



HOME BASED CHILD CARE IN PENNSYLVANIA:

A CRITICAL RESOURCE FOR FAMILIES AND COMMUNITIES



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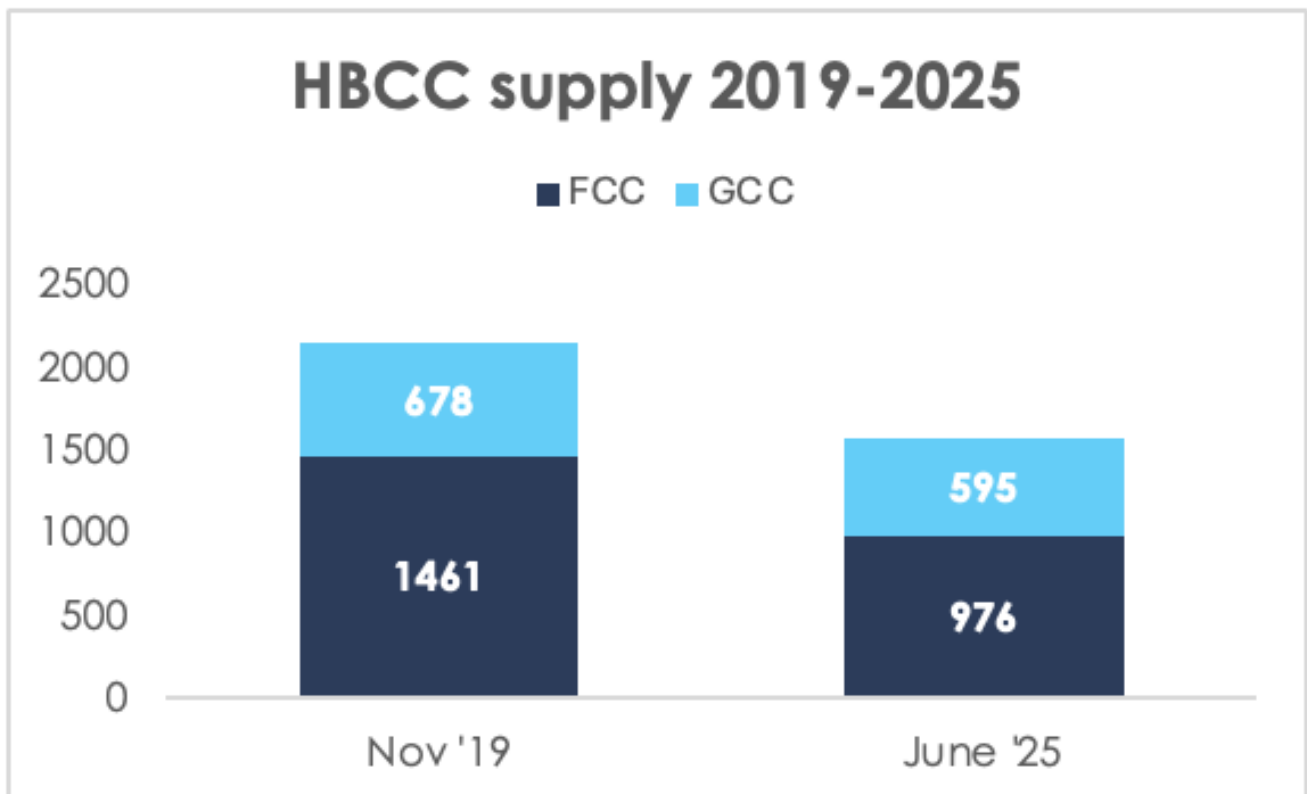
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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY:

THE STATE OF HOME-BASED CHILD CARE IN PENNSYLVANIA

Home-based child care (HBCC)—a facility where four to twelve children are cared for by an unrelated caregiver in their own residence, including licensed family child care (FCC) and group child care (GCC) homes—is an essential pillar of Pennsylvania’s early childhood education (ECE) system. Representing over a quarter of all licensed ECE settings in the Commonwealth, HBCC delivers flexible, culturally responsive, and relationship-driven care that many families cannot find elsewhere. It is especially relied upon by rural families, those working nontraditional hours, families of infants and toddlers, multilingual households, and families of color.

Despite its critical role, HBCC in Pennsylvania is in severe decline. Between November 2019 and June 2025, the state lost 27% of all HBCC programs, including one-third of all family child care homes, even as center-based programs saw a net increase. This contraction threatens family choice, workforce participation, and economic stability—particularly in communities where HBCC is the only viable option.



HBCC educators are highly experienced and deeply embedded in their communities. They offer continuity of care unmatched in center-based programs, often supporting children from infancy through school age and providing families with a trusted, culturally aligned partner. However, these educators face significant systemic barriers: low compensation, long hours, inconsistent regulation enforcement, limited access to training and technology, isolation from peer networks, and deeply inadequate subsidy reimbursement rates that fail to reflect the true cost of care.

The consequences extend far beyond individual programs. High-quality HBCC is proven to advance cognitive, social-emotional, and language development, especially for infants and toddlers. Families benefit from flexible schedules and stable caregiver relationships. Communities rely on HBCC educators not only as child care providers, but as connectors to housing aid, food assistance, health supports, and other critical resources. Child care—including HBCC—also yields a \$7–\$13 return per dollar invested and fuels Pennsylvania’s workforce and local economies.

Yet HBCC programs continue to operate within systems built overwhelmingly for child care centers, leaving them structurally disadvantaged. Without targeted policy changes—including equitable subsidy rates, administrative relief, expanded access to pre-k contracts, strengthened peer support networks, and compensation strategies that stabilize the workforce—the HBCC sector will continue to shrink, undermining the state’s ECE infrastructure and limiting family access to high-quality care.

