When it was clear that Pennsylvania legislators could be on the verge of a cut far worse for public schools than those experienced under Governor Corbett during the Great Recession, we knew a parallel crisis in education was in the offing.

As our regularly scheduled visits with state legislators were not possible with social distancing protocols, we shifted to video conferences featuring parents and education leaders who joined us in our call for extraordinary leadership to protect kids and their futures. Speaking directly to lawmakers is a fundamental advocacy strategy for PCCY and has been throughout our 40-year history, and this year was certainly no exception.

But this spring we began a powerful new chapter with our first ever series of Teen Town Halls, ‘visiting’ four counties.

When Mawa Lewis addressed Congressman Brian Fitzpatrick and state legislators during our inaugural Teen Town Hall for Bucks County, after 37 districts in the region gave out laptops so that their students could continue their studies while they sheltered at home, PCCY asked the School District of Philadelphia to do the same. We launched the #TEACHOURKIDS social media campaign to restart learning for Philadelphia’s public school students, asking parents, students, advocates, and all Philadelphia residents to post photos on social media.

That’s where our energy at PCCY is focused. We are demanding an end to the educational apartheid propagated by the way Pennsylvania funds its schools, so that every child in cash-strapped school districts can expect an education as high in quality as their peers in wealthy communities.

We are working to stop the injustice of a criminal justice system that fills youth detention facilities with black and brown boys, while their white peers are sentenced to community service for the same offenses.

In memory of the countless victims of racial violence, from Emmett Till to Trayvon Martin to Tamir Rice, we at PCCY rededicate ourselves to advocacy and activism to help heal ourselves, our communities, and our country from the disease of racism.

Black lives matter.
she spoke with candor and clarity, fighting for her fellow students at Morrisville High School in Bucks County. Dismissing helplessness for hopefulness, Mawa seized the moment, demanding that the half-dozen lawmakers acknowledge her undeniable truth: if the looming threat of COVID-19-blamed cuts to PA school districts materialize, students at already under-resourced schools will be the most devastated.

“70% of our students are on free and reduced lunch,” Mawa, a senior at Morrisville, said, adding that even though online learning is mandated, there are still more than a dozen families at her school without internet access or even basic computer access. Lacking connectivity and computers is endemic among students in poorer communities across the Commonwealth.

Lawmakers pushing for cuts, she said, would be “taking a lot of opportunities from students, setting them back even further.”

“There’s nothing there for you guys to cut,” she said. “We’re already struggling!”

By the end of May, state lawmakers passed a short-term budget bill that would maintain state funding for public schools that was swiftly signed by Governor Wolf, an impressive sea change that could inspire a new hopefulness, Mawa seized the moment, demanding that the half-dozen lawmakers acknowledge her undeniable truth: if the looming threat of COVID-19-blamed cuts to PA school districts materialize, students at already under-resourced schools will be the most devastated.

While Pennsylvania boasts that it “covers all kids” under its pioneering CHIP program (one of PCCY’s defining and most consequential achievements), the legislation callously cuts out a cohort of an estimated 24,000 vulnerable children who, through no fault of their own, are undocumented and, as a result, are not permitted to access public insurance in Pennsylvania.

COVID-19 makes plain that state lawmakers going out of their way to rule out these children not only harms children by depriving them of their basic right to healthcare, but robs all Pennsylvanians of an effective public health approach and saddles the healthcare system with extraordinary and entirely avoidable costs.

When uninsured children get sick, often their lack of health care access means minor issues develop into serious issues and they head to hospital emergency rooms, which must be paid for by the hospital or health care system.

“Lawmakers need to understand that when children get sick, they’re less likely to get care if they’re uninsured, like the thousands of undocumented children in Pennsylvania,” Dr. Karen Wang, a pediatrician at the Berks Community Health Center and district physician for the Reading School District, told PCCY. “But with COVID-19, the stakes are higher and the need to extend CHIP coverage to all children has never been greater.”

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OUR DREAM FOR ALL PA CHILDREN

This year, over 400 volunteers registered nearly 1,200 children in just four hours of operation, besting last year’s total. More than half received two pairs of free glasses.

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LEADING THE CHARGE TO SUPPORT CHILD CARE

When close to 80% of parents with young children in the workforce, the importance of child care to the economy and hopes of a post-COVID recovery cannot be overstated. But while the future of child care faces challenges, even as many counties re-open for business, thousands of child care centers were for a time facing imminent collapse in the early days of the pandemic.

Approximately one-third of surveyed childcare agencies in PA reported that they would not be able to remain open if the state-mandated shutdown last longer than a month.

PCCY put an emergency response plan into effect mere weeks into the shutdown, assessing the needs of child care centers in our five-county region as described in a series of emergency conference calls with providers who had few supports and dwindling hopes.

The plan also included a one-of-a-kind pop-up technical assistance program, providing expert advice on matters such as the myriad of changes to federal requirements on Family/Medical leave, unemployment compensation, as well as applying for state and federal COVID-19-related grants and loans made available for small businesses.

