

Supporting Young Learners



At least one in ten preschool children are expelled from their early learning programs, according to leading research by the Yale University Child Study Center. Most often it's subtle – parents get frequent complaints about their kid's behavior or abrupt midday calls to come collect their child. Other times, parents will just be told, "Don't come back."

Push-out practices alter a child's way of perceiving their world, and not in a good way. Young children need familiar, safe, and nurturing places to build critical skills like self-regulation, problem-solving, and positive peer relationships. They're also at the age of developing trust and healthy attachments, and suddenly never seeing their teachers and friends again definitely undermines that. Later in life, these kids who have been suspended or expelled from preschool have higher instances of repeated discipline in school, lower levels of school readiness, mental health challenges, and more involvement in the criminal justice systems.

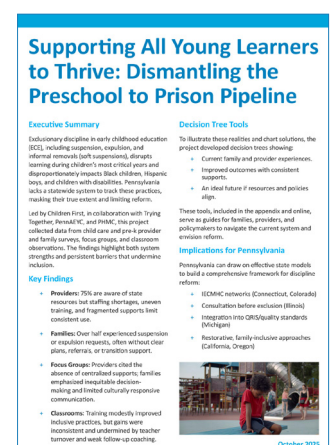
"Pushing kids out of care and pre-k is incredibly personal for young children, parents, and providers," said Dr. Stephanie Blake, Early Childhood Education Operations Manager. "We wanted to uncover what was happening and why, because it's important to families and the early learning sector that supports them."

Digging deep into the problem, it became very clear that parents and providers are not on the same page about 'who needs to do what' when a child is disruptive in a program. Parents and providers had unspoken assumptions and unclear guidelines to address concerns. And, fundamentally, there are just not enough behavioral health resources and program supports to meet a child's unique needs. For example, a child having social and sensory issues is likely going to be stressed out in a typical loud and messy preschool environment. In classrooms already understaffed, who will be able to give that child dedicated one-on-one time? What responsibility does a parent have to get their child help outside the classroom?

Supporting All Young Learners to Thrive: Dismantling the Preschool to Prison Pipeline offers policy and practical recommendations so all children can learn in safe, supportive, and inclusive environments. We coached pre-school providers on ways to constructively address disruptive behaviors. We detailed existing activities and resources that most providers and parents don't even know about. Parents and providers will have access to innovative tools so they can better communicate about ways to address behavior problems before they reach a boiling point.

"These resources will help parents and providers be better partners in constructively addressing a child's behavior," added Dr. Blake, who co-authored the report. "Every kid deserves the greatest opportunity to live their best life, and it starts young."

Briefing paper and the full report are available at www.children-firstpa.org/resources.



Budget Impasses Hurt All

Everyday Americans have to meet their job duties and deadlines; lawmakers are no different. But federal and state leaders shirk their responsibilities time and again to the

detriment of children. Thirteen times in 20 years state lawmakers have failed to pass a budget on time, including four impasses that went over 100 days. This year also marks the fourth time Congress used the nuclear option of shutting down the entire federal government.

Every time this happens, it undermines the infrastructure that serves children that's been notoriously underfunded for generations.

Whenever lawmakers fail to deliver a budget – the top job of their constitutional job description – local schools, child care providers, and community service organizations have to take out loans, drain resources, cut services, or beg for donations. This is no way for the richest country in the world to operate.

Advocacy in Action

The Fight against Lead Paint Poisoning

Pennsylvania has the nation's second highest number of children poisoned by lead, a toxic metal that still lingers in the paint and plumbing in homes and businesses. More than 11,000 Pennsylvania children have been poisoned by lead, although the number is likely higher since only 20% of kids under six have been tested.

For those 11,000+ kids, their whole lives will be impacted by what is an entirely preventable condition. Lead poisoning can cause permanent brain damage to children, causing learning behavior, hearing, and speech problems. Early diagnosis through blood testing can connect affected kids with intervention services to moderate the lifelong symptoms.

