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HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES
COMMONWEALTH *of* PENNSYLVANIA

House Democratic Policy Committee Hearing

UNIVERSAL PRE-K
Tuesday, March 3 | Noon

Reps. Khan & Dougherty

- 12 p.m. Welcome and member introductions.
- 12:05 p.m. [Zaina Cahill](#), Early Childhood Education Policy Director
[Children First PA](#)
Q & A with Legislators
- 12:25 p.m. [Otis Bullock](#), CEO
[Greater Philadelphia Community Alliance](#)
Q & A with Legislators
- 12:50 a.m. [Benjamin Hover](#), Legislative Representative
[Philadelphia Federation of Teachers](#)
Q & A with Legislators

Zaina Cahill

Children First

My name is Zaina Cahill and I am the Early Childhood Education Policy Director at Children First in Philadelphia. I am a certified teacher, and the parent of a 4-year-old. My teaching and administrative background is in child care, private school, and public school settings.

I want to thank Representative Tarik Khan and Representative Sean Dougherty for convening a hearing on Universal Pre-K. Working parents struggle in Pennsylvania from the second they find out they're pregnant, due to the cost of healthcare, a lack of paid family and medical leave, and the high costs of child care and Pre-K. This is a great opportunity for Pennsylvania to lead for families with young children.

As of 2025, there were 665,910 total children under 5 across the Commonwealth, with 274,450 of them preschool aged, or age 3-5.

The average cost for one child in a preschool classroom in Pennsylvania is just over \$12,000 annually. In my own experience, as the mother of a 4-year-old in a Pre-K classroom in Philadelphia, I currently pay \$15,600 per year for a STAR 1 program, while the high-quality programs in my neighborhood average over \$20,000 per year. For families who are above the income limit for Child Care Works, Early Head Start, Head Start, or Pre-K Counts, this is a bill that often is equivalent to, or exceeds families' highest monthly costs, like rent or mortgage payments. This limits low- and middle-income families' opportunities for economic growth and mobility, as many are forced to make impossible choices. Like choosing between working or staying home to care for children, or choosing between staying at a poverty-level income to maintain benefits or increased wages that would limit their ability to participate in these programs. These costs also contribute to families' decisions about whether to have additional children, or any children at all.

Low- and middle-income families should not have to choose to limit their economic mobility so that they can afford early education for their children. A few years ago, a friend of mine, who qualified for child care subsidy and was able to place her infant son in high quality child care (infant care averages \$13,254 annually in Pennsylvania, and increases based on quality level), was offered a modest raise by her employer. She had to turn it down. This raise would have placed her income above the cut-off for Child Care Works, dramatically increasing her monthly costs beyond their current level, leaving her more financially unstable. So, she opted to forego her raise to maintain her eligibility.

Universal Pre-K would take away the financial constraints of the cost of preschool for the families of over 250,000 children across Pennsylvania, promoting increased economic mobility for Pennsylvania's families.

Currently, the commonwealth faces an annual economic loss of \$6.65 billion, with some experts positing that number to be even higher. Some of this is attributed to adults not participating in the workforce to care for young children, including their lost wages and the commonwealth's lost tax revenues. This can be mitigated by ensuring that early childhood education is affordable for working families through strategies like expanding the income threshold for Child Care Works subsidies and eventually moving toward a well-planned universal system for all families to access.

Additionally, Universal Pre-K promotes integration of children in school, regardless of their race or socio-economic status. Pennsylvania's current structure of early childhood funding streams promotes segregation of children by socioeconomic status, which often reflects racial divides. In fact, early childhood education is 20% more racially and ethnically segregated than K-12 schools due to the nature of its funding streams. A small percentage of providers intentionally abate this practice through braided funding, a financial strategy of combining funding sources for early childhood education while still maintaining distinct requirements and reporting for each funding source, but most are not utilizing this practice. Therefore, a system that integrates children, regardless of socioeconomic status, promotes higher social capital and social mobility. Studies show that preschool children in economically mixed classrooms demonstrate more empathy, and show greater growth in language skills, larger test score gains for low-income children, and increased graduation rates. Thus, Universal Pre-K has the potential to create another pathway to economic mobility for low-income families.

This past year, New Mexico became the first state in the country to offer Universal Child Care for children from birth- age 5 across the state, funded through a trust designated for early childhood education.

This was achieved in phases, starting with gradual increases in the eligibility cap for access to child care subsidy from 200% to 400% of the federal poverty level, before fully achieving Universal access. It is important to note that New Mexico has prioritized increased quality in child care throughout this process, in addition to increased access. This ensures that children can reap the proven benefits of high-quality early childhood education, including strong foundational cognitive skills that lead to long-term academic success.