A strong, stable HBCC system is not a peripheral benefit—it is core economic infrastructure. Protecting and strengthening HBCC will expand family choice, support Pennsylvania’s labor force, improve outcomes for children, and ensure that high-quality early learning is accessible across every community in the Commonwealth.



INTRODUCTION

When both formal and informal settings are included, home-based child care (HBCC) is present in every community across all demographics in the United States.[1] These education programs provide significant support to communities across the country, and Pennsylvania's Home-Based Child Care (HBCC) includes licensed family child care (FCC), defined as a home other than the child's own home, operated for profit or not-for-profit, in which child care is provided at any one time to four, five or six children unrelated to the operator, and group child care (GCC), defined as the premises in which care is provided at one time for more than 6 but fewer than 16 older school-age level children or more than 6 but fewer than 13 children of another age level who are unrelated to the operator, including a facility located in a residence or other premises. In Pennsylvania, HBCC can also include informal "Relative Providers," meaning close relatives who do not live in the home of the child, and who are eligible for child care subsidy reimbursement if they have a subsidy agreement and completed clearances/mandated reporter training.

Each of these care settings includes an adult caring for non-relative children for extended periods of time, in a home rather than center-based or institutional setting. This report will focus on licensed FCC and GCC providers. The term "HBCC" will refer collectively to licensed family and group child care homes, and not relative providers, unless otherwise noted.

HBCC is a powerful vehicle for high quality care that supports both the child and the family and is an essential part of Pennsylvania's mixed-delivery system. Over a quarter of all licensed early care and education (ECE) settings in Pennsylvania are home-based.[2] Despite its importance, the HBCC sector is contracting at an alarming rate: Pennsylvania lost 27% of all HBCC programs between November 2019 and June 2025, including a staggering 33% of family child care programs; in contrast, Pennsylvania has seen a net increase of center-based programs.[3]

Pennsylvania's supply of HBCC programs has sharply decreased since 2019, in part due to the myriad of challenges facing these educators. Given the decline in availability of HBCC for Pennsylvania's working families, it is important for policymakers and leaders across the Commonwealth to better understand HBCC as part of the overall ECE system in order to better support these valuable education programs.

This report seeks to outline the current landscape of HBCC in Pennsylvania, explore the gaps in research and resources that pose challenges to these educators, and provide recommendations on policy and research areas that may best support HBCC programs. Opportunities for improving conditions for HBCC educators include compensation and benefits, streamlined administrative requirements, and better understanding and support from the various entities who interact with HBCC educators.



Pennsylvania's Regulatory Definitions of Home Based Child Care, Family Child Care, and Group Child Care

In Pennsylvania, the regulations for child care facilities are defined as follows:

Family Child Care: A facility located in a home where four, five, or six children are cared for by a caregiver who is not related to the children.

Group Child Care: A facility where seven to 12 children are cared for by a caregiver who is not related to the children.

These definitions are part of the regulations set by the Pennsylvania Department of Human Services (DHS) to ensure the safety and quality of care provided to children in these settings.[4]

WHAT IS A "CHILD CARE HOME?"

HBCC programs in Pennsylvania are licensed to care for a maximum of 6 children in a family child care home, or up to 12 children in a group child care home.[5] HBCC learning environments may contain many or most of the elements seen in center-based preschool classrooms, including curricula, lesson plans, or prepared sets of learning and play activities.[6] HBCC programs also enjoy the benefits of being in a home, such as easy access to a kitchen and maybe a yard. Each educator's home environment is transformed into a unique learning space, depending on the space and resources available, as well as the makeup and needs of the families and community served.

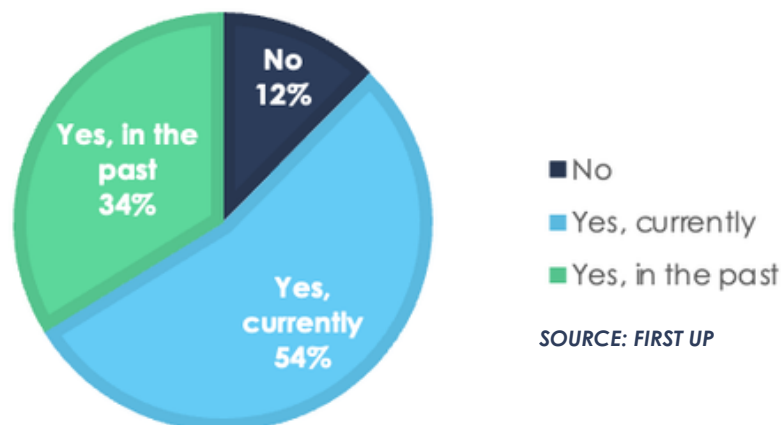
WHO UTILIZES HOME BASED CHILD CARE?



Nearly 6.4 million children 0-5 years old receive care in HBCC settings nationally.[7] Families tend to prefer HBCC settings for reasons such as the nurturing home setting, neighborhood location, flexible schedule to accommodate shift work, or cultural similarities.[8] HBCC is also the first choice for rural communities due to the continuity of care and ability to serve siblings together.[9] HBCC also serves communities who do not have a critical mass of young children to necessitate a larger center.

