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Pennsylvania's Working Families Need Greater Investment in Early Learning Services

2020-21 State budget proposal: modest growth for pre-k; fails to expand critical child care and evidence-based home visiting services

HARRISBURG, PA (February 4, 2020) – The principal partners of Early Learning Pennsylvania (ELPA), a statewide coalition of advocates focused on supporting young Pennsylvanians from birth to age five, are calling on the General Assembly to go beyond Governor Wolf's budget proposal and prioritize greater state investments in high-quality pre-k, child care and evidence-based home visiting services to help Pennsylvania's working families. ELPA operates three issue-based advocacy campaigns: Pre-K for PA, Start Strong PA, and Childhood Begins at Home. Reaction statements from these respective campaigns regarding Governor Tom Wolf's 2020-21 budget proposal follow.

PRE-K

“Governor Wolf deserves to be acknowledged for his continuous support of expanded access to publicly-funded, high-quality pre-k in PA. If approved, his proposed \$30 million in new state funding as part of the 2020-21 Executive Budget will provide the once-in-a-lifetime opportunity of high-quality pre-k to more than 3,200 young learners.

“Research shows that high-quality pre-k benefits children's cognitive, social and emotional development. This is why, according to recent polling, an overwhelming majority of Pennsylvania voters support investing additional state dollars to expand access to pre-k for children in every corner of the commonwealth.

“Unfortunately, only 44 percent of eligible children in Pennsylvania are currently enrolled in publicly-funded, high-quality pre-k, according to the most recent data available (FY 2018-19). That means 56 percent of eligible children do not have access to this vital early education opportunity due to limited state funding. We must do better, faster, if we are to move the needle on these dismal statistics. PA is being outranked by states like Georgia, Alabama and West Virginia when it comes to expanding access to publicly-funded, high-quality pre-k. PA ranks 19th — a drop from the 2018 study — among the 28 states that also publicly fund high-quality pre-kindergarten programs with similar quality standards.

“Pre-K for PA, representing tens of thousands of Pennsylvania families, appreciates that policymakers in Harrisburg understand the irrefutable value of investing in high-quality pre-k. We strongly urge the General Assembly to make a bold move and boost funding for both access and quality to Governor Wolf’s proposed pre-k investment. By investing now, Pennsylvania can serve more eligible children and take steps to adjust quality pre-k provider rates for inflation.”

CHILD CARE

“Start Strong PA agrees with Governor Wolf that the critical shortage of affordable, high-quality child care is a major barrier to workforce participation for many Pennsylvania families. Given that 70 percent of Pennsylvania children under the age of five have all adults in their household in the labor force, high-quality child care is an essential workforce support. This finding was a focal point of the January 2020 Keystone Economic and Workforce Command Center reports — which included input from Pennsylvania business leaders — and recommended greater access to affordable high-quality child care.

“Start Strong PA is disappointed that the Governor’s budget proposal commits no new state funding to help Pennsylvania’s working families find and afford high-quality child care.

“Although the Governor’s budget proposal utilizes \$15.3 million in federal funding toward child care subsidy base rates, this proposal will have no impact in addressing the list of children waiting to gain access to subsidized care or improve the quality of that care.

“Less than half of certified child care capacity in Pennsylvania currently meets high-quality standards. And only 34 percent of infants and toddlers that receive subsidized care attend programs that have met high-quality standards.

“Start Strong PA urges the Pennsylvania General Assembly to invest in our youngest children, their families, and our workforce by allocating additional state funding for more children to gain access to high-quality child care.”

EVIDENCE-BASED HOME VISITING

“The Childhood Begins at Home campaign has credited the Wolf administration over the past three state budgets for making the state a national leader for delivering voluntary, evidence-based home visiting programs that ultimately improve maternal health, child well-being and family self-sufficiency.

“Unfortunately, the proposed \$2.4 million included in the 2020-21 state budget is disappointing, because it does not build upon the steady progress of investing in evidence-based programs to expand services to additional children and families.

“We understand state funds will preserve federal slots through the Maternal, Infant, and Early Childhood Home Visiting program (MIECHV) and support Medicaid managed care organizations offering short-term, in-home services for first-time mothers. However, the proposal is a missed opportunity as only 5 percent of the pregnant women, children and families who would benefit the most from evidence-based home visiting programs currently receive services.

“While we’re not losing ground, we’re not gaining it either, and building successful families by providing healthy and safe home environments through consistently demonstrated, evidence-based home visiting programs takes a greater commitment than maintaining the status quo.”

“From birth to age 5 early learning is happening, and our coalition of advocates is committed to ensuring that families can access it in high-quality, developmentally appropriate settings. The lack of state resources for early learning creates deep inequity among families at a very early age. We, and our tens of thousands of supporters, urge lawmakers to boldly invest in early learning in 2020 – it is an urgent necessity.”

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