

Testimony on New Early Childhood Education Initiatives Provisions of House Bill 64, the FY16-17 Biennial Budget

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On Primary and Secondary Education
Representative Robert R. Cupp, Chair
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Chairman Cupp, Ranking Member Phillips and members of the House Finance Subcommittee on Primary and Secondary Education, thank you for the opportunity to speak with you today regarding the new early childhood and school counseling initiatives within sections of House Bill 64, the Fiscal Year 2016-2017 Biennial Budget. I am Angel Rhodes, Early Education and Development Officer in the Office of Governor John Kasich. I work with the Ohio Departments of Education; Job and Family Services; Health; Mental Health and Addiction Services; and Developmental Disabilities in the area of early childhood to align agency programs, remove silos, implement best practices and improve quality. I also oversee the nearly \$70 million *Early Learning Challenge Grant* to build the state's early childhood infrastructure and improve early learning services to Ohio's children.

Ohio's High-need Population

Ohio has over 720,000 children under the age of six and approximately 55 percent of those children are considered high needs based on family income under 200 percent of the federal poverty level, native language or having identified disabilities. We know from examining 10 years of data from our Kindergarten Readiness Assessment that there is an approximately 25-30 percentage point achievement gap in the skills of high-needs children as they enter kindergarten compared to their peers.

Research shows that children who participate in high-quality early learning and development programs demonstrate enhanced language skills and improved reading and math skills through grade three. They also are less likely to be retained in the early grades and less likely to be referred for special education services. It is critical that Ohio ensures all publicly funded programs are held to the same high standards to ensure that each of our children, especially children with high needs, enter kindergarten ready to be successful academically, socially, emotionally and physically.

Ohio's Race to the Top Early Learning Challenge Grant

Ohio was one of the first nine states awarded an Early Learning Challenge grant in 2011. After three rounds of grants, Ohio's award of almost \$70 million is still the highest of all states' awards, and we have completed the third year of the four-year grant. The grant allowed for an unprecedented opportunity for Ohio to focus deeply on reforms of state-level systems and infrastructure that support children from birth to five by developing new standards, assessments, professional development, data systems and a common rating system for programs known as the Step Up To Quality - Tiered Quality Rating and Improvement System.

Ohio received this award because of the strong collaboration between the Governor's Office and state agencies that serve young children in Ohio. These state agencies include:

- Ohio Department of Education;
- Ohio Department of Job and Family Services;
- Ohio Department of Health;

- Ohio Department of Mental Health and Addiction Services; and
- Ohio Department of Developmental Disabilities.

Ohio's Early Learning Challenge grant application laid out an aggressive reform agenda to close the kindergarten readiness gap for disadvantaged children. This will be accomplished by increasing access to high-quality services, improving the quality of early childhood experiences and measuring and reporting progress on the goals we want to achieve. These early experiences lay the foundation for all of the subsequent learning for a child.

Prior to the Challenge Grant, Ohio had a disjointed set of siloed programs with little focus on quality, which ultimately did not address the needs of the children served and left parents at a disadvantage when it came to making informed decisions for their children.

Thanks to a strong focus, much has changed in Ohio. As the third year of the four-year grant came to a close in December 2014, I am happy to say our state agencies have aligned their work to ensure all types of early learning programs and providers that serve children birth to age 5, including preschools in school districts, child care, private and community-based programs, are part of a coordinated system for early childhood education. As a state we now:

- Use one set of state-developed child standards for birth to age 5 to ensure academic, social, emotional and physical development in young children in the Ohio Departments of Education; Job and Family Services; Health; Mental Health and Addiction Services; and Developmental Disabilities;
- Hold all publicly funded programs to common program quality standards and both the Departments of Education and Job and Family Services monitor them in the same way through Step Up To Quality, which I will discuss further momentarily;
- Provide high-quality regional professional development to early childhood professionals to ensure they have access to ongoing professional growth opportunities; and
- Have a comprehensive Kindergarten Readiness Assessment that will help us understand, beyond literacy, how to support children as they enter school academically, socially, emotionally and physically.

Some of the key accomplishments over these three years included:

- Increasing the number of publicly funded programs participating in Step Up To Quality by 580 sites (from 1010 to 1590);
- Transitioning the number of children with high needs enrolled in high-quality, publicly funded programs from 12,080 to 44,082 (32,002 transitioned); and
- Providing 31,500 early childhood professionals with new professional development opportunities.

