

# **EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION TASK FORCE**

## **Minutes of the 1st Meeting of the 2022 Interim**

**June 28, 2022**

### **Call to Order and Roll Call**

The 1st meeting of the Early Childhood Education Task Force was held on Tuesday, June 28, 2022, at 1:00 p.m., in Room 131 of the Capitol Annex. Senator Danny Carroll, Chair, called the meeting to order, and the secretary called the roll.

Present were:

Members: Senator Danny Carroll, Co-Chair; Representative Samara Heavrin, Co-Chair; Senators Wil Schroder, Reginald Thomas, and Mike Wilson; Representatives Adam Bowling, Josie Raymond, and Scott Sharp.

Guests: Dr. Sarah Vanover, Policy and Research Director, Kentucky Youth Advocates; and Mahak Kalra, Chief Policy Advisor, Kentucky Youth Advocates.

LRC Staff: Ben Payne, Eric Rodenberg, and Maurya Allen.

### **Opening Remarks about the Charge of the Early Childhood Education Task Force**

Co-Chair Carroll gave a brief overview of the jurisdiction of the task force and previewed the topics to be covered over the course of the interim. The task force plans to be systematic, hear from interested parties, including providers, and compare Kentucky to other states throughout the nation. It will be necessary to look at the funding of early childhood education and daycares, including childcare assistance, as an investment in the workforce. Special attention will also be paid to early childhood education for children with special needs.

Co-Chair Heavrin provided her opening remarks and discusses how conversations with constituents highlighted the need to invest in early childhood education in Kentucky. She shared a quote from Desmond Tutu that she feels speaks to the charge of the task force: “There comes a point where we need to stop just pulling people out of the river. We need to go upstream and find out why they are falling in.” Investment in early childhood education is investment in the workforce and the private sector needs to get involved to help provide solutions.

Both Co-Chairs stated they are looking forward to what the task force can discover and hope the task force can propose innovative policy recommendations to address the very

real needs of the Commonwealth. Co-Chair Carroll said in future meetings there will be invited individuals from various expert organizations present in the meetings to engage in these discussions and provide their input and expertise.

### **Overview of Early Childhood Education in Kentucky**

Dr. Sarah Vanover, Policy and Research Director, Kentucky Youth Advocates (KYA), and Mahak Kalra, Chief Policy Advisor, KYA, were present to provide an overview of early childhood education in the state to the members.

Ms. Kalra said the early childhood education system is a win for parents who participate in the workforce, a win for students who benefit academically from early education supports, and a win for the economy of the Commonwealth. KYA is supportive of policies that build up childcare through affordability and autonomy, and applaud the legislature for their focus on this very important issue. Dr. Vanover said she has worked in the field for over 24 years in all facets of childcare and early education. All of the programs work very differently, but are critical to early childhood education.

There are five pillars to early childhood education in Kentucky, HANDS, First Steps, Head Start/Early Head Start, public pre-kindergarten, and independent childcare providers. The HANDS program is a home visiting program for pregnant women and very young children. The support begins with the prenatal stage by providing models of education engagement for mothers that can be implemented in the home starting from birth. The First Steps program brings dedicated special education therapy services into homes or daycares to provide for children, ages birth to 3, that may be exhibiting the early signs of a developmental delay. First Steps allows the therapists to provide training to parents and daycare employees. These interventions are very successful in creating a strong educational foundation.

One of the most recognized programs for early childhood education is the Head Start and Early Head Start program. Head Start provides services to children ages three through kindergarten while Early Head Start is for children from birth to age three. Both are federally funded. In addition to early childhood education, Head Start/Early Head Start provide access to various health screenings and medical services, and often provide poverty assistance for at-risk families. Currently, every county in Kentucky has an active Head Start program but not all are participating in the expanded Early Head Start program.

Public pre-kindergarten or preschool is the largest support service for children ages three through five with disabilities. The supports provided through public preschool make it possible for these students to be as successful as possible when they enter kindergarten. Most schools have only half-day programs, so many parents rely on private daycare for the remaining half day. While the public school system has the specially trained teachers, the private organizations to which these children transition may not be capable of meeting their

needs. Often this can result in children being dismissed from private daycare facilities because of issues stemming from their un-met special needs.

There are approximately 2,000 independent daycares in Kentucky. While the state requires minimum standards, there are additional standards and accreditations that care organizations can enroll in to distinguish themselves in a highly competitive market. Some of these businesses are in homes providing care to a handful of children, while some are much larger operating one or many centers providing care to dozens of children. Programs can be full-day or part-day. These are largely paid for by parents. The Child Care Assistance Program (CCAP) exists to help parents afford tuition at these private daycares, often by covering a percentage of the tuition, and approximately 13 to 15 percent of children receive assistance. Independent childcare programs exist for children ages birth to age 13 years.

