

Shared Prosperity Philadelphia

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In January 2013, Mayor Nutter issued an executive order calling for a strategic approach to reducing poverty in Philadelphia and establishing the Mayor's Office of Community Empowerment and Opportunity (CEO) to coordinate the efforts of local public, private and nonprofit agencies. Although the poverty rate had recently reached a high of 28% as the city struggled to recover from recession, it had been growing steadily for two generations. CEO listened to hundreds of stakeholders who told us that there is no single path to reducing poverty and that we should focus on a cluster of issues that have the potential to increase opportunity for the city's lowest income residents. They underscored that high-quality early learning must be part of the city's anti-poverty agenda. The result is Shared Prosperity Philadelphia: Our Plan to Fight Poverty. One of its five goals is ensuring that all children start kindergarten ready to learn (www.sharedprosperityphila.org)

Most children aren't ready to read until the ages of five to seven. Why then should the city focus attention on earlier years? Research in neuroscience and child development confirms that 90% of brain development occurs in the first five years. Children begin to develop language and

literacy, critical thinking and problem-solving skills in infancy. Structured interaction between caring adults and children encourages healthy growth and development during the first five years, while adverse early childhood experiences such as poverty and toxic stress can inhibit it, sometimes permanently.

High-quality early childhood education (ECE) provides positive interactions between caring adults and children. It recognizes that parents are children's most important teachers and partners with parents to support their children as well. Well-trained teachers foster the development of cognitive skills including executive functions: working memory, mental flexibility and impulse control, social and emotional skills and motor coordination. Children develop the ability to listen to a story, retain language and even grasp a pencil, all prerequisites for learning to read. In addition to building skills, high-quality high quality early childhood education focuses on multiple service delivery systems to support children during this critical period of brain development, providing a full range of health and development screenings and assisting families with follow-up.

Although Pennsylvania made significant gains in developing a high-quality ECE system from the late 1990s through 2008, good ECE opportunities are still out of reach for most Philadelphia families. While the state introduced sweeping reforms including a child care quality rating and improvement system (Keystone STARS),

supplemental Head Start funding and high-quality pre-k (Pennsylvania Pre-K Counts), only 21% of Philadelphia children from birth to five have access to high-quality early childhood education today. As they move toward kindergarten, the picture improves somewhat: a third of the City's three- and four-year-olds attend at least a year of high-quality pre-k through Head Start, Pre-K Counts and Keystone STAR 3-4 programs.

One reason for low participation is lack of affordability and limited resources to address that issue: it costs over \$21,000 a year to enroll two children under age five in high-quality ECE, more than half of the median household income for a family of four. Although moderate-income families earning up to 300% of poverty (\$72,750 for a family of four) can apply for Pre-K Counts, funding only supports 2,700 children in Philadelphia, 8% of those who are eligible. Families earning up to 200% of poverty (\$48,500) are also eligible for child care subsidies, but this, too, is limited. Families encounter long waiting lists, and the enrollment process can be difficult to navigate, which discourages many from ever applying (U.S. Census Bureau, n.d.).

Philadelphia also has an inadequate supply of convenient, high-quality early learning programs. Although nearly half of licensed providers participate in Keystone STARS locally, fewer than 9% are in the top tier (STAR 3 or 4) of Keystone STARS. This leaves whole neighborhoods devoid of high-quality options that are convenient for

working parents.

Beyond the shortage of high-quality early childhood programs, many parents do not have information they need about how to prepare their children for kindergarten, and the early childhood and K-3 systems are not currently aligned, although the school district has taken some preliminary steps in this direction.

Recognizing these challenges, Shared Prosperity Philadelphia has worked with many stakeholders to develop a citywide early learning plan that will be released this spring. The plan has four substantive goals:

- 1) increase children's access to high-quality early learning opportunities in formal classroom environments and informal ones including home and the library;
- 2) expand the supply of high-quality early learning programs to every neighborhood in the city;
- 3) create a highly professionalized ECE workforce by improving training and compensation for ECE teachers and staff; and
- 4) build on early childhood gains by aligning the birth to five and K-3 education systems more closely, beginning with the kindergarten transition.

A fifth goal relates to the infrastructure and funding needed to carry out this plan.

Stakeholders will implement the plan by collaborating on 15 strategies that are designed to achieve these goals. Some of these, including strengthening kindergarten transitions and parental engagement, mirror goals of the READ! by 4th campaign. All of them create the conditions for children to succeed in school and later in life

Philadelphia's early learning plan will build on and strengthen statewide initiatives such as Keystone STARS, Pre-K Counts and Early Intervention. While participation in Keystone STARS is optional at the state level, Philadelphia's plan would require participation from all early learning programs that receive public funding. It would increase incentives for programs to reach the top tier of Keystone STARS through a fund that would also increase provider compensation. It would also establish a single point of access to streamline eligibility determination and registration for high-quality, publicly funded early childhood programs.

Some of these strategies will require policy shifts by state and federal government to succeed. Others require new investment by public and private funders. While we are just completing the planning process, CEO has been encouraged by the high level of interest from other public agencies and funders, and we are optimistic that this interest will continue during implementation.

Philadelphia will implement this plan using a collective impact framework. Public agencies including the City of

Philadelphia, the School District of Philadelphia and the state's Office of Child Development and Early Learning, and private ones including child care providers, the business community, funders, technical support agencies, advocates and parents, will work together to pursue a common agenda with shared metrics and continuous evaluation. This activity will be coordinated through a citywide public-private entity that invites participation from the next mayor but doesn't rely on it for core support, ensuring its success across administrations. CEO and other stakeholder groups have just begun this process, and we have much to learn. We invite you to find ways to participate in implementing the plan and learn with us as we work together.

Reference

U.S. Census Bureau. (n.d.). *American Community Survey: Philadelphia region*. Philadelphia, PA. Retrieved from http://www.census.gov/regions/philadelphia/www/programs_surveys/surveys/acs.php