The Executive Budget proposes appropriating \$8 million in FY16 and \$3.4 million in FY17 federal funding (line item 200672) in the Department of Education's budget to complete the grant activities.

Through the Early Learning Challenge grant reforms, Ohio will be able to generate information that is timely, relevant and accessible for families, state agencies, early learning and development programs and early childhood educators to use for ongoing improvement. We will be able to understand the status of children's academic, social, emotional and physical development upon entry into kindergarten, be able to tie those results to the quality of early learning experiences and be able to determine how best to support young children as they move forward in school. Through increased funding and supports for early childhood programs, Ohio will be able to assure children are fully supported in their growth and development throughout the birth to grade 3 continuum.

Holistic Approach to Early Childhood in HB64

Our work on the Early Learning Challenge grant has taught us that in order to successfully move our early childhood system forward, we must take a holistic approach to creating new or expanding current initiatives. This is reflected in the Governor's early childhood proposals in House Bill 64.

Increasing Access to High Quality Preschool

Through the grant, Ohio has implemented its new, five-star tiered quality rating and improvement system, mentioned earlier, called Step Up To Quality. It is designed to empower parents and families through infrastructure, transparency and education to be savvy consumers of programs. It also provides funders assurances as to the effectiveness of their investments and provides programs with a roadmap for quality improvement through state-provided technical assistance and professional development. All early learning and development programs funded through the Departments of Education and Job and Family Services (i.e., district preschool programs, child care and family child care) are continuing to be phased into Step Up To Quality.

With the successful expansion of the Early Childhood Education (ECE) preschool program (the Department of Education's line item 200408) in FY14 and FY15, Ohio doubled the number of income-eligible children receiving high-quality preschool services from 5,700 to 11,090. The program also expanded beyond just public districts to include child care programs licensed by the Ohio Department of Job and Family Services and chartered nonpublic school programs. Early Childhood Education preschool is now offered by 377 providers throughout Ohio. The per-pupil amount of \$4,000 provides high-quality preschool, including requirements for a locally selected research-based curriculum aligned to the new early childhood standards, use of assessments to inform instruction, health and developmental screenings, teacher credentials and family engagement.

The Executive Budget in House Bill 64 will triple this funding from FY13 levels by appropriating an additional \$40 million to provide high-quality preschool. The Executive Budget increases the level of funding in FY16 by \$15 million and increases the funding by another \$10 million in FY17. The new funds will be distributed across the state to high needs areas identified through three indicators: high levels of poverty, low kindergarten readiness scores and low third grade reading scores. The Department of Education expects to serve approximately 6,125 additional children in FY17, over FY15, with this added funding, bringing the total number of children served to more than 17,000.

To move toward the goal of ensuring that all disadvantaged children have access to at least one year of preschool, in FY17 the Early Childhood Education preschool program will transition to provide services only to economically disadvantaged 4-year-old children. Through this FY16-17 expansion in Early Childhood Education preschool funding, along with existing high-quality publicly funded child care and federal Head Start, Ohio will be serving approximately 70 percent of its population of 4-year-old children in families with incomes below 200 percent of poverty.

By FY17, the Departments of Education and Job and Family Services will align their co-payment systems for families between 0-200 percent of the federal poverty level, design a joint process for helping families determine eligibility and location of program services, and design a common system for tracking child attendance.

Early Childhood Mental Health Counselors

The impact of poverty and trauma on young children can have a lasting effect on their emotional and academic wellbeing. Preschool expulsion rates are higher than K-12 expulsions. To help address these issues, Ohio implemented an Early Childhood Mental Health Counseling pilot through the Early Learning Challenge grant. Based on the strong outcomes in this pilot over the past three years, we seek to expand this pilot statewide by provide \$5 million in each year of the biennium to make early childhood mental health counselors available to children, teachers and early child care staff statewide; create a hotline for acute problems; and make an early childhood counselor available for site visits within 48 hours of a request to conduct observations, train staff and develop support plans for children in need. This funding, while not included in the Department of Education's budget (it is included in the Department of Mental Health and Addiction Services' budget recommendations) is part of the Governor's holistic proposal to increase supports for early childhood education.

Removing Barriers to Moving Up

The lack of access to affordable, quality child care remains one of the top employment barriers to low-income parents. Not having child care is a barrier to getting jobs. The Governor's budget proposes new strategies for removing this barrier.