In response to a question from Co-Chair Carroll, Dr. Vanover said that if a child qualifies for public school preschool because they are at-risk financially or they have an individualized education plan (IEP) the county is obligated to find a Head Start placement for them. This has led to a rapid expansion in Head Start programs throughout the state. While early childhood education has received more funding in recent years through the state budget expansion for full-day kindergarten, preschool has received significantly less investment. Dr. Vanover said when a school offers a full-day preschool program, the school district typically funds the portion not covered by state funding through their own budgets or by charging a fee to parents. Some public school preschools also have a childcare license and can tap into the CCAP or choose to partner with a Head Start program.

In response to a question from Representative Raymond, Dr. Vanover said she does not have data at this time on the number of enrolled children in each of the five areas of early childhood education, but there is a maximum of 158,264 slots for childcare in the state. Unfortunately, many programs cannot fill their maximum number of slots based on staffing shortages. Many programs have rooms closed at this time and this vastly decreases the number of actual students enrolled. Dr. Vanover directed members' attention to the fact sheets distributed in the meeting materials which described the funding and enrollment in Kentucky. As a result of the coronavirus pandemic, every state in the nation lost programs and slots in 2020-2021. Kentucky lost nine percent of their slots, but there have been signs of recovery as the state is rebounding from the pandemic. Compared to surrounding states which have more home-based childcare, Kentucky is largely center based and these account for most of the available slots, especially in larger cities. Home-based childcare is more prevalent in rural areas, but there are significant childcare deserts throughout the state. Even in counties designated as not having a childcare desert on the distributed fact sheet, such as Jefferson County, communities may be experiencing a childcare "drought" because the childcare centers are concentrated on the opposite side of the county from where they live and/or work.

Responding to a question from Representative Bowling, Dr. Vanover said the public school system provides the assessments to certify that a child has special needs impacting their ability to learn and creates an IEP for the child. This means there can be students who are diagnosed with a disability who would not qualify because the public school does not feel the disability significantly impairs their learning ability.

In response to a question from Co-Chair Carroll, Dr. Vanover said because there is sometimes overlap between licensing and accreditation, blended classrooms between Head Start and public school preschool are more easily created than other kinds of blended childcare.

Responding to questions and comments from Co-Chair Heavrin, it was acknowledged that some of these programs, such as the HANDS program, do not have an income threshold or special needs requirement and that is often not well understood by parents. Dr. Vanover said the Department of Public Health supervises the HANDS and First Steps programs, so those programs complement one another nicely. Additionally, parents and childcare providers can refer children to the First Steps program. However, because of the high degree of turnover in early childhood education staffing, it is sometimes difficult for staff to be knowledgeable enough about these programs to make recommendations.

Co-Chair Carroll said parents may need to be proactive in seeking out assistance, especially for children with special needs. Dr. Vanover agreed and shared that some school-based Child Find programs go door-to-door to find families and inform them about the availability of these programs. In counties that are struggling to fill teacher positions, it is unlikely they are able to staff a dedicated Child Find program. It is also difficult for young and inexperienced teachers to approach families to discuss the possibility a child needs special education services, largely due to the stigma surrounding special education and disabilities in general.

Kentucky's independent childcare programs are housed in various locations including private homes, churches, community centers, non-profit organizations, and for-profit businesses. During the last couple of years there has been a push to have communities address their local zoning bylaws to see if they are presenting a challenge to opening home-based childcare. Partnerships are also valuable between Head Start and licensed childcare to provide additional Head Start slots in underserved areas.

Regarding standards and accreditation, the All-STARS program is mandatory for programs wishing to utilize state and federal funds. Facilities that do not participate are ranked zero, while participating centers are ranked from one to five stars. The largest number of centers are one star programs, which is the minimum necessary ranking to receive funding. Higher ranking programs frequently achieve that through lower teacher to child ratios and better compensation of teachers and staff. Prior to the pandemic, Kentucky

tried to attract more individuals to work in childcare through a push for higher wages; however, currently both the hospitality and the retail sectors are higher paying and are more attractive to job seekers. The median income for early childhood education employees is approximately \$22,000 a year and hourly wages for administrators can range from \$5 to \$22. Often the childcare manager does not pay their own salary until after all other bills are paid, resulting in potentially below minimum wage earnings. Improving wages is critical to improving the field and addressing staffing shortages.

