

Child Care: A Strategy for Economic Vitality in Berkshire County

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Table of Contents

Letter of Introduction	2
Executive Summary	3
Introduction	5
Declining Workforce in Berkshire County	5
Child Care Supply and Access in Berkshire County	6
Impact of Child Care on the Workforce	8
Challenges of the Child Care Business Model	9
Overcoming Barriers and Strengthening Child Care Infrastructure in Massachusetts ..	12
National Examples of Communities Supporting ECE Systems	14
Call to Action	15
References	16

Letter of Introduction

The evidence is clear: Early Childhood Education (ECE) provides a foundation for learning, success, and engaged participation in civic life. At the state level, Governor Healey made it clear that childcare plays an essential role in driving the state's economy and competitiveness. Locally, the ECE system contributes in critical and powerful ways to economic development and community vitality. Early childhood educators are dedicated, passionate, skilled professionals who, as the research suggests, have positive long-term outcomes for our youngest children. Simultaneously, our ECE system allows parents and caregivers to pursue their own career and educational goals, which strengthens households, neighborhoods, and our region as a whole.

We've known this for decades, and it only has become more visible and undeniable in recent years.

We also recognize that the ECE system is incredible fragile and that it will take all of us working together to support, sustain, and equitably fund this system for the long term. The question of long-term sustainability is a challenging one, and there are no easy answers. Despite the challenge, we must build a coalition to imagine and advocate for the system we want and need in the Berkshires. Doing so is an investment in an important economic sector, it is an investment in the future, and it is an investment in our most precious resource, the children of Berkshire County.

Berkshire United Way and Berkshire County Head Start are ready to meet this challenge head-on, and we invite you to join us in this work. We're building a coalition of local leaders to investigate regional solutions to strengthen and support our region's early childhood system. We will engage members of the education, business, nonprofit, and public sectors to enhance and strengthen the early childhood education system in Berkshire County. We want to focus on regional funding options, build community support, and lift up Berkshire County and its early childhood system as an example to the Commonwealth as they convene over the next three years to take a whole government approach to improving our ECE system.

It will take the expertise, passion, and perspective all of us have to offer to shape a stronger and more equitable future for early childhood education in Berkshire County as well as to make a positive impact on the lives of children and families in our community.

This report, prepared by our friends at Luminary Evaluation Group, sets the stage for the work ahead. It lays out the challenges we face, and makes the case that we are at a moment of potential, possibility, and partnership. We look forward to working with you to imagine and create the ECE system our children, families, educators, and the community as a whole need, and the one we deserve. Thank you!

Sincerely,

Brett Random
Executive Director
Berkshire County Head Start

Tom Bernard
President and CEO
Berkshire United Way

Executive Summary

The Early Childhood Advisory Committee, convened by Berkshire United Way (BUW) is a collective effort of public and private organizations to strengthen the early childhood education (ECE) system in Berkshire County through education, funding, coordination, and advocacy. To understand the current state of the local ECE system and its role in the community, BUW commissioned a landscape study that examines the connection between accessible, high-quality child care and the region's economic vitality. The resulting report illustrates the economic threats posed by a steadily declining population and an aging workforce. It also underscores the potential for a robust child care system to help address regional workforce challenges. It issues a call to action that leverages ongoing investments into ECE made by the state of Massachusetts.

The report offers several key takeaways about regional economic challenges, child care demand and supply, and the impact on the workforce.

- **A shrinking population and an aging workforce threaten Berkshire County's economic vitality.** This demographic shift has resulted in workforce shortages that challenge local employers.
- **Berkshire County faces a significant shortage of child care, leaving many families—especially those with children under five—without adequate options.** High costs further strain families, with child care consuming a significant portion of household income, while low-income families often encounter long waitlists for financial aid.
- **Insufficient child care options hinder workforce participation, particularly for parents of young children, and create challenges for employers in attracting and retaining staff.** Research shows accessible child care boosts productivity, reduces absenteeism, and drives economic growth, delivering a \$3–\$4 return in local economic activity for every dollar invested.
- **The child care business model presents significant sustainability challenges for providers.** Research shows the model leads to high costs of care for families, workforce instability due to low wages and difficult working conditions, and gaps in public subsidies.

