

Testimony

**Christian Davis, Founder, Cincinnati Parent Empowerment Network,
In support of continued funding for
Waterford.org's Upstart Early Literacy services
Before X Committee
March 21, 2023**

Madam Chairperson and members of the Committee, I am pleased to have the opportunity to share with you my support for the continuation of funding to advance school readiness of Ohio's children. I am Christian Davis from Cincinnati and Hamilton County, Ohio.

When I founded the Cincinnati Parent Empowerment Network, I committed to sharing resources and opportunities to support children and families. In Waterford.org, UPSTART provides valuable services to children and supports caregivers. Over 35,000 caregivers are part of our network and I've had the opportunity to hear their stories and look forward to sharing some of those with you today.

In addition to my role as CEO of the Cincinnati Parent Empowerment Network, I also support Cincinnati's Cradle to Career Collective Impact initiative's Parent Champions Network as their director. In that role I also connect with Cincinnati Children's Hospitals' All Children Thrive's efforts, which includes working with pediatricians to prescribe early learning opportunities. The resources provided through TANF for Upstart align well with the systemic changes Ohio communities are making to support pre-school children.

From a system perspective, it is also important to note this work helps fulfill Ohio's commitment to early childhood. Significantly, Upstart enables Type B sites to provide additional early learning support to achieve quality star ratings in the Ohio's Step Up to Quality program.

History of Waterford.org in Ohio

Over 3,500 Ohio children have prepared for kindergarten as participants in Waterford Upstart since 2016. What makes Waterford Upstart special is the individualized instruction that uses adaptive technology to personalize each learning experience, while helping all kids advance their readiness for kindergarten.

In addition to the personalized curriculum in reading, math, and science, each family receives coaching to ensure strong caregiver engagement. While the curriculum is in English, families are also supported with translation services as needed. All participants receive computers and Internet service is included as part of the program if the home does not have connectivity.

On average, Pre-K learners enter kindergarten **at or above grade level** after using Waterford software and receiving family coaching.

Why Does This Matter?

Nationally, 34% of children enter kindergarten without having been taught the skills needed to learn to read¹. And that's important because 65% of 4th graders in Ohio read below grade level². We also know from the NAEP test that 63% of students across the nation graduate below reading proficiency. It doesn't have to be that way. It shouldn't be that way.

Research shows an investment in early education is a great investment. When children enter school without having been taught the skills needed to learn to read, it's challenging to close gaps. In 1855, freed slave and statesman Frederick Douglass wisely counseled: "It is easier to build strong children than fix broken men." Upstart provides Ohio's children with a smart start.

Frederick Douglass also taught us that, "Once you learn to read, you will be forever free." When children have a strong foundation of learning, they are able to stay on track to remain in school, graduate and pursue post-secondary education and training to successfully transition into adulthood.

Waterford is working with caregivers to make sure they have the resources needed to develop readiness for school, so children achieve academic success and improve their long-term prospects.

Ohio Results and Caregiver Feedback

For all of last year's cohorts of Upstart participants, children's outcomes averaged at the "Kindergarten Intermediate" level, which is where most children score at near the middle of the Kindergarten year. Cohort 1 saw 75.38% of children score at "Kindergarten Beginning" or above, demonstrating strong school readiness outcomes. Cohorts 2 and 3 both exceeded 70% on the same measurement.

Summer Learning Path participants fared even better with 82% demonstrating strong school readiness outcomes. The Summer Learning Path cohort averaged just seven points below the Kindergarten Advanced level (where most children score at the end of the Kindergarten year).

Here's what caregivers shared with us:

"We loved it! My child enjoyed the program and being able to work a mouse! I loved seeing my child happy and it surprised me how smart she is!"

"I loved this program and will be telling EVERYONE I know that has pre-k kids about it."

¹ Council on Early Childhood. (2014). Literacy promotion: An essential component of primary care pediatric practice. *Pediatrics*, 134(2): 404–409

² The Nation's Report Card: Reading. 2022 National Achievement-Level Results. <https://www.nationsreportcard.gov/reading/?grade=4>

“It's the best thing that happened to her. She will always be the one to remind us that it's time for Upstart. She brings all her Barbie dolls together and sits down for the Upstart. This is one thing that she looks forward to everyday, even on the weekends.”

“Our coach was a great help throughout the process. She was encouraging and helped me feel secure in our progress even if we'd had a rough week. I really appreciated her weekly check-ins.”

“We loved it!!! Thank you! Such a smart idea to have it directed toward each child's needs as well.”

“My daughter is now ready for kindergarten. If she did not have this program, I don't think she would be able to keep up. She is now looking forward to going to kindergarten.”

Conclusion and Call to Action

Thank you for giving Ohio's youngest learners and their families a strong start. This saves us all time and money in the long-run.

I appreciate the opportunity to appear before this committee. I look forward to answering questions you may have. Thank you.