Early testing is the solution. Since most kids are poisoned by eating sweet-tasting peeling lead paint or inhaling lead paint dust at home, buildings built before 1978 should be tested and hazards addressed. And every child in the Commonwealth should be tested twice before turning two. But state and federal governments aren't taking action.

The Trump Administration eliminated the CDC program that offered funding and expertise to local health departments to address lead poisoning and state lawmakers have failed to act, again and again, on various bills that would ensure that homes are safe, and children are tested. But not all leaders are turning a blind eye to the irreversible effects of lead poisoning.

Children First and our partners in the Lead-Free Promise Project are working with local authorities to pass city and town ordinances to make homes safe and detect lead poisoning early on.



This fall, the Borough of Yeadon put into effect an ordinance that requires all rental homes and homes for sale built before 1978 to be tested for lead paint. Yeadon joins eight other Pennsylvania municipalities, including Philadelphia and Pittsburgh, that have passed rules typically requiring rental properties, child care centers, condemned properties, and property transfers to be certified by a state inspector as either lead-free or lead-safe. These local lead laws are working. For example, Norristown's Lead Poisoning Prevention and Lead Hazard Control Ordinance, in effect since 2021, has boosted the percentage of lead-free or lead-safe homes from 50% to 85%.

The Lead-Free Promise Project is now working with Lansdale, where 94% of their homes were built before 1978, to pass lead-free, lead-safe requirements but state action is still needed. Said Rosemarie Halt, a health policy expert working with the Lead-Free Promise Project, "Momentum at the local level should flag to state legislators that this is a serious problem and needs a statewide solution."

Learn more about the Lead Free Promise Project at: www.paleadfree.org and if you are not already signed up for updates, do so today!

Policy Priorities

Punishment Too Big for the Crime

In what world does locking up a child as young as ten make sense? Not ours! But that's happening in Pennsylvania. Our in-depth research to expose this irresponsible criminal justice policy found that, in a typical year, nearly 2,000 Pennsylvania children between the ages of 10 and 13 are charged with crimes. Half of these pre-teens were found guilty, while the rest are saddled with a juvenile record.

Locking up kids who are in middle school does nothing to help them understand how to be better so they return to their neighborhoods with more anger, not social-emotional skills. To make matters worse, decades of research proves that putting children in prison increases the chances they will commit crimes as they grow up and likely end up back in jail as an adult.

"Young children's brains are still developing; they make impulsive decisions and aren't mature enough to fully understand the consequences of reckless behavior," said Stefanie Arbutina, Director of Vulnerable Youth Policy at Children First.

"Prosecuting kids does more harm than good because we know it only increases their likelihood of repeat offenses."

Children First is calling for state lawmakers to act on the facts and change this policy by making sure children under twelve are never locked up. This isn't a radical idea; 13 states already are following the research by setting minimum ages a child can be charged with a crime.

THE PUNISHMENT IS TOO BIG FOR THE CRIME

PA CHILDREN AS YOUNG AS 10 YEARS OLD CAN BE ARRESTED...AND JAILED.

September 2025

Pennsylvania's outdated laws allow children as young as ten years old to be arrested, prosecuted in juvenile court, and even locked up. In 2024, nearly 1,900 delinquency charges involved children between the ages of 10 and 12, over half resulted in a finding of guilt and the consequences of a juvenile record. Our laws are out of step with several other states and ignore prevailing research demonstrating the value of investments in programs that nurture healthy brain development for children who make mistakes.

Seven other states outlaw the prosecution of children under 13: California, Delaware, Massachusetts, New York, and Utah have a minimum age of 12, while Maryland and New Hampshire have a minimum age of 13 for prosecution.

Pennsylvania's current approach to charging and incarcerating young children harms children and makes our communities less safe. These children have unique needs and require support that advances healthy development. We can make communities across the Commonwealth safer by reforming the state's juvenile laws to prevent children under 13 from ever getting locked up, allowing them to benefit from restorative, competency-oriented programs.