The report also highlights the significant steps taken by the state of Massachusetts and Governor Maura Healey's Inter-agency ECE Taskforce to address systemic challenges. Progress includes policy advancements such as the recent increases in child care subsidy rates and extending the pandemic-era Commonwealth Cares for Children (C3) grants to help stabilize operations and improve quality.

Opportunities for local public-private partnerships are presented based on successful efforts identified nationwide. Local initiatives, such as career pathway programs for early educators and state-supported preschool expansions, demonstrate the potential for collaborative solutions. National examples, such as wage supplements for child care workers in Washington, D.C., and public-private partnerships in Colorado, offer models for addressing workforce and funding challenges.

The report concludes with a call to action. Public and private organizations throughout Berkshire County have an opportunity to coalesce around targeted strategies that strengthen the local ECE system. These efforts can leverage current state-level investments, strengthen the local workforce, and contribute to economic vitality in the Berkshires.



Introduction

Berkshire County is the westernmost region in Massachusetts and is known for its natural beauty, vibrant culture, rich history, and close-knit communities. It also faces threats to its economic vitality, including a steadily declining population and labor force shortages. As the community considers how to respond to these challenges, access to quality, affordable child care emerges as a high-potential workforce solution. This report, developed by Berkshire United Way and Luminary Evaluation, describes the current early childhood education (ECE) landscape in Berkshire County and contextualizes it with evidence from contemporary academic literature. It demonstrates the community's need for a strengthened ECE system, identifies lessons learned at the local, state, and national levels, and highlights opportunities to build upon current progress and address continued challenges. The report concludes that addressing the shortage of accessible, high-quality child care in Berkshire County is critical to strengthening the local workforce and protecting the vitality and sustainability of the Berkshire County economy.

Declining Workforce in Berkshire County

Besides a 2020 Covid-related 3% estimated increase, Berkshire County's population has steadily declined since the 1980s. The county's estimated 2024 population is 126,089 (US Census Bureau). As overall population levels have decreased, average age has increased, with approximately 25% of the county's residents over 65 (US Census Bureau). According to the MassHire Berkshire Workforce board, over one-third of residents are 55 and older, and a significant portion plan to retire in the next decade (2023).

Concurrently, the population of millennial residents (specifically individuals aged 25 to 39) is not keeping pace with the decline. Millennials make up approximately 17% of the total population in Berkshire County, whereas they comprise an estimated 21% of the national and 27% of the Massachusetts populations, respectively (US Census Bureau). This downward population trend has resulted in a diminished workforce, directly impacting employers of every size. Overall, the labor force remains 13% below the level measured in 2000 (69,423) and is projected to continue declining (Berkshire Regional Planning Commission, 2024). It is more critical than ever for the region to attract and retain younger workers. Research shows that access to quality, affordable child care is a crucial factor influencing workforce entry and participation, particularly in rural communities, making it an essential lever for economic strength in the Berkshires (Henning-Smith & Kozhimannil, 2015).

Child Care Supply and Access in Berkshire County

Analysis of the child care supply in Berkshire County reveals that demand exceeds the number of slots available to families. As of May 2024, there are 3,777 licensed child care slots in Berkshire County (as shown in Table 1). U.S. census data indicates that the youth population in Berkshire County exceeds the licensed child care supply, with 5,172 children under 5 years old and 5,604 between the ages of 5-9 years old (US Census Bureau, 2022).

TYPES OF CHILD CARE PROVIDERS

Child Care Center (Group Child Care) - Licensed facilities where children are cared for in a group setting. They typically have multiple classrooms. Centers include for-profit, nonprofit, and public preschool programs.

Family Child Care - Providers care for children in their own homes in a smaller more personalized setting.

Head Start and Early Head Start Programs - Federally funded programs which provide early childhood education, nutrition, health, and family services to low-income families.



