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# Failing Kentucky's Families: An Appeal to the Kentucky General Assembly to Stop Pontificating and to Start Providing Universal Preschool

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[Failing Kentucky's Families: An Appeal to the Kentucky General Assembly to Stop Pontificating and to Start Providing Universal Preschool](#)

**By: Holly Hammons, Staff Editor, Vol. 111**

In December 2022, Governor Andy Beshear announced that Kentucky had been awarded a \$36 million grant to partially fund universal preschool for all Kentucky four-year-olds.[1] The announcement came after several calls by the governor for the Kentucky General Assembly to enact a universal preschool program.[2] Earlier in the same year, Beshear proposed a budget that included an additional \$2 billion toward public schools, with \$172 million per year funding the universal preschool program for four-year-olds.[3] Despite the governor's best efforts and Kentuckians' hopes for assistance, childcare costs continue to surge—and the 2023 Kentucky General Assembly chose not to advance legislation that would significantly improve the lives and educational outcomes of children and families.[4] House Bill 35 was sent to the House Committee on Committees following its introduction on January 3, 2023.[5] The bill did not receive a reading as legislators instead duked it out over drag and pronoun bans.[6]

Kentuckians, however, are facing economic pressures as childcare costs rise following the COVID-19 pandemic.[7] John Hicks, the State Budget Director for Kentucky, spoke before the Kentucky General Assembly on Governor Beshear's budget proposal in 2022. In response to questioning from opponents, he stated the proposal was a compilation of "targeted investments that we think will pay off, that we think will increase the capabilities, the education levels, the economic development opportunities for Kentucky citizens and raise their net income." [8] Hicks' assertion is correct that free preschool programs would

benefit Kentucky families, and research shows the entire economy would be positively impacted by allowing mothers to enter the workforce earlier if they so choose.[9] In fact, as states began to implement free “public kindergarten programs between 1950 and 1990, about 40% of single moms with 5-year-olds and no younger children entered the workforce.”[10]

When the COVID-19 Pandemic caused prices of childcare to rise, the economic supports provided by the federal government demonstrated how many children are lifted out of poverty through even menial government assistance. From 2020 to 2021, the “year-to-year decline in the child poverty rate was the largest on record” at 4.5 percentage points—a decrease directly attributable to the Child Tax Credit expansion.[11] The expansion provided families \$300.00 per child under age eighteen in each of the last six months of 2021.[12] Private preschool is currently estimated to cost Kentuckians \$6,517.00 per year, which results in an estimated monthly rate of \$543.08.[13] Thus, the rate saved in childcare cost would be above the benefit families received from the Child Tax Credit expansion.

Not only is preschool known to improve academic outcomes for students,[14] but reduction in economic stress on families is directly associated with decreased child maltreatment.[15] Recent meta-analysis has shown a significant decrease in child neglect where families are given access to financial assistance, ultimately concluding that easier access to Temporary Assistance to Needy Families “may have resulted in 29,112 fewer children entering foster care” between 2004 and 2016.[16] When the data is this clear, the question demands to be asked: *are the parents truly responsible for these cases of neglect when economic stress is due to the legislature’s lack of action?*

Were Kentucky families able to retain their monthly childcare cost and enter the workforce, the impact would be felt across the Commonwealth for generations. To date, the Kentucky General Assembly has ignored opportunities to address this overwhelming need and have instead pontificated on self-created controversies. It is time to set aside personal political identification and pursue meaningful legislation benefitting and protecting Kentucky’s children.

[1] Gov. Beshear announces \$36 million to help fund universal pre-K in Kentucky, WLKY (December 29, 2022), <https://www.wlky.com/article/gov-beshear-36-million-fund-universal-pre-k-kentucky/42363882#>.

[2] Erin Kelly, *Lawmakers Discuss Governor’s Proposed Budget*, Spectrum News One (Jan. 20, 2022), <https://spectrumnews1.com/ky/louisville/news/2022/01/20/lawmakers-discuss-governor-s-proposed-budget>.

[3] *Id.*

[4] H.B. 35, 2023 General Session, (introduced January 3, 2023 and sent to Committee on Committees (H)); see also Austin Horn, *What did the Kentucky Legislature pass so far? A rundown of key bills, big and small*, Lexington Herald Leader (March 22, 2023 10:40 AM), <https://www.kentucky.com/news/politics-government/article273372240.html> (detailing key bills to watch for the duration of the veto period) [hereinafter Horn].

[5] H.B. 35, 2023 General Session.

[6] Horn, *supra* note 4.

[7] See Kristen Kennedy, *WKYT Investigates: Rising cost of childcare*, WKYT (Aug. 30, 2021 at 4:05 PM), <https://www.wkyt.com/2021/08/30/wkyt-investigates-rising-cost-childcare/> (while the rising costs were noted in this 2021 article, inflation has caused rates to continue to rise); see also Amber Smith, *Kentucky mom of twin 3-year-olds says universal preschool would be ‘life changing’*, Spectrum News 1 (Feb. 15, 2022, 10:03 AM), <https://spectrumnews1.com/ky/louisville/news/2022/02/10/universal-preschool> (discussing the hopefulness one mother felt at Beshear’s now-dead budget proposal).

[8] *Id.*

[9] Daniela Costa, Maddison Erbabian & Youran Wu, *Economic Effects from Preschool and Childcare Programs*, Penn Wharton Budget Model (Aug. 23, 2021), <https://budgetmodel.wharton.upenn.edu/issues/2021/8/23/economic-effects-preschool-and-childcare-programs>.

[10] Jannelle Marte, *Analysis: U.S. rollout of free preschool could put more moms into U.S. workforce*, Reuters (Dec. 14, 2021 6:26 AM), <https://www.reuters.com/world/us/us-rollout-free-preschool-could-put-more-moms-into-us-workforce-2021-12-14/>.

[11] Center on Budget & Policy Priorities Statement on 2021 Census Income, Poverty, and Health Insurance Data, (Sept. 13, 2022), <https://www.cbpp.org/press/statements/in-pandemics-second-year-government-policies-helped-drive-child-poverty-rate-to-a>.

[12] *Id.*

[13] *Kentucky Private Preschools By Tuition Cost*, Private School Review (2023), <https://www.privateschoolreview.com/tuition-stats/kentucky/pre>.

[14] See Beth Meloy, Madelyn Gardner & Linda Darling-Hammond, *Untangling the Evidence on Preschool Effectiveness: Insights for Policymakers*, Learning Pol’y Inst. (Jan. 31, 2019), <https://learningpolicyinstitute.org/product/untangling-evidence-preschool-effectiveness-report> (referencing a “growing consensus” in the academic field on the impact of preschool on academic success).

[15] Melissa T. Merrick & Angie S. Guinn, *Child Abuse and Neglect: Breaking the Intergenerational Link*, 108 Am. J. Pub. Health 1117 (September 2018), <https://ajph.aphapublications.org/doi/pdf/10.2105/AJPH.2018.304636>.

[16] Dana Ginther & Johnson-Motoyama, *Associations Between State TANF Policies, Child Protective Services Involvement, and Foster Care Placement*, 41 Health Affairs 1744 (December 2022), doi:10.1377/hlthaff.2022.00743 (a single restriction on 'Temporary Assistance for Needy Families' access indicated a rise in neglect victims at a rate of 44.14 per 100,000 child population).

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