THIS IS THE REAL LIFE IMPACT OF OUR CURRENT LAWS.

Michael and Jameson are young children who were in the child welfare system, and who broke the law. No alternatives were considered. Did their punishments fit their crimes?

When Jameson was 11 years old, he broke into his school and stole some school supplies. Police officers arrested him, he went to court, was pronounced guilty, and put on probation. A condition of his probation was wearing an ankle monitor. He was a fifth grader who wanted art supplies, and the court decided justice was best served with a juvenile record and restricting his movements 24/7 for six months.

Michael was only 10 when he recklessly lit some paper on fire and threw it in a nearby trashcan. At such a young age, he couldn't imagine that a simple act could have larger consequences but unfortunately the fire spread and burned down a neighbor's shed. No one was injured. Michael was arrested and the judge sent him to juvenile lock-up to await his court hearings simply because Michael's parents have intellectual disabilities and mental health challenges and couldn't be trusted to bring him back to court.

Read the fact sheet, *The Punishment is Too Big for the Crime* at childrenfirstpa.org/resources.

If you'd like to make communities safer and support children getting a second chance, contact Stefanie at stefaniea@childrenfirstpa.org to join the PA Youth Justice Alliance.

Advocacy in Action

Building Mental Health Connections

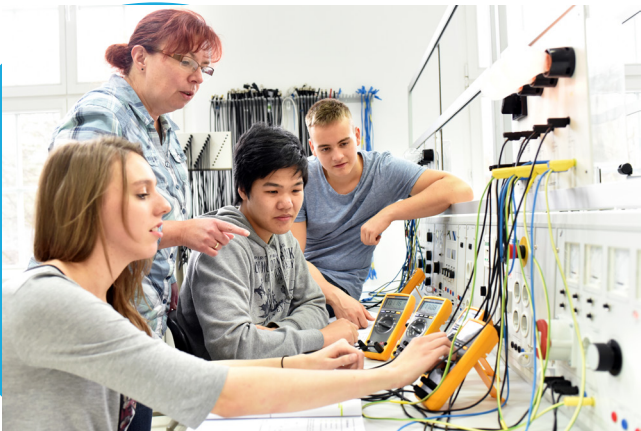
Here's a startling statistic: nearly 70% of youth who die by suicide never received the care that might have saved their lives. In fact, far too few Pennsylvania children even with mild mental health needs can get the support they need when they need it. One big reason is Medicaid. It covers nearly half of Pennsylvania children, but its rules make it far too hard for kids to get help early enough to avoid a lifetime of mental health pain.

That's why more than 100 organizations have joined together through the Strong Minds, Bright Futures partnership. The partnership is working to modernize Medicaid and make sure prevention and early support are available to every child. Across the state, youth and parents are stepping up to share their anguish publicly detailing long waits, underfunded programs, and making the desperate plea for prevention and access to mental health services in schools and communities.

"An Indiana County mom shared how her daughter had been struggling in silence for so long, she had to be hospitalized," said David Heayn-Menendez, Children First's Senior Advisor for Communications. "Even though the closest available bed was six hours away in another state, she's so glad her daughter is finally getting help to stay alive and be mentally whole." Visit www.strongmindspa.org to learn more and sign up for updates.



Increasing Access to Career-Technical Education

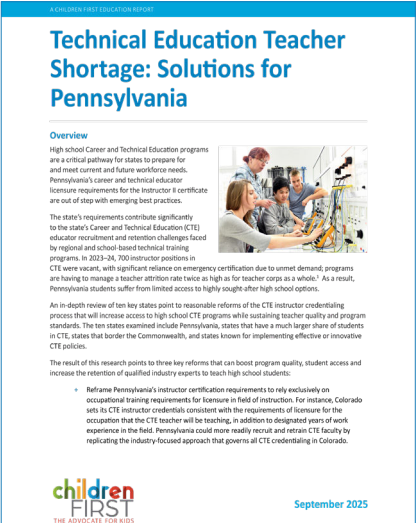


Career and technical education (CTE) in high school prepares students to learn real-world skills and graduate ready to earn a good living, but less than seven percent of Pennsylvania students are enrolled in these practical, hands-on courses.