As stated previously, families choose HBCC for a variety of reasons. They may prefer the home-like setting and small group size, or require more flexible hours, such as evening and weekend care. [10] Other families who prefer HBCC include families of infants and toddlers, Black and Latino families, families of children with special needs, and families experiencing poverty.[11] Nationally, nearly 90% of HBCC educators cared for at least one child under 3 (considered an infant or toddler); similarly, around 30% of infants and toddlers in the U.S. attend HBCC programs.[12][13]

HBCC OFFERING FLEXIBLE HOURS



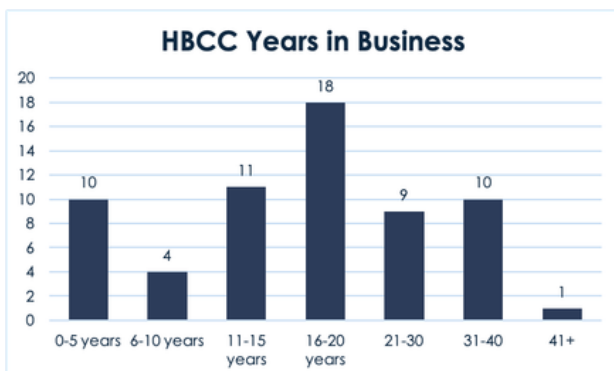
WHO ARE THE HBCC EDUCATORS?

Home Grown, a national nonprofit focused on supporting HBCC, describes the HBCC workforce as 97% female, compared to 47% of workers in other sectors, with about half of whom are people of color.[14][15][16] Eighteen percent are immigrant educators, and 31% speak multiple languages.[17] Over half have more than 10 years of experience, and have completed some college.[18]

HBCC educators can provide greater caregiver consistency because children do not move to different classrooms with different staff as they often do in a center-based setting.[19] Children may remain in care for years at a time, from infancy through kindergarten entry at age 5, and even return during elementary years to receive before- or after-care from their HBCC educator. HBCC educators are part of the extended family.

This continuity of care allows the educator to deeply understand their learners and tailor learning activities to their curiosity, developmental level, and skill. In addition, they are able to build on shared knowledge and experience that grows with each day they spend together, adding learning power to every activity and conversation. HBCC educators may care for the same child all day, every day, from birth until they enter kindergarten, unlike a center-based program where they may shift classrooms every few months or each year.

HBCC educators invest time in their community, providing service and leadership beyond their child care role. In addition to long hours providing child care, nearly 50% of 154 statewide HBCC educators surveyed by Start Strong PA partner First Up in 2025 reported that they also serve as coach, volunteer, or other community leadership role.[20] Others have provided lending libraries and food banks to their community beyond the immediate families served in their child care program.



SOURCE: FIRST UP

47% of HBCC educators nationally report that their work in home-based child care is a personal career or a calling.^[21]

BENEFITS OF HBCC



HBCC provides a myriad of benefits to the child, the family, and the greater community. First, the continuity provided by the same caregiver from day-to-day and year-to-year supports child development, including children's sense of security and healthy interactions with others.[22] HBCC settings also support the specific needs of infants and toddlers that are harder to meet in institutionalized settings.[23] Finally, the family gains a trusted partner in their HBCC provider, an expert friend who shares the work of raising their child.

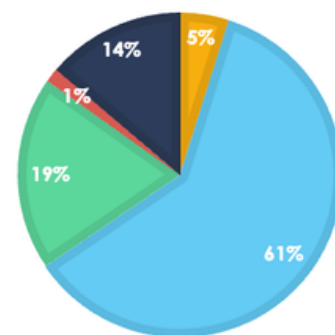
“[the security of a primary caregiver] is the foundation for how you learn a language, the foundation for whether you take a risk and solve a problem, the foundation for how you learn to self-regulate. The best place to get that is a home environment.” - Dr. Brenda Jones Harden, Professor of Children and Families at the University of Maryland.[24]

QUALITY IN HBCC SETTINGS

Research demonstrates that children benefit most when early education is rated high in quality.[25] High quality HBCC has been linked to improvements in children's cognitive, social-emotional, and physical development.[26] Children who attended HBCC programs showed similar academic gains and greater social-emotional outcomes than their peers in center-based classrooms.[27] Pennsylvania utilizes the Keystone STAR system to rate early childhood program quality from one STAR (indicating basic certification compliance) to four STARs, the highest rating. Programs with 3 or 4 STARs are considered “high-quality.” Over half of Pennsylvania's HBCC programs are rated STAR 1, and fifteen percent are rated STAR 3 or 4.[28]

PA HBCC QUALITY LEVELS, 2026

■ No STAR Level ■ STAR 1 ■ STAR 2 ■ STAR 3 ■ STAR 4



SOURCE: PENNSYLVANIA OFFICE OF CHILD DEVELOPMENT AND EARLY LEARNING

Infants and toddlers particularly benefit from high quality care. HBCC settings help infants form a secure attachment with their caregiver and allows toddlers to learn social and emotional skills by interacting in a small, family-like setting.[29] Children under three who participate in high quality care and education demonstrate stronger language, math, and social-emotional skills than children the same age who are not in high quality ECE programs. Infants and toddlers also experience greater developmental gains when they experience continuity of care, meaning they are cared for by the same caregiver over time; this is true for children cared for by the same adult each day.[30]

The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services published a report in 2023 which showed that children from families with low incomes, dual-language learners, and children with disabilities see the greatest gains from participation in high quality early care and education.[31] Because these families often prefer HBCC programs, as mentioned above, quality is especially important in HBCC. Building the quality of the HBCC supply would positively impact these children and their families.

