

19th House District

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134th General Assembly Committees

Technology and Innovation, Ranking Member
Higher Education and Career Readiness
Primary & Secondary Education
Energy and Natural Resources



**Representative Mary Lightbody, Ph.D.
19th House District**

Testimony to the House Families, Aging, and Human Services Committee
House Bill 145 <> March 11, 2021

Chair Manchester, Vice Chair Cutrona, Ranking Member Liston, and fellow members of the House Families, Aging, and Human Services Committee, thank you for allowing Representative White and myself to testify in support of House Bill 145.

There are three aspects of the bill that I will address briefly. The first is what are we proposing in this bill, the second is the impact on our workforce, and the third relates to the impact on our youngest Ohioans

First: House Bill 145 would increase the maximum percentage for childcare assistance eligibility from 130% of the federal poverty line to 200%. This change will allow us to focus on building a strong system for childcare as an investment in our families, childcare providers, and businesses alike. Raising the eligibility will enable more parents and caregivers to remain in the workforce and keep Ohio's economy growing for all of our citizens.

Based on the current income levels, the household income of a family of four must be less than \$34,450. Given the strict limit at 130% of the poverty level, many employees have been forced to turn down a salary increase of as little as \$0.25 per hour, or even a promotion to a position with a higher salary because such an increase would trigger the loss of the federal support for the childcare that allows them to work. Under House Bill 145, that same family of four would be able to earn up to \$53,000, which is still not enough to keep food on the table, pay the rent and utilities, maintain reliable transportation, keep shoes and warm coats on their children, and save for a big-ticket item or for retirement. Families which qualify for this assistance can fall into a situation where low incomes allow them to receive benefits that may help to cover the cost of basic necessities; however, these short-term financial needs can prevent them from advancing in their careers due to a risk to losing the benefits that allow them to work while others care for their children.

That brings me to my second point, which is about our workforce. Ohio, along with the rest of the country, is facing an economic crisis. Small businesses in particular were hit hard by the pernicious pandemic. I believe that this bill will address the top priority in communities across the state by providing and supporting the needed workforce. For parents to continue or resume their positions now that the worst seems to be over, they need quality childcare centers, making childcare a crucial issue for small businesses but also for our families. Increasing access for

working parent to childcare programs in which their children will thrive allows parents to throw themselves into their work and careers, even at some point along the way to being able accepting a raise or a promotion. Career advancements contribute to the employer and lead to job satisfaction and loyalty. So this bill will allow us to keep our Ohio Promise: You can live out the American Dream right here at home.

To accomplish this, we must provide a strong infrastructure for Ohio to build upon as we navigate the COVID-19 pandemic and the options that we can provide for our constituents. Ohio's working parents rely upon accessible childcare in order to maintain professional responsibilities and an active work-life balance. The financial burden weighs heavily on working parents and we must take steps to expand access across the state. Our communities are facing a difficult and uncertain economic future, and this is one key step to easing that worry. Without access to affordable childcare, many workers remain at an economic disadvantage that will limit job growth. I know some two parent families who arranged to work a different shift from each other, one working first and one third, so one parent would be at home with their young school-age children. And I know that more than 1 million women – and some men - left the workforce entirely during the pandemic because they could not find a childcare center with an opening.

The third point in my argument in support of HB145 relates to the children. It is very important for us to invest in the children. When the youngest among us are in high quality childcare centers they grow, learn, and develop social skills. Their parents do not worry about them so much that their productivity at work is diminished in any way.

We know that from birth to age 5, a child's brain develops more than at any other time in her life. We know this early brain development has a lasting impact on a child's ability to learn and succeed in school and life. And we know that the quality of a child's experiences in the first few years of life – positive or negative – helps shape how their brain develops. The connections that young brains develop through their everyday experiences happen because the youngsters have positive interactions with their parents and caregivers (a serve and return interaction) and they use all their senses to interact with the world.

In the first few years of life, researchers have found that more than 1 million new neural connections are formed every second.¹ If those neurons and the connections are used, the brain retains them, the connections become more efficient, and early simple circuits form the foundation for more complex circuitry that develop a few months further down the road. As the child grows, the brain is less able to restructure itself or adapt to new challenges, so the early years are pivotal.

A child's daily experiences determine which brain connections develop and these connections will last for a lifetime. Truly, it is the amount and quality of care, stimulation and interaction they receive in their early years that makes all the difference. It is fair to say that healthy development in the early years (particularly birth to three) provides the building blocks for educational

¹ Center for the Developing Child, Harvard University; <https://developingchild.harvard.edu/guide/what-is-early-childhood-development-a-guide-to-the-science/#cps>

achievement, economic productivity, responsible citizenship, lifelong health, strong communities, and successful parenting of the next generation.

As an educator I know that when children arrive at the door of their pre-school or kindergarten classroom, those who have been stimulated, talked to, read to, and encouraged to be curious about the world around them arrive ready to learn. Those who receive little or no stimulation and encouragement but instead might suffer from toxic stress arrive at school behind their same age peers. That gap is very hard to close, with significant investments often required of the schools. Schools and teachers and counselors and psychologists spend hours working with the children and have some successes. But the brain of a 6- or 8-year-old is not the same as the brain of a 2-year-old, so please, let's get as many young Ohio toddlers as we can in quality childcare centers while their parents are at work, and help the parents continue the learning experiences at home when they return from work.

If we are to get the economy humming, we need parents to take jobs, and those parents need childcare.

We all know that protecting our workforce will keep people healthy, reporting to work every day, and contributing to the economy of Ohio as we recover from the pandemic. Removing the barrier to job advancement for hard working Ohio parents will help us get there, and I thank you for the opportunity to testify today in support of this important legislation. Representative White and I would be happy to answer any questions the committee members may have.

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