Children's Hospital of Philadelphia PolicyLab

Ensuring Families Benefit from PA's Investment in Early Childhood Education

Health Equity

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As a psychologist who works with many children who receive early childhood services, I am excited by the FY2018 Pennsylvania budget. Passed by the Pennsylvania state House and Senate in early July, the budget includes funding elements to support child care services, Keystone Stars, Early Intervention, and pre-kindergarten services. Some of these key expanded investments include:

- An increase in Pre-K Counts of $25 million
- An increase in the Head Start Supplemental Assistance Program by $5 million
- A restoration of the $20 million cut in the 2016-17 budget to Child Care Services
- New investments in evidenced-based home visiting of $4.77 million

Although the budget is not yet funded, these increased allocations are good news for parents of young children. Child care supports child health by providing each child with daily physical activity, nurturing healthy eating that is guided by Child and Adult Care Food Program (CACFP), reducing screen time, and often monitoring of health screenings.

This commitment in the budget is also good for employers and families. Employers benefit when mothers and fathers can steadily maintain their work without missing days, and be productive at work with peace of mind that their children are safe and nurtured. Families benefit from having steady, uninterrupted income that is needed to provide for every aspect on their family's care, as well as from having the pleasure of seeing their child learn

and mature.

How can we ensure that Pennsylvanians take advantage of these services?

The newly passed budget is a step in the right direction for our state by increasing the level of services and supports available to children and families. But they will only be effective at improving outcomes for children if families are aware that they exist. That's where we as clinicians, child advocates, and members of the community can help by letting parents know about these resources and answering questions they might have about enrolling their child in child care or pre-kindergarten for the first time.

Here are a few concerns I've heard from parents about the quality and availability of child care, and helpful ways to address those concerns:

- "Will my child be safe in these child care programs?"
  - Pennsylvania has taken strong steps to ensure the safety of every child. In the Keystone Stars program, all centers are reviewed annually to ensure not just that the environment is safe, but also that the teaching staff is trained in caring for young children.
- "How will I know what happens during the day if my child is not talking yet?"
  - Pennsylvania's Office of Child Development and Early Learning (OCDEL) has made it clear that parent engagement is the responsibility of each center and daily communication is expected to occur.
- "I've tried child care before, by my child was asked to leave due to behavior problems? Will other places accept us? And can I get help to address my child's behavior?"
  - The state recently issued guidelines for reducing expulsion and suspension that outline the supports that are available to child care centers, so help is available. One of these services is Early Childhood Mental Health Consultation (ECMH), which sends an early childhood expert out to child care centers to help them adjust their environment and teaching approach in a way that enables every child to remain in the center and optimize their participation. The increased funding to Early Intervention can also provide additional supports for children with special needs.
- "Are there child care centers that are open during the hours I need to get to work?"
  - The additional funds for child care subsidies can support those 'wrap around' hours and move children off the child care waiting list. Child Care Information Services (CCIS) can help parents find the centers that meet their needs.

What's next for early learning in Pennsylvania?

In my experience as an early childhood psychologist, I know that most parents already believe in the benefits of pre-kindergarten and most working parents know the value of a high-quality child care. With the additional funding in the FY18 budget to support these services and a new policy statement from the American Academy of Pediatrics in support of quality early education and child care from birth, we are much better positioned to connect our families with the child care they need to help their children learn and grow, and to maintain the employment they need to support their families. The state has taken the right step in funding greater access and quality of child care and early childhood services, and we should all take it upon ourselves to support families in taking advantage of these opportunities to better the health and well-being of their children.

This post is part of a collection of back to school-related research and information that we're curating for the new school year. Follow our hashtag (#PolicyLabGoesBacktoSchool) for more.