



children's defense fund ohio

House Finance Health and Human Services Sub-Committee

HB 33 – Interested Party Testimony

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Chair Curruthers, Ranking Member Liston, and members of the House Finance Subcommittee on Health and Human Services, thank you for the opportunity to testify on House Bill 33. I am here today to discuss HB 33's budget provisions in support of whole child wellbeing.

Born out of the civil rights movement, with more than four decades of advocacy behind us, it is the mission of the Children's Defense Fund to champion policies and programs that lift children out of poverty, protect them from abuse and neglect, and ensure their access to appropriate and targeted health care, quality education, and nutritional wellness. We recognize that every child contributes to the vibrancy and success of our communities and are therefore driven to ensure every child and young person has opportunities to gain the social, economic, cultural and political capital they need to flourish into adulthood and give back to their communities.

We have a saying, that children do not come in pieces, and neither should our policy and budget decisions when it comes to their overall wellbeing. We are committed to advocating for the prioritization of the whole child in the FY 24-25 Ohio budget, which includes ensuring adequate investments in the systems they rely on and the communities they call home. The budget is a moral document that is a reflection of our priorities as a state, and we must do right by our children and youth – the future of Ohio. We must ensure our budget invests in and protects essential programs all children need to live in dignity.

Ohio currently ranks 31st in overall child well-being, lagging in the bottom half of all states. One in 6 children in our state experiences poverty, as many as one in four in children in certain counties lives in a household that faces [hunger](#), and far too many children and adolescents across the state of Ohio continue to grapple with unmet basic needs that have caused soaring rates of chronic absenteeism (as high as 65% in the 2020-2021 school year for students who are houseless), dropping proficiency rates in school (especially along striking equity lines depending on what school district or building a child attends), and increasing gaps in an accessible continuum of care for health challenges.

Children's Defense Fund-Ohio in partnership with Ohio Excels and the Ohio Children's Hospital Association (OCHA) recently released a report on [Supporting Children's Behavioral Health in the Learning Environment](#). In this research, we found that 17% of youth 6-17 experience a mental health disorder, but only 51% of those youth actually receive treatment in a given year. The national suicide rate for adolescents ages 10 to 24 increased 60% and is now the second leading cause of death for this group.

According to the [2020-2021 National Survey of Children's Health](#), an estimated 58,000 school-age children in Ohio were not able to access needed health care. Although Ohio ranked 13th in access to mental health care for youth, more than half of children who experienced major depression did not receive mental health services and only 33% received consistent treatment. In Ohio, nearly 1 in 8 children received a diagnosis of anxiety, depression, or both in 2020, up 42% – the 10th highest increase nationwide. Further, among teenage girls nationwide, nearly 3 in 5 reported feeling persistent sadness in 2021 and 1 in 3 seriously considered attempting suicide. These disorders can be especially devastating to young people, impacting current health and school success and contributing to serious lifelong consequences impacting their families and their communities.

HB 33, as introduced, does much to invest in children and address their health and wellbeing and we applaud many of the provisions. There are still many opportunities for the General Assembly to make other targeted investments to improve the health of children.

As an organization, we recommend the following be considered and included in HB 33:

- ♦ **Consider the whole child** and the families they are part of when making investments. Behavioral health begins with strong families, strong schools, and strong communities. Our state funding decisions must lay the foundation for children's lifelong health and prevent the need for costly medical interventions down the road.
- ♦ **Prioritize child physical, mental, and behavioral health needs** by protecting the critical provision included in the Governor's budget to increase support of Medicaid for children whose household income is below 300% of the Federal Poverty Level.
- ♦ **Expand critical children's health access in Ohio's schools by modernizing the Medicaid in Schools program to increase access for school-based children's mental health services.** We urge for budget language ([see here](#)) to be included that specifically directs the Ohio Department of Medicaid (ODM) to seek permission from the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services (CMS) to reimburse schools for health services provided to any Medicaid-eligible student by the end of 2023.
- ♦ **Medicaid coverage of doula care services.** There is a strong and growing body of evidence that access to doula care during pregnancy reduces the incidence of preterm birth, the prevalence of cesarean births, and increases positive birth experience and healthy outcomes for both mother and child.
- ♦ **Ensure access to universal school meals for all Ohio children** to address alarming rates of child hunger. Currently, more than one in three kids that live in a food insecure household does not qualify for school meals.

As a member of the [The Ohio Children's Budget Coalition](#), a statewide group of 22 advocacy organizations committed to supporting the holistic needs of every child, we encourage you to reference the new [FY24-25 Biennial Budget Issue Book: Creating a Vision for Child-wellbeing for Ohio](#), which outlines 15 critical opportunities to improve child well-being in this budget. This can be referenced for further detail on the recommendations I have outlined today and others that ought to be considered to move the needle on child well-being in our state.

The bottom line is that at some point during the budget process discussions will begin about changing the tax structure and reducing the amount of resources available for programs that support children. There are powerful interest groups requesting the opposite of what we are asking for here today. We urge you to prioritize whole child wellbeing as the budget process continues, for the future of our children and the future of Ohio.

I appreciate having the opportunity to provide testimony today. Thank you.