

**The Ohio Senate
Finance Committee
House Bill 166: FY2020-2021 Operating Budget
Learn to Earn Dayton & Dayton-Montgomery County Preschool Promise
Robyn Lightcap, Executive Director
May 29, 2019**

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

My name is Robyn Lightcap. I am the Executive Director of the Dayton-Montgomery County Preschool Promise, an initiative that is helping make high quality Preschool available to all 4-year-olds in the City of Dayton and select nearby communities with large numbers of high-needs children. Our hope is to one day expand throughout Montgomery County.

I am also the Chair of Groundwork Ohio, a non-partisan organization advocating for early childhood education.

I am incredibly grateful for Governor DeWine's proposed investments in the health and early education of our youngest children. The administration's \$50 million commitment in new support for home visiting, for example, is an especially important affirmation that investing in the earliest years is what matters most.

Home visitors teach families how to keep their child safe and healthy, which saves on health care costs and expensive interventions later on. Delayed treatment for a child who is behind or who didn't get the right attention early on almost always costs more later.

I urge you to support Governor DeWine's priority of making this research-supported, best practice available to more mothers in need.

Incidentally, the Health Policy Institute of Ohio earlier this month pointed to home visiting as a critical investment to ensure children thrive. I mention that to assure you that confidence in the return on investment in high quality home visiting is universal.

One of the other vital parts of our early childhood system is the Publicly Funded Child Care system that helps families pay for childcare for parents who are working or going to school.

Parents aren't going to take jobs if they don't have a safe and affordable place for their children while they're at work. At the same time, employers need to know that their employees will be there every day and focused on the tasks at hand.

The goal of Ohio's Publicly Funded Childcare program is not to provide babysitting. Rather, this initiative is designed to give families a safe and enriching place for their children SO parents can afford to work and will know their children are in good hands.

We want parents to become economically self-sufficient as a result of the PFCC program. But we also need to use this time with children to ensure they are engaged in age-appropriate early learning and will be ready to start Kindergarten on track. Catching children up starting in Kindergarten and beyond is expensive — and success is by no means guaranteed.

I celebrate the increases to the reimbursement rate as stipulated in HB 166. The childcare reimbursement rates have been woefully low and have provided insufficient funding for providers to operate at higher levels of quality. We know how critical it is for children to be in an engaging learning environment from birth and when reimbursement rates are so low, providers cannot hire teachers with the right skills and provide environments that support learning.

Because Ohio's reimbursement rates are so low, Ohio's preschools and childcare providers pay their teachers, on average, \$9-11 an hour. That's below what waitresses and parking lot attendants make, and means the teachers themselves qualify for Publicly Funded Child Care and other social services. Childcare providers in my community can't even begin to compete with Amazon, which pays [\\$15 to start](#) at its Dayton/Monroe fulfillment center. The increased reimbursement rates will allow providers to modestly increase the wages to move our teachers closer to a living wage.

I am grateful that Governor DeWine's budget directs the federal dollars to improving the reimbursement rates for Ohio's childcare providers. This is a great step forward. **There will also need to be additional state investment to really make our childcare system work for children and families.**

In Montgomery County, we have been fortunate to have County and City leaders who have prioritized early childhood and have provided funding to help with 4-year-olds in some of our high needs communities. While this has been an impressive investment and is helping us make improvements, it is hardly enough to support the whole system. Also, we know there are only a few urban centers around Ohio that have the resources to even think about standing up initiatives like Preschool Promise in Cincinnati and Dayton and PRE4CLE up in Cleveland. Our rural communities and the rest of the state cannot do this. The bottom line is that we cannot build the system without significant state investment.

Unfortunately, we all know the federal government will never put up the entire amount required to provide quality childcare to needy families even in pursuit of promoting work — this commitment requires a financial partnership.

We will need state dollars to continue to invest in the reimbursement rates so teachers working with our babies, toddlers and preschoolers in the most important years of brain development, can earn a solid living wage, one that is in line with the expectations of the Star Rating system where teachers must have a degree in early childhood education.

We also will need state dollars to ensure children can access Publicly Funded Child Care. Currently, only families earning 130% of the Federal Poverty Level or less are eligible for Ohio's Publicly Funded Childcare, which means a family of three who makes more than \$27,729 does not qualify for help paying for childcare. The cost of high quality care is about \$12,000 per child – so imagine making \$27,729 a year and having to pay \$12,000 per child for care. It is not possible. Ohio actually has the second lowest eligibility rate in the country.

Governor DeWine has been emphatic that he is eager to increase eligibility to those earning 150% of the Federal Poverty Level and I support this direction. I would advocate that we actually need to put in place a long term plan to get to 200% eligibility – which is still only \$42,660 for a family of three. I fully understand there are limited funds and we cannot move the entire system in one budget. My request is for us to look at setting benchmarks that we must meet over the next few budgets that will get us to higher levels of eligibility. I know the Health Policy Institute of Ohio also is advocating for increasing to 200% on its new [Health Value Dashboard](#). The benefits impact not just educational outcomes but also health outcomes.

In Montgomery County, our Preschool Promise offers tuition assistance according to need on a sliding-scale basis. We consciously and deliberately are giving the most financial help to our middle-income families. They are not eligible for Head Start or the state's help, so they are most at-risk of leaving the workforce because they can't find quality childcare.

We know the impact of investing early is impressive, and there is a new [study](#) by Duke University researchers that came out in December of last year. Researchers [updated a project](#) where they have been tracking a stunning 1 million students who were born between 1988 and 2000. The researchers found that North Carolina's Preschool initiatives are showing positive effect and not fading out at least up through 8th grade. Specifically, they documented that children who had experienced quality Preschool had higher math and reading test scores, and fewer of these students were placed in special education. The North Carolina program provides early childhood education for children well beyond our 130% of the Federal Poverty Level eligibility.

We know that all children, not just our lowest of low-income children, benefit from accessing high quality early learning, and we need our state investments to make that happen. We must continue to increase the reimbursement rates for Publicly Funded Child Care and we must create a plan over time to ensure more children can access Publicly Funded Child Care.

I celebrate Governor DeWine's commitment to children and look forward to seeing how our state will invest dollars to make great things happen for children.