Table 1. Number of Child Care Providers and Licensed Capacity in Berkshire County as of May 2024

City/Town	Family Child Care		Group and School Age Care		Combined	
	# Providers	Licensed Capacity	# Providers	Licensed Capacity	Total # Providers	Total Licensed capacity
Adams	13	106	2	59	15	165
Ashley Falls	1	8	0	0	1	8
Becket	0	0	1	13	1	13
Cheshire	8	56	1	136	9	192
Clarksburg	2	18	0	0	2	18
Dalton	10	78	3	108	13	186
Great Barrington	0	0	3	110	3	110
Hinsdale	2	16	2	44	4	60
Housatonic	1	8	0	0	1	8
Lanesboro	3	24	0	0	3	24
Lee	3	26	2	126	5	152
Lenox	0	0	2	108	2	108
Lenox Dale	0	0	1	73	1	73
Mill River	1	6	0	0	1	6
North Adams	16	132	4	200	20	332
Pittsfield	37	286	22	1,552	59	1,838
Sheffield	1	10	2	105	3	115
Stockbridge	0	0	2	44	2	44
Williamstown	1	8	4	307	5	315
Windsor	1	10	0	0	1	10
Grand Total	100	792	51	2,985	151	3,777

Source: MA Department of Early Education and Care (retrieved October 8, 2024)

The number of children on the Massachusetts Child Care Financial Assistance (CCFA) Program waitlist also evidences the gap between child care supply and demand. As of 2022, 700 children were eligible for CCFA vouchers. Of those children, (as presented in Table 2), 477 were enrolled in care, and 223 were waitlisted (Berkshire Regional Planning Commission, 2022). The gap in Berkshire County's child care supply is also confirmed by national research tracking state and local trends. The Bipartisan Policy Center's Child Care Gaps Assessment tool estimates a 38.5% gap in the child care supply in Berkshire County, a shortage of 1,950 slots (Bipartisan Policy Center, n.d.).

Table 2. Berkshire County Children Served by Child Care Financial Assistance (March 2022)

Eligible for Vouchers	Enrolled in care	Waitlisted
700	477	223

Source: Berkshire Regional Planning Commission (2022)

Massachusetts Child Care Financial Assistance Program (CCFA) provides financial assistance to eligible low-income families to help cover the cost of child care. The program is designed to support working parents, allowing them to access safe and quality care for their children while they maintain employment or attend school.

Impact of Child Care on the Workforce

In Berkshire County, the gap in available child care significantly impacts the employability of parents of young children, a critical segment of the potential workforce. This is especially true for low-income families. As noted previously, the overall size of the workforce in Berkshire County has decreased. Persistent data on the workforce shortage indicates that in addition to attracting new residents, maximizing the potential workforce participation of existing residents is imperative. If this does not occur, businesses will struggle to attract and retain employees who may need but cannot access child care.

Research indicates that parents prioritize employers who offer child care solutions. Without child care, employees are absent more often or leave their jobs entirely, increasing costs for employers. The costs associated with employees being absent from work due to child care issues are estimated at approximately \$12.7 billion annually across the U.S. (First Five Years Fund). Companies that offer child care benefits experience improved employee retention rates and productivity. This illustrates that strategic investments in child care mutually benefit the workforce and their employers (Stevens, 2017). Given the high levels of employer demand for more qualified workers across the county and the observed gap in the child care supply, a robust ECE system has the potential to be a key driver in a stronger Berkshire economy.

Return on Investment: Why Supporting Child Care Initiatives Matters

Investing in child care is a key economic strategy that strengthens the local workforce and contributes to economic resilience for both communities and individuals. Numerous experimental and quasi-experimental studies have demonstrated ECE program impacts and economic returns for high-quality one- or two-year prekindergarten programs, indicating that the benefit-cost ratios for local economic activity are around \$3 to \$4 for every dollar spent (Karoly, 2016). In a recent study, García et al. confirm that high-quality birth-to-five programs for disadvantaged children can deliver a 13% per year return on investment (2020). Contributing factors to these long-term economic benefits include school readiness, K-12 educational performance, high school graduation, and labor market success (Karoly and Auger, 2016).

Evidence of this return on investment to the community is also apparent in its immediate impacts on employers and employees. When child care is readily accessible, parents can fully participate in the workforce, which leads to greater economic productivity (Morrissey, 2016). By enhancing parents, particularly women's participation in the workforce through investments in child care, the average market income per capita is projected to increase by 0.4%, effectively growing the Massachusetts economy. This will be evident in employment hours and worker productivity (Liebman, 2024).

Challenges of the Child Care Business Model

As communities consider pathways to stronger ECE systems, they must consider the unique challenges of the typical child care business model. The most significant include 1) the high cost of quality care, 2) staff instability and turnover, and 3) setting affordable rates.