When New Mexico began the exploration of this initiative, Universal Pre-K was the focus; however, they quickly realized that working families' needs were beyond Pre-K, and instead, they needed full day, full year care for children from birth to age 5. For context, traditionally, Pre-K mirrors the time frame of K-12 schooling, lasting approximately 6 hours per day for 10 months of the year, and for many families, this still must be supplemented by wraparound care. Conversely, child care offers hours that extend before and after

traditional schooling time, and this care is offered year-round. As such, it would behoove Pennsylvania to explore the full extent of child care needs for families with young children across Pennsylvania.

Here in the Commonwealth, we have a unique opportunity to scale up a Universal Pre-K or child care system, as we have a mixed delivery system for early childhood education. This means that we are not dependent exclusively on schools or private programs to deliver high quality early childhood education, but rather that we have a variety of programs to meet this need- school districts, private providers, non-profits, and a variety of high-quality program types, including family child care providers. This would mean that families would still be able to access pre-K through their preferred or needed type of early childhood provider. Furthermore, Pennsylvania has a Quality Rating and Improvement System (QRIS), Keystone STARS, with high-quality performance standards across domains that are built on the minimum health and safety requirements for child care certification in our state.

In conclusion, I applaud the initiative to take on the work of planning for and moving toward the implementation of universal early childhood systems in our state, and support the exploration of how to achieve this moving forward.

Resources

1. Bipartisan Policy Center. [National and State Child Care Data Overview](#).
2. Center for American Progress. [The True Cost of High-Quality Child Care Across the United States](#).
3. The Century Foundation. [We Must Seize the Opportunity for Integration in Universal Pre-K](#).
4. Learning Policy Institute, The Century Foundation, New America, & Southern Education Foundation. Webinar: [Fostering Integration in Early Childhood Settings: Implications for Policy](#).
5. New Mexico Early Childhood Education & Care Department. [Universal Child Care Brief](#).
6. Pre-K for PA, Pennsylvania Partnerships for Children, Start Strong PA. [2025 State of Early Care and Education in Pennsylvania: A Sector in Crisis is Impacting Critical Education for Young Children](#).
7. ReadyNation. [\\$6.65 Billion: The Growing, Annual Cost of Pennsylvania's Child Care Crisis. Start Strong PA](#).
8. Start Strong PA. Fact Sheet: "[Facts About Child Care- Pennsylvania](#)".

Zaina Cahill, M.Ed.

Early Childhood Education Policy Director

[Children First](#)

Zaina Cahill has worked in early childhood education since 2005, with experience in caregiving and teaching, administration, coaching, consulting, and creating and facilitating professional development. While working in early learning centers, she was selected by national advocates to advise on early learning policy, even submitting testimony to Congress. Before joining Children First in 2025, Zaina was an Instructional Specialist for the Office of Early Childhood Education within the School District of Philadelphia, supporting teachers and administrators in child care programs partnered with the district to provide high-quality services and to meet Head Start and Pre-K Counts requirements. She earned her master's in Elementary Reading and Literacy from Walden University, and her bachelor's in Early Childhood Education/Early Childhood Special Education from New York University. She has also served on multiple advisory councils and working groups to the governing board for NAEYC, including currently, as a member of their Centennial working group. Reach Zaina at zainac at childrenfirstpa.org.

**Pennsylvania House of Representatives
House Democratic Policy Committee Hearing
Universal Pre-K
Tuesday, March 3, 2026 | Noon
Remarks from Otis Bullock, CEO of Greater Philadelphia Community Alliance**

Good Afternoon Mr. Chairman, State Rep. Tarik Khan and Policy Committee Members. My name is Otis Bullock, CEO of Greater Philadelphia Community Alliance. At GPCA, our mission is to break the cycle of generational poverty by ensuring equitable distribution of resources for vulnerable children, families, and communities. Our vision is to be Philadelphia's catalyst for community empowerment and partnership, and the upward mobility of families and communities. A Brookings study has said that it takes five generations to break the cycle of generational poverty even when everything goes right. GPCA is here to change that.

A focus on children and youth development, specifically early childhood education, is one of our core pillars of service that we use to achieve that goal. Family Development, Community Development, and Housing & Economic Empowerment are GPCA's other three core pillars of service.

For more than 56 years GPCA has been a leader in early childhood education, operating two early education/pre-k programs that both have STAR 4 ratings and are nationally accredited by the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC). NAEYC sets the standard for quality early education with rigorous requirements and regulations regarding programming, staffing, and family and community involvement. Based on a Reinvestment Fund analysis, only 14.5% of childcare seats in Philadelphia have a STAR 3 or 4 rating and are considered high quality. Less than 10% of childcare centers nationwide are NAEYC accredited. And GPCA operates two of them. More than 90% of our children leave our preschool programs ready for kindergarten.

In Philadelphia, we have long-term systemic social and economic problems created by underinvesting in underserved children at an early age.