Many families below 100 percent of the federal poverty level cannot afford the current copays for child care. The state will allocate \$7 million each year of the biennium to cover the copays for families making less than 100 percent of the federal poverty level. This will: (1) make it easier for low-income families to get child care while they go to work; and (2) align the child care with preschool education to help simplify the system for parents and ensure that they receive the same experience regardless of which door, Job and Family Services or the Department of Education, they enter.

The sudden loss of subsidized child care if a parent or family's income exceeds 200 percent of the federal poverty level (approximately \$3,298 a month for a family of three) can actually prevent some parents from taking a better-paying job and moving up the economic ladder. The childcare cliff is the largest cliff in the subsidized benefits programs. The executive proposal appropriates \$4 million dollars a year to remove this cliff, which serves as a barrier to economic advancement by allowing families to keep subsidized child care with a gradually increasing copay scale up to 300 percent of the federal poverty level (approximately \$4,948 a month for a family of three).

Currently the entrance eligibility requirement for the subsidized childcare program in Job and Family Services is 125 percent of the federal poverty level, while the entrance for most other subsidized programs in Job and Family Services is 130 percent of the federal poverty level. The state will allocate \$3 million a year to align these subsidized programs by moving the child care eligibility to 130 percent of the federal poverty level.

Evaluating the Investments

The Governor's early childhood agenda also recognizes the importance of making data-informed decisions. The Governor also recognizes that additional funds are needed to further expand preschool slots and improve the state's early childhood system; however, we need to evaluate the numerous changes that have been made to the system and develop a list of priorities based on that data. Making informed decisions is crucial to continued success in early childhood. The Governor's Office will work with the Departments of Education and Job and Family Services to use the data and create recommendations, no later than Jan. 1, 2016, for the \$20 million annual appropriation out of the Casino Operator Settlement Fund (line item 200673). Recommendations will involve further preschool expansion and priorities to advance programs and systems that support high-quality early childhood opportunities.

School Counseling

Finally, while not directly related to the executive proposal's early childhood initiatives, I want to speak about the Governor's school counseling proposal to help students move toward graduation successfully and identify a pathway to a career. School counselors have earned master's degrees in school counseling, which includes an intensive 600-hour internship in the schools in which 240 clock hours must involve direct engagement with K-12 students. School counselors are trained to address academic, career and personal-social issues for students. Further, they are trained to provide individual support, small group counseling and full classroom guidance sessions for students. School counselors also are trained to conduct a needs assessment of their schools and to create school counseling plans each year based on that data. While much of their work is with children directly, school counselors also collaborate with teachers and administrators to solve problems and work with parents to support their children.

Although school counselors are highly trained and ready to play critical roles in the schools, they have no state-adopted standards or framework for evaluation. This leads to many school counselors being ineffectively evaluated on a teacher's framework. It also leads to school counselors being assigned to spend large amounts of time in activities such as clerical work, lunchroom duty and administrative tasks.

Effective school counseling is critical to making sure that every student in our state achieves his or her potential. That's why the Governor's budget proposes the creation of standards for school counselors. The new standards will be aligned to the American School Counselors Association standards and will reflect knowledge of academic, personal-social and career counseling for students. The standards also will include Ohio-specific knowledge of career information for students.

In addition to the creation of the standards, the executive proposal will require the State Board of Education to develop and adopt a standards-based framework for the evaluation of school counselors, which currently does not exist. Following the adoption of these standards, each school district board of education will adopt a policy that conforms to the statewide framework and will implement the evaluation policy for the first time during the 2016-2017.

The proposed budget also includes \$1 million in each fiscal year to support a statewide effort to improve access to school counseling services for all students. The Ohio Department of Education will work with the Board of Regents to provide professional development and outreach for school counselors and to post training and informational resources on the OhioMeansJobs K-12 website. There are school districts and career centers in Ohio that have done great work utilizing school counselors to meet the students' academic, career and personal-social needs; get their students excited about learning; and connect their work in the classrooms to work in the real world. This requires a commitment on the part of our school leaders. This funding will identify those leaders and provide professional development to help other school administrators and school counselors replicate the work the leaders are doing so that all students across Ohio are able to achieve their potential and experience success.

In conclusion, these new early childhood and school counseling initiatives will help to ensure children birth through grade 12 are provided the academic, social and physical supports they need to be successful from school readiness to college and career readiness.

Chairman Cupp, this concludes my testimony. I greatly appreciate your time and would be pleased to answer any questions you may have.