Cost of Quality Care

Child care providers, both for- and non-profit, often face tight margins with insufficient operating revenues that fail to cover the high cost of providing quality care. Most for-profit child care facilities operate on profit margins that are usually less than 1% (Grunewald & Davies, 2011). Tables 3 and 4 present recent cost estimations for operating child care programs in center and home-based settings in Western MA. These estimates were developed by the Center for Early Learning Equity in a statewide report commissioned by the state of MA in 2023. Annual costs to provide full-day care in a center-based setting range from \$29,939 for an infant to \$9,420 for a school-age child. The annual costs for family child care providers range from \$15,293 for children under age two to \$14,778 for a school-age child. Required staff-to-child ratios are much lower for infants and toddlers than for older children. The data reflects the stark reality of the high daily and annual costs providers face as they work to operate sustainable businesses.

Table 3. Per-Child Cost of Providing Child Care in Western MA (Center-based)

Age	Daily Cost	Annual Cost (260 work days/year)
Infant	\$115.15	\$29,939
Toddler	\$89.54	\$23,280
Preschool	\$46.83	\$12,176
School-Age (Before & After)	\$31.07	\$8,078
School-Age (Full-Day)	\$36.23	\$9,420

Table 4. Per-Child Cost of Providing Child Care in Western MA (FCC)

Age	Daily Cost	Annual Cost (260 work days/year)
Under age 2	\$58.82	\$15,293
Age 2-5	\$58.82	\$15,293
School-Age (Before & After)	\$34.10	\$8,866
School-Age (Full-Day)	\$56.84	\$14,778

Source: Center for Early Learning Equity, Cost Estimation Study Final Report (2023)

Staffing Instability and Turnover

Personnel costs are typically the most significant expense for child care programs, yet ECE workers earn low wages and work long hours (Workman, 2018). Unlike other industries, providers cannot just raise prices to increase wages because families cannot bear the higher cost.

The ECE workforce is comprised primarily of women (92%), and about half are people of color (41%) (Massachusetts Taxpayers Foundation, 2024). According to the Center for the Study of Child Care Employment in Massachusetts, as of 2022:

- The median wage for the ECE workforce was \$16.95 and the living wage gap for the ECE workforce was 16% or \$3.12/hour.
- 41% of early educator households participated in one or more public safety net programs
- The ECE workforce was 4.9 times more likely to live in poverty than elementary and middle school teachers.

Because child care providers cannot afford to raise wages, low pay and stressful work environments lead to high turnover and staffing shortages. If programs do not have enough educators to meet required staffing ratios, they are forced to cut back their hours or close locations (Schaack et al., 2021). Staffing instability has a direct impact on service quality and program sustainability.

Setting Affordable Rates

The profitability gap widens in moderate and low-income communities, where providers and families are more likely to rely on state subsidy programs to pay for care. Tuition for low-income families is typically reimbursed to providers through public funding programs (Barcliff, n.d.). However, public subsidies often do not cover the full cost of providing care for a child (Liebman, 2024). For example, until recently, the MA Department of Early Education and Care provided daily reimbursement at 30% of the market rate, far below the federal recommendation of 75%. The market rate is determined by collecting information on pricing from a large sample of providers (Jones, 2023). Under the reimbursement model, the provider is responsible for collecting parent copays. Reimbursement rates typically do not reflect the true cost of care. The cost of providing care often exceeds reimbursement rates, particularly for infant and toddler care. Providers typically charge less than the actual cost to deliver infant and toddler care because they know few parents can afford it. Preschool and school-age care prices are often set higher to offset the losses providers absorb for infants and toddlers (Hawley et al., 2023).

There is no "market-based" solution to failed child care business models. They cannot charge families more as existing rates strain parent budgets, yet they are mandated to maintain health, safety, and quality (First Five Years Fund, 2023). The broken model particularly impacts families of infants, toddlers, and low-income communities (Workman, 2021). According to the MIT Living Wage Calculator for Berkshire County, households with young children in which a single parent or two adults participate in the workforce can expect to pay more than 20% of their income to child care alone. A single parent working full-time with three children in child care would need to earn at least \$70.34 per hour to cover the

cost of child care. In the scenarios presented in Tables (5-7), the most financially viable is a two-adult household where one adult works and the other remains home to care for young children rather than enrolling them in child care. However, this situation is not feasible or necessarily desirable for many families. Further, it does little to improve the staffing shortage and bolster the Berkshire County economy.

