

Strategies for Children

Massachusetts Board of Early Education and Care

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Statements from the Public

Amy O'Leary, Early Education for All Campaign Director, Strategies for Children

Dear Board Chair Lesaux, Secretary Peyser and members of the Board:

We appreciate the opportunity to submit written testimony for this virtual EEC Board meeting. These are unusual times and we at Strategies for Children are grateful for all you have done to keep the field updated and include feedback in decision making. We also want to thank Commissioner Aigner-Treworgy for her exceptional, passionate, thoughtful leadership.

We know that it will be impossible to fully reopen the economy without a robust child care system. This pandemic has highlighted the fragility and urgent need for innovation within our industry. This instability is a direct result of inconsistent funding models. It is not sustainable to fund based on attendance, per child/per day. We need to treat child care like the public good that it is and work towards cost-based financing. We would not be at-risk of losing 30% of our child care capacity if providers had access to stable funding streams. Approximately 70% of our pre-COVID system has applied to reopen. The remaining 30% has not submitted reopening plans to EEC and almost 200 programs have closed their doors permanently. We worry that this number will only increase in the months ahead without substantial investment.

Nationally, a recent NAEYC survey found that 40% of providers are certain they will close without additional federal assistance. Only 18% of programs expect that they will survive longer than a year. The child care system, within MA and around the country, is in crisis. We know that all programs are going to need flexible, stable funds to have a chance at making it in our new reality.

Over the past month, we have heard heartbreaking stories from directors and family child care providers who are borrowing from their reserves in the hope of a child care bailout that may never come. Providers are considering staff reductions and salary cuts for a workforce that already makes poverty-level wages. Other potential solutions, increasing tuition rates and changing program hours, will place a heavy burden on working families.

We must continue to respond to the immediate needs of our field, while also rebuilding a stronger early care and education system for the future. In EEC's strategic plan it is important to recognize how the Coronavirus has changed the context in Massachusetts, while also acknowledging the unique opportunity to make significant advancement. Now is the time to modernize our data systems, we need to have local systems that are designed to collect real time supply and demand data for children birth-school-age. We also need to build our technical support for programs - financing, business planning, shared services, support for legal and human resources. COVID-19 has revealed that child care has little-to-no infrastructure to support these functions. It is critical that we eliminate unnecessary barriers to our field and develop strategies to recruit and retain high quality early educators. This is why we support eliminating juvenile offenses as a disqualifier with the Background Record Check system. The recent FY20 Supplemental Budget established a Public-Private Trust Fund to be monitored by EEC and added to through philanthropic donations that will support technical assistance and professional development for the field. These are only a few of the infinite possibilities that lie before us. We will rely on the creativity and expertise of this Board and the Department and our field to lead us into a brighter future.

Throughout the COVID-19 emergency, Strategies for Children has been monitoring the reopening process and its potential impact on both the Early Education and Care sector and the young children and families of

Massachusetts. **As a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, it is more apparent now than ever before that alignment, integration and communication between the Early Education and Care sector and local K-12 school districts is essential to success. Amid the current times of chaos, uncertainty and unprecedented change, the children and families of Massachusetts are relying on our diligent planning and collaboration to deliver consistent child care solutions.** These two worlds are NOT separate; our families and communities are intertwined and are often forced to come up with solutions to the barriers we have created for them. We have all spent the past few months filled with uncertainty – not knowing when child care programs and schools will be able to reopen, how they are going to reopen safely, or the financial impact of this virus. We can solve this together.

We are calling on the Board, the Department of Early Education and Care, the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, local school districts and the Early Education and Care sector to align reopening guidance and create opportunities for local collaboration between these two sectors in planning for reopening this fall. We know that there will not be a one-size-fits-all solution and that each community will need to develop an individualized plan. Many early education and school-age programs will reopen this summer, meanwhile public schools are preparing for multiple potential scenarios in the fall (in-person, hybrid and remote learning). It is paramount that we work together to develop ethical and thoughtful reopening plans.

We also call on EEC to be diligent as they reconsider health and safety protocols for the fall. We know the financial burden that decreased enrollment has placed on providers. As the Department reconsiders classroom capacity and other guidelines, we ask that they continue to make decisions that are grounded in science. We must monitor the public health data and prioritize the health and safety of the children, families, educators and providers that make up our industry.

According to Brown economist Emily Oster, who has been collecting COVID data on children, child care has been a source of outbreaks nationwide. Bearing in mind the limitations of the data due to its self-report nature, California (as of July 28) had 1443 cases in child care facilities. Ohio (also as of July 28) had 442. Texas child care facilities have reported a whopping 1,799 cases as of July 9. According to the Texas Tribune, the outbreak in the state began a few weeks after Governor Gregg Abbott decided to repeal the health and safety protocols, which included guidelines requiring daily temperature checks, outdoor drop offs, and distanced meals. EEC and the Department of Public Health are working to collect and disseminate COVID-19 child care data. This information is ESSENTIAL to operations. **As we reopen child care it is paramount that we learn from other states and keep our Commonwealth safe.**

This requires accessible Local Boards of Health, testing with rapid results, and continued support to help providers access PPE and adequate sanitization supplies. The language in Section 45 the supplemental budget that Governor Baker signed on July 24 is excellent and we look forward to the process being implemented. Providers are relying on local boards of health - as directed by the EEC Health and Safety Minimum Guidelines - for help navigating these complex situations. Clear and consistent messaging from local boards of health as potential coronavirus exposures and cases inevitably rise is critical. We need to expedite the reporting of test results. This problem is not unique to the child care industry, but the impact and resulting instability could be catastrophic. This will undoubtedly create situations that lead to unnecessary learning loss for young children and stress on providers. Testing is rendered completely useless when it takes anywhere from 5-10 days to receive results. Finally, the field needs help subsidizing the cost of PPE and cleaning supplies. This can come in either the form of direct monetary subsidization, or through group purchasing options.

While the subsidy system has received some financial support, in the form of continued subsidy payments throughout the child care closure and the \$45.6 million in reopening grants from the CARES Act, many providers who rely on private dollars and out-of-pocket tuition payments have been left to fend for themselves. We must continue to prioritize our most at-risk children, while also acknowledging the inequality

that exists within our current subsidy system. There are many families that need our support, even if they pay out-of-pocket tuition. We know that the Massachusetts child care industry lost \$250 million per month during closures and programs continue to operate at a loss with the reduced capacities. **The Department of Early Education and Care must develop a sustainable plan to finance the field and address the immediate need of ALL providers.**

We cannot accomplish these goals without substantial federal funding. We will need to develop solutions and advocate together for additional resources. We call on all EEC Board members to support federal legislation creating a child care stabilization fund that allocates \$50 billion dollars in flexible spending for the child care industry. This is not a problem that states can fix on their own.

In a global pandemic, we need federal support. The Child Care Is Essential Act and the Child Care for Economic Recovery Act provide such relief and will allow us to rebuild a stronger child care system for years to come. The HEALS Act currently provides \$5 billion to child care providers through the Child Care and Development Block Grant (CCDBG) and creates a \$10 billion “Back to Work Child Care Grants” fund. We know that this will not be enough to stabilize our industry. We also know that states need flexible dollars. **Join us as we advocate for Congress to provide \$50 billion in flexible spending while negotiating the next and final coronavirus relief stimulus package, the HEALS Act.**

Thank you for your leadership. We look forward to continuing our work together.

Amy O’Leary
Strategies for Children

CC: Commissioner Aigner-Treworgy