

All families want their children to be ready to learn when they start school. Children who start behind their peers often fail to catch up. High quality pre-k gets children ready to learn, teaches them valuable social-emotional skills and cuts special education costs for schools. Although a growing share of suburban families depend on child care because both parents work (70%), many parents cannot afford the cost of good quality care.

Each year, thousands of suburban children start kindergarten without the basic skills they need, struggling to catch up with their peers. Of about 144,000 children under age 5 in Bucks, Chester, Delaware and Montgomery counties, 38% are considered “at risk” for school failure. Tests show that 58,700 school children are performing below grade level in reading or math.

Paying for child care is a hardship for many families

The median cost of licensed care for a family with an infant and a preschooler is \$22,000 to \$24,700 across the four counties, and high quality care usually costs more.

The unmet need for quality care is growing

The number of children under age 5 living in poverty has increased by 49% since 2008. But child care subsidies and Head Start seats have declined due to budget cuts. In all likelihood, a larger share of children will be entering Kindergarten without the necessary preparation.

Much of the care in private centers is not high quality

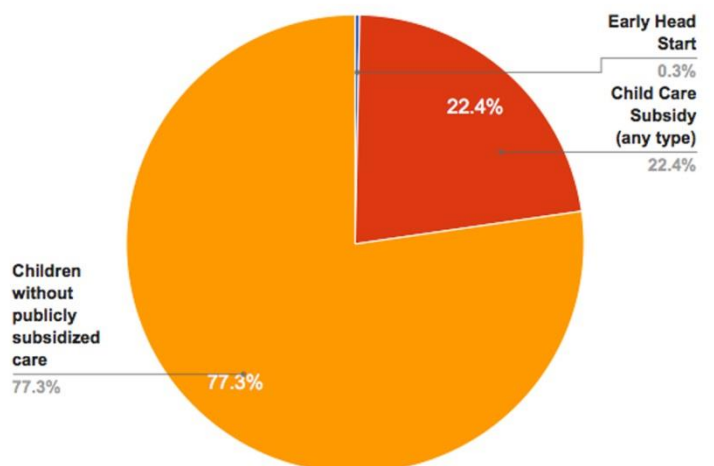
The number of seats in private child care programs rated high quality has more than doubled in five years, but the proportion remains too low, ranging from 13% of seats in Delaware County to 20% in Montgomery County.

State investments fall far short of the need. Pennsylvania makes public investments in order to increase the overall quality of care that children receive, and to help those in need to have access to quality care that can help them participate in the workforce and get their children ready for school.

Subsidies for Infants and Toddlers are Limited

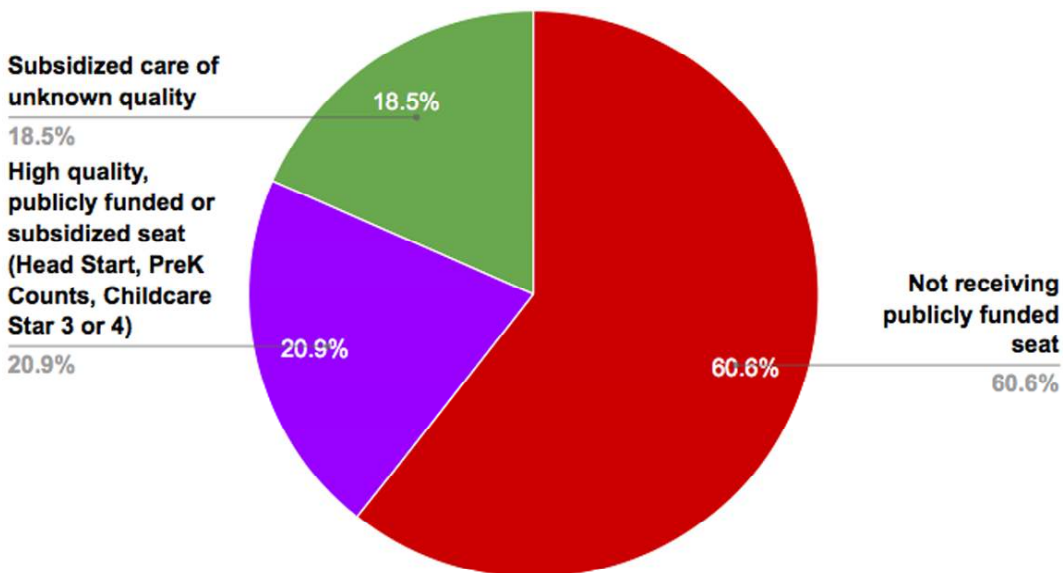
Infant and toddler care costs an average of \$13,000 per year in a licensed center – out of reach for low and moderate-income families. Although the state provides partial subsidy for low-income working families (incomes under 200% of poverty), limited state and federal funds mean there are not enough seats for everyone who is eligible. The majority of families who work find a solution they can afford, but it is often one that does not meet standards for safety, reliability or quality.

Of 17,250 infants and toddlers in poor or working-poor families, only 22% are receiving any subsidized care.



When children turn 3, most families use licensed child care or nursery schools so their children have a pre-k experience. But most of these programs lack a high-quality rating in the state's Keystone Stars system or other accreditation. Publicly funded programs including Pre-K Counts and Head Start are targeted for children at higher risk of school failure, but the number of available seats across the four suburban counties, 4,561, falls far short of the 21,750 children who are eligible, or about one in five.

Of 21,750 3- and 4-year olds eligible for publicly funded pre-K, only 1 in 5 has a subsidized seat in a high-quality program



Some parents use their subsidies at programs with lower ratings or none at all, often because of their non-traditional work hours or problems accessing a program close enough to their home.

Recommendations for counties

1. Support the PreK for PA campaign, with the end goal of providing high quality preschool for every 3- and 4-year old in Pennsylvania by 2018.
2. Create a countywide campaign to boost program quality that helps providers meet the one time and long term costs of quality improvements, and encourages parents to be “quality” consumers of early learning options.
3. Incentivize community colleges and other training programs to boost offerings for adults working in child-serving fields to increase program quality.
4. Create a grant/loan pool from the county economic development resources to assist child care facilities with capital expenses that would help them advance up the quality ladder.
5. Forge a partnership with other counties to advocate for the state to boost the child care subsidy for all eligible working families and reduce wait times to a maximum of 30 days.