Table 5. 1 Adult Household Living Wage Estimation for Berkshire County

Number of Children	Hourly Wage	Annual Salary	Child care expense	Child care as % of total income
0	\$21.83	\$45,406	\$0	0%
1	\$41.89	\$87,131	\$16,843	19%
2	\$54.05	\$112,424	\$29,738	26%
3	\$70.34	\$146,307	\$41,279	28%

Table 6. 2 Adult Household, 1 Working Living Wage Estimation for Berkshire County

Number of Children	Hourly Wage	Individual Annual Salary	Child care expense	Child care as % of total income
0	\$30.45	\$63,336	\$0	0%
1	\$37.06	\$77,085	\$0	0%
2	\$42.08	\$87,526	\$0	0%
3	\$44.73	\$93,038	\$0	0%

Table 7. 2 Adult Household, both Working Living Wage Estimation for Berkshire County

Number of Children	Hourly Wage	Annual Salaries Combined	Child care expense	Child care as % of total income
0	\$15.22	\$63,315	\$0	0%
1	\$23.42	\$97,427	\$16,843	17%
2	\$29.63	\$123,261	\$29,738	24%
3	\$34.74	\$144,518	\$41,279	29%

Source: MIT Living Wage Calculator

Overcoming Barriers and Strengthening Child Care Infrastructure in Massachusetts

While child care systems in Berkshire County and other regions across Massachusetts face obstacles and vulnerabilities, great strides have been made to address these challenges in recent years. In 2024, Governor Maura Healey issued Executive Order 625, appointing an Inter-Agency Task Force on Ensuring Affordable, High Quality Child Care as part of the “Gateway to Pre-K” agenda (Commonwealth of Massachusetts, 2024). To date, the administration has achieved several key policy and funding measures that strengthen the child care system across the Commonwealth, described below. Local communities, including Berkshire County, have promising opportunities to leverage these achievements and build upon their success.

Most significantly, in January 2024, Massachusetts shifted to reimbursement rates driven by the true cost of care instead of market rates. This means that child care subsidy reimbursements will be closer to the costs providers incur when offering care. Providers received at least a 5.5 percent increase to their daily per-child reimbursement rate, resulting in an average increase of over \$2,000 a year per child (Executive Office of Education, Department of Early Education and Care, 2024). The state has also approved the continuation of the Commonwealth Cares for Children (C3) funding. The C3 program offers grants to child care providers to cover ongoing operational expenses and improve workforce and program quality. Local communities can leverage Massachusetts’ demonstrated commitment and investment in strengthening child care availability and access. Massachusetts remains the only state in the nation to continue its Commonwealth Cares for Children (C3) program, originally funded by the American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA). This was achieved by committing state funds after the federal pandemic funding ended (Liebman, 2024).



Other Massachusetts-based state and local ECE initiatives gaining traction include the following examples.

- [Strategies for Children](#) is a nonprofit organization focused on improving equitable access to quality ECE services across the state of MA. It is a key driver in promoting policies and investments. Among its notable efforts is the "9:30 Call," a regular virtual convening designed to connect ECE advocates policy makers, and community leaders. During these calls, participants engage in dialogue and share resources to strengthen the ECE system.
- [Massachusetts Business Coalition for Early Childhood Education](#) is a statewide alliance of business leaders committed to advancing high-quality, accessible, and affordable early childhood education. The Coalition views this effort as a key economic strategy as a strong ECE system enables parents to participate in the workforce and better-prepares the next generation of employees. Among its achievements, the Coalition has successfully elevated early childhood education as a priority in legislative discussions, influenced ECE public funding increases, and fostered partnerships between businesses and ECE providers.
- The [Commonwealth Preschool Partnership Initiative \(CPPI\)](#) is a state-funded program that helps communities expand access to high-quality preschool for three and four-year-olds. Through CPPI, public school districts receive funds to develop partnerships between the district and local early education and care programs to increase the number of high-quality slots available (Massachusetts Department of Early Education and Care, n.d.). In Berkshire County, Hoosac Valley Regional School District and North Adams Public Schools were recipients of CPPI grants. In addition to expanding the number of full-day programs in a North Adams elementary school, the funding resulted in two offsite classrooms in Cheshire (Spinella, 2024).
- In July 2022, City of Boston Mayor Michelle Wu signed an executive order enacting [Boston's Childcare Zoning Initiative](#). This order requires new significant commercial developments in the city's downtown to include on-site child care services or to fund off-site child care spaces (City of Boston, 2022).
- [Shared Services MA](#) is an alliance of child care providers focused on strategies to address the financial challenges of running early childhood education programs. Services include business training, coaching, technical assistance, advocacy, and early screening services. The alliance is funded through philanthropic partners and operated under the umbrella of the United Way of Massachusetts Bay.
- [The Together for Kids Coalition](#) in Worcester (TFK) is a community-based initiative that brings together community organizations, service providers, community leaders, businesses, and residents to address key ECE issues. TFK takes action to promote community access to ECE resources, advocate for system change, and facilitate collaborative community partnerships. Recently, the Coalition hosted its first TFK Solution Forum to develop a community-driven solution to ensure affordable, high-quality ECE in Worcester. The forum communicated that the region's employers who

