

Good afternoon, ladies and gentlemen. My name is Angela Bayer-Persico. I wanted to come today to speak before you from a different perspective. I have been working in childcare for over 18 years as a group child care provider. I started my own home child care business back in Pennsylvania as a necessity – there was no one I could trust to leave my children and child cares that I visited were either not friendly and safe environments or they were expensive.

Through the years, I obtained my Masters in Early Childhood but most importantly, I earned experience. I learned about National Accreditation and was able to understand the meaning of high quality child care versus being called a baby sitter. That is a word that triggers in everyone's minds a person who sits around in their bathrobe, on their phone using social media while the children in their care are watching TV and eating fruit loops. I've seen places like that.

We have all heard the horror stories of abuse, neglect or blatant violations of State standards in child care. We all have heard or may even know of plenty of unregistered and unlicensed child cares. I wondered why any parent would knowingly leave their child in an unregulated or unsafe place and then I asked parents. They cannot afford to pay child care and do not qualify for subsidy. So parents acknowledge the fact that they see problems and wish they could send their children to a higher quality child care but cannot. When child care rates expend all of their weekly salary, they have no choice.

I have spoken to some unregistered providers. They might have the children's best interest at heart, but chose to not be regulated because the State standards are too costly for them to bear the burden. Resources might be out there to improve quality but not enough and educating people to these resources is hard if they are unregulated.

When I started back in 1999, I did my due diligence and even before I received my license to operate, I had taken courses and had enrolled into the CACFP program. By the time I had clients, I already had a familiarization of child care and its networks. I received a lot of information through a large network: CACFP, the State regulatory board, my local subsidy office, and then later much more information through the National Association, NAFCC and Stars program. Keep in mind, this was all in PA. Rural PA.

I was able to reach the highest quality of child care by achieving NAFCC accreditation and re-accreditation many times in PA. I achieved a four star rating, highest in the State program every year. I did not take this lightly and made sure that I continued to offer the quality of care that I would like to see offered for my own children.

When I moved back to New York, I was able to start up a home child care shortly after I purchased a two family house in Yonkers. I got licensed and became part of the early care and education system now in New York. The reality of it though is that in Westchester County, you can find child cares like you can find Nail Salons. In a six block radius from my facility, there are 8 child cares! Parents chose child care then primarily for location and cost not necessarily quality unless they are educated and have the means to pay for child care.

There are over 750 home child cares in Westchester County. Unfortunately too, providers see each other as competition and do not share resources or information. When I first got my license, I tried calling several providers in my area and asking them for coffee or tea at my place. I wanted to network, share ideas, and get to know each other. I got nowhere and no one came. Meeting and networking has been much harder here. Maybe it is because I was used to the small town where in my county in PA, there were 56 home providers. We got to know each other. I mentored many of them and helped them follow in my footsteps and achieve National Accreditation. The mindset is different here and needs to be changed.

When we talk about the early care and education system, it is not just the teachers, providers, parents, Council, or State regulatory commission, it is also the public who are stakeholders. People who have no idea what quality child care really means. Quality child care is not seen by parents as readily available or financially feasible. Second to mortgage or rent, child care is the greatest expense families need to budget.

On the other side of the coin, providers spend tuition on payroll, accounting, legal services, loans, taxes, insurance, mortgage, supplies and much more. Last year I broke even. Child care is not a money making business. The ones who are doing it, do it because they naturally love it. My tuition rates are average for my area in Yonkers. I work out of my two family home- one floor which is 1500 square feet

is dedicated to operating the business. I have spent time and invested money creating a child safe and fun space for children that makes children want to stay and parents comfortable.

I am at my capacity of 12 children. This translates to not being able to earn more and having many children on my waiting list. I have many parents who have been waiting to come into my program for over a year and ask if I can expand. Finances and logistics restrict opening up another site.

When parents come in for a tour, I want to make sure that they understand that quality counts. Even if they do not choose to send their child to my facility, I inform them of what they should be looking for in child care. The fact though is, I am the only Nationally Accredited group child care in all of Westchester County. Parents do not know what Accreditation means. Some assume that license means that you are accredited! I give parents handouts from NAFCC to explain what Accreditation signifies.

