

**The Ohio Senate
Finance Committee
House Bill 166: FY2020-2021 Operating Budget
Summit Education Initiative
Laura DiCola, Early Childhood Strategy Leader
May 29, 2019**

Thank you, Chairman Dolan, Vice Chairman Burke, Ranking Member Sykes, and Members of the Senate Finance Committee.

My name is Laura DiCola. I am the Early Childhood Strategy Leader at Summit Education Initiative, a data-driven, “cradle-to-career” non-profit organization working to improve personal and regional prosperity through increased educational attainment of individuals and their families living in Summit County.

I also serve on the Steering Committee of Groundwork Ohio, a non-partisan organization advocating for early childhood education.

I am very grateful to Governor DeWine for his proposed investments that support quality early learning from birth. A child’s brain grows fastest during the first few years of life, with more than a million new brain connections forming each second. From the moment children enter the world, they have started on their educational path. What happens – or doesn’t happen -- in these first five years impacts and “hard wires” the brain in a way that impacts all future learning.

So much of early childhood development and school readiness depends on experiences in the home, particularly during this period of rapid and critical brain development. For these reasons, the administration’s commitment to tripling the number of families served statewide through evidence-based home visiting, increased dollars for early intervention and child welfare, and a new \$5 million investment to ensure all children have books from birth are all important investments.

But there is so much more. We know quality child care and preschool programs that help children learn and grow in their earliest years can change the trajectories of their lives. Children who begin kindergarten “on track” for success are almost twice as likely to meet third grade reading achievement standards than peers who are not “ready” for school. What happens **before** a child ever enters kindergarten is therefore the single most effective strategy to ensure success in third grade – a pivotal point in a child’s educational journey and key predictor of future success in school and beyond. Conversely, children who enter kindergarten behind are likely to remain behind. These gaps in achievement are difficult and expensive to close with K-12 education alone. We can help ensure children arrive at kindergarten ready to learn by providing our youngest learners with access to affordable, high-quality early childhood programs where they can develop the full range of skills necessary to be successful in school and life.

Our local community in Summit County recognizes and values the importance of investing early in quality. For example, one of our local private foundations, GAR Foundation, recently launched a two-year, \$617,000 investment in a program called “STARS: Supporting Teachers and Ready Students.” STARS is providing expert tools and intensive support to a cohort of 24 community-based early learning centers in Akron. The program is designed to help these centers navigate Step Up to Quality (the state’s quality rating system), and increase their ratings over the next two years in accordance with the state’s mandate. The STARS initiative addresses gaps in the early childhood education system, and seeks to demonstrate how effective teaching and engagement tactics can support meaningful educational advances for young children. The goal is to help our youngest children be ready for kindergarten through high-quality early childhood instruction.

In addition, my organization, Summit Education Initiative, developed and launched the CLASS Act Scholars program in 2017, a nine-month professional development program designed to elevate and celebrate the quality of preschool teacher professional practices in Summit County. The program is funded by PNC Bank and other local foundations. Now in the process of selecting its third cohort, the goal of the program is to improve quality interactions between teachers and students in preschool classrooms through an evidence-based course of instruction and coaching, and also to reinforce the critical role that early childhood educators play in the lives of students and the health of a community. Participating teachers are awarded a modest stipend, since our early childhood professionals are paid so little to do the important work of educating our youngest learners.

For early education teachers and caregivers, a profession that is undervalued despite the presence of many educated and credentialed professionals, we hope the local investments in these novel approaches (as well as many others) to supporting quality will help stabilize childcare centers’ staffing, enhance the quality of teacher/child interactions, and ultimately support students’ learning.

We know that high-quality child care is one of the best ways to prepare a child for school and set him or her on a track for success, yet it is very expensive. Ohio’s publicly-funded childcare system helps parents who are working or going to school pay for child care. I am grateful that Governor DeWine’s budget increases the child care reimbursement rate paid to these programs by directing federal dollars from the Child Care Development Block Grant (CCDBG). This rate increase is critical and an important step in the right direction.

But running quality programs and paying quality teachers a decent wage requires more dollars. We cannot rely on these federal dollars or local investments alone. **There must also be additional state investment in order to provide families with the type of quality early learning that we know produces outcomes.** Investments at all levels –

federal, state and local (both public and private) - is needed to build and sustain a child care system that puts quality at the center. The state is on the right path, but more investment to leverage current federal and local investments are necessary.

In closing, Summit Education Initiative, along with many key community partners, has been developing a systems-focused strategy that will enhance equitable early learning opportunities in Akron and throughout Summit County. Reaching families earlier with knowledge and supports to empower them to be their child's first and best teacher, and investing even earlier in targeted supports and interventions across all systems – health, housing, social services, mental health, education, etc. -- are critical to ensuring that all students prepared for success when kindergarten begins.

Our ultimate goal is that all children enter kindergarten ready to learn. This matters to our community, to our organization, and most of all, to the kids who are Summit County's future. Early investment pays the greatest dividends. We can only succeed by aligning funding to leverage investments at all levels – federal, state and local, public and private – to build a sustainable system that places quality at the center. We ask you for increased state investment to continue to build and support a quality child care system, a solution that builds brains, creates upward mobility through opportunity and helps prevent achievement gaps before they even develop.