Dr. Vanover also gave the members an overview of the Childcare and Development Block Grant. This is a federal funding source that must be used to target supports for minority groups, those in poverty, and other at-risk populations. The state must provide some matching funds and audits are performed at both the state and federal level to ensure the funds are being appropriately used. The state administers the Child Care Assistance Program (CCAP) to help families pay for childcare through the Division of Child Care. In some instances parents may be required to pay a co-pay or be responsible for overage costs if the amount charged for childcare tuition is greater than the state maximum rate.

Dr. Vanover briefly covered the fragility of childcare center budgets and the great cost of childcare, especially for infants whose tuition can be more than \$1000 a month. Many mothers are forced to leave the workforce because the costs of childcare required to return are too high, which impacts the economy as a whole. Dr. Vanover also briefly illustrated the tight margins by which many daycares survive with a sample program budget from an urban setting with many at-risk/low-income families. Centers and other independent childcare programs can easily be forced to close in the event of a large unexpected expense such as the failure of a HVAC unit. She emphasized that the sample budget also assumed 90 percent enrollment and all tuition being paid on time, which is rare for any facility. Kentucky has a higher child to teacher ratio than any of the surrounding states, and even at those ratios, centers can lose money. Centers with closed classrooms are reducing statewide capacity, and there are significant childcare deserts throughout the state. Children with disabilities and children of color lack access to high quality child care and parents of all incomes are struggling to find the funds to afford full-time childcare.

Co-Chair Carroll said the sustainability of childcare is critical for parents, providers, and for the economy of Kentucky. There is a need to create quality affordable childcare and increase access throughout the state. This will likely require an increase in state funding to supplement childcare worker salaries, especially in light of current inflation.

In response to questions from Senator Schroder, Co-Chair Carroll said the Benefits Cliff Task Force will likely not address the CCAP in the same depth as this task force will. Dr. Vanover said the lower the income is for a family, the greater the assistance provided by the CCAP. Every twelve months a family has to re-certify their need, and if they no longer meet the criteria, they have three months to readjust their budgets before they lose assistance. There has been recent discussion about needing to extend that time frame.

Dr. Vanover also explained that there are base credentials for childcare workers at both the state and federal level. An employee who receives a Kentucky state credential is halfway towards meeting the requirements for the federal credential. Additionally, there are various certificate and credentialing programs for early childhood education throughout the state, especially in community and technical colleges. She cautioned that while the federal credential is the same nationwide, state credentials and pay scales, vary widely. Kentucky has a great credential, but the expectation from other states can be very different, and leads to an inequality among employees who may be coming from out of state.

Responding to questions from Senator Thomas, Dr. Vanover explained that the childcare desert map is based on census data, and not every child needs childcare. Some will be cared for by a parent or family member. The goal is to achieve enough slots to meet demand. She reiterated that the map also does not illustrate pockets within a county that are oversaturated versus those that are underserved.

In response to a question from Co-Chair Carroll, Dr. Vanover said individuals interested in starting a childcare business apply through the Office of Regulated Child Care. These applications are referred to the University of Kentucky which provides training on all the aspects of opening and running a childcare business. They also connect individuals with technical advisors to assist interested parties in getting a temporary childcare license. Once mandated training for instructors and a series of audits are completed, a permanent license can be granted. A market rate survey is conducted periodically by the state as is a workplace survey conducted by the University of Kentucky. These are not exhaustive data collection tools, but they do give a general idea of the scope of the market and benefits available to workers.

In conclusion, Co-Chair Heavrin asked the members, presenters, and other advocate groups to come to future meetings with policy recommendations that could be implemented through legislation. She also asked that the members think outside the box and innovate to address these issues. Perspectives have changed as women currently represent a significant part of the workforce, and will continue to be part of the workforce. The private sector needs to be engaged in ways of keeping women in the workforce through childcare assistance as a benefit of employment.

Co-Chair Carroll referred to House Bill 499 of the 2022 Regular Session as a starting point and an illustration of how inclusion of employers is critical. He also encouraged members to do their own investigations into childcare including models from communities and from other states. He welcomed individuals, including Amy Neal, Governor's Office of Early Childhood, to introduce themselves and become active participants with the task force. Ms. Neal directed members to the wealth of data available through KY STATS regarding childcare, specifically as it relates to funding. With no further business to come

before the task force, he said the next meeting of the task force will be July 26, 2022 at 1:00 p.m. The task force adjourned at 3:00 p.m.