⁶ [Here](#)

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³⁸ [Here](#)

³⁹ [Here](#)

⁴⁰ [Here](#)

⁴¹ See article form footnote 41

⁴² [Here](#)

⁴³ [Here](#)

44 “Continuous Quality Improvement (CQI),” The Pennsylvania Key, accessed December 20, 2023, [Here](#)
45 Rina Irwin, Child Development Centers
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