face workforce shortages recognize that supporting child care access contributes to higher productivity and employee engagement (Worcester Regional Chamber of Commerce, n.d.).

- [Berkshire Community College](#) offers the **Early Education and Care Career Pathways Grant** to support individuals pursuing careers in early education. The grant covers tuition and fees for courses leading to teacher certifications and the Child Development Associate (CDA) credential. Participants benefit from evening classes, mentoring, and stipends as they progress toward their higher educational goals.
- The **Berkshire County Early Educator Convening**, co-hosted by Berkshire Community College (BCC) and Berkshire United Way, is a collaborative initiative aimed at supporting and enhancing the professional development of early childhood educators in the region. This convening provides a platform for educators to engage in discussions, share resources, and address common challenges within the field.

National Examples of Communities Supporting ECE Systems

Across the nation, there are examples where states and local communities bring together public and private partners who view strong child care infrastructure as a crucial workforce solution. Communities and collaboratives are working toward:

- Developing a workforce pipeline with better wages and working conditions to attract and retain qualified staff (Jones, 2023).
- Providing direct financial assistance to child care centers, such as low-interest loans or grants for acquiring and renovating child care spaces (Liebman, 2024).
- Addressing the ECE educator wage gap as a critical precursor to the expansion of child care capacity (Liebman, 2024).
- Creating public-private partnerships to develop innovative financing mechanisms and pilot programs to scale up evidence-based solutions (Stevens, 2017).

In Colorado, business leaders launched [Executives Partnering to Invest in Children \(EPIC\)](#), a coalition of business leaders championing strategic investments in early childhood education. Now in its eleventh year, EPIC identifies and facilitates partnership opportunities with existing and potential child care facilities, supports employers seeking to bring child care options directly to their employees, and collaborates with local community-based organizations to meet the emergent needs of providers and families. Other examples include:

The [Utah High-Quality Preschool Program](#), an innovative model in which private investors Goldman Sachs and J.B. Pritzker Family Foundation provided upfront financing and a social impact bond to expand access to high-quality preschool for at-risk children.

North Carolina's [Smart Start](#) is a public-private initiative that funds local nonprofit organizations offering child care services, health initiatives, and family support. A portion of its funding is sourced from private contributions.

Washington D.C.'s [Early Childhood Educator Pay Equity Fund \(PEF\)](#) provides substantial wage supplements (\$10,000-\$14,000 annually) to over 4,000 eligible ECE educators. Researchers found that after two years, PEF increased ECE employment in Washington D.C. by 219 educators, a 7% increase compared to the control group. The program showed positive impacts on workforce retention and stability. The two-year impact study demonstrated that substantial wage supplements can support hiring and retention in the ECE sector. Taxes were raised for high-income earners who made more than \$250,000 annually, and a portion was allocated to supplement ECE educator wages. (Schochet, 2023). Subsequent post-program analysis found that the initiative yielded a one-year return on investment of 23% in social and economic benefits (Belfield & Schochet, 2024).

Call to Action

Berkshire County MUST address the challenge of sustainability for the early childhood system. A high-functioning system provides access to quality care that improves outcomes for young children AND provides a safe place for children so parents and caregivers can participate in the workforce. As Governor Healey announced in 2024, child care is a critical service for Massachusetts and a key economic driver for communities. The Berkshires has an opportunity to lead the state AND nation by serving as a blueprint for regional public/private efforts to strengthen the ECE system and thereby contribute to improving the economic development of the Berkshires.



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