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**The Ohio Senate
Finance Committee
House Bill 166
Tracey Rowe
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Thank you, Chairman Dolan, Vice Chairman Burke, Ranking Member Sykes and members of the committee. My name is Tracey Rowe and I serve as Senior Vice President for Cincinnati Early Learning Centers (CEL C), a multi-site child care provider in the Greater Cincinnati area that has been committed to serving the diverse needs of children and families in our community since 1981. I am offering written testimony as an interested party on House Bill 166, the Fiscal Year 2020-2021 Operating Budget.

CEL C currently consists of eight 5-star quality rated child care centers that served 618 children in 2018, 60% of which receive publicly funded child care subsidies. Our 3 newest centers are located in areas considered to be quality deserts and are serving nearly 100% publicly funded children. Like countless other child care providers, we see a much higher demand for quality care in our community than we can accommodate, with many families who live slightly above the state's current PFCC eligibility threshold of 130% FPL unable to qualify for subsidized care. Although these families make too much to qualify for PFCC, they are nowhere near able to afford licensed child care at the market rate, let alone quality care.

Cincinnati Early Learning Centers prides itself on providing the highest quality care for children because we know our youngest learners deserve the absolute best start we can give them, especially those children who are at highest risk of being left behind—those living in poverty, with high levels of toxic stress, experiencing homelessness, and children of color—who also benefit most from quality early learning. We can address the achievement gap before children enter kindergarten. As 5-star rated provider, we see on a daily basis the impact of quality care on children and families. Parents are a child's first and best teacher. When parents have access to working with highly educated teachers through daily interactions and formal conferences they are better positioned to support not only their child's academic development, but have strategies to promote their highly complex emotional and social development.

Furthermore, the validation study conducted on Step Up to Quality confirmed what we already knew intuitively: our quality-rated programs have been proven to increase kindergarten readiness, which in turn leads to increased third grade reading level proficiency, high school graduation and job readiness down the road. We know that high-quality early educators are critical to maintaining high standards of care and work to support our early educators as best we can. Despite the will to support our staff, current financing for child care across the state makes it exceedingly difficult to pay teachers a fair wage—more than half of our passionate early educators are living in poverty.

I want to be clear: Ohio took a crucial first step toward creating an effective child care system when it instituted our quality rating and improvement system in 2006. By recognizing that child care is a work support, as well as a critical opportunity to improve school readiness, foster healthy development, and even break the cycle of poverty, our state transformed the child care landscape and we continue to make consistent progress toward improving the quality of care statewide. The administration's decision to invest federal CCDBG dollars in increasing rates for child care providers was another important step and we celebrate this investment. But in order to create a truly sustainable system in Ohio, we must go beyond policies and mandates—we need sustainable state investments that provide fair wages for early educators, offer sustainability for providers, and—most importantly—serve more working families who are in desperate need of affordable, quality care.

On behalf of Cincinnati Early Learning Centers, I want to express my gratitude to the administration once again for the decision to invest in increased rates for providers and thank the legislature for its ongoing support of our quality rating and improvement system. In the upcoming FY 2020-2021 budget, we ask that you increase the investment of state dollars in the child care system to improve outcomes for young children, support the needs of working families, and work toward creating a sustainable system that is positioned for success in the years to come.

Thank you for your time. I am happy to answer any questions.