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Primary & Secondary  
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Primary & Secondary Education  
  
Financial Institutions  
  
Higher Education

**Phillip M. Robinson Jr.**  
**State Representative**  
**Ohio House District 19**

**The Universal Preschool Act / House Bill 595**  
**Sponsor Testimony for House Finance Committee**  
**December 3, 2024**

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Chairman Edwards, Vice-Chair LaRe, Ranking Member Sweeney, and members of the Ohio House Finance Committee, thank you for the opportunity to testify in support of House Bill (HB) 595, the Universal Preschool Act. I look forward to productive conversations with the committee and all related stakeholders both this General Assembly (GA) and next GA.

There is no better way to invest in Ohio's future than investing in our children's education. The best way to give students a strong foundation for success in their K-12 education and future career is by giving every child in the state all-day kindergarten and universal pre-k, the option of affordable and easily accessible preschool.

If enacted, HB 595 would **create a public, half-day preschool option for children and require full-day kindergarten** be provided to all students in Ohio. The benefits to these policies are numerous. Almost every study in early education indicates preschool and all-day kindergarten improves overall education with higher proficiencies levels, graduation rates, and better future outcomes for students. Supporting early education also helps take some burden off parents in early childcare, saving Ohio families money and time.

This legislation will save taxpayer dollars by supporting kids now, early in their education, instead of paying much more later down the road for more expensive interventions and remediation to get students back on track. If Ohio can afford universal vouchers that wealthy families can access, then how can we not afford universal preschool for working families?

Several of the main components of the legislation, in brief summary, include the following:

- All kindergarten programs will be required to be full-day, matching elementary grades' hours and completion requirements, and school districts can no longer charge tuition.
- Children are not required, but public school districts must provide the option of at least one year of half-day preschool to 4-and-5-year-old children that live in the district.
- School districts can either create a preschool program or contract with an existing preschool program, either in place of or side-by-side with their own program, rating restrictions and guidelines for districts as they set up their program.

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- Preschool education standards will be improved by increasing teacher education and professional development requirements, lowering maximum class size and staff-child ratios, and increasing teacher minimum base pay to match kindergarten teachers.
- The new requirements will have a 4-year implementation deadline but school districts not ready to start their preschool program by the deadline will be able to request extensions from the Ohio Dept. of Education and Workforce (ODEW) for an additional 2-years.
- The new requirements' funding will be folded into the bipartisan Fair School Funding Plan (FSFP) formula to cover the additional annual costs.
- ODEW and the Legislative Service Commission (LSC) will be required to put together a recommendation for phase-in funding for school districts' initial start-up costs in new staffing, classroom space, and other expenses for initiating the requirements.
- An additional revenue source will come from a 13% increase to the Annual Sports Gaming Tax Revenues rate, excluding low market share companies, with those funds dedicated to public preschool programs, to help offset some of the increased costs.
- School districts are not required but have the option to charge tuition for their preschool program to help cover the local share costs. Families at or below 250% Federal Poverty Level (FPL) cannot be charged tuition, and families above 250% FPL and up to 450% FPL would pay a graduated, prorated tuition.

My office reached out to and received feedback from several of Ohio's major early childhood advocacy and K-12 education groups representing teachers, school administrators and staff, and other educators for input on this legislation. I look forward to having additional interested party and stakeholder meetings for further input on the bill.

There are 17 states that require full-day kindergarten, including North Carolina, Oklahoma, South Carolina, Tennessee, Utah, and West Virginia. There are 11 states with some form of universal preschool, including Georgia, Iowa, Oklahoma, West Virginia, and Wisconsin. Ohio needs to catch up with these states and build a strong education foundation for our children.

As of the 2022-2023 school year, Ohio's Kindergarten Readiness Assessment (KRA) shows only 35.4% of children were ready for kindergarten. With only 10% of 4-year-old children enrolled in preschool in Ohio, we are ranked 36th among other states in enrollment. The disparities are even greater when we look at low-income households. In order to give our children the foundation for success they need, we have to better prepare them for kindergarten and the rest of their education. I urge you to work with me and support this legislation.

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Chairman Edwards, Vice-Chair LaRe, Ranking Member Sweeney, and members of the committee, I thank you for your time and I am happy to answer any questions you have.

The following is a more extensive summary of the legislation:

1. Public Preschool Program & Free All-Day Kindergarten

**Require kindergarten programs to provide full-day education**, matching other elementary grades' school hours. School districts can no longer charge tuition for full-day services, and all children in the state will need to complete full-day kindergarten similar to other elementary grades.

**Creates a public, half-day preschool program option at all traditional public-school districts** for 4-year-old and 5-year-old children.