In 2023, the median household income in Philadelphia was \$35,064 compared to the median household income of \$80,060 for the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania as a whole. Nearly 20% of the Philadelphia's population had incomes at or below the federal poverty level, dropping from over 23%. I would like to attribute Philadelphia's own investments in free Pre-k programming to that decrease in its poverty rate.

Low-income neighborhoods in Philadelphia face both economic and education challenges. While the median household income is \$80,060 and about 20% of the population live below poverty, the cost of high-quality childcare can cost a family between \$18,000 and \$30,000 a year.

The National Institute for Early Education Research estimates that nationally, 30% of low-income children enter school without the proper social, emotional and cognitive skills to succeed. Students entering without proper skills face up to an 80% higher chance of being retained or needing special education services. Deficits in early social emotional skills can hinder future academic success, personal growth, and later lead to economic challenges.

While many organizations are working to improve school performance now, it is widely recognized that the trajectory of educational success is determined before a child enters kindergarten. The experiences that children have in their first months and years have a decisive impact on neurological development and the nature and extent of their adult capacities. Early childhood education must be a core component of any educational improvement or economic development strategy.

Tony Wagner, Harvard-based education expert and author of "The Global Achievement Gap," explains that "there are three basic skills that students need if they want to thrive in a knowledge economy: the ability to do critical thinking and problem solving; the ability to communicate effectively; and the ability to collaborate." Lower income children have vocabularies that are 46% smaller than their middle-income peers by age 3. Only 47% of low-income children are likely to have attended a center-based early education program, compared to 66% of higher income children. This perpetuates high school dropout rates, unemployment rates and poverty. To solve later skill deficits, we need to invest in closing early skill deficits," says economist and Nobel Laureate James Heckman. "Waiting to address these issues makes the remedy much more costly--or impossible. Countless studies show that increased spending on early childhood education would affect both cognition and character at its most malleable, lowering dropout and juvenile delinquency rates by building 'soft skills' such as discipline, self-esteem, motivation, collegiality and persistence." It is clear that young children from low-income communities are set up for academic and economic failure before they enter kindergarten. And with the rising cost of high-quality Pre-k programs, middle income families are also being squeezed and affected.

This is why I support Universal Pre-K legislation for the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania. As an antipoverty organization, GPCA understands that the road out of poverty begins with key investments at birth all the way through early education. Universal Pre-K has long been understood to be beneficial for children. However, a recent study by the [National Bureau of Economic Research](#) finds that Universal Pre-K is also good for parents. Universal Pre-K raises parents' earnings by about 20%. This study shows that Universal Pre-K is not just great for children, it is also great for parents and the economy. I encourage the committee to take a look at it.

Thank you for your time and consideration.

Otis Bullock, CEO

[Greater Philadelphia Community Alliance](#)

From growing up in poverty to becoming a powerful force for change, Otis Bullock's journey is a testament to resilience and impact. His early life shaped his commitment to breaking the cycle of generational poverty. After law school, Otis started his own legal practice while awaiting a position with a city councilwoman, which he secured in 2004.

Balancing his city role with his growing legal practice, Otis decided in 2006 to focus solely on law. He thrived in criminal and family law, and ventured into zoning, real estate, and land use—skills he honed during his time with the councilwoman.

In 2007, Otis's career took a significant turn as he became the Outreach Director for the successful Nutter for Mayor Campaign. This led to pivotal roles in the Mayor's Office of Community Service, where he managed \$7 million in grants and led impactful anti-poverty initiatives.

In 2022, Otis spearheaded a strategic merger to create GPCA, transforming it into a major force for change in Philadelphia. By combining United Communities and Diversified Community Services, GPCA now plays a critical role in fighting poverty with innovative solutions. Otis's dedication is deeply personal; he ensured his own son benefited from GPCA's programs, with his son excelling at Masterman after being involved with the organization.

Under Otis's leadership, GPCA has grown from a \$3 million organization to a powerhouse with over \$25 million in assets, showing financial strength and stepping in where other large nonprofits have retired. GPCA is now a key player in shaping major anti-poverty policies in Philadelphia.

Otis's impact has not gone unnoticed. He has been featured in "The Immortality of Influence" and "I Choose To Stay," and has received numerous accolades, including The Philadelphia Tribune's Most Influential African American Leaders, Billy Penn's "Who's Next: The Givers," the 2015 MLK "Drum Major for Justice" Award, and the 2012 Legacy of Leadership Award from West Chester University. In 2024, he was honored with Pennsylvania's 40 in Their 40s Award, celebrating his extraordinary leadership and contributions.

Otis Bullock's story is an inspiring journey of overcoming adversity and driving meaningful change. His blend of personal experience, visionary leadership, and deep community engagement proves that transforming lives and shaping a better future is not only possible but achievable within just one or two generations. Otis currently lives in Strawberry Mansion with his wife, former state Rep. Donna Bullock, and two sons Malcolm and Xavier.