EQUITY

In HBCC programs, there is a greater likelihood that the child and educator will share cultural features, allowing for more culturally informed and responsive care.[32] HBCC educators support equity by providing child care options for families with low incomes and by serving infants and toddlers, children with special needs, and children from families of color or families who speak languages other than English.[33]

Families benefit when they can receive child care that is flexible and allows for varying parental working hours.[34] They are more likely to receive this flexibility at a HBCC program compared to a center, as 70% of HBCC programs nationally reported providing flexible hours, compared with 45% of centers.[35] HBCC provides additional support for Black families, over half of whom work at least some nonstandard hours, and schedule needs that are more likely accommodated by a HBCC provider.[36]

Often [HBCC educators] mimic and look like the home setting of the children they care for. Students are provided with an atmosphere where they see people representative of their color, nationality and faith..." –HBCC educator



CHILD OUTCOMES

Research from the National Association for Family Child Care (NAFCC), and echoed by others, shows that consistent and reliable caregiving supports early neurological development.[i] The consistency provided by a HBCC setting provides the opportunity for a responsive relationship between the infant or toddler and the caregiver.[38]

HBCC settings provide small, family-like environments with more opportunity for one-on-one interactions. These relationships support long-term gains for children's language, social-emotional and academic skills development.[39] HBCC also provides children with an opportunity to be cared for in smaller groups, allowing HBCC educators to build upon the strengths of relationships and interactions between the children and with the educator.[40]

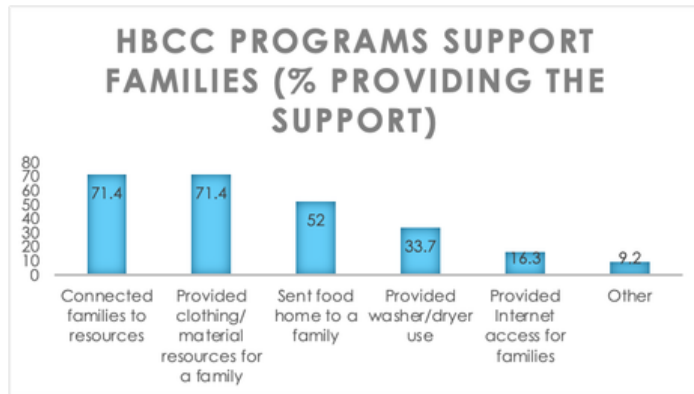
“I inadvertently have served primarily children with autism. Many of these children were kicked out of previous programs for not napping or being unable to participate in group activities. With my small in home program and experience with people with disabilities I am able to create a more flexible program for each child’s needs.” –HBCC educator

FAMILY & COMMUNITY BENEFITS

HBCC quality features include a safe and healthy environment that supports optimal child development, child interactions that nurture children's self-identity and healthy development, supportive provider–family relationships, and resources for sustaining HBCC, according to the U.S. Administration for Children and Families.[41] HBCC programs reflect the communities they serve and are uniquely positioned to identify and support families' needs. HBCC program quality reflects the resources, strengths, and needs of families and children, including their family culture, the languages spoken at their home, and other features relevant to the community.[42] This allows for an individualized education program that can closely meet families' diverse visions for early learning settings. Parents, families, and the wider community benefit significantly from the presence of high quality HBCC programs in their neighborhoods.

“We use every opportunity to keep parents engaged and informed — not only about what’s happening in our program, but also about helpful tools they can use at home. From potty training and positive behavior strategies to meal ideas, family time, and self-care, we share resources that support the whole family. We also create opportunities for children and families to come together, connect, and fellowship, building a stronger sense of community.” -HBCC educator

Children form lifelong connections in their child care community, while also providing parents and families with a sense of community, and the support of a village.[43] The close relationship between parents and HBCC educators ensures children’s healthy development. A recent survey of Pennsylvania HBCC educators showed that the majority of HBCC programs connected families to resources such as housing, healthcare, emergency assistance, or other supports, and nearly 50% had sent clothing or other material resources home to a family in the last year.[44] A Philadelphia-based educator reported housing a family facing eviction, rather than let the child’s family, and the child, suffer. [45]



SOURCE: FIRST UP

“I have supported women that have been abused. Mental illness, loss of job, transportation, food, clothing. And sometime just a safe place to cry and pray.” – HBCC Educator

ECONOMIC RETURNS

A study by Council for a Strong America found that paid HBCC programs generated \$167 million in revenue in 2016, in addition to the spillover effects on other industries.[46] The Committee for Economic Development found that in 2022, the PA child care industry as a whole generated a total economic impact of \$152 billion, and supported 2.2 million jobs.[47]

Early learning programs provides significant returns to the economy, generating an estimated \$7-13 per dollar invested.[48] These returns stem from immediate benefits such as family productivity, wages, and taxes paid, and in the longer run generates benefits to the child in reduced likelihood of repeating a grade or requiring Special Education.[49] Later in life, participants of high quality early education see stronger health and career outcomes.[50]



HBCC CHALLENGES

Despite the high value of HBCC programs, lack of appropriate compensation and support has resulted in the rapid closure of HBCC programs in Pennsylvania. Between November 2019 and June 2025, Pennsylvania lost almost 27% of all HBCC programs (group and family child care homes combined), including a shocking one-third (33%) of “family child care homes;” in contrast, Pennsylvania has seen a net increase of center-based programs.[51] Nationally, there has been a 12% decline in licensed HBCC programs since 2019.[52]


Family child care educators report that providing in-home care is a challenging job to navigate; it is difficult to carry out standards without sufficient resources, in addition to other difficulties.[53] Examining the workload, training, compensation, and supports available to HBCC educators in Pennsylvania, it’s easy to see why HBCC educators are closing their doors, and why support is urgently needed.



NAVIGATING A CENTER-FOCUSED SYSTEM

HBCC is severely underrepresented in policy conversations at the local, state and national level.[54] Although HBCC is the most prevalent form of care for children (when informal care settings are included), centers care for children in larger numbers and take up more regulatory space in early childhood systems. Thus, many elements of the early childhood system, including grant applications, and professional development training opportunities, as well as the general expectations of early educators are formed around the vision of center-based care.