- The program will be optional for student participation, but require school districts to provide an option of at least one-year of half-day preschool to students of the district.
- School districts will have the flexibility to choose whether they provide their preschool program to 3-year-old children, more than one year, and if they provide full-day services.

**School districts can contract an existing preschool program** to fulfill the public preschool option requirement either in place of or side-by-side with their own created program.

- Qualifying, existing preschool programs for contracting must be licensed and have oversight by the state, and can have providers including local governments, charter and STEM schools, private schools, other public school districts, and child care centers that meet additional criteria.
- The preschool program must also have a Step Up To Quality (SUTQ) rating of 3-stars or higher for programs in the school district, or preschool program with a SUTQ rating of 4-stars or higher for programs in an adjacent school district. Preschool programs that don't have a SUTQ rating can request one from the Ohio Dept. of Children & Youth.
- School districts will be allowed to contract with multiple preschool programs and/or form joint programs, and will have general flexibility between them and outsourcing preschool program providers and operators to determine their contract agreement.
- Contracted preschool programs will have to follow all rules for the public preschool program.

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- School districts who contract their program will be required to pass a resolution outlining their outsourcing rules and hold public hearings with potential contract providers and operators.

2. Improving Preschool Standards

**All preschool programs will follow increased standards** to match the increase in access from the bill to assure children are getting the high-quality education they deserve.

- The increased standards include:
  - Require teachers to have a bachelor's degree and for assistant teachers to have a child development associate degree or equivalent degree;
  - Require a staff-child ratio of 1:10 and a maximum class size of 20 students for both 3-and-4-year-old children;
  - Require teachers and assistants to have individual professional development plans with at least 15 hours per year for development.
- Preschool teachers will be entitled to the same minimum, base salary pay rules as kindergarten teachers.
- There will be safe harbor for currently employed preschool teachers and assistant teachers that don't meet the new degree requirements.

3. Phase-In Support Plan, Funding and Revenue Guidelines

**With a 4-year phase-in, on July 1, 2029, for the '29-'30 school year is when the new requirements go into effect** for all-day kindergarten, public preschool program, and increased preschool standards.

- From the bill's passage, the Ohio Dept. of Education & Workforce (ODEW) will be required to begin surveying and holding stakeholder meetings with all of the state's school districts and several statewide education groups, and must finish the process by February 15, 2025.
- ODEW will provide their results to the Ohio Legislative Service Commission (LSC), who will provide a recommendation for **phase-in funding** to help school districts meet the new requirements and set up their preschool programs by the 2029. LSC will have until March 15, 2025, to submit their recommendation to the state legislature so it can be considered for the state operating budget and upcoming state capital budget.
- If the phase-in recommendation is not fully funded during the 136<sup>th</sup> General Assembly for the 2026 and 2027 fiscal years; the Speaker, Senate President, and Governor must

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make a public statement on why it was not fully-funded, and why the phase-in funding passed was adequate.

- For school districts not ready to implement their preschool program by the deadline, they will be able to request a 1-year extension from ODEW. A school district can do this twice, so up to two years. Effectively giving school districts **up to 6 years to implement their programs.**

**The funding for the new requirements will be folded into the bipartisan Fair School Funding Plan (FSFP) formula** and would cover the costs of additional students, staff, and added expenses with K-12 education state foundation aide from the general revenue fund.

- An additional revenue source will come from a 13% increase to the Annual Sports Gaming Tax Revenues rate, excluding low market share companies, with those funds dedicated to public preschool.
- Early childhood education grants and other existing preschool funds will continue to support early education with the funds going to the public preschool program.

**School districts have the option to charge tuition for their preschool program**, but are not required and at the choice of the local school board, to help cover the local share costs.

- The school district’s board of education must have a public hearing and pass a resolution to outline their rules and rates for having tuition for their program.
- The annual tuition chosen by the district is capped at 40% of the local share estimate of the per pupil cost for their district, calculated using the FSFP formula. The tuition can be lower than this at the discretion of the school district.
- Families at 250% of Federal Poverty Level (FPL) or lower cannot be charged tuition. Families above 250% FPL will pay a graduated, prorated tuition, with families above 450% FPL paying 100% of the tuition chosen by the district. Families at above 700% FPL can be charged tuition above the tuition cap at whatever rates the school decides is appropriate.
- School districts cannot require all tuition be paid upfront, and must provide multiple paying options, including monthly payments.
- If the FSFP is fully phased-in and implemented, school districts will no longer be able to charge tuition for their preschool program, except if they request a 2-year waiver from ODEW. These waivers can be requested indefinitely.
- A school district’s board of education must have a public hearing and pass a resolution to have their superintendent request a 2-year waiver.

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