A major reason that thousands of students are missing out is the major shortage of CTE instructors. Nearly 700 CTE teaching slots are open in large part because Pennsylvania requirements make it unnecessarily time-consuming and costly to become one. A review of CTE teacher certification in ten states, including Pennsylvania finds that, in every other state, occupational licensure and work experience can be substituted for a significant portion, or all, of the academic requirements for certification.

"Pennsylvania does not consider professional experience or industry credentials as qualifications to become a teacher," said Executive Director Donna Cooper, who authored *Technical Education Teacher Shortage: Solutions for Pennsylvania*. "A mechanic with years of experience and industry certifications or a life-long early education teacher with expertise in child development would be turned away from teaching in the Commonwealth." CTE teachers must complete the equivalent of two years in college to be certified, unlike other states.

Based on the success of how other states certify CTE instructors, Pennsylvania has many avenues for policy reform; top among them is acknowledging the value of industry experience. Technical Education Teacher Shortage includes specific policy recommendations that will reduce the barriers to CTE teacher recruitment and retention and let Pennsylvania's economy and future workforce thrive. [Read the report, Technical Education Teacher Shortage at childrenfirstpa.org/resources.](http://childrenfirstpa.org/resources)



In Case You Missed It...

Save The Date: May 1, 2026 for the Celebration of the Champion for Children honoring Donna Cooper

Under Donna Cooper's leadership, Children First has grown to be the largest child advocacy organization in the state, with a team of nearly 30 advocates supported by a budget that is four times larger than when she took the helm. Our impact and reach are due, in large part, to Donna's unwavering and dogged leadership. After 13 years, Donna has decided to retire from her position in 2026. On Friday May 1, 2026, we will celebrate Donna's stellar legacy of improving the lives and life chances for children and youth across the state. [For more information on sponsorship opportunities and ticket sales, visit www.childrenfirstpa.org/2026celebration.](http://www.childrenfirstpa.org/2026celebration)

Donor Salute

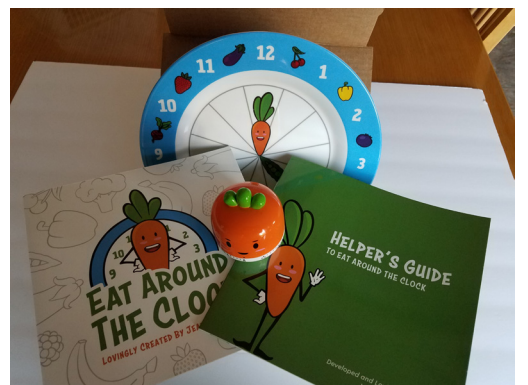


Jeanann (Jeannie) Kahley, a foster parent and former educator in the Central Bucks School District, knows the connection between a good meal and a bright future: healthy food fuels minds and bodies.

But when her foster child balked at eating healthy food, she created the Eat Around The Clock toolkit that makes healthy meals fun for picky young eaters. After its launch in 2024, Jeannie reached out Children First, asking if she donated 50 kits to us, could we distribute them to our partners in the child care field. She didn't stop at 50 though! Thanks to her generosity, Children First has been able to distribute more than 250 Eat Around The Clock kits, and parents and teacher report that kids love them, use them, and are eating new healthy foods.

"I love all that Children First does to support early learners and child care teachers. It was a perfect match," Jeannie said. All of us at Children First are inspired by Jeannie's creativity and determination to grow strong minds and bodies, as well as her generosity to our organization and children everywhere.

Thanks, Jeannie, for thinking outside the box and choosing us as your partner to enhance the lives of our youngest learners.



Be like Jeannie and support our work. Contact Caroline King at carolinek@childrenfirstpa.org or 215-680-0077.

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