All told, PCCY connected with 1,400 child care providers, mostly from Southeast Pennsylvania but some from as far as Erie. But our work was only just beginning. In the long term, the prognosis remained bleak for the child care sector without desperately needed support from Harrisburg.

In May, we hosted a virtual town hall called Child Care on the Brink, engaging education policy makers and journalists in and out of the child care sector, in partnership with First Up and United Way of Greater Philadelphia and Southern New Jersey, hoping to convince lawmakers to prioritize aid to shore up the Commonwealth’s child care infrastructure. Featuring national child care experts and information relevant to their broad, statewide audience, the Pennsylvania Cable Network requested permission to broadcast the town hall to households across the Commonwealth.

In addition, we spoke to every Republican member in the Southeast and testified before the House Democratic policy committee twice.

Simultaneously, as a leading organization in both statewide coalitions, Start Strong PA (child care) and Pre-K for PA, we formulated a strategy to sustain early childhood education infrastructure with the goals of enabling parents to return to work post-crisis, prevent higher costs for public schools that would result from learning losses, prevent steep tuition increases, and reduce the chances of child care-based COVID-19 outbreaks with mandated training and safety policies for all providers.

Much to the relief of parents of young children and PA child care providers, state lawmakers ultimately delivered on these urgent needs through the short-term budget, providing a $222 million boost for the sector.

The work continues, as we press on to advocate for the federal funds needed to protect the best of our early child care providers.

COVID-19 TOOLKIT FOR PARENTS & PROVIDERS

When schools first shut down in March, it was a wakeup call about how non-normal things were going to be. But the shock wore off quickly and the implications for parents started to mount. What will happen to the school year and student grades? How am I supposed to get anything done (like work or make sure my family gets through this pandemic) if my child is unsupervised? How are kids going to be learning from home? How am I supposed to teach my children?

Enter: PCCY’s COVID Toolkit To Help Kids During The Coronavirus Shutdown, the region’s first family-focused resource.

We made sure to include practical education resources and tips for parents, as well as important health insurance information, WIC updates, food pantry locations, and as many resources as we could find to help support parents and children, including our celebrated #ArtsEdAtHome module.

The Toolkit also houses several flyers translated in up to 10 languages so that immigrant families for whom English is not their first language could avail themselves of assistance as English speakers can easily do. Our multi-lingual information also includes an extensive list of safe healthcare providers, eviction support, and gig worker unemployment assistance.

THE NATURAL EVOLUTION OF OUR MINECRAFT EXTRAVAGANZA

With Philly’s finest dinosaur collection looming overhead, some 6,000 children from our region and beyond spent the last weekend before New Year’s steeped in a massive celebration of their favorite video game and a few of their favorite subjects, namely Science, Technology, Engineering and Math.

The work continues, as we press on to advocate for the federal funds needed to protect the best of our early child care providers.

In response to the dearth of engaging STEM events for young learners, we formed a partnership with event producers Open World and event host the Academy of Natural Sciences of Drexel University (made possible by the visionary leadership of their Board Chair David E. Griffith) to create a special experience in Philadelphia over the holidays, our third annual Minecraft event.

We would like to thank our amazing event sponsors who helped make Minefair, which also raised funds to support PCCY, possible: IBEW 98, Microsoft, PECO, FAN GURU, and Keystone First.
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PICASSO PROJECT RISES TO EXCEED NEW CHALLENGES

The creative arts aren’t just lessons and talents, they’re tools,” Masterman eighth grader Noah Eggerts told Philadelphia City Council in his eloquent testimony about the importance of arts education funding for himself and his peers.

That’s because the role of the arts remains woefully misunderstood, despite mounds of hard data that demonstrate the impact arts education has on every student. So when the threat of COVID cuts to education drew near, PCCY was data-bound to fight to hold arts education harmless for the sake of Philadelphia students.

“Arts programming at school introduces students to themselves, their passions and careers,” Eggerts explained. “School is where we grow – where we find friends, well-being and purpose. That isn’t possible without the arts funding we need.”

“Arts are the glue that attach students to learning at school,” Picasso Project director Tim Gibbon testified before City Council. The sentiment had particular resonance during the shutdown of schools and the protracted rollout of the shift to online instruction as arts education was largely neglected.

PCCY’s Picasso Project produced an online arts education guide that takes a measured, practical approach to help parents and educators support creative learning while schools remain closed during the COVID shutdown. Made possible through the generous support of Wells Fargo Foundation, the guide was called #ArtsEdAtHome.

#ArtsEdAtHome, a curated selection of free arts education resources is organized by artistic discipline: general art/virtual field trips, visual arts, music, dance/movement, and theater/poetry. It is available for download now and some eager parents and teachers are already starting to post works from their young artists.

“Access to arts education is critical, especially in this time of social distancing and disruption of normalcy,” says Tim. “Through the arts, kids can stay connected, use their imaginations to access a more positive reality, and process any stress and anxiety that they may be experiencing.”

TAKE ACTION: CHECK OUT THIS NEW ORGANIZATION WITH A NEW APPROACH TO HOLDING ELECTED OFFICIALS ACCOUNTABLE ON ISSUES AFFECTING KIDS

Childrenmatteractionfund.org