I feel that I am here preaching to the choir. We know what quality means. “Accreditation reflects a high level of quality through a process that examines all aspects of the family child care program: Relationships, The Environment, Developmental Learning Activities, Safety and health, Professional and Business Practices. Accredited providers agree to abide by the standards set forth and to be measured against those standards with periodic integrity and compliance reviews.” (NAFCC website)

We need to create a culture of continuous quality improvement. High-quality early care and education programs should never stop improving. Continuous improvement starts with providers who engage themselves and staff in reflecting on strengths and growth areas through self-assessments, feedback from colleagues and parents. Programs as a whole can annually update goals, objectives and strategies for improving services. I have been honored several times to be asked to be a trainer and I get a chance to teach other providers what I do with my class.

In order to spread the word, media outlets should be used to spread the word about quality. Television, radio and social media should be utilized to spread the word. We can have the local news run a human interest story about quality child care or make a commercial about quality child care. This past Friday, I was fortunate

enough that Tribune news radio wanted to learn more about quality child care and we were on the air talking about what quality means and how children learn through play.

This is the Week of the Young Child. Politicians who dictate the budget in Congress should be invited to high quality programs so that they see what a true early care and education program looks like. It is important that politicians have faces to think about when early care and education comes to the chopping block. When I went to the NAFCC conference one year in California and they had a quality tour. Politicians traveled to different facilities to take a look at child cares. This is a wonderful idea to apply here in Westchester County. When I lived in PA, I hosted Educational Round Table forums and had my Senators and state legislators on the panel. Many child cares came to explain what they do and how they do it. I also invited the same politicians to come and visit my program and share snack time and read stories to the class. I was even able to get Governor Ridge to visit my center. I hosted a large celebration in honor of the Week of the Young Child at a local mall and over 40 child cares would assemble at tables for families to learn about what each center had to offer. The town Commissioners would make a public proclamation to start Week of the Young Child.

Here in Metro NY, I have invited senators and politicians to come and do the same and I only get the automated responses. Luckily last year, the chief of staff of the Yonkers mayor came for stories and snack. I believe personal advocacy to politicians can increase the budget for child care and put in funding for grants. Policymakers can:

- **Guarantee child care assistance to low-income families.** No waiting list
- **Set provider reimbursement rates to be at or above the federally recommended 7<sup>5th</sup> percentile of the market rate**
- **Offer higher reimbursement rates, wage supplements, scholarships, technical assistance, and other resources to promote and reward higher quality using the Quality Rating Scales**
- **Offer incentives to voluntarily participate in an Accreditation process and bonus upon completion**
- **Raise child care licensing standards, increase monitoring, and provide technical assistance opportunities to providers.**

Contracted child cares in Westchester have not had a rate increase in years. This translates to barely if any raises to staff which then leads to high turnover rates and low quality care. My rates are higher than the subsidy rates and since I am not contracted, I can charge the difference to my clients. This though puts a strain on low income families. We know the saying 'you get what you pay for', but quality early childhood should be made available to all children regardless of family economic status.

We need to support the early care and education workforce. The administrators, teachers, and caregivers working with young children each day are at the center of creating high-quality early care and education. Most of the current staff have low education level, and average annual incomes for some workers are under the federal poverty level for a family of four, despite efforts to promote higher qualifications and access to professional development.

I was lucky to be involved with the Keystone Star program in PA. They offered bonus incentives for reaching a certain level of quality child care and grants to reach the next level of quality. Training and technical assistance found here in New York is great but being told that you need to change XYZ in your program and not having the funds to make changes or purchase items, leaves providers feeling unable to do improvements. Honestly I thought that when I moved to NY, I thought I would find at least the same support and financial help to get my facility re-established. I was surprised at the lack of grant funds. If PA can do incentives and bonuses to increase quality child care, my question then is, why can't NY? Where are the priorities?

Our focus should be solely on the children. Regardless of setting, children's safety, health, and happiness are the non-negotiable elements of quality care and education. Minimizing risk and maximizing children's opportunities to engage with teachers, caregivers, other children, and the world around them are essential strategies for promoting physical health and social-emotional, language, and cognitive development. They are the future of our society and there should be no cap for expenses on achieving universal quality child care.