“I was a STAR 3 as well as a mentor for the STARS program. I let my designation go because I felt the program catered more to centers.”
-HBCC educator



HBCC educators often operate alone, making it difficult to manage paperwork, compliance reporting, grant applications, and documentation required by policymakers or funders, compared to centers. Time and scheduling barriers also pose a challenge, as HBCC educators have long operating hours and limited coverage, making it difficult for HBCC educators to participate in required trainings, meetings, or assessments. Professional development offerings are frequently center-focused and may not align with mixed-age care, small group sizes, or HBCC learning environments. This lack of alignment makes career and educational advancement difficult and time-consuming. In addition, limited access to reliable technology, digital platforms, or materials in educators' home languages can hinder participation and compliance with state and local regulations.

INCONSISTENT CERTIFICATION & REGULATION APPLICATION

All early learning settings offered to the public must be safe for children. This is done through licensing and certification processes. Licensing, or certification, regulations are essential for the safety of children and provide basic health and safety requirements for caring for young children.[55] Child care certification regulations are focused on ensuring the health and safety of children while attending child care. A certified program meets Pennsylvania's minimum requirements for health and safety.

Additional measures of quality beyond basic health and safety are used to measure the program's overall quality beyond this important baseline standard in other areas that impact child wellbeing, such as educator trainings and family support.

Despite their overall importance to protecting children while in care, the regulatory environment for HBCC educators has become increasingly complex and inefficient for HBCC educators. For example, regulations can be inconsistent across jurisdictions. This causes problems where a local and a state regulation may give conflicting interpretations or may be enforced differently by different inspectors.[56] Additionally, local zoning codes can create barriers in opening or maintaining HBCC programs.

Many HBCC educators report inconsistencies in regulation enforcement or monitoring when different inspectors interpret the same regulation in a different way. These inconsistencies may be due to different interpretations by different licensing inspectors, or lack of training by the inspectors on the specifics of HBCC. This confusion creates disproportionate challenges for HBCC educators and business owners.

“Unlike larger childcare centers, home-based programs often do not follow fixed schedules, as daily routines are shaped by the needs of the children in care. Recognizing these distinctions would provide a more equitable and accurate assessment of quality in home-based programs.” –HBCC educator

“Constantly rotating reps makes it hard to build rapport, and inspections often feel punitive rather than supportive. If there were consistent reps trained specifically in family childcare—and if broader issues like acknowledgement, funding, and access to education were addressed—it would make the process less stressful and far more beneficial for providers, families, and the community.” –HBCC educator

PEER ISOLATION

In addition to the broad issues of inadequate funding, high costs, and complex administrative systems, HBCC programs may also experience isolation due to working alone for long hours, without regular connection with peers or other community resources and support. Isolation impacts HBCC educators' abilities to attend trainings, whether mandated or in pursuit of an advanced degree, added to the financial barriers preventing their fuller enrollment in ongoing education, as few find higher education affordable on HBCC wages.[57] In addition, lack of engagement with professional peers reduces access to resources and supports. Participation in supportive professional networks can promote economic sustainability, as well as provider well-being, by helping HBCC educators access the information, resources, and supports needed to provide care to young children.[58]

LONG HOURS, LOW PAY

HBCC educators work a disproportionately high number of hours for disproportionately low pay, with little time to rest. According to national experts at Home Grown, HBCC educators earn an average annual income of \$29,377 despite providing an average of nearly 60 hours of care per week, plus additional time for daily set up, clean up, and administrative tasks.[59] In addition, the state gives only 15 days of allowable closures, significantly limiting these educators' abilities to attend doctors' appointments and in-person business transactions, or take vacation.[60]

“I’m open from 7:00 to 5:00 and have to prepare before and clean after. Preparing all the meals, being in compliance with the food program, doing all the paperwork to stay in compliance with health and safety, Keystone STARS, bookkeeping, sending out invoices, keeping educational records, keeping all the information necessary for compliance, all of the grocery shopping, certification and food prep, fire safety, health safety, navigating COVID and flu season, teaching, hanging diapers, communication and interaction with parents, creating parent engagement, multiple curriculums for different aged children. It’s all on me, and I still qualify for welfare.” -HBCC educator

Median child care wages do not meet the cost of living in any PA county, according to a statewide survey conducted by Start Strong PA, and early childhood educators overall report a poverty rate 7.7 times higher than K-8 educators. [61][62] Fifty-three percent of child care workers receive public assistance.[63] Many HBCC educators could take a job in a school district for a substantially higher salary, plus benefits.

“I don't make enough money having only 6 spots. If I worked at a center with my teaching certification or public school I would start at \$60,000 a year with full benefits, pension and 401K.” –HBCC educator

MATERIAL HARDSHIP

Nationally, Home Grown's research finds that 53% of HBCC workers receive public assistance of some sort.[64] This is supported by findings from the RAPID survey from Stanford University, which showed 45% of early educators surveyed experienced difficulty meeting at least one category of need such as food, housing, or health care and that a full third of child care professionals overall reported experiences of hunger.[65] As noted, these educators work longer than the average work week and would not struggle financially in almost any other occupation with the same (or fewer) hours.

“I've been in foreclosure, had my gas cut off. It's not because I'm not doing everything that's asked of me. The bills increase but the pay doesn't..... Consider what you're requiring of me, and the income I'm working with to accomplish it.” –HBCC educator



LACK OF ADEQUATE FUNDING

The overarching challenge facing HBCC educators is longstanding and pervasive lack of funding, partly due to flaws in the funding structures. For example, the primary source of funding for many HBCC educators in PA, the Child Care Works (CCW) subsidy program, reimburses all child care programs at 75% of the local market rate rather than the true cost of care.[66] This creates issues for HBCC educators when families in their community struggle financially, as low rates are calculated into the regional reimbursement rate for all providers.

