

**The Ohio Senate
Finance Subcommittee on Health and Medicaid
House Bill 166
Malissa Harris
May 16, 2019**

Thank you, Chairman Hackett, Vice Chairman Huffman, Ranking Member Thomas and members of the committee for the opportunity to provide interested party testimony on House Bill 166, the Fiscal Year 2020-2021 Operating Budget. My name is Malissa Harris and I am the Education Specialist at Little Miracles Early Development Center, a 4-star rated child care center on the east side of Columbus.

Little Miracles serves about 75 children here in Columbus—all between birth and five years old. Currently, 100% of the kids we serve receive subsidized care through Ohio's publicly funded child care program. As the center's education specialist, I spend the majority of my time in the classroom with our teachers, helping them to understand our curriculum and supporting their interactions with the infants, toddlers, and preschool-aged kids at our center.

As Little Miracles moved from unrated to rated to high-quality rated in Step Up to Quality over the past couple of years, I have seen a significant difference in the impact we've had not only on the kids we serve, but their whole families. The transition to quality has been far more than simply checking off boxes—our center has delved deeper into ensuring each child receives the unique, quality care and support they need to thrive. We have developed creative ways to engage parents in their child's growth and development and have worked to forge new partnerships with programs like Early Head Start that support both our teachers and our kids.

But despite our center doing all the right things—moving up the quality system, remaining dedicated to providing care for the most at-risk kids in our community—we are still unable to support our early educators with fair wages. I've been passionate about caring for kids all my life and worked hard to earn both an Associate's and a Bachelor's degree in early childhood education, but I am forced to rely on publicly funded child care myself to send my daughters to child care while I'm at work. I wish I could say I was an exception, but the reality is that this is the norm for early educators across the state.

For many child care providers, the inability to provide higher wages results in difficulty finding and maintaining quality staff. At my own center, we have about 5 teachers who have been there for five or so years. The other 15-20 have only been with us for less than a year and our staff turnover rate makes it incredibly difficult to provide the consistent care that kids need. The passionate early educators that we are trusting with our youngest, most vulnerable kids—our state's future—should not be forced to rely on public assistance to support their own families.

I support the budget bill's current investment of the additional \$198 from the federal Child Care Development Block Grant being invested in increased rates for providers, but this investment is only the first step in supporting a system that has been woefully underfunded for way too long. If our state is truly committed to supporting quality early learning for young children—an investment that we know will prepare kids for school and lifelong success, empower families to work and thrive, and improve Ohio's long-term economic success—we must *invest* the dollars to make it happen.

Providing quality early learning is not cheap, but it is far less expensive than the costly interventions that the state will be required to pay later in fixing problems through the K-12, criminal justice, and welfare systems that could have been prevented in the first place. Our kids and our state can't afford for us to wait.

Thank you for your time and I'm happy to answer any questions you have.