

Joint Committee on Education

November 23, 2021

RE: Written testimony in support of H.605/S.362

Chairman Lewis, Chairwoman Peisch, and distinguished members of the Joint Committee on Education:

Thank you for the opportunity to submit testimony on behalf of Children's HealthWatch, based at Boston Medical Center, in strong support of *An Act Providing Affordable and Accessible High Quality Early Education and Care to Promote Child Development and Well-Being and Support the Economy in the Commonwealth* (H.605/S.362).

The mission of Children's HealthWatch is to improve the health and development of young children by informing policies that address and alleviate economic hardships. We accomplish this mission by interviewing caregivers of young children on the frontlines of pediatric care, in urban emergency departments and primary care clinics in five cities: Boston, Minneapolis, Little Rock, Baltimore, and Philadelphia. Our headquarters are located at Boston Medical Center in Boston, Massachusetts. Since 1998, we have interviewed over 75,000 caregivers of children under four years of age, and analyzed those interviews to determine the impact of public policies on the health and development of young children. We write today in strong support of H.605/S.362, which would ensure that all families are able to access affordable, high-quality child care that is essential for positive health and developmental outcomes for young children, and the health of their families.

**High-quality child care is associated with better health outcomes and higher educational attainment. However, it is not currently available to all, and barriers to obtaining child care harm the health and financial stability of families:**

High-quality, nurturing, and affordable early education and care is essential to support children and their parents. Research has shown that a child's early years are the most important for brain development. Over 90 percent of lifetime brain growth occurs during this period, making it critical to focus on developmentally appropriate skills, including language, communication, social, and emotional skills.<sup>1</sup> A large body of evidence consistently demonstrates the importance of high-quality early environments as critical determinants of school readiness, cognitive and social outcomes, and later educational and career success for children living in low-income households.<sup>2-5</sup> However, despite evidence and widespread recognition of the critical role of high-quality early child care, many families, particularly those with low incomes, have limited access to these programs that could dramatically improve children's development and future opportunities.<sup>6</sup> This is particularly true when considering the potential role of child care in offsetting the adversity and hardship often experienced by families with low incomes, which are also disproportionately families of color. Research indicates that children who participate in high-quality early childhood care and education have improved math, language, and social

skills as they enter elementary school, attain higher levels of education, require less special education, have higher earnings as an adult, and have fewer lifetime interactions with the justice system.<sup>2-4,6,7</sup> These each have immediate and lifelong implications for children’s health and well-being, as well as the health of the larger community and the economy.<sup>6</sup>

Barriers to accessing quality child care, particularly for families with low incomes, impact parents’ ability to work or further their education. Although many parents choose to stay home with their child and thus do not experience child care constraints, when a parent cannot work or attend classes as desired the entire household may suffer.<sup>8</sup> However, high-quality child care, especially for infants and toddlers, can be difficult to access for a variety of reasons. For many families, the interrelated barriers of cost, location, hours, and availability of high-quality child care may restrict parents’ ability to pursue work, training, and/or education (i.e. “child care constraints”), and thus impact their ability to achieve economic mobility and contribute to the workforce. When Children’s HealthWatch examined the impact of barriers to accessing care, we found that families experiencing child care constraints had worse child and parent health as well as multiple family hardships, including difficulty affording food, utilities, and housing, than those without child care constraints.<sup>8</sup> Our research also found that parents of color were at a greater risk of child care constraints than white parents.<sup>8</sup>

Recognizing the critical role child care plays in child growth and development and its positive support for parents, public investment must focus on increasing quality of care across settings while simultaneously expanding its access. However, availability of high-quality care that meets the needs and preferences of parents — including affordable cost, location, and hours — is limited across Massachusetts.<sup>9</sup>

### **Cost of care inadequately covers the true costs for providers to offer high-quality care:**

Cost of child care has been of particular focus in recent years in Massachusetts, as what a family is required to pay in the Commonwealth is especially high compared to other states, ranking only behind Washington, DC.<sup>9</sup> These high costs place a significant burden on family budgets, particularly given the comparatively high costs of other competing basic needs, such as housing.<sup>10</sup> A recent report from The Boston Foundation found that the average cost of infant care – the most expensive age for care – is unaffordable for all neighborhoods in Boston; however, the impact of cost is most severe in low- and middle-income neighborhoods.<sup>9</sup> In Massachusetts, the cost of child care consumes an average of 16.4% of parent’s budgets, and only 1 in 5 children eligible for a subsidy are able to receive it due to limited funding that does not adequately meet the needs of families.<sup>11,12</sup>

At the same time, child care is one of the lowest paid professions in the US and providers often struggle to afford the cost of providing high-quality care while staying afloat – a concern that the pandemic has exacerbated.<sup>13</sup> These inequities disproportionately impact women and families of color.<sup>13</sup> Although the current cost of child care is often prohibitive for families, it is critical to also acknowledge that the cost of child care for families does not cover the true cost of providing quality child care and often results in insufficient wages for child care workers. To meet quality standards across settings and expand access to

care, multi-level financial investment will be required to build state-level and provider capacity to deliver high-quality programs that support child care workers, children, and their families.

**H.605/S.362 would establish a much-needed system of affordable, high-quality early education and child care:**

Despite the critical role of child care and early learning to support the health of children and their families as well as the ability of parents to pursue work or education, free public early education and care is not universally available in Massachusetts until a child enters kindergarten after age five. This bill would rectify that by establishing, over a five year period, a universal system of affordable, high-quality early education and child care for all Massachusetts families that prioritizes the lowest-income, highest-need families. H.605/S.352 – known as the Common Start legislation – would create a new direct-to-provider bedrock funding allocation based on provider capacity (not attendance) that directly offsets provider’s operating costs, including higher educator pay. Once fully implemented, families below 50% of statewide median income would be able to access early education and child care options for free. Families with incomes above that threshold would pay no more than 7 percent of their total household income. Notably, programs would be available in multiple settings – including early education and child care centers, private homes, and schools – allowing parents to access affordable and high-quality care without restricting their ability to choose a preferred setting for their family.

Supporting the health and development of children and families across our Commonwealth is essential to our state’s equitable recovery and future prosperity and well-being. Years of research show that access to comprehensive, high-quality child care reduces family hardship, improves child health and achievement over the lifespan, and supports parents’ ability to participate in the workforce. The COVID-19 pandemic has underscored these facts, and that child care is foundational for family health and prosperity. As child care facilities closed across the state due to the pandemic, thousands of parents across the Commonwealth – particularly women – were forced to leave their jobs to care for children at home.<sup>14</sup> This bill is necessary to promote equity and address the needs of children and entire households. For these reasons, we strongly urge you to continue to support children and families by swiftly and favorably reporting H.605/S.352 out of committee.

Sincerely,

Children’s HealthWatch

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