HBCC programs are vulnerable to low wages when the families in their community cannot pay the full cost of care, forcing educators to leave the family without care (and possibly income) or charge a rate that their families can afford at their own expense. Many HBCC educators choose the latter, which muddies the federal funding formula and further shortchanges regional HBCC educators by framing this discounted rate as the true cost of care, pulling down the average rates for the entire local market.[67] A cost-modeling formula would be more accurate, effective and equitable in terms of reimbursing educators for care provided.



Child Care Reimbursement by Care Setting (ELRC-19)

Child Age	Family (\$)	Group (\$)	Center (\$)
Infant	39.96	50.36	62.07
Young Toddler	37.62	48.09	58.54
Older Toddler	37.24	46.52	55.01
Preschool	35.91	43.70	49.20
School-Age	34.73	39.16	41.35

SOURCE: THE PENNSYLVANIA KEY

Child Care Reimbursement by Care Setting (ELRC-7)

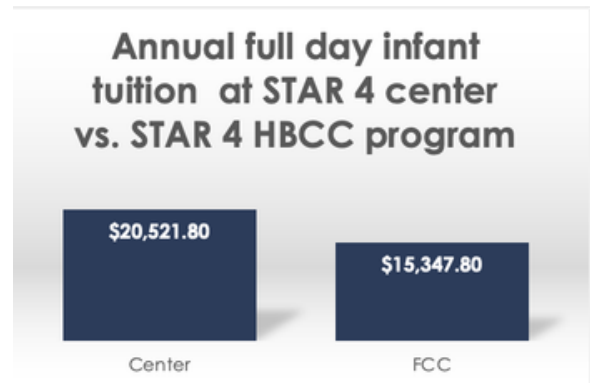
Child Age	Family (\$)	Group (\$)	Center (\$)
Infant	30.49	27.00	39.59
Young Toddler	29.79	26.00	37.37
Older Toddler	29.93	26.00	36.97
Preschool	29.93	26.00	34.7
School-Age	29.36	27.39	29.72

SOURCE: THE PENNSYLVANIA KEY

This important funding stream under-recognizes HBCC settings as well as the true cost of care. For example, under the current PA Maximum Child Care Allowance (MCCA) rates, implemented in 2025, an infant in Chester County, for example, receives a subsidy amount of \$59.03 in a family child care home, \$60.95 in a group child care home, and \$78.93 if cared for in a child care center- the same child merits nearly \$20 less if cared for in either HBCC setting.[68] Where a center can benefit from economy of scale in bulk ordering, health benefits, and other factors, HBCC educators cannot do so and must make up the difference in additional labor, or lost revenue.

“The government will pay me \$250 a week for an infant, but will pay a center with 140 children \$400 per child. I have more qualifications, standards and experience, but just because I’m [home-based], I get paid less.” –HBCC provider

In addition to inequitable reimbursement rates, HBCC programs are often excluded from the funding opportunities and benefits available to child care centers.[69] Additionally, they are unlikely to attain nonprofit status due to the high administrative time required, losing out on an additional set of grant and funding opportunities in addition to having to pay income tax on a business that brings in little income.



SOURCE: THE PENNSYLVANIA KEY

HBCC programs are also impacted by a sharp rise in liability insurance costs, a growing problem across the early childhood space overall. HBCC programs in Pennsylvania reported many changes in their insurance options in recent years, impacting HBCC educators' ability to remain in operation.[70] Additionally, some HBCC educators have reported increases in their local taxes and other business and administrative requirements.

HBCC programs are often ineligible for many grants and contracts child care centers are eligible for, including pre-k contracts, which can help to stabilize program finances with their predictable nature.[71] Some public pre-k programs are beginning to include HBCC, a major win for the HBCC programs able to secure a contract.[72] Although HBCC educators have been included in some recent initiatives, such as the Child Care Staff Recruitment and Retention Program, there are still many instances where HBCC programs are not eligible or face increased barriers. Ultimately, it is hoped that HBCC programs will be equitably included in all initiatives targeting early childhood settings.

“If the [pre-k] grants don’t start coming in I will be dropping my star level and then only taking private pay families”—HBCC educator

INCREASING SUPPORT FOR HOME BASED CARE

Despite the many challenges facing the long-overlooked sector of HBCC, there are bright spots to celebrate. For one, the child care system has achieved a new level of attention and respect since the Covid-19 pandemic. While this is focused on center-based care, the elevation of the child care system as a whole can positively impact HBCC programs in the manner of “a rising tide lifts all boats.” Specific efforts to support HBCC educators in recent years include increased access to resources and initiatives that historically excluded HBCC programs, and, more importantly, some efforts to increase compensation.

EARNING LIVING WAGES

A group of HBCC educators in Philadelphia participated in pilot program intending to show the impact of living wages. These educators were provided \$500 per month in a direct cash transfer, for a period of eighteen months. The pilot showed that increased income positively impacts HBCC program quality along with educators' intention to remain open. Evaluators noted reduced fluctuations in income, fewer extreme financial problems, greater ability to meet basic needs and to pay off debt, and greater confidence in their ability to continue working in early childhood education.[73] Highlighting the connection between funding and the quality and longevity of HBCC programs will help policymakers and advocates build reliable and consistent funding structures for the HBCC workforce.[74]

Pennsylvania's newly-established Child Care Staff Recruitment and Retention Program, initially funded with \$25 million as a new line item in the 2025-26 budget, has the potential to support HBCC educators across the Commonwealth with an annual bonus.

“[With the additional income] I’ve been able to continue to provide food weekly for the children enrolled in the program without high levels of stress waiting for the reimbursement from the food program.” [75]
-HBCC educator and guaranteed income recipient



ACCESS TO PEER SUPPORT

Another growing area of progress is the strengthening of networks, or supportive peer communities for HBCC educators. Networks offer educators opportunities to develop a long-term professional relationship with HBCC professionals, including coaches, advocates, and mentors, as well as a place to connect with peers.[76] As research is beginning to note, these networks help to improve HBCC program quality and educator wellbeing.[77] Results saw that HBCC educators who were affiliated with staffed networks that delivered a combination of ongoing support services were more likely to offer higher quality care than unaffiliated educators.

Pennsylvania houses multiple child care networks, both educator-led and staffed by external partners, and has recently merged two HBCC-focused networks, in collaboration with a leading national organization, to create a larger and stronger body of support for HBCC educators.

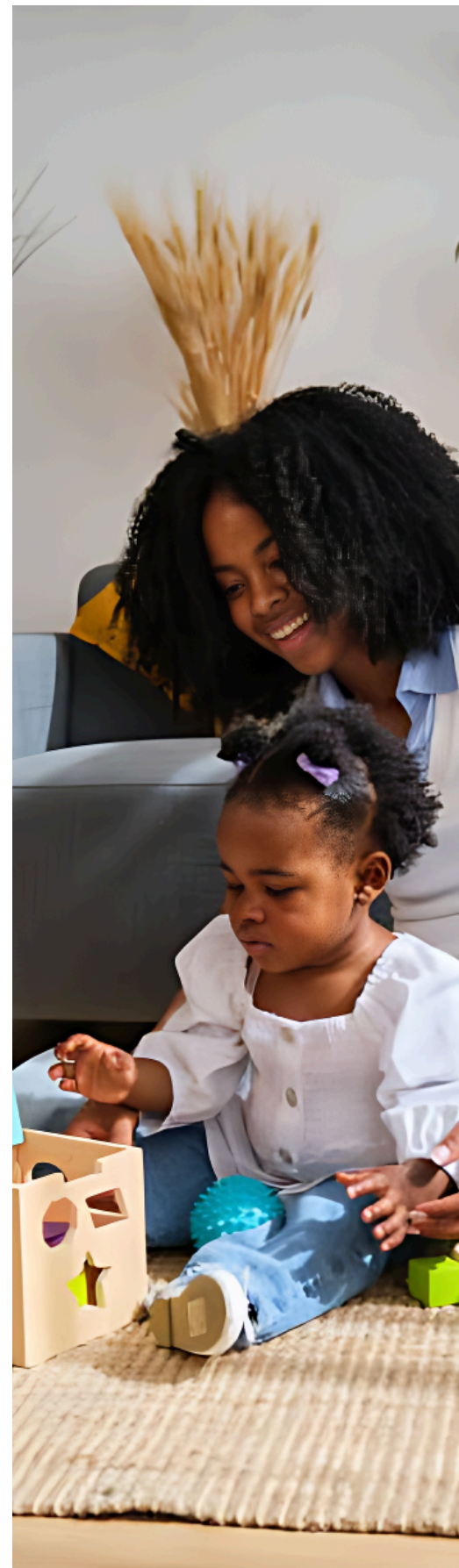
“An amazing network can assist with expanding your circle of relationships, help to gain self-confidence, and provide access to advice, mentorship, and new perspectives, fostering personal and professional development.”

– HBCC provider

“Through networking, I’ve gained knowledge, encouragement, and a community that truly understands this work.” –HBCC educator

PRE-K GRANTS

Securing grants to provide pre-k programming provides financial stability for programs. For example, when a HBCC program was awarded a contract for 4 “slots,” or seats for students, under Philadelphia’s PHLpreK program, she found her program stabilized considerably, in addition to lessening the financial burden on her families. Another HBCC program participated in the state-funded Pre-K Counts program, provided access to quality improvement resources linked to the pre-k program, in addition to similar financial stability. Families served received additional resources and supports, such as books and winter coats.



Pennsylvania allows some HBCC participation in pre-k grants but has yet to establish universal program policies to ensure all pre-k grant applications are open to HBCC educators. This is important because opportunities for HBCC programs to provide pre-k to their communities benefits both provider and community.[78] Researchers at the Erikson Institute posit that embracing HBCC settings as venues for public pre-k dollars could hold many potential benefits for children, families, and communities by offering continuity and stability, culturally and linguistically responsive care, individualized care and education, flexibility and family support, and by fostering community connections and development. [79]

“Our educational background qualifies us to be eligible for any grants available, including Pre-K Counts and others.” – HBCC educator

SUPPORT FOR QUALITY IMPROVEMENT

Resources and supports for improving quality in Early Childhood settings most often focus on center-based care. Often, HBCC programs must fit within a system designed for child care centers in order to participate. Now, HBCC educators can access more specific quality-improvement supports designed with HBCC programs in mind.

Due to their small size and slim potential profit margins, upfront costs for materials, environment changes, or assessments can be prohibitive for HBCCs. Financial support for participating in quality work is becoming a best practice. Ensuring programs targeting HBCC programs are fully funded, including factors such as books, technology, and travel, will help to ensure HBCC educators can fully participate, in addition to ensuring meetings and coursework are available virtually or in the evenings and weekends.



Similarly to accessing targeted supports to improve quality, HBCC educators also face challenges in working to advance their education. This is often due to classes being held during the day, when HBCC educators cannot leave their programs without hiring staff. Similarly, educators seeking certification must complete a semester as a student teacher; this can be nearly impossible for a HBCC educator who does not have a “lead teacher” to serve as a mentor or a supervisor to sign off on student teaching hours. In recent years, professional development agencies have worked to accommodate HBCC educators and worked with institutes of higher education to create more achievable policies and pathways for these professionals to gain the same coursework and credentials more easily availed to early learning peers in center-based settings. HBCC educators have more opportunities to advance their education and gain degrees than previously, and the best practices that support HBCC educators in higher education appear to be on the rise.



ACCESS TO HIGHER EDUCATION

Similarly to accessing targeted supports to improve quality, HBCC educators also face challenges in working to advance their education. This is often due to classes being held during the day, when HBCC educators cannot leave their programs without hiring staff. Similarly, educators seeking certification must complete a semester as a student teacher; this can be nearly impossible for a HBCC educator who does not have a “lead teacher” to serve as a mentor or a supervisor to sign off on student teaching hours. In recent years, professional development agencies have worked to accommodate HBCC educators and worked with institutes of higher education to create more achievable policies and pathways for these professionals to gain the same coursework and credentials more easily availed to early learning peers in center-based settings. HBCC educators have more opportunities to advance their education and gain degrees than previously, and the best practices that support HBCC educators in higher education appear to be on the rise.

“I tried to get my student loans cancelled and they said childcare wasn’t recognized as an educational institution.... I need to be recognized for my contributions and recognized as an educational facility. I have all [the equivalent] qualifications.”
—HBCC educator

CONCLUSION

HBCC educators are a valuable part of Pennsylvania's early learning landscape as trusted caregivers, cultural anchors, and community resources who meet the needs of children and families with a level of continuity, flexibility, and relational depth unmatched in any other setting. As this report demonstrates, HBCC programs are not a peripheral child care option; they are a central, long-standing component of the early childhood ecosystem, especially for families seeking culturally responsive care, nontraditional hours, or environments that feel closely aligned with home.

Yet the bright promise of HBCC stands in stark contrast to the conditions under which many educators are asked to operate. Systemic instability—manifesting as administrative barriers, insufficient funding, and policies that default to center based models—undermines the sustainability of these vital programs. Despite HBCC educators' commitment and expertise, no early learning system can thrive when an entire group of educators are expected to navigate a maze of structures designed without their realities in mind.

To build an early childhood system that truly serves all children and families, Pennsylvania must recognize HBCC as the essential infrastructure component it is and support them to this measure. This means centering HBCC educators and families in decision-making, integrating HBCC fully and intentionally into early learning systems, and ensuring that funding, regulations, professional development, and quality supports reflect the unique features and strengths of HBCC environments. It means creating policy frameworks that stabilize rather than strain HBCC operations, and investing in compensation, administrative relief, and structural supports that allow educators not only to remain in the field, but to flourish with their communities for years to come.

When HBCC educators thrive, families gain access to stable, trusted care; children benefit from nurturing, developmentally responsive environments; and communities maintain essential learning spaces embedded in their cultural and social fabric. Supporting HBCC is not simply an investment in a sector, it is a commitment to family choice, economic stability, and the belief that every child deserves high quality care, no matter where or how it is delivered.

By embracing the recommendations laid out in this report and collaborating meaningfully with HBCC educators, policymakers and advocates can build the early childhood system Pennsylvania needs: one that is cohesive, inclusive, adequately funded, and deeply aligned with the diverse ways children grow, learn, and belong.


“[HBCC educators] remain the most underpaid and undervalued simply because we are not housed in commercialized buildings. Policies must be enacted to ensure we are appropriately compensated and recognized for our education and the hard work we have invested in delivering quality care to children.” – HBCC educator



POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS TO SUPPORT & SUSTAIN HBCC IN PENNSYLVANIA

In collaboration with HBCC educators, partners, and advocates, Start Strong PA recommends that Pennsylvania:

- Work towards a cohesive ECE system that supports HBCC programs by centering HBCC and family voices in policy decisions, integrating HBCC into all ECE systems and providing sufficient leave time to complete administrative and personal functions.[80] [81]
- Support the growth of the HBCC educator workforce by increasing access to HBCC-focused degree programs, professional development, and staffed child care networks. [82][83]
- **Increase financial stability** for HBCCs by:
 - Fully funding the PA Recruitment & Retention line in the PA budget.
 - Enacting high quality HBCC eligibility for all pre-k programs.[84] [85] [86]
 - Setting subsidy reimbursement rates at 100% of Market Rate, in all licensed child care settings and ultimately replacing the Market Rate Survey with a Cost Estimation Model.[87]
 - Reducing tax burden and improving insurance options and protections for HBCCs. [88]
- **Implement policies that promote licensing and retention** by:
 - Educating licensing/certification staff around HBCC programs.
 - Developing clear partnership agreements between HBCC educators and licensing entities and promoting transparency for Inspectors and HBCC educators involved in regulatory processes.[89] [90]
 - Applying technology strategies to reduce regulatory burdens.[91]

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- **Examine quality** in HBCC programs by:
 - Explore what quality looks like in licensed HBCC programs, and how features of quality more likely to occur in HBCC are associated with child, family, and provider outcomes.
 - Study the connection between child care regulations and quality in HBCC settings to build the relationship between the features that impact child outcomes.[92]
 - **Research impact** on child & family outcomes, including:
 - Impact of quality on child and family outcomes for subgroups such as infants & toddlers, families of color, dual language learners, children with special needs, and families of modest wealth who utilize HBCC programs.
 - Impact from continuity of care for children, families, and communities who receive support from HBCC over multiple years.[93]

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