

## The Next Big Things



"You're being told no all the time, and you could get discouraged about life," said Philadelphia high school student Rhymier McKellar at the Children First Big Thing 2.0 summit.

Since the first Big Thing conference last year, we are seeing progress:

- ✚ \$100 million per year for five years in new state funding for schools to add or enhance mental health support.
- ✚ \$24 million in new state funding for CTE/career pathways in the budget.
- ✚ Legislation to build a teacher pipeline and develop ways to support educators in high-need or rural areas passed the full House and awaits a hearing in the Senate Education Committee.

Over 125 young people, parents, leaders, and advocates came together to design new ways to say "yes" to young hopes and opportunities by focusing on three specific things: mental health, teacher diversity, and career and technical education (CTE).

These three "big things" came out of last year's groundbreaking conference. This year's summit was a chance to revisit the topics, hear updates and latest research, and connect with each other to keep the momentum going strong.

Alex Briscoe of the California Children's Trust shared the blueprint on California's ambitious mental health reforms that will give every child who needs it access to mental health services.

Thaddaeus Peay, a young Black man teaching in the Norristown Area School District, spoke about connecting with his students of color who are struggling, telling them, "I totally understand where you're coming from because I went through the same thing. And was it easy? No. But did I persevere? Yes, and you can too."

Contact Neli Sepulveda at [nelidas@childrenfirstpa.org](mailto:nelidas@childrenfirstpa.org) if you want to be a part of this exciting, long-term, grassroots strategy. The work continues.



## Winning Strategy

Getting the Lead Out

Seven out of ten Pennsylvania homes today still have lead paint on their walls. Our partners in the Lead-Free Promise Project have been leading the charge to remove lead paint hazards from homes and apartments so no child will ever suffer the lifelong consequences of lead poisoning.

Children First was on-hand as the House Democrats released \$10 million to provide low-income homeowners and landlords assistance to test for and remove hazards. In a Pennsylvania first, lead remediation was specifically designated in the state budget with \$2.37 million to remove more lead hazards from homes and develop the workforce to tackle the crisis.

Visit [www.paleadfree.org](http://www.paleadfree.org) for more information.



Donna Cooper, House Speaker Joanna McClinton, and Dr. Monica Taylor, Chair of the Delaware County Council announce the \$10 million for lead remediation.



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# Winning Strategy

## Reforming Cyber Charters

The 14 cyber charter schools in Pennsylvania rank among the worst performing schools in the state and cost taxpayers \$1 billion a year, according to the in-depth research by our PA Charter Performance Center. For years we've made the case at the State Capital that lawmakers need to rein in reckless cyber charter spending and boost scores, and we're seeing the fruits of our labors.

A strong bipartisan vote passed cyber charter reform legislation in the House of Representatives. Sponsored by Representative Joe Ciresi (D-Mont), HB 1422 would create a single statewide cyber charter tuition rate – \$8,000 per student. Right now, cyber charters and brick and mortar charters are paid the same even though cyber charters operate at a fraction of the cost. This common sense change would save local school districts – who pay charter tuition – millions of dollars a year.

The PA Charter Performance Center studies show that cyber charters are sitting on a quarter billion dollar surplus. While too many school districts are forced to raise property taxes or struggle with less, cyber charters have \$250 million that could be used to improve student learning or be returned to the taxpayers.

Clearly, Pennsylvania's cyber charters are overpaid and underperforming and now, thanks to the PA Charter Performance Center, lawmakers from both parties are agreeing that reform is urgently needed.

## Broad Coalition Stands Up for Funding Public Schools

Only months after the Commonwealth Court declared our public schools unconstitutionally underfunded, Governor Shapiro and Senate Republicans sought to create a new \$100 million state budget line item for private and religious school vouchers. This proposal surfaced only weeks before the budget was due for a vote.

Children First alerted parents, who pressured state lawmakers to keep state funds focused on what evidence shows works – investing in public schools.

A powerful and spirited partnership of parents, advocates, school officials, the AFL-CIO and other labor unions kept state lawmakers focused on proven strategies that will create educational opportunity for the students in most underfunded public schools across the state. Lawmakers responded by rejecting the voucher proposal.



# Advocacy in Action

## Empowerment Fellowship Launches a Dozen Child Advocates



Empowerment Fellowship, an eight-month program that trains parents how to build change in their own community. Hers is one of the many initiatives being driven by the first Fellowship cohort. For example, Laura Foster, a mom in the Pennridge School District in Bucks County, is building a grassroots campaign to fight back against the extremist Moms for Liberty takeover of the school board. And Dorian Harris is expanding his network to bring books and the joy of reading to thousands more kids in North Philly and parts of Montgomery County.

Inella Ray, Children First Director of Parent Advocacy & Engagement who ran the Fellowship program, knows that this cohort will be the start of important change for children. "They've all dedicated themselves to creating something larger and greater in their neighborhoods and cities, and that's going to create ripples of goodness and change that will endure." [Go to www.childrenfirstpa.org/pec](http://www.childrenfirstpa.org/pec) for more information about Parents Empowered for Change.

"The Fellowship intensified my mission to fix our broken Philadelphia schools," said Sheila Johnson. "It gave me the gumption to press forward."

Sheila's daughter attended Building 21, a district high school that closed suddenly because of asbestos. Sheila led the parent response over the way the district mishandled communication with parents and students. Thanks to the Fellowship, she intensified her grassroots efforts to improve public education and demand better support for students.

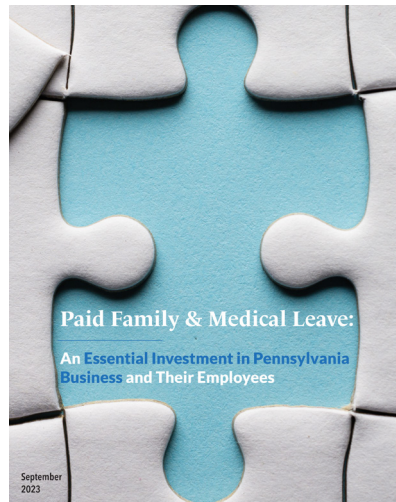
Sheila participated in the inaugural



# Advocacy In Action

## Paid Leave Give Employers the Competitive Edge and Parents a Choice

Paid leave benefits for all employees would make Pennsylvania a great place to live, work, raise a family, and run a business – and we're not the only ones who think this. Children First Action Fund commissioned a statewide poll that found that six out of ten Republicans favor a paid leave program that would allow families to care for loved ones, especially newborns, without risking their jobs and hard-earned financial security. Loyal GOP voters, including 64% of voters without a college degree and 67% of women, want the government to give parents the choice they need to tend to the medical needs of their family.



Building on the eye-opening poll results, Children First released a report showing that a statewide paid leave program is good for business. (It's good for new parents and babies, too.) In today's tight labor market, employers need every advantage to attract skilled workers. According to *Paid Family & Medical Leave: An Essential Investment in Pennsylvania*, paid family leave gives employers the competitive edge. Employers who offer paid leave have higher profit margins, and employees who have access to family leave were less likely to quit than those who did not, saving thousands in hiring and training costs.

State Senator Devlin Robinson (R) and state Representative Dan Miller (D) are working closely with Children First and business leaders to enact a paid leave program. At a roundtable discussion in Pittsburgh, Representative Miller stated emphatically, "It's going to happen." [Go to www.childrenfirstpa.org to download the report.](http://www.childrenfirstpa.org)

# Advocacy In Action

## Juvenile Justice Reform

Children First is a key partner in a burgeoning statewide coalition that is leading the charge to improve the juvenile justice system – and many of our partners are from across the state and across the political spectrum. Republicans and Democrats increasingly agree that young people who make mistakes need support to do better, and whenever possible, receive that support while remaining in the community. This approach makes communities safer, saves money, reduces recidivism, and increases the opportunities for young people to be contributing (taxpaying) members of society.

The coalition is working with the state legislature's bipartisan, bicameral Youth Safety Caucus, that has endorsed a package of bills to reform the juvenile justice system. The Improving our Juvenile Act (HB 1381), which will make communities safer and prevent kids from going deeper into the justice system, passed the House Judiciary Committee. This is the first time in a long time that progress has been made and there's a lot of work in store to get this important legislation to the Governor's desk. [Stay up to date by following the Children First Juvenile Justice/Child Welfare social media page on X \(formerly known as Twitter\) at Kids1stCW\\_JJ.](#)



## Donor Salute

Drs. Carol Pate and John Melvin are the proof that it's better together. John's tenure at MossRehab and Jefferson in rehabilitation medicine partnered well with Carol's lifelong work to improve K-16 education, particularly for children with special needs. And they have been a mighty duo in their support of Children First for over three decades.

Carol served on our Board of Directors from 1992 to 2001, a significant time in children's health as Pennsylvania rolled out the country's first Children's Health Insurance Plan (CHIP). Her latest passion is writing a book on how to transform our education system to meet the needs of all children, especially kids in under-resourced communities. John, meanwhile, is enjoying his recent retirement from his position as Chair of the Department of Rehabilitation Medicine at Jefferson.

Strong financial donors for over 30 years, Carol and John have thoughtfully included Children First in their wills because they want to do all they can to support our critical work on behalf of Pennsylvania's neediest children. [To learn how you can include Children First in your estate planning, contact Caroline King at \[carolinek@childrenfirstpa.org\]\(mailto:carolinek@childrenfirstpa.org\) or \(215\) 680-0077.](#)



**We want to hear from you!** Scan the QR code to answer a short survey about the Childwatch Newsletter so we can deliver you the most meaningful information or visit [www.childrenfirstpa.org/newslettersurvey](http://www.childrenfirstpa.org/newslettersurvey).





# YPAC Leaders



The Children First Young Professionals Advisory Council (YPAC) is building the pipeline of child advocates and two rising stars are already shining bright.

Saumya Ayyagari joined YPAC just three years ago and has found the knowledge and professional network invaluable to her personal and professional development and was just selected to serve as the first YPAC representative on the Children First Board of Director. Board President Javier Suarez said, "We're all looking forward to Saumya's participation. Having a diverse board means including people who bring perspectives of every kind, especially fresh ideas to the work."



Another rising star is YPAC member ChauWing Lam, who is the new Director of Operations for the Gun Violence Intervention Coordination Center. ChauWing connected with this lifesaving work through her Children First mentorship with Board Member Estelle Richman, who is heading up gun violence reduction programs in the city. According to Estelle, "You find talent in many different places; I was happy to reconnect with ChauWing at Children First which led me to recruit her to this new position." **If you're under 40 years old and want to be among tomorrow's fun, compassionate, and successful leaders, email**

**[childrenfirst.ypac@gmail.com](mailto:childrenfirst.ypac@gmail.com) for information.**

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# Our Advocacy Worked

It has been a busy time at Children First and we are happy with the ways our advocacy worked this year on behalf of the region's kids. We are hoping you will make a donation now to help us begin this season of gratitude and giving as our supporters were a big part of the successes we had this year:

**Our leadership** at the state level to get our public schools fairly funded for ALL kids resulted in half a billion dollars invested even as we continue pushing those in power to allocate the additional \$6.2 billion needed to meet the state's constitutional obligation to our children's future.

**Our effort** to drive improvements in early care and education has resulted in 1,200 more children in free pre-K in Philadelphia.

**Our work** on improving kids' health is driving down the share of kids poisoned by lead across the state, and the share of kids getting mental health care is going up.

**Our commitment** to combating the horrors of the juvenile justice system has led us to build a powerful new state-wide coalition to demand reforms.

**Our Kids Campaign** is pushing the next mayor to put children and their needs front and center from day one of the new administration.

Visit us at [www.childrenfirstpa.org/donate](http://www.childrenfirstpa.org/donate) or use the enclosed